

The Role of Social Media in New Caledonia's Referendums on Self-determination

Nic Maclellan

In Brief 2020/31

Introduction

The French Pacific collectivity of New Caledonia has held two referendums on its political status under the 1998 Noumea Accord, on 4 November 2018 and 4 October 2020. Both referendums saw a majority of registered voters decide against independence, to remain within the French Republic. But the [narrow margin](#) of 57% 'No' to 43% 'Yes' in 2018, and a [closer result](#) 53% to 47% in 2020, suggests the territory will move to the third and final vote by 2022, as proposed under the agreement.

Although traditional methods still dominated during the referendum campaigns (public meetings, rallies, posters and so forth), all political forces in New Caledonia have increased their use of social media. This In Brief discusses the use of social media by the main independence coalition Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), and by parties opposed to independence, such as Calédonie ensemble and the six-member alliance the Loyalists (Les Loyalistes).

In a system with voluntary voting, the independence movement targeted younger people, seeking to register and mobilise a key cohort who have often abstained during local elections (Maclellan 2019:23–25). Social media also provide crucial mechanisms to share information about New Caledonia with neighbouring countries of the Pacific Islands Forum, as well as with other independence movements.

Escaping media boundaries

From the 1980s, independence voices were often marginalised in key media: the only daily newspaper [Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes](#), commercial radio, and French state TV and radio (Maclellan 2009). To challenge the dominance of conservative perspectives, the FLNKS helped establish the community station Radio Djido in 1985, which still broadcasts today, operating on a shoestring budget.

While balanced coverage of competing perspectives has improved since the signing of the Noumea Accord, major media outlets still editorialise against the FLNKS, influenced by commerce and ideology. In addition, many media give less coverage to voters in rural areas and outer islands,

who are mainly indigenous. Journalistic practice has often caricatured indigenous perspectives: Marie M'Balla-Ndi (2017) has documented the constraints facing Kanak journalists, as well as cultural challenges for metropolitan French media workers in a land of Melanesian custom.

Given all these constraints, use of social media has become a cheap and effective tool for political campaigners during the referendum campaigns — directly sharing information, music and symbols as well as practical information on voter registration, policy and campaign events. At the same time, there is lively debate, with sharp retorts and sometimes racist abuse. In 2018, a Committee of Elders issued a 'Call for Moderation', concerned about 'anonymous diatribes on social media and insults, often racist, which could damage social cohesion' (Maclellan 26/10/2018).

Social media access

The rapid spread of smartphone technology in New Caledonia mirrors patterns in other Pacific Island nations. Nearly half the population of 271,000 has broadband access on mobile phones (CCI 26/2/2020). There are significant variations, however, in access to quality broadband — and even electricity — between urban centres and isolated villages in the central mountain chain and the outer islands, where the population is majority Kanak.

A February 2020 study commissioned by the New Caledonia Chamber of Commerce and Industry focused on the role of social media in building local businesses, but contains useful data on the reach of these platforms (CCI 26/2/2020). It finds that 86% of young people (age 15–29) use a smartphone to access the internet, followed by laptop (9%), desktop computer (3%) and tablet (2%). Two-thirds of the overall population are 'active social media users' while six out of ten young people use one or more forms of social media: Facebook (92%), Instagram (17%), Snapchat (10%), Twitter (7%), YouTube (5%), LinkedIn (2%), Pinterest (1%). While political messaging peaks during elections and referendum campaigns, social media is mainly used for entertainment, especially by the young.

Political campaigning

During the 2018 referendum campaign, social media from conservative anti-independence parties was often produced by advertising agencies, with high production values. Mobilising a large publicity budget, Calédonie ensemble's Facebook page distributed [professionally produced videos](#) that were also played during campaign meetings and official television broadcasts.

French researcher Akila Nedjar-Guerre has highlighted the popularity of Facebook in New Caledonia above other social media, noting:

Facebook is by far the most utilised social media by residents of the territory ... In contrast, the use of Twitter by political parties is very weak in comparison to mainland France. Twitter accounts (such as the FLNKS) have sometimes been open for some years, but are very seldom used and sometimes even non-existent. (Nedjar-Guerre 9/10/2020)

Nedjar-Guerre reports that, during the 2020 referendum, the use of Facebook posts by the FLNKS increased markedly compared to 2018. In the week before the November 2018 referendum, the official FLNKS page issued six posts; in the week before the October 2020 vote, there were 135 (in contrast, the Loyalists issued 25 unique posts and Calédonie ensemble 20).

Compared to past years, the independence movement has increasingly diversified its use of social media: livestreaming concerts and demonstrations; sharing memes, photographs and videos to promote a Yes vote; promoting details of campaign events; and circulating images and aphorisms of Kanak martyrs. The FLNKS distributed video clips, such as a 2018 [drone shot](#) of independence activists forming the word 'Oui' (Yes), through their [official Facebook page](#).

In 2020, competing social media postings often used emoticons of the flags of Kanaky or the French Republic, reinforcing the symbolism of the nationalist banners. The Loyalists widely [promoted](#) the French tricolour at a time of political and legal dispute over use of the flag during the campaign ([French courts](#) rejected a case by Kanak politicians arguing that the partisan use of France's tricolour was a breach of French electoral law).

Pan-Pacific solidarity

Social media amplifies the real-time sharing of information and expands social reach, when movements for self-determination are mobilising across Melanesia. The use of Facebook and YouTube has increased the sharing of information and images between Melanesian activists in Bougainville, West Papua and New Caledonia, interested in the lessons of the 20-year transition under the Noumea Accord (e.g. Giay 5/10/2020), as well as with movements in Corsica and Catalonia that support the FLNKS.

Youth networks have increasingly used social media to hold Zoom meetings and share music, memes and messages of solidarity across the region. In October 2020, the youth network Youngsolwara in Fiji used its [Facebook page](#) to post solidarity messages from Fiji, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and other nations. Another [solidarity message](#) on YouTube came from Jeffrey Bomanak of the TPN/OPM (West Papua National Liberation Army/Free Papua Movement). The West Papuan guerrilla leader, hiding from Indonesian forces in the Papuan Highlands, highlighted parallels between the Kanak and West Papuan nationalist cause.

Conclusion

While there is increasing evidence of the use of social media, there is scope for further research on the effectiveness of messaging. Transcending language barriers, the sharing of photos and videos from New Caledonia has increased real-time awareness of events on the ground for media and politicians in other countries (especially in the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which provides extensive diplomatic support for the FLNKS). The significant turn-out by young Kanak in 2018 and 2020 — first-time voters who were not born when the Noumea Accord was signed — was a crucial element of the Yes campaign. This trend will likely increase with the third referendum in 2022 and there is a need for further research on the way social media was used to mobilise this youth cohort.

Notes on authors

Nic Maclellan is a correspondent for Islands Business magazine (Fiji) and reports on elections and referendums in New Caledonia for regional media.

References

- CCI (Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Nouvelle-Calédonie). 26/2/2020. [Communication Digitale — Usage des réseaux sociaux en Nouvelle-Calédonie](#).
- Giay, E. 5/10/2020. [Pro-Kemerdekaan Kaledonia Baru: kedaulatan tidak bisa dihindarkan](#). *Jubi* (Papua).
- Maclellan, N. 2009. [The Changing Mediascape in New Caledonia Broadens the Political Spectrum](#). *Pacific Journalism Review*, 15(2):205–9.
- Maclellan, N. 26/10/2018. [Wise Elders Call for Peaceful Referendum](#). *Islands Business*.
- Maclellan, N. 2019. [‘We Lost on the Numbers, But for Us It’s a Victory’: New Caledonia’s 2018 Referendum on Self-Determination](#). *The Journal of Pacific History*, 54(2):224–52.
- M'Balla-Ndi, M. 2017. [Division in the Land of ‘the Unspoken’: Examining Journalistic Practice in Contemporary New Caledonia](#). *MedieKultur*, 62:52–71.
- Nedjar-Guerre, A. 9/10/2020. [Nouvelle-Calédonie : les réseaux sociaux au cœur du militantisme politique](#). *The Conversation* (France).

