

5. Social media and Fiji's 2018 national election

Abstract: Political campaigning on social media in Fiji was first witnessed in the 2014 national election. In the Fiji 2018 general election, social media political campaigning had evolved with greater complexity and a wider variety of implications. This research examines and highlights the use of social media by political parties and candidates in the 2018 national elections. This examination provides comparative social media discussions between the two elections; 2014 and 2018. The research uses digital ethnography as a methodology to examine and highlight social media use, by political parties and candidates in Fiji's 2018 national elections. The research found that FijiFirst, as the ruling government, had a significant advantage in Fiji's social media landscape. However, opposition social media efforts and growing Facebook 'reactions' were beginning to challenge FijiFirst's social media dominance.

Keywords: censorship, elections, Facebook, Fiji, politics, social media, voting

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Introduction

SOCIAL media use in political campaigns and engagement has been wide spread around the globe. Some scholars argue that the impact of social media was initially highlighted through the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 (Boulianne, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012). But President Obama's 2008 online campaign has been seen as one of the earliest moments in the use of social media in politics (Enli, 2017; Boulianne, 2015). Most, if not all, scholars agree that social media in politics has and continues to expand around the globe but its impact or influence is still a matter of great debate (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Boulianne, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012).

Similarly, in the Pacific, social media use in political discussions and engagement has risen dramatically in recent years (Tarai, Finau, Titifanue, & Kant, 2015; Cave, 2012). This can be attributed to the expansion of interconnectivity and increasingly competitive internet costs (Cave, 2012; Minges & Stork, 2015). In PNG, Logan (2013) had followed and documented the increasing use of mobile phones and online political discussions. She argued that a majority of the online interactions revolved around corruption and governance-based issues in PNG, discussed by bloggers and commentators (Logan, 2013). In Vanuatu, Facebook

groups such as Yumi Tok Tok Stret had expanded in 2012 and 2013, amplifying a variety of issues (Cave, 2012). In Solomon Islands, Forum Solomon Islands International was active online as a Facebook group since 2011 and covered political and governance issues (Afuga, 2014). All of these online discussions culminated in some form of political action or reaction from the governing elite.

In Fiji, social media and politics largely stems from the nation's coup history and its subsequent implications on media freedom (Robie, 2001; Robie, 2016; Singh, 2015; Tarai, 2015; Morris, 2017). This was particularly evident shortly after the 2006 coup, where online discussions initially flourished with blogs (Foster, 2007). This was a reaction to the direct media censorship witnessed at the time, when people resorted to blog sites as the alternative means for accessing information (Foster, 2007; Singh, 2015). In a similar pattern, social media political discussions, specifically on Facebook in Fiji have emerged out of ongoing variations of censorship. For instance, direct media censorship in news rooms shortly after the coup of 2006 has evolved into a culture of self-censorship, cultivated by what was known as the *Fiji Media Industry Decree 2010* (now *Media Act*), and Constitutional 'claw back' clauses (Robie, 2016; Morris, 2017). In 2006, there were media censors appointed by the regime at the time to exclude media content that it deemed 'to create disorder'. This form of direct censorship had since been replaced by laws with massive penalties, which fuels a habituated media culture that discourages a free media and investigative journalism. This dynamic of media censorship has coincided with the rise in interconnectivity, internet access and the expansion of digital technologies across the Pacific region (Minges & Stork, 2015; Tarai, 2018).

Social media and political discussions in Fiji began with a Facebook in group called Letters to the Editor Uncensored. Initially, this was an online social media group designed to publish unpublished letters by print media outlets in 2011 (Tarai, 2018). Since then Facebook groups like these have succumbed to the curse of the 'bubble effect', where over time the tendency of likeminded online users to agree and interact only with each other has increased and subsequently online discussions and debate have declined.

However, by 2014 in Fiji's first elections under the 2013 Constitution and its *Electoral Act*, the role of social media in political campaigning was witnessed for the first time in Fiji's political history (Tarai, Finau, Titifanue, & Kant, 2015). It was evident that Facebook is Fiji's most preferred social media platform, compared to Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Facebook Pages and its advertising features were fully maximised by more social media savvy political parties such as FijiFirst, SODELPA and NFP (Tarai et al., 2015). FijiFirst appeared to have a planned social media strategy thanks to its huge financial budget and controversial access to a variety of resources (sometimes including state based resources) (MOG, 2014).

For the 2018 national election the dynamics of social media in Fiji and its use in political campaigning has evolved with greater complexity and detail. As such this research seeks to examine the use of social media by political parties and candidates, in the 2018 national elections, to provide comparative discussions between the two elections of 2014 and 2018.

To achieve this objective the research used Digital Ethnography as a methodology using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Methodology

Digital Ethnography is an iterative-inductive approach to examining and studying online and offline related dynamics usually through a mediated form of contact (digital technologies) and participant observation (Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, & Tacchi, 2016). These dynamics are subject to the context and content of what is being examined and how it is being examined. The research draws on a key principle of digital ethnography which is 'Reflexivity', in which knowledge is produced and gathered through encounters with digital users and the observation of facets within the context being examined (Pink et al., 2016). In this regard, qualitative and quantitative methods were used in specific ways to capture the necessary data required to inform the research objective.

Quantitative data was drawn from accessible FacebookCountry data sets and Social Media Analytics Software. Qualitative data involved informal and open ended discussions with willing party members and voters. Participants encountered requested anonymity and informal unstructured discussions. This aspect has become an ongoing implication of Fiji's fragile and highly polarised political landscape and nature. These methods facilitated a reflexive approach to the data gathered which was coupled with ongoing online observations. In addition to this, trips were undertaken to all of Fiji's electoral divisions in the lead up to polling day. These included the Eastern division in Ovalau, Macuata in the Northern division, Lautoka—Nadi in the Western division and the Suva-Nausori corridor in the Central division. These trips involved a variety of offline participant observations and approaches that helped inform the examination of digital dynamics in Fiji's electoral divisions.

Fiji and Facebook

Facebook is Fiji's most popular and actively engaged social networking site. In the lead up to the polling month of November there were an estimated over 500,000 active Facebook accounts in Fiji (Fiji Audience Insights, 2018). The central division is estimated to have the largest Facebook account audience with over 60 percent of Fiji's estimated total Facebook users (Fiji Audience Insights, 2018). Around 82 percent of the Facebook access was through a mobile or handheld device, while 18 percent was accessed through immobile devices

Table 1: Facebook audience insight - data set estimates for Fiji

Age	13-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60+	Total
Estimated accounts	110,000	200,000	120,000	60,000	29,000	15,000	534,000
Percentage	20.60%	37.5%	22.47%	11.24%	5.43%	2.81%	100%

such as desktops (Fiji Audience Insights, 2018). This indicates the increasingly competitive and affordable internet data costs, which have been easily accessed through handheld and mobile devices.

Accessible Facebook data estimates indicate that those within the ages of 21 to 30 constitute the highest number of Facebook accounts at around 37.45 percent of online users in the lead up to the elections (see Table 1). The Fiji Elections Office released registered voters data on 17 September 2018 as shown below. Interestingly, those within the ages of 21 to 30 constituted the highest number of registered voters, at around 24.29 percent. However, it is instructive to note that there are more estimated Facebook accounts than registered voters. At this point in September registrations were continued until the Writ of Elections was issued on 1 October 2018. In addition, it is also evident that there are people in Fiji with multiple accounts. Despite these aspects, the estimates do confirm that the highest registered age group for the elections were the most frequent users of social media.

Table 2: Registered voters data - 17 September 2018 (FEO)

Age	13-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60-70	71-80	80+	Total
Male	14,263	78,030	76,681	57,599	50,547	27,971	11,434	2,909	319,434
Female	14,177	76,017	72,241	54,393	49,450	30,279	14,140	3,989	314,686
Total	28,440	154,047	148,922	111,992	99,997	58,250	25,574	6,898	634,120
Percentage	4.48%	24.29%	23.48%	17.66%	15.77%	9.19%	4.03%	1.09%	100%

Another interesting aspect about the 21 to 30 age group, is the fact these were those who were born in the years between 1988 and 1997 (see Table 2). The 21 to 30 age group are part of what can be termed as the ‘Coup-Constitution’ generation, because 1988 was a year after Fiji’s first two coups and 1997 was the year that Fiji’s 1997 Constitution was promulgated. This period marked the initial political events and continued to have implications on Fiji’s media landscape and its vulnerabilities. It also marked a period in which SODELPA leader, political candidate, Fiji’s first coup maker and former Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka had significant control of Fiji’s political landscape. The 1997 Constitution was abrogated by the coup leader of 2006, FijiFirst Party leader and current Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama. Interestingly, the ‘Coup-

Constitution' generation was now being shown the two main former coup leaders, Sitiveni Rabuka and Voreqe Bainimarama, through social media.

Official party pages

There were six political parties competing in the 2018 Fiji national election. These were the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), FijiFirst Party (FFP), HOPE—Humanity, Opportunity, Prosperity, Equality, National Federation Party, Social Democratic Liberal Party Fiji (SODELPA) and the Unity Fiji Party. All of these parties had varying levels of social media presence and engagement depending on financial and technical resources, coupled with expertise. It was evident that only some parties saw social media as a useful platform and had established their presence much earlier with creative patterns of engagement. In order to take a snapshot of this presence and creative patterns of engagement, an analytics tool was used to examine official political party page data from 1 November to 1 December 2018. This period covered two weeks before and after the election day on 14 November 2018. This analytical data does not cover individual candidate pages or platforms, but is restricted to officially listed political party pages only.

Facebook Page	Total fans	Total change (>/< 1000)	Interactions (per 1000 fans)	Sum of reactions	Sum of shares	Sum of comments	Sum of page posts
FijiFirst	110,694	1800	926	76,961	4,652	20,465	132
NFP	34,407	1902	971	24,052	3,363	4,775	97
SODELPA	25,665	2383	1736	32,413	3,694	5,666	78
FLP	12,933	4	8	99	0	2	1
Unity Fiji	7,408	1101	1699	10,128	1,021	538	45
HOPE	3,369	927	1214	3,269	209	125	20

Note: The statistics are between 1 November 2018 - 1 December 2018.

It is important to note that these figures do not necessarily indicate support but some level of interest in the information provided by these pages and their political parties. As such, FijiFirst's official page has had the highest level of interest, gathering over 110,000 interested accounts (see Table 3). It also had the highest sum of reactions (76,961), shares (4652) and comments (20,465). FijiFirst's presence on social media has been extensive, similar to the 2014 national elections. It has a coordinated social media presence across a number of social networking platforms that are not limited to Facebook. These include Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. These social networking sites simultaneously or in a coordinated fashion have amplified FijiFirst's social media campaign-

ing. These high numbers of interested accounts, reactions, shares and comments are a product of a number of circumstances. FijiFirst's budget and financial resource is considerably larger than the rest of the political parties in Fiji. It spends around F\$1.9 million on advertising and a little over F\$80,000 on social media (Krishnamurthi, 2018). From a media marketing and public relations position, FijiFirst has had an advantageous position being in government since 2014, with its party leader being the most publicised public political figure even before the 2014 elections. Without caretaker conventions for a caretaker government to oversee the elections period, the incumbent FijiFirst government has had significant social media and campaigning advantage (MOG, 2014; MOG, 2018).

The National Federation Party's official page was the second highest performing, gathering around 34,407 interested accounts but its sum of reactions (24,052), sum of shares (3363) and comments (4775) were third behind SODELPA and FijiFirst respectively. The NFP has continued to advance its social media focus through Facebook with a number of platforms, such as Twitter and the use of YouTube for documenting events. Its social media presence has been built and advanced over time since the 2014 elections.

SODELPA's official page was the third highest performing, gathering around 25,665 interested accounts, but its sum of reactions (32,413), sum of shares (3694) and comments (5666) was the second highest among all political parties behind FijiFirst. SODELPA's social media presence has carried on from 2014 with a significantly evident level of reactions, shares and comments. This can be attributed to the increasing level of social media engagement of its supporters and critics alike. In addition to this, the party's individual candidate pages (such as Sitiveni Rabuka, Lynda Tabuya, Mosese Bulitavu and Niko Nawai-kula's pages) considerably raised the level of the party's social media presence compared to 2014.

Fiji Labour Party had a listed page during the period examined, which now does not exist online. It had 12,933 interested accounts with very minimal reactions. During that time two other pages emerged under similar names with newly appointed leader Aman Singh being the face of one and former leader Mahendra Chaudry being the face of the other. Fiji Labour Party's social media presence and interaction has been negligible and at times ambiguous.

Unity Fiji gathered 7408 interested accounts during the period examined, with a notable sum of reactions at 10,128. The party's social media and marketing presence was assisted by Party leader Savenaca Narube's opinion pieces published in the media discussing economic issues. These were informed by his experience as the former governor of the Reserve of Fiji. This is was also coupled with the party's experienced marketing members, such as Liga Gukisuva.

HOPE was able to garner an estimated total of 3369 interested accounts with a relatively sizeable sum of reactions at 3269. The party's leader, Tupou

Draunidalo, was a former NFP party member and President in 2014. Her new party initially gathered some level of social media support and engagement. However, the party's social media engagement was marred by controversy and antagonistic implications due heated online debates and exchanges.

Reactions to the party

Facebook increased the number of reaction options to online content in 2015, which allowed users to express 'online emotions' through the use of 'emoji reactions' (McAlone, 2015). These now include 'Like, Love, Haha, Yay, Wow, Sad, and Angry'. The analytics tool utilised was able to assess emoticon reactions of specific political party posts during the period examined (1 November to 1 December, 2018).

Due to the media blackout rules of the elections, which also covered social media, political parties had to either shut down their pages before 12 November or announced they were not going to be posting any online content. Therefore, social media content analysis of reactions in the lead up to polling day ranged from the 1 to 11 November 2018.

Table 4: Top 10 most 'loved' posts before polling day

2018 Ranking	Page name	Reactions - love	Content type
1. 11/10	Lynda Tabuya (SODELPA)	2118	video
2. 11/7	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	1603	photo
3. 11/3	SODELPA	1237	photo
4. 11/3	SODELPA	1130	photo
5. 11/2	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	1118	photo
6. 11/8	Lynda Tabuya (SODELPA)	1023	video
7. 11/4	Lynda Tabuya	994	photo
8. 11/2	FijiFirst	834	video
9. 11/5	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	805	video
10. 11/8	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	683	photo

The most 'Loved'

The top ten most 'Loved' content or posts during this period was collated (Table 4). SODELPA's Lynda Tabuya released an impassioned 2min 37sec video, four days prior to polling day, which became the most 'Loved' content before the day of the elections. The video was viewed over 65,000 times, shared more than 750 times and attracted more than 7000 reactions online, with more than 450 comments. nine out of the top 10 most 'Loved' social media content all belonged to Fiji's largest opposition party—SODELPA. FijiFirst's two hours 43minutes live streamed

video from a Northern Division rally was ranked as the 8th most ‘Loved’ content, which attracted a little over 5500 reactions, with more than 90,000 views and was shared at around 200 times, with more than 2000 comments.

The most ‘Angered’

The top ten social media content which attracted the most ‘Angry’ reactions ranged from November 2-10, 2018. Eight of this top ten content was released by the FijiFirst official page. Interestingly, the most ‘Angered’ content was 8th ranked in the top ten most ‘Loved’ social media content (see Table 5). This was a 2hours 43min live streamed video from a Northern Division rally in Savusa-vu. This video garnered around 2,498 comments which saw heated exchanges between SODELPA and FijiFirst party supporters.

Table 5: Top 10 most ‘angered’ content

2018 Ranking	Page name	Reactions - angry	Content type
1. 11/2	FijiFirst	217	video
2. 11/5	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	217	video
3. 11/5	FijiFirst	31	video
4. 11/10	FijiFirst	26	photo
5. 11/6	FijiFirst	24	video
6. 11/10	FijiFirst	22	photo
7. 11/9	FijiFirst	21	video
8. 11/10	FijiFirst	21	video
9. 11/8	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka (SODELPA)	20	photo
10. 11/8	FijiFirst	19	video

The second most ‘Angered’ content was the featured Radio Fiji One, live streamed and live radio broadcasted debate between Rabuka and Bainimarama on 5 November 2018. This debate was one of the most galvanising live debates for viewers, voters and radio listeners. The debate was done in indigenous Fijian between the two leaders, which was viewed over 48,000 times, gathering over 5500 comments (most of which were expressed in real time). While the two leaders were both controversial in their own right, significant anger was levelled at the host, who was accused of being biased and unnecessarily antagonistic towards the opposition party leader, Sitiveni Rabuka. Numerous sentiments expressed in indigenous Fijian also capture the underlying distrust of certain media outlets such as FBC and continues to exemplify Fiji’s skewed media landscape.

The ‘LOL’—‘Laugh out Loud’ emoticon gauges users’ response of laughter and sometimes ridicule directed at specific online content. Out of the top ten most

Table 6: Top 10 most 'LOL' (laughed at) content

2018 Ranking	Page name	Reactions - Haha	Content type
1. 11/2	FijiFirst	340	video
2. 11/1	FijiFirst	262	video
3. 11/10	FijiFirst	244	photo
4. 11/9	FijiFirst	233	photo
5. 11/10	FijiFirst	206	photo
6. 11/4	Mosese Bulitavu	198	photo
7. 11/1	National Federation Party	193	photo
8. 11/6	FijiFirst	189	photo
9. 11/10	Lynda Tabuya	188	video
10. 11/5	Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka	135	video

'laughed' at online content, FijiFirst produced six of the most laughed at social media content. The top five all featured FijiFirst social media content relating to its events and campaigning promises. In fact, interestingly once again the 8th ranked most 'Loved' online content, the most 'Angered' was also the most 'Laughed at' social media post. This was the FijiFirst campaign rally which was live streamed for 2 hours and 43 minutes in Savusavu. The sixth most laughed at content featured SODELPA candidate and Member of Parliament, Mosese Bulitavo ridiculing FijiFirst's campaign rally in Labasa (Northern Division), where he claimed that people merely pretended to support FijiFirst for the free T-shirts and food provided. Rabuka's debate with Bainimarama which attracted a considerable number of angry responses, became the tenth most 'laughed at' social media content, with Tabuya's video which was the most 'Loved' as the ninth 'laughed at' content.

2014 vs 2018 elections

The social media landscape in 2014 was estimated to consist of under 300,000 active accounts (Tarai, Finau, Titifanue, & Kant, 2015) but four years on it has expanded to more than 500,000 accounts. The increasing interconnectivity and affordability of internet costs continues to fuel Fiji's growing social media landscape. In addition to this, the constrained and skewed media landscape continues to make social media an appealing platform for engaging information, despite its credibility and accuracy at times.

Those in their 20s and 30s that were registered for the elections constituted a significant proportion of estimated online users. In 2018, there were around 320,000 Facebook accounts estimated within the ages of 18 to 35 in Fiji. This

indicated that out of the 534,000 estimated total accounts in Fiji, 60 percent were within Fiji's youth policy age of 18 to 35. However in 2014, this age group was estimated to have constituted 70 percent of Fiji's total Facebook population. This decline from 70 to 60 percent can be attributed to the increasing popularity of other social networking sites for much younger users. These social networking sites include Instagram, Snap Chat and TikTok to name a few. For instance, a number of students in the University of the South Pacific, in their late teens, early twenties have revealed that Facebook has become less appealing than other social networking sites. There is seemingly a shift to more 'selfie' and 'fun filter' orientated social networking platforms (Snap Chat and Instagram), with more entertainment features such as edited music clips and videos (TikTok).

In terms of official Facebook pages, FijiFirst's social media audience was the largest in 2018, as it was in 2014. However, it has seemingly downplayed its 'multi page' pattern from 2014, emphasising its official party page more than any of its other Facebook pages. FijiFirst, since 2014 and in 2018, has the most well-resourced social media and marketing campaign (Krishnamurthi, 2018). The political party's reach and interconnected platform has been dominant since 2014. This has been aided by its advantageous political position within state affiliated resources and institutions (MOG, 2018). However, increasingly social media discussions are indicating greater scepticism and frustrations targeted towards FijiFirst. In 2014, there were pockets of cynicism against FijiFirst but this has certainly escalated in the three years leading up to the 2018 elections. The snapshot data of online Angered and LOL Haha emoticon reactions in the lead up to the 14 November election day, reveal a considerable level of cynicism and ridicule towards FijiFirst's social media pronouncements. This is not to say that FijiFirst does not have online support, but its opposing views appear to be more vocal, pronounced and in greater quantity than 2014.

SODELPA's most pronounced and evident social media savvy candidate was Lynda Tabuya. Her social media campaigning presence was evident since the Nadi ATS march in early 2018, where her campaigning team live streamed the event coupled with drone images. The Tabuya team ran offline and online strategies that targeted young voters. This involved sports events such as volleyball matches and concerts, which engaged more weekend participation and youth interest. The team's short informative videos, catchy local tunes and Facebook group strategies brought a new and fresh social media political dynamic. Tabuya's Facebook page had more than 77,000 interested account users and during the campaign period her team acquired one of Fiji's largest Facebook Forums, which had over 100,000 active accounts. Perhaps the biggest evidence of Tabuya's social media prowess was the fact that her short video on 10 November four days before the elections, was the most 'Loved' short video among the compared pages content.

SODELPA as a party gathered a significant social media presence over the

last four years. MPs such as Mosese Bulitavo, Niko Nawaikula, Salote Radrodro and Aseri Radrodro have been known to update a variety of Facebook forums, some of which have more than 100,000 active accounts regularly.

The National Federation party continued to maintain and expand its social media efforts with an added Instagram account and an interactive Twitter account taken on personally by the party leader, Professor Biman Prasad. NFP's social media presence has also been boosted with the well-known local personality Lenora Qereqeretabua who was a candidate and continues to have a notable online following. Smaller political parties' social media efforts were limited due to specific priorities, approaches and areas of focus.

Facebook continues to be the most populated social networking site in Fiji. There have been considerable political discussions that have expanded onto Twitter and produced high quality of debates at times. However, by quantity Facebook still outnumbers all other social networking sites. In addition to this, Facebook groups in Fiji have expanded from its earlier dynamics of small groups like Letters to the Editor Uncensored (LEU) (Tarai, 2018). For instance, groups such as Fiji Exposed Forum, which accommodate more than 140,000 account users, have made media headlines for its claims of exposing government corruption and promoting transparency (Beldi, 2018). Arguably the biggest Facebook group in Fiji is Chat Fiji, which accommodates over 230,000 active accounts. The dynamics of influence in these groups has become increasingly evident with a number of viral videos generated from within these groups (Tarai & Drugunalevu, 2018). Suva as the capital city and the central division at large, continues to have the largest estimated audience than any other area in Fiji. With the Suva-Nausori corridor continuing to increase in population and density, more and more users are logging on from within the central division.

Since 2014, Facebook continues to grow steadily with a variety of new dynamics and complexities. One of these complexities has been brought by the recently instituted *Online Safety Bill*, which has fuelled local concerns about its possible limitations and implications on social media (Tarai, 2018). These dynamics did not limit social media campaigning during the elections because it was enforced in early 2019 (Tarai, January 21, 2019). Social media continues to be a prominent arena for political discussions, debates and campaigning. It is creating more space for citizen engagement and exchange, while providing opposition parties with creative opportunities to challenge FijiFirst's social media dominance.

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