

Social Media and the Business of Local Government: Evidence From South Africa

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Abstract: Local governments are at the forefront of public service delivery and can encourage democracy through open and transparent communication using social media. Officials must provide instant, correct, and reliable information and feedback in that regard. Local authorities however use social media but fail to utilise it effectively in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus this study explores social media intricacies as a digital platform in enhancing public service delivery, access to information and critical engagement for effective participatory governance in a Municipality in South Africa. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological strategy, collecting interview data from the local bureaucracy as well as focus group discussions with community leaders and members. The study found that the use of social media is underpinned by the Local Authority's communication strategy, progressive but remains out of touch with reality, with glaring shortcomings leading to negative perceptions, thereby undermining public service delivery enhancements and effective participatory governance endeavours. Findings indicate that social media platforms can support transparency and critical engagement but the municipality's communication strategies need to be first and foremost in touch with reality and utilise more current platforms which are experiencing rapid and intense surges in popularity and engagement. This will facilitate better positioning to build and/or counter eroding public trust and enhance transparency, thus necessitating a communication policy strategy and social media rethink in the post-truth era. This is pivotal in promoting local administrative ideals and for understanding and addressing community needs using aspects of social media that are most impactful for improving the local government's service delivery as well as the lives of all constituencies for the better.

Keywords: Social Media; Participatory Governance; Local Government; Communication Strategy; Digital Divide

1. Introduction

South Africa's post-Apartheid local government and its reforms have been anchored on democratic values of communication and overall participatory governance for ideal implementation, planning and overall state – bureaucracy performance. However, local government in the country experiences many challenges such as a lack of innovation, slow technological innovation uptake, lack of financial commitment and immensely challenged public - community participation and management, including intergovernmental relations (see: Biyela et al, 2018; Khanyile et al, 2021; Mthuli, 2024b; Biyela, Ndebele & Mdlalose 2025; Mkhize et al, 2025). These issues if addressed would contribute to strengthening the country's democracy, advancing its bureaucracy and performance as well as functions at all levels (see: Khanyile et al, 2021; Mthuli, 2024b). Information Communication Technology (ICT) has a huge impact on how we communicate and cascade information (Chung, 2017). Sebola (2017) highlights that while much has been done by government to communicate with its citizenry in South Africa in the traditional way, there are other options such as social media, on which governments must capitalise. More so at local government level as the authority closest to the people. Sebola (2017) further noting that many municipalities in the country to date do not have a reliable internet connection nor access to social media. This can therefore undermine the business of local government in the digital age.

2. Background and Problem

The use of technologies to communicate cannot be under-estimated and Maarek (2014) using the 2012 re-election of United States of America's Barack Obama highlights the central role of communication, the successful use of various forms of communication, including the recent newly elected New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani, seen as social media savvy, solidifying the powerful and advantageous use of social media and overall digital organising, as evidence of the power of social media usage (Mays and King 2025; Badawi 2025). In the age of e-governance, m-governance, e-services and e-participation, local public administration use social media to communicate with their constituencies so to improve policy implementation and the overall public service delivery. This on the backfoot of explosive research on social media and e-government from 2010 (Magro, 2012). This study argues that, if utilized effectively, social media presents an opportunity to rebuild trust, transparency and interest the youth in the public governance revolution. Social media in this context includes a wide-range of functions and improvements in e-governance, m-governance, e-services and e-participation technology and as well as in the use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp is most beneficial and according

to Schwester, Carrizales and Holzer (2009) have thus added another dimension to the communication systems used by municipalities .

The Municipality which is the focus of this study is located in a rural town of the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) - South Africa. This rural Municipality has experienced continuous service delivery protests from 2010, with communities marching against lack of service delivery and the poor flow of information from the Municipality on matters affecting them leading to, among other incidents, the torching of Municipal offices and vehicles, stoning and road blockading. In the protests, placards displayed by the disgruntled during two marches, indicated a lack of access to information, accusing the authorities of also sharing Municipal information along partisan lines, and questioning the existence of *Batho Pele* (putting people first) principles (see: Mtshali, 2016; Pieterse, 2016; Khanyile et al, 2021; Khunoethe et al, 2021). Like many of its counterparts in country, the Municipality has uses ICTs such as municipal websites, social media platforms, and instant messaging to communicate with members of its communities beyond traditional means. In uMshwathi Municipality, Khanyile et al (2021) found the ineffective use and management of internet platforms, central to its technologically innovative participatory governance, were weak because of complexities in effectively managing and utilising them. This study thus explores social media intricacies as a digital platform in enhancing public service delivery, access to information and critical engagement for effective participatory governance in a rural town in KZN, South Africa.

3. The Role of Social Media in Public Governance

The role of social media in public administration and broader governance is being transformed by today's digital age. This is very important in overcoming existing challenges in the areas of policy development, process design, governance, and the overall conceptions of democratic engagement today (see: Bertot et al, 2010) this in both the developed and the developing world.

3.1 Developed World

In the USA, Graham (2014) found that social media is effective in communicating with communities, especially the youth and in encouraging dialogue and overcoming existing barriers to traditional communication. Communicating by social media in addition had not placed any constraints on nor required much effort from community members, which conventional methods generally had done. Bertot et al (2010, p.53), also in the USA researching and evaluating social media initiatives expressed that social media held great promise in its ability to transform governance, further stating that it can:

“create new ways of democratic participation, pressures for new institutional structures, and processes and frameworks for open and transparent government on an unprecedented scale”.

The implementation of the E-Government Act of 2002 in the USA assisted in enabling community members timely to access to information using technology (Bertot et al, 2010). Social media as a communication tool between local governments in the USA and the citizenry has encouraged two-way communication, Graham (2014) concluded. This has allowed public information officers and the community to openly engage on many issues and communicate back and forth including in dealing with complaints and challenges from communities. Similar findings were also found by Kent (2013) in Australia that the use of social media, does encourage and enable an open and transparent democracy because of its ability to foster open communication. Jaeger and Bertot (2012) holding a similar view in the USA, concluded that the use of social media by local governments has made them become more transparent adding that through this medium, communities are updated, educated, and informed of local policies, and processes are easily communicated, with queries immediately responded to.

In European countries such as Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, there is a divergent behaviour across countries in the use of social media by public/state institutions (Magro 2012). Social media thus over a decade ago had not been used to its full potential from an analysis of 27 European countries in 2009 (Molinari and Ferro's 2009). In Italy and Spain's local governments, Guillamón et al (2016, p.460) found that the “level of e-participation, population size, citizens' income level and level of indebtedness have an impact on Facebook use by local governments...” further to that finding that the “...high level of Facebook use would suggest that local governments tend to enable citizens to oversee government making more transparent information, data and processes”. Thus this solidifies the link and benefits of social media on not only public administration realizing its goals, but also in encouraging communities been seen and heard in the developed world.

3.2 Developing World

Social media was once seen as that which would close the global digital divide because of e-government but it has resulted inadvertently in the social exclusion of the disadvantaged. Internet access was and continues to be seen as something that can empower developing nations, with social media empowering individuals in these nations and combatting the obstacle of the digital gap (see: Ochara-Muganda & Van Belle 2010; Ali 2011). Evidence has shown social media increasing e-governance adoption in Nepal for example, where trust in government and its institutions was low, hence a useful tool for governments to improve relationships with its citizens and to enable transparency (Shah & Lim 2011). Social media has become easily accessible with internet access now available to all citizens in countries such as in Jordan which has an e-government page on Facebook which shows an ideal level of engagement by citizens in the country. In addition, published posts are received positively as evidenced by 'likes' and comments made, posts shared, or questions being responded to when asked. Thus, this is seen as a way to rebuild the relationship with their citizens, increasing citizens' engagement and participation levels in the country (Khasawneh & Abu-Shanab, 2013).

In Sub-Sahara Africa, the Namibian local government, like many other governments in Southern Africa, uses social media to communicate with constituencies. However, this is not without its challenges, utilising social media effectively for the benefit of the people (Maritz, 2015). Matali (2017) highlights that the main challenges include the lack of applicable policies to guide social media usage, as well as a lack of trained local government staff to manage social media communication in Namibia. Government officials managing such platforms need the necessary knowledge of social media (Charalabidis & Loukis 2011) and this assertion is supported by Landsbergen (2010), who adds that for the use of social media to be a success, government officials must provide instant, correct, and reliable information and feedback.

Nchabeleng, Botha and Bischoff (2018) expressed that the use of e-governance and social media by the public service is effective in South Africa, however the issue was that data was expensive in the country thus making it difficult for some members of the public to access the internet. Other studies that sought to explore the use of social media and intricacies in the country remain limited at local government level. Fashoro and Barnard (2017) found that in a municipality that used Facebook and Twitter as its standard social media platforms to engage citizens, did not have its own social media policy, also the lack of administrative and political leadership support after using social media. This on the backfoot of concerns on what information and its depth can be posted - shared with the public, in relation to issues of confidentiality or sensitivity. While in another municipality, social media used by a local government as its internal communication tool but with no guiding policy document, while in others in South Africa where it exists there remains issues of compliance and adherence with the policy and policy awareness (Grawe, Nkoala & Makwambeni 2023).

Fashoro & Barnard's (2021, p.3) analysis of social media pages of the South African governments, found that platforms are used mainly for information broadcasting in the country, an extension to existing websites, stating that:

“...limited engagement and participation; where these exist, it is due to the municipality posting information relevant to citizens' lives and being intentional in responding to citizens' comments”.

There remains in South Africa nevertheless discrepancies in the adoption of social media between municipalities with some municipalities under-utilizing social media, whilst others use it to share information or respond sporadically (Mawela 2017).

4. Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological strategy (Mthuli, Ruffin & Singh 2022). In doing so primary data was collected by means of one of one interviews with open-ended questions with the local bureaucracy and focus group discussions with community leaders who were purposefully sampled (see: Mthuli et al, 2022; Khunoethe et al, 2021) to attain their lived experiences and perceptions as knowledge holders (Khumalo et al, 2019; Mthuli et al, 2022). Data was collected through seven interviews – respondents (Rs) and three focus group discussions (FDGs) with ten members each. The sample included participants that were ward councillors of the three wards, and a traditional leader of one of the wards, making a total sample size of thirty-seven, which was deemed sufficient for a study of this nature (Mthuli et al, 2022). The data was analysed thematically and the patterns that emerged were triangulated interview and focus group discussion data - transcripts and categorized into themes (see: Khanyile et al, 2021; Khunoethe et al, 2021; Khumalo et al, 2019).

5. Findings and Discussion

In exploring at a Municipality in South Africa the intricacy of social media as a digital platform in enhancing public service delivery, access to information and critical engagement, two themes emerged: (a.) challenged strategic technological use and (b.) information communication adversities which are discussed below:

5.1 Challenged Strategic Technological Use

There are issues with the use of technology to supplement the provision of information sharing and communication in the Municipality informed is by its strategy. This study found that the Municipality does also use social media to communicate by sharing information with its communities but this perceived negatively for a number of reasons. A participant pointed to a key shortfall in the Municipality's communication strategy, that:

"... the network reception in most rural wards in this Municipality is very bad and until the Municipality attends to this with the network providers, access to information through the use of technology will remain a huge problem" (R 3).

With a Focus Group Discussion participant (FGD 3; Participant 4) expressing that:

"...the Municipality needs to pull up their socks with regards to information systems because it takes too long for information to get to Ward committee members and the general public. Also relying on the network is a huge challenge because the reception in most wards is a nightmare".

Responding timeously was another concern on social media platforms such as Facebook, with the view that the Municipality should develop a formal policy on social media platforms use that gives specific staff responsibilities to communicate on these platforms so as to assure timeous and correct responses to the public. This would aid in addressing the issue of the Municipality's social media being under-utilized and sporadic response rate also identified by Mawela (2017) in South Africa. This supports the findings of other researchers like Cullen et al (2003) in New Zealand, and Landsbergen (2010) in Namibia, that municipalities must respond timeously to requests for accessing municipal information and that social media is an extension of existing communication platforms in the Municipality, supporting Fashoro & Barnard's (2021) assertion in South Africa. Over the past two decades, while Africa has seen an increase in the use of mobile phones, as they become more and more affordable (Kayisire and Wei, 2016). However the infrastructural divide thus remains a major stumbling block, undermining strategy endeavours, more so for rural and or poor municipalities and countries without the necessary resources to expand access meaningfully and for all.

5.2 Information Communication System Adversities

The study found that the while traditional face-to-face structured meetings were being complimented with other methods facing difficulties nevertheless social media remained underutilized and ineffectively used, this evident by utterances made, that:

"...different systems to ensure that communities have access to the municipal information. These include the Traditional Council structures led by the Amakhosi (Chiefs), the...Facebook page ...helps a great deal in providing members of the public with an opportunity to communicate with the Municipality on their frustrations and challenges" (Respondent 6).

While FGD 2, Participant 3 expressed that:

"...for those of us who are lucky to access internet, we do post request for information on the Facebook page... but they hardly respond to our requests".

With another FGD 3 member, Participant 7 supported this by stating that:

"...Municipality does have a Facebook page where they post some of the information but when we request clarity or more information you are lucky to get a response".

Another FGD 3, Participant 10 also indicated that:

"Complaining through their Facebook page is a waste of time because they do not respond to complaints".

These findings indicate that there are systematic challenges with communication and information sharing including the Municipality's social media use. Access to the internet is still a major stumbling block because social

media that caters only for those who either have internet access or good internet access, disadvantages the poor and destitute mostly located in rural areas undermining participatory governance.

This study fills a gap in knowledge by identifying the superficial nature of policy, administration and the SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic & timebound) indicator use, this a critical aspect of practice which does not necessarily receive the attention it deserves (see: Khunoethe et al, 2021). The superficial nature of the Municipality's communication policy and implementation remains exacerbated by being out of touch with the local authority's reality. The lack of use of social media platforms that are trending in terms of experiencing a rapid, intense surge in popularity and engagement such as Instagram and or TikTok was noted. Meaning that for the social media platforms to support transparency and critical engagement in the rural Municipality, there ought to be first and foremost a communication strategy in touch with its reality. This can build and or counter any eroding public trust and transparency needs, considering that information consumption of social media posts and vice versa are influenced by unique contextual issues as evident in this case, thus necessitating a communication policy – strategy and social media rethink in the post-truth era in similar contexts.

6. Conclusion

The study explored the intricacy of social media use as a digital platform in enhancing public service delivery, access to information and critical engagement for effective participatory governance in a rural Municipality in South Africa. The findings points to two points of complexity in the Local Authority's social media use, the: (a). challenged strategic technological use and (b.) the information communication system adversities. These undermine any possible customer engagement which ought to influence and affect service delivery behaviour between the Local Authority and its communities. This a vital interaction and mechanism for community building anchored on an ideal participatory governance system. This study recommends a municipal dialogue on the strategic use of trending social media platforms that are experiencing a rapid, intense surge in popularity and engagement as well as other diverse aspects of social media, which would lead to a communication strategy that is in touch with reality and meaningful resource allocations for communication, including social media use and professionalization. Hence an area for further research is the strategic use of trending social media platforms experiencing a rapid, intense surge in popularity and engagement in spurring e-participation and enabling participatory governance, more so for the youth in the developed world.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was required for the research, obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC), and the protocol number: HSSREC/00001318/2020

AI Declaration

This serves to confirm that no AI tools were used and in any way or form in writing the manuscript.

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