

Chapter 7

Metros and the Use of Social Media for Citizen Participation: The Cases of Cape Town and Johannesburg

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Abstract

South Africa's major metropolitan municipalities are still leaning towards traditional spaces for citizen participation and bureaucratic insulation between elections, exactly three decades after the country's first democratic elections. This suggests that they are not taking full advantage of the worldwide boom in Internet usage and meaningfully moving their citizen participation processes to online social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp. Where this happens, the process is a "tick-a-box" exercise and it is mainly used as an information dissemination tool for municipal administrators. This begs the question: Why is this being allowed, despite the rise in the use of digital technology in South Africa? This qualitative chapter argues that social media in the hands of these municipalities is unlikely to deepen democracy at the local level, which demands greater participation among citizens in a country's governance processes. The results of this study are not surprising, given the ongoing debate among practitioners and scholars about the role of social media in strengthening democracy.

Keywords: Citizen participation, Elections, Digital technology, Social media, Democracy

Introduction

The South African government claims to have made strides in key areas since 1994, such as uniting the country, consolidating democracy, achieving non-racialism, and delivering basic services (Maseko, 2022); but many contest the durability and depth of these changes (Garman and Wasserman, 2017; World Bank, 2022). The end of apartheid and the introduction of a legal framework, such as the Constitution Act 108 of 1996, paved the way for citizens to participate in governance processes, including voting in free and fair democratic elections. However, exactly three decades after ousting the racist apartheid regime that trapped many people in poverty and racialised spaces, South Africa still faces enormous developmental, nation-building, socio-spatial inequality, and structural challenges.

This chapter analyses the political use of social media at the local government level, which is the closest sphere of government to the people, followed by the provincial and national spheres. It focuses on the situation in Cape Town and Johannesburg, two of South Africa's biggest metropolitan municipalities. According to Van Staden (2017), citizen participation in government affairs is democracy in action. South Africa's government receives a general mandate once every five years to govern nationally, provincially, and locally. There are concerns about declining youth participation at the local level and by other citizens with a lower economic status (Dalton, 2017). This casts doubt on current methods used for citizen participation outside of online engagement.

Social media is used by an estimated 5 billion people around the globe, according to Petrosyan (2024). She states that this figure represents more than 60% of the global population. A 2014 study done on 31 world cities found that Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook were some of the social media platforms most used by governments in cities with stronger service delivery records, e.g. Paris, New York, Hong

Kong, and Barcelona (Mainka, et al. 2014). They argue that the governments in these cities use social media services for government-to-citizen interaction.

Why this Subject?

There is a big debate worldwide about the use of digital technologies, particularly social media, and the nature of democratic politics. One side of the debate is led by scholars who argue that citizens are surfing the Internet for frivolous, apolitical purposes, instead of engaging in meaningful practical civic and political activities (Boulianne, 2015; Gladwell, 2010). These scholars predict challenging times ahead for citizens and further declines in civic life. The other side argues that social media may have a positive impact on citizen participation (Diamond, 2010; Lin and Kant, 2021). Furthermore, they say that social media could mobilise politically inactive populations, and more so at the local government level. In South Africa, the continued role of legacy media such as radio, talk shows, television, and newspapers could help us understand why citizens are looking for alternative ways to communicate in political settings. Chiumbu and Ligaga, (2013) argue that legacy media still excludes many groups from participating in local government processes, including women, black people, indigenous language speakers, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities (Sahin, 2021). Chiumbu and Ligaga (2013) further argue that, given its strong social influence, legacy media seems to be the preferred method of communication by the state (pointing towards municipal administrators and bureaucrats alike). Additionally, they argue that legacy media may also be subject to manipulation and abuse by the state and powerful politicians and business groups (Chiumbu and Ligaga, 2013).

To address some of the challenges, Wasserman (2011), Chiumbu and Ligaga (2013), and Baker (2012) suggest exploring the role played by social media platforms in terms of citizen participation. South Africa, it would appear, would be an ideal location for this kind of participation, given the level of Internet connectivity in the country. As at January 2024, there were 45.34 million active Internet users in South Africa (Cowling, 2024). She further argues that close to 26 million Internet users in the country use social media, which represents about 42.8% of the total population of over 60 million people (Cowling, 2024). According to Statistics South Africa (2022), the results of the National Census 2022 also show a growing trend in mobile phone ownership, with 92.1% of households in the country owning a working mobile phone. However, Dalvit and Schoon (2018) warn that while mobile phones allow users to provide analysis and commentary on social networks, people sometimes react more to sensationalist aspects of the content they are engaging in.

The rest of this chapter addresses the problem statement and research question, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and literature perspectives. It then introduces the optimist, pessimist, and realist debate regarding using social media in political processes in South Africa. This is followed by a reflection of the state of democracy and local government in the country. Citizen engagement is then discussed generally, followed by the state of participation in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The chapter also discusses South Africa's digital divide and how it impacts the local level, before presenting the findings and discussion. The chapter ends with recommendations to improve the communication strategies of metros, and a conclusion.

Problem statement

The problem statement centres around two main contested areas. Firstly, the disagreement among scholars about the use, potential, and impact of social media on civic and political engagement. Cyber-pessimistic scholars believe that social media use will contribute to civic decline by spreading inaccurate and uncivil disinformation (Morozov, 2011), while cyber-optimistic scholars think that it has a role to play in reinvigorating civic life (Soriano, 2013). Secondly, the problem statement focuses on the effect of citizen participation in governance and the innovative technologies that could encourage it further.