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Assessing South African Government's Use of Social Media for Citizen Participation

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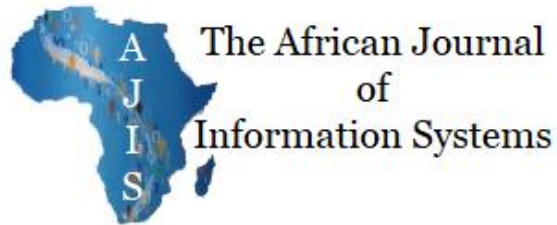
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ABSTRACT

Social media are commended as e-participation reformation tools; consequently, governments around the world are adopting social media. South Africa is not exempt from this adoption trend; however, the extent to which social media is used for public participation is yet to be understood. This paper presents a qualitative study exploring social media as an e-participation tool through content analysis of social media pages of the South African government. The study found that while all provinces and municipalities have social media accounts, these platforms are used mainly for information broadcasting, viz., as an extension to their websites. There is 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. The study contributes to the social media discussion within the African government context and is a first step towards actualizing effective public participation through social media in South Africa.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

Social media have been ingrained into our lives and quickly are becoming one of the most common mechanisms of communication. Social media technologies offer benefits of direct communication, empowerment, and crowdsourcing for collective problem-solving (Kavanaugh, Sandoval-Almazan, & Ubacht, 2020). These technologies are used regularly in our personal and business lives. As citizens become more tech-savvy, their technological expectations from government increase (Andrews, Jarvis, & Pavia, 2014), causing governments to adopt new technologies in a bid to satisfy citizen expectations. Resources are being devoted to social media adoption in a bid to meet citizens' needs and achieve democratically legitimate citizen engagement. Nam (2012) remarks about government agencies being under pressure to adopt social media due to the expectations of citizens and businesses. Governments around the world have adopted social media in different capacities in the past few years. The UN's e-

government survey reported an increase in the number of governments using social media from 71 in 2014 to 152 in 2018 (United Nations, 2018). The current survey from the United Nations also indicates that 65% of its member states are now at a high or very high Electronic Government Development Index (EGDI). EGDI is a readiness index that measures a country's capacity and willingness to use ICT to deliver public services. Countries are scored on an index ranging from 0.00 to 1.00 (United Nations, 2012). The EGDI is a composite measure of three important dimensions of e-government, namely: provision of online services, telecommunication connectivity, and human capacity (United Nations, 2014).

In conjunction with the rapid adoption of social media, public sector organizations have acknowledged the importance of citizen interaction and public participation. In recent years, there has been an increase in the demand for citizens to be involved in matters of government and for governments to be responsive to their changing needs and opinions (Coleman & Gøtze, 2002; Eom, Hwang, & Kim, 2018; United Nations, 2014). Citizens are demanding accountability and transparency from governments and are less passive in their interactions with governments. They expect to be included in policy developments and informed of the government's activities. Public participation subsequently has become a major focus for governments which have come to realize that meeting citizens' needs is the main purpose of public service, and to achieve this purpose, citizen involvement is required (Mainka, Hartmann, Stock, & Peters, 2015). This shift in prioritizing citizens has led to a growing interest in how government can satisfy its customers effectively and efficiently through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Digital government thus aims to alter the relationship between government and citizens by potentially improving interactions and dialogue.

The successes identified in using social media in government for public participation, engagement, and communication cannot be generalized to countries with developing economies (CDEs) which face challenges, such as the digital divide—highlighted by the United Nations as a persisting challenge (United Nations, 2020), as well as lack of policies, lack of skills, red tape and bureaucracy, and resistance from leadership (Bawack, Kamdjoug, Wamba, & Noutsa, 2018; Fashoro & Barnard, 2017). South African municipal governments, in a bid to keep up with citizen expectations and trends around the world, have set up social media accounts for interacting with and engaging citizens. One factor that has encouraged the South African government's Internet and social media adoption is the rapid and continuous adoption by citizens. Citizen use of social media in South Africa has seen a steady increase in use year by year, with 22 million current active users (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020). Current statistics regarding South African social media use show that WhatsApp has 10.1 million active users, Facebook has 9.1 million active users, Twitter has 4.7 million active users, YouTube users increased to 9 million active users, Instagram has 4.7 million active users, and LinkedIn has 3.7 million active subscribers (Worldwideworx & OrnicoGroup, 2020).

These social media implementations by South African governments are disorganized sometimes and have been done without an action plan or structure. Most of these accounts have been started by individual government employees who felt the need to be on-trend. These adoptions were short-sighted and only addressed the immediate need of the municipality as identified by the individual who set up the account. In the process of setting up these social media accounts, municipalities have therefore not considered the long-term needs of citizens. Understanding the needs of citizens in e-government adoption has been established as an essential factor for providing effective services through ICT (Al Athmay, Fantazy, & Kumar, 2016). The aftermath of these impromptu implementations are interactions that are intangible, superficial, and have no impact on public participation.

Presence on social media has been deemed insufficient to assure participation from citizens; consequently, municipalities require a strategy for social media that will enhance citizen participation (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & del Carmen Caba-Pérez, 2018; Mainka et al., 2015). In a bid to develop an appropriate strategy for local municipalities in South Africa, there is a need to understand the status quo of social media use by these municipalities. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the use and impact of social media by the South African government, specifically provinces and metropolitan municipalities. At the point when this research was conducted, limited research on social media use by governments in CDEs could be found; therefore, this paper attempts to fill this gap. The paper will therefore be investigating the following research questions:

> RQ1: What social media platforms are used by South African provincial and metropolitan governments?

> RQ2: How are these platforms used for participation activities?

The subsequent sections of this paper describe the context of the study, a review of existing literature relating to social media and e-government, and the methodology of the study. A discussion of the content analysis results will follow, and the final section of this paper presents concluding thoughts and reflections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature will be explored in this section to provide context to the study presented in this paper. The section will include discussions on social media in government, highlighting the opportunities presented by using social media. The discussion will proceed to e-participation activities and strategies employed by governments in conducting these activities on social media. Subsequently, empirical studies relating to social media use in government will be highlighted. The final section of the literature review addresses theoretical frameworks used in evaluating e-participation activities.

Social Media in Government

Social media have evolved into the favored method of engagement with individuals, businesses, and even celebrities. Governments had initially been slow to adopt social media but have invested increasingly in these tools as a cost-effective way of engaging citizens. In the context of government, Mergel (2015, p. 3018) defines social media applications as "online platforms and services that are developed by third-party providers and adopted by government organizations to increase their interactivity and exchanges with citizens." These applications include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, social tagging, social bookmarking, and other forms of collaborative tools.

Social media have become a prevalent technology worldwide. The number of individual and business users on social media has increased exponentially since its inception. According to the web analytic company Alexa (Alexa, n.d.), social media websites are some of the most visited around the world. Social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn report millions of users. Governments adopting social media will be meeting citizens in a space where citizens are familiar with and capable of navigating, which has been identified as a success factor for e-participation initiatives (Friedman, 2006; United Nations, 2014). The role of social media in public participation has been made more imperative due to the COVID-19 crisis (United Nations, 2020); citizens have expectations of information provision, online working and learning, and e-health using these digital platforms.

Social media allow governments to overcome the limitations of resources which has been a struggle, especially for local governments which are closer to citizens, by providing a cost-efficient space for

communication and collaboration (Silva, Tavares, Silva, & Lameiras, 2019). With social media and other Web 2.0 technologies, citizens can contribute to the service delivery process by becoming what has been termed *prosumers*. Using social media technologies, citizens are able to collaborate with the government in sourcing solutions to service delivery issues (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010). Crowdsourcing is a possibility due to the large number of users available on social media platforms; expert opinions can be sought, and innovative solutions formulated in less time and with less money (Nam, 2012). These solutions and policies created through crowdsourcing might have the benefit of appealing to the majority of the community since they reflect the citizens' opinions, and are backed by the power of the crowd (Nam, 2012; Sæbø, Rose, & Nyvang, 2009). Some citizens and nongovernmental organizations take up the initiative and create services for the public using social media technologies; for instance, in Cape Town, Lungisa is created as a community monitoring tool that allows the public to report service delivery issues to local government authorities (United Nations, 2014).

Social media also are expected to improve transparency and accountability while increasing trust of citizens in government (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Eom et al., 2018; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). This is because social media reduce information asymmetry between government and citizens by providing a platform for information sharing. Transparency and accountability have become an important issue for governments in a bid to fight corruption and restore citizens' trust and confidence in governments (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010; Mzimakwe, 2010). Waning interest by the public in politics and low election turnouts have made it imperative for governments to improve transparency and accountability. In a bid to build trust and curb corruption, governments have taken to posting information on spending, budgets, and activities of officials on social media, so citizens can monitor government action.

Information dissemination is one of the predominant ways in which governments use social media. The dissemination of information to citizens is done in a bid to overcome what is referred to as information asymmetry. Information asymmetry arises when one party, in this case the government, has more or better information than the other (citizens). This asymmetry can lead to a lack of trust from citizens and results in their low engagement with government (Bonsón et al., 2015; Eom et al., 2018). According to Arshad and Khurram (2020), online participation and trust increases as more quality information is provided on social media by governments. The potential of social media to increase engagement between government and citizens is one of the reasons why it has been taken up by many governments around the world.

Digital government aims to alter the relationship between government and citizens by potentially improving interactions and dialogue. Social media platforms present new opportunities that could reinvigorate local governance (Ellison & Hardey, 2014). Government use of social media has gone beyond connecting and sharing information with citizens, and now encompasses integration into core business functions, such as emergency management, service delivery, and policy feedback, as well as innovative health emergency initiatives like contact tracing, that have emerged with the COVID-19 crisis (Krzmarzick, 2013; United Nations, 2020). Social media have been employed in e-participation activities and areas; some of these that are identified in literature (Kalampokis, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2008; Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008; Tambouris, Liotas, Kaliviotis, & Tarabanis, 2007) include: *Activism*, *Deliberation*, *Campaigning*, *Consultation*, *Petitioning*, *Service delivery*, *Information Provision,* and *Polling*.

The extent to which these activities are successful in achieving genuine engagement is determined by the strategy employed by the governmental organization. Different strategies are employed by

government organizations in their engagement with citizens and have specific goals which result in either a superficial or a genuine engagement.

Mergel (2013) identified three tactics used by government agencies: representation of agency, engagement of citizens, and networking with the public. The representation tactic is used by most organizations that are at the early stages of social media use. The purpose of this tactic is to have a presence on social media to maximize all possible interactions with citizens (Mergel, 2013; Pedro & Bolívar, 2016). Social media are recognized as popular platforms with citizens and government organizations which want to be where the citizens are. Engagement at this stage is one-way and takes the form of a *push strategy*. In a push strategy, information, such as memos and reports, are broadcast to citizens much in the way of traditional interaction techniques, like websites or online newsletters. This is similar to the informative model of e-government where the government produces and distributes information to citizens (Halpern & Katz, 2012). Interaction is characterized by a lack of comments on posts made either by citizens or the government organization (Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013), disabling of comments on the page, or a lack of response to comments from citizens.

The tactic used to elicit citizen engagement employs a *pull strategy*, where interactivity is the goal. Organizations have recognized the need for bi-directional interactions and encourage citizens to co-create content (Mergel, 2013; Pedro & Bolívar, 2016). This tactic is similar to the consultative model of e-government; governments define issues for consultation, present them to citizens while inviting them to contribute their views and opinions, and manage the process of consultation (Halpern & Katz, 2012). Although the degree of interaction is low using this tactic, there is some back and forth between the organization and citizens (Mossberger et al., 2013). Messages from the government are shared and retweeted by citizens, comments are made on posts, and citizen-produced content are used on the organization's website (Mergel, 2013; Mossberger et al., 2013).

The final tactic, networking with the public, employs a *networking strategy*. The goal of this tactic is collaboration between citizens and the government. Social media are used as tools to facilitate conversation and mingling among stakeholders (Mergel, 2013; Pedro & Bolívar, 2016). The voice of the government is not heard often, but it is present on these platforms, listening to citizens. This is aligned with the participative model of e-government where citizens are involved actively in defining policies (Halpern & Katz, 2012). Social media is seen as a facilitator for public deliberation. Mossberger et al. (2013) describe this tactic as having noticeable back and forth conversations between the government and citizens; individual comments are responded to and citizens proactively provide their own content.

Initial expectations of the power of social media to transform and enhance public participation have proven to be less than ideal, with many government organizations failing to mature to the networking strategy in terms of their social media use (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018; Silva et al., 2019). DePaula and Dincelli (2018) question the validity of social media in achieving transparency and participation after empirical research showed that government use of social media is primarily for information provision and self-promotion. Even as the power of social media to enhance participation and citizen engagement is being espoused, Wakabi and Grönlund (2015) argue that in African authoritarian regimes, such as Uganda, where citizens have little freedom of speech and expression, social media dissuade public participation. Issues, such as the lack of political will by the current strategic leadership and its lack of commitment to advance digital services have impacted the adoption of social media in most CDEs. Silva et al. (2019) also refer to the bad side of social media use by local governments. According to their study, social media give citizens a high expectation of local governments which can hardly be met and therefore lead to further disappointment in governments.

Several studies have been carried out to assess how social media have been used by governments and evaluate the level of public participation achieved through social media posts. Some of the more recent studies are highlighted. Gu, Harrison, and Zhu (2020) compared the social media posts of three municipalities in China, analyzing the communication strategies, topics, and citizen responses. Guidance, reminders, and publicity were the most common strategies employed. The most common topics were on transport, art, and society. The results also showed an increase in citizens' responses to social media posts in correlation with the increase in number of posts. Citizens also responded more to posts that employed announcement and interaction communication strategies. A study of local municipalities in Germany revealed that 41% of the municipalities investigated are present on at least one social media platform (Born, Meschede, Siebenlist, & Mainka, 2019). Facebook was determined to be the most popular platform, followed by Twitter, while YouTube was the least popular platform. In terms of reactions to posts, YouTube views and Twitter retweets were most popular. In general, the study found that interaction on social media is low, with comments being the lowest form of interaction. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) analyzed the use of social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, by local governments in Spain to determine which of these platforms is preferred by citizens and to assess the levels of interactivity. The study found that Spanish local government adoption of social media is on the rise; however, the level of interaction by citizens is lower than expected. Spanish citizens also prefer Facebook to Twitter and interact more on Facebook when there is a negative mood in the locality. Facebook posts by local governments in the United States were analyzed based on a communication strategies framework to determine how citizens react to the different types of posts made by the government (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018). The study found that posts related to symbolic representation and online dialogue receive more reactions in terms of likes, shares, and comments. Bonsón, Royo, and Ratkai (2017) studied the use of Facebook by municipalities in Western Europe in a bid to understand how these municipalities use Facebook for communication and engagement, how citizens engage with their local governments, and what factors affect activity and engagement levels. A majority (73%) of the municipalities examined had a presence on Facebook; however, their level of activity was determined to be low. Citizen engagement was also low, with "likes" being the most prevalent form of engagement. The study also found that the only factor that affected the activity and engagement levels was the size of the municipality.

In Africa, few studies have reported on the use of social media for public participation and engagement by government; where studies exist, the focus is not always on social media but on e-participation in general. Okeke-Uzodike and Dlamini (2019) examined e-participation in South Africa using a framework that categorizes e-participation into e-empowering, e-enabling, and e-engaging. The study focused on three municipalities: Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal, and Western Cape. They found that traditional participation methods are preferred in the former two municipalities, while the latter employs e-participation to a great extent, with evidence of e-enabling activities. One study evaluated e-governance in Ghana, assessing the websites and social media pages of two local municipalities; consistent with other studies, the results showed that there was sparse activity and interaction by administrators of these platforms (Asamoah, 2019). The administrators perceived websites and social media platforms to be inadequate in reaching their citizens and preferred traditional methods, such as posting physical notices and sending out information vans. Other limitations identified were the capacity of target users, low resident awareness of e-government tools, financial inefficiencies, and related infrastructural deficits. Bawack et al. (2018) studied e-participation in CDEs using the Cameroonian National Social Insurance Fund as a case study. The fund uses social media and other Web 2.0 technologies for e-consulting, e-informing, e-collaborating, and e-involving, as well as achieving the objectives of citizen engagement and mobilization, transparency and accountability, and improving

government service. Clients of the fund who participated in the study point out that improvement is required in the response time to posts and in the quality of information posted by the fund. A Tanzanian study assessed the use of social media by the public sector to communicate with citizens (Mandari & Koloseni, 2016). Of the 110 public sector organizations surveyed, 28.5% used social media with infrequent posts made. One study was identified that focused on social media use in South Africa. Van Jaarsveldt and Wessels (2011) investigated the use of Web 2.0 technologies by the government and found that several municipalities had set up profiles on social media platforms as well as set up blogs to provide information and engage with citizens, At the national level, Facebook was used as a way of providing information to citizens, such as the President's State of the Nation Address.

Theoretical Frameworks for Assessing Public Participation

E-participation tools are diverse in variety. Assuming social media platforms are the only types of tools considered, there are still a diverse variety of platforms available. It is important to continue assessing available tools so government practitioners can select the right tools that fit their objective and are suitable to budget, time, and other constraints (Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007). Several frameworks and models have been developed to assess public participation using ICT tools. Three of these frameworks/models are described below.

Open Government Maturity Model

The model was developed to help government agencies assess their open government initiatives in relation to transparency, interaction, participation, and collaboration as well as to provide guidance for agencies to implement these initiatives effectively (Lee & Kwak, 2012). The model consists of five levels: Level 1–Initial Conditions; Level 2–Data Transparency; Level 3–Open Participation; Level 4–Open Collaboration; and Level 5–Ubiquitous Engagement. At Level 1, government agencies are lacking in open government capabilities, rarely use social media, and have no way to assess their engagement with citizens. Agencies at Level 2 have started making efforts to initiate open government initiatives; social media use is still limited; however, efforts are made to increase data transparency and process-centric matrices are used to measure public engagement. Level 3 focuses on enabling citizen participation in government decisions and activities with the purpose of utilizing citizen knowledge. Social media and Web 2.0 technologies are critical at this level. Level 4 seeks to foster collaboration between the government and public and private organizations with the aim of co-creating specific outputs and tackling complex tasks and projects. Collaborative social media tools, such as wikis, are used at this level. The final level, Level 5, is a combination of Levels 2–4, with government agencies seeking to broaden the scope and depth of public engagement by harnessing the power of social media and related technologies (Lee & Kwak, 2012). At this level, public engagement should be easier and universally accessible and government agencies should be integrated seamlessly within so the public can navigate and engage in different activities without having to log on and off different websites and platforms. Open government initiatives are expected to progress sequentially from one level to the next. With each level, public engagement and public value increase. As the maturity levels increase, the technical and managerial complexities of the initiatives as well as the challenges and risks also increase as depicted in Figure 1.
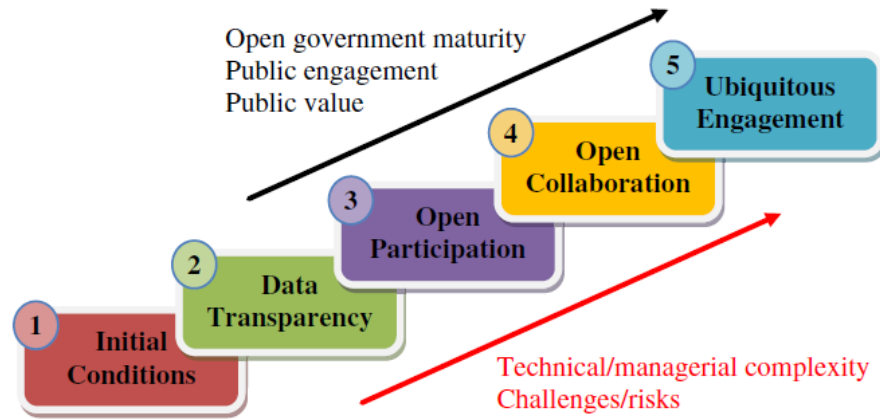
Figure 1. *Open Government Maturity Model* (Lee & Kwak, 2012)

The model was developed using case studies in the United States and does not reflect the conditions of e-government adoption in CDEs. As evidenced from the studies based in Africa previously discussed, many CDEs are still at Level 1, with no open government capabilities and limited use of social media.

Communication Strategies Model

DePaula et al. (2018) extend Mergel's tactics of push, pull, and networking to provide a descriptive model of government communication strategies. The model adds a category of symbolic and personal presentation. DePaula et al. (2018) observed that symbolic and personal presentation make up a significant amount of government social media posts but had not been integrated into the literature on government use of social media. This communication strategy is related to the social media affordances of self-presentation, self-expression, and identity management. Some government organizations are connected directly to politicians who use the associated social media account for self-presentation. Social media also enables government organizations to adopt and distribute visual symbols that communicate specific social values. For example, the rainbow profile background on Facebook indicates support for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community. Symbolic presentation is further divided into four sub-categories as shown in Table 1. The purpose of the model is to evaluate and understand the type of content government organizations post on social media. The communication strategies employed by government on social media are categorized into: information provision; input seeking; online dialogue/off-line interaction; and symbolic presentation, with the former three aligning with Mergel's tactics. Table 1 shows the main categories and sub-categories identified under each.

General and specific categories of government social media content.	
Information provision	**Operations & events:** Content on agency policy, operations, and events.
	Public service announcements: Regarding safety, health, and well-being.
Input seeking	**Citizen information:** Requesting feedback, opinion; use of survey or poll.
	Fundraising: Asking for donations and contributions to a cause.
Online dialogue/off-line interaction	**Online dialogue:** Response by agency to user comment on agency post.
	Off-line discussion: Off-line event to discuss particular policy issue.

General and specific categories of government social media content.	
	Off-line collaboration: Asking citizens to become active and volunteer.
Symbolic presentation	**Favorable presentation:** Positive imagery, self-referential language of gratitude, and praises of itself.
	Political positioning: Taking or expressing a position on a political issue.
	Symbolic act: Expressing congratulations, condolences to others. References to holiday, cultural, and historical symbols.
	Marketing: Presentation of features with intention to attract individuals to acquire or consume.

Table 1. *Social Media Communication Strategies Employed by Governments* (DePaula et al., 2018)

E-participation Scoping Framework

The framework contains five layers that can be viewed from a top-down, or bottom-up approach, as depicted in Figure 2 (Tambouris, Liotas, Kaliviotis, et al., 2007).
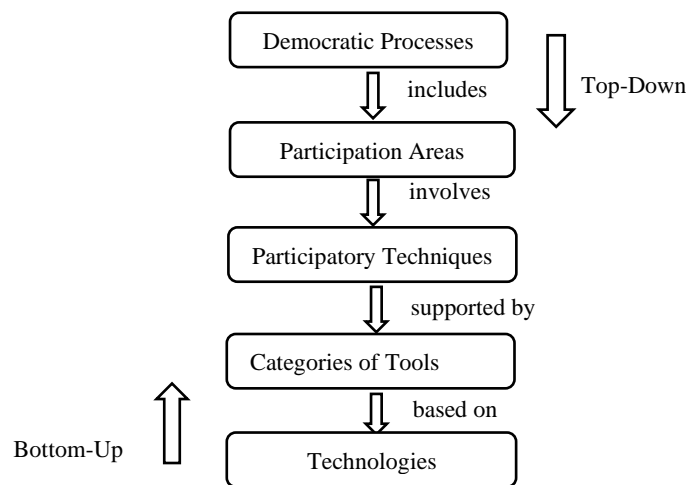

Figure 2. *E-participation Scoping Framework* (Tambouris, Liotas, Kaliviotis, et al., 2007)

In the bottom-up approach, technology can become the trigger for implementing and exploring new ways to achieve public participation. The layer at the top of the framework is *democratic processes*, which refers to activities that are involved in the democratic process such as voting, public debates, and campaigning. The next layer is the *participation areas;* this refers to areas in the democratic process that engage and involve citizens (Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007). These areas define the scope and extent of the participatory process, answering the *what* question. Some of these areas are deliberations, consultations, campaigning, information provision service delivery, discourse, and participatory policy-making. *Participatory techniques* are the third layer of the framework, and represent methods used to engage citizens and other stakeholders in the democratic process. Techniques include focus groups, scenario workshops, public hearings, and deliberative polling. The techniques address the *how* question about the execution of the participatory process. The next layer is the *categories of tools* that represent ICT tools used to support and enhance the participatory techniques. Some of these tools include chatrooms, virtual communities, podcasts, bulletin boards, web portals, and survey tools. The bottom

layer of the framework represents *technologies*, which are the backbone of ICT tools used in e-participation.

METHODOLOGY

The larger research study is a case study research approach based in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The focus of this paper is the analysis of social media participation activities of South African provinces and municipalities. The method used in achieving this goal is a qualitative content analysis of the social media accounts of these government organizations. The sample for the analysis is comprised of the 9 provinces and 8 metropolitan municipalities in South Africa. These organizations were selected because they are larger and believed to be more innovative with technology, have more resources and infrastructure to support social media, and have a larger citizen base for interaction (Bonsón et al., 2015).

Content Analysis Method

The content of the social media websites of provincial and metropolitan municipal governments were analyzed for activities associated with e-participation. The content analysis was done twice (in 2017 and 2020), providing snapshots of the municipalities' and provinces' social media use at these points in time. By having these two snapshots, a comparison of how social media was used during these time periods could be done. The maturity of the South African government social media use could also be determined.

To identify these social media pages, the government's official portal (www.gov.za) was used as a starting point. The portal has a list of websites of each of these municipalities and provinces. These websites were visited subsequently, and the direct links to the social media pages were followed. In cases where the links were not available on the website, a general Internet search was done to find these pages. The content of the social media pages was then analyzed thematically using the Tambouris et al.'s E-participation Scoping Framework. The themes were identified and interpreted based on democratic process, participation area, participatory technique, category of tools, and technologies. The framework was selected because it considers the entire domain of public participation encompassing the democratic process and participation areas, allowing a link to be made between traditional public participation and e-participation.

RESULTS

Using the E-participation Scoping Framework discussed above, Table 2 presents a characterization of e-participation using social media in South Africa. In terms of social media, the democratic processes, participation areas, categories of tools, and technologies map directly to examples provided by Tambouris, Liotas, Kaliviotis, et al. (2007). However, the participation techniques are not mapped easily, but seem to be online versions of newsletters and public hearings/inquiries. These techniques provide information to citizens in the case of newsletters, while public hearings/inquiries are presentations by government agencies regarding plans and policies which are open to members of the public (Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

Democratic Processes	Participation Area	Participation Techniques	Categories of Tools	Technologies
• Sharing political information/news • Public/community meetings • Communication between policy-makers and the public	• Information Provision • Service Delivery • Discourse • Consultation • Community Building	• Online Newsletters • Online Public Hearing/Inquiries	Social networking sites • Facebook • Flickr • Google+ • Instagram • LinkedIn • Twitter • YouTube	• Web 2.0 • Social Media

Table 2. *Scoping E-participation Using Social Media in South Africa*

The social media platforms used by these government organizations are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The tables also indicated whether the platform is currently active and the number of followers and posts on these government accounts.

Province	Platform	Status: Number of followers	
		2017	**2020**
Eastern Cape	Facebook	Active: 2,530 followers	Active: 13,527 followers
	YouTube	Inactive: 11 subscribers, last post 2015	Inactive
	Twitter		Joined 2020: 264 followers, 182 posts
Free State	Facebook	Inactive: 3,801 followers, Last post in 2013	Active: 35,747 followers
	Twitter	Inactive: 7,304 followers, 469 posts, Last post 2013	Active: 8,176 followers, 1,727 posts
Gauteng	Facebook	Active: 12,109 followers	Active: 301,341 followers
	Twitter	Active: 87.5K followers, 22.4K posts	Active: 219.9K followers, 33.6K posts
KwaZulu-Natal	Facebook	Active: 9,363 followers	Active: 27,598 followers
	Twitter	Active: 7,680 followers, 6172 posts	Active: 26.4K followers, 14K posts
	YouTube	Active: 25 subscribers	Active: 9,676 views
	Instagram	Active:771 followers, 174 posts	Active: 4,833 followers, 1,196 posts
Limpopo	Facebook	Active: 7,350 followers	Active: Office of Premier – 52,280 followers Active: Official Page – 3,226 followers (Established May 2019)
	Flickr	Active: 3 followers	Active: 9 followers
	Twitter	Active: 1,424 followers, 414 posts	Active: 22.5K followers, 3,053 posts
Mpumalanga	Facebook	Active: 5,548 followers	Active: 8,876 followers

Province	Platform	Status: Number of followers	
		2017	**2020**
	Twitter	Active: 63 followers, 63 posts	Active: 3,881 followers, 684 posts
Northern Cape	Facebook	Active: 5,833 followers	Active: 23,083 followers
North West	Facebook	Active: 23,912 followers	Active: 70,241 followers
	Twitter	Active: 3,964 followers, 2244 posts	Active: 12.4K followers, 5, 070 posts
	YouTube	Active: 67 subscribers	Active: 966,710 views
Western Cape	Facebook	Active: 46,950 followers	Active: 102,638 followers
	Twitter	Active: 17.8K followers, 11 000 posts	Active: 40.6K followers, 18.3K posts

Table 3. *South African Provincial Governments' Social Media Presence* (2017 & 2020)

Municipality	Platform	Status: Number of followers	
		2017	**2020**
Buffalo City (East London)	Facebook	Active: 5548 followers	Active: 47, 378 followers
	Twitter	Inactive: 79 followers, 47 posts, Last post in 2015	Active: 2,567 followers, 1,209 posts
City of Cape Town	Facebook	Active: 135, 838 followers	Active: 229,139 followers
	Google+	Inactive: 35 followers, Last post in 2015	
	LinkedIn	Active: 23,476 followers	Active: 51,941 followers
	Twitter	Active: 229K followers, 60.5K posts	Active: 375.2K followers, 115.9K posts
	YouTube	Active: 150,762 views	Active: 939,856 views
Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality (East Rand)	Facebook	Active: 68 578 followers	Active: 158,805 followers
	LinkedIn		Active: 892 followers
	Twitter	Active: 21.8K followers, 11.5K posts	Active: 69.7K followers. 47.4K posts
	YouTube		Active: 25 subscribers, 4,005 views
City of eThekwini (Durban)	Facebook	Active: 45,125 followers	Active: 292,095 followers
	LinkedIn		Active: 89,189 followers
	Twitter	Active: 45K followers, 13.5K posts	Active: 152.4K followers, 33K posts
	YouTube	Active: 124 subscribers	Active: 693 subscribers, 154,091 views
City of Johannesburg	Facebook	Active: 16,452 followers	Active: 151,195 followers
	Flickr	Inactive: 150 followers, Last post 2016	Inactive: 12 followers, Last post 2019

Municipality	Platform	Status: Number of followers	
		2017	**2020**
	Google+	Inactive: 523 followers, Last post 2014	
	LinkedIn	Active: 10,049 followers	Active: 44,116 followers
	Twitter	Active: 528K followers, 158K posts	Active: 1M followers, 269.7K posts
	YouTube	Active: 126 subscribers, 26, 032 views	Active: 600 subscribers, 246,217 views
Mangaung Municipality (Bloemfontein)	Twitter	Inactive: Joined 2012, 280 followers, No posts	Inactive
	Facebook		Active: 12,578 followers
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality	Facebook	Active: 11,150 followers	Active: 44,609 followers
	Twitter	Active: 7,141 followers, 1,649 posts	Active: 13.8K followers, 5,808 posts
	Blog	Active	Inactive: Last post 2018
City of Tshwane (Pretoria)	Facebook	Active: 63,167 followers	Active: 192,050 followers
	Twitter	Active: 278K followers, 44.4K posts	Active: 444.5K followers, 82.1K posts

Table 4. *South African Municipal Governments' Social Media Presence* (2017 & 2020)

DISCUSSION

The social media accounts of 17 provincial and municipal government organizations in South Africa were analyzed. All 17 of these organizations have a presence on at least one social media platform. The most common platforms used are Facebook and Twitter. In 2017, there were a few inactive social media accounts that have been revived now and are being used actively, indicating an increased interest by provincial governments in these platforms. This might point to South African government organizations having moved on from the experimentation stage where accounts were abandoned to having these platforms as a standard for communicating with citizens. The number of followers and posts also have increased significantly between 2017 and 2020, with most accounts having over 10 times more followers.

In terms of content posted, the provinces focus on posting information on activities of the premier, projects carried out by the province, and events within the province. Most of these posts are in the form of press releases, videos, and photographs of speeches made by government officials and invitations to events around the province. These organizations seem to be focused on highlighting their achievements rather than interacting with citizens. The Western Cape Province has the most diverse category of posts, which include surveys and promoting local businesses. With the current COVID-19 situation, the majority of posts by the provinces are public service announcements regarding the pandemic, COVID-19 stats in the region, and appreciation posts honoring healthcare workers. This has been reported similarly by the United Nations in their 2020 e-government report (United Nations, 2020).

Similar to provinces, municipalities post information on local government officials, events, and projects. Nevertheless, municipalities focus their posts on informing the public on service delivery issues, employment services, disaster management, and invitations to public participation meetings. Municipalities are closer to citizens and this is reflected in the types of posts made; municipal posts are localized and reflect the daily needs of the community.

The most popular forms of engagement were liking posts, commenting on posts, sharing posts, and retweeting posts. Engagement was higher on posts with content relevant to citizens' daily lives, such as those related to service delivery interruptions, as opposed to information about the activities of community leaders. Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, and Luna-Reyes (2012) highlighted the importance of relevant information to the adoption of social media in government. Most responses from citizens involved complaints about service delivery issues and these were either ignored or redirected to a different platform (website or phone number).

There is not much difference in the way the various platforms are used. Information posted on Facebook and Twitter is replicated in most cases, except for live streaming events like press conferences and council meetings on Facebook. Facebook seems to be preferred for video content.

With regards to engagement strategies of provinces and municipalities, all 17 organizations allow comments on their social media pages. Although this is a characteristic of organizations using the pull strategy (Mergel, 2013; Mossberger et al., 2013), these municipalities employ a combination of pull and push strategies. The focus of communications on these platforms involves broadcasting information to the public, which is the main feature of the push strategy. While comments from citizens are allowed, the municipalities make no effort to solicit information from the public; their interactions are only in response to a comment. The analysis of the posts also revealed that not all comments receive a response. The responses are sporadic and seem to be based on the discretion of municipal staff. The municipalities do not seem to have policies that require responses for all comments. Most of the comments that got responses were related to service delivery complaints by citizens. Citizens have taken up social media as a channel for making complaints about service delivery. Other participation activities identified are discussed next.

Information Provision

Social media is used primarily for information provision by all provinces and municipalities. Information provided include pictures and videos of activities by leaders of the provinces and municipalities, events in the area, initiatives launched by the government, public health or safety tips, and in some cases, budgetary information. The method of posting and type of information posted seem to affect the response received from citizens. Posts with pictures of events and activities of leaders receive little engagement in terms of likes, shares, and comments, whereas posts that have a call to action or directly affect the lives of citizens, such as weather warnings, traffic information, and public safety information achieve a higher level of engagement.

Service Delivery

Service delivery is an area of participation that has been achieved by provinces and municipalities using social media. The City of Cape Town and Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality have dedicated Twitter pages for reporting service delivery issues and updating the community on service delivery. Several of the social media pages explored have posts related to service delivery problems, such as water supply interruptions in certain neighborhoods. South Africa currently is facing challenges with electrical supply, hence, social media has been used extensively by the government to communicate about

interruptions and provide schedules on outages. Another service delivery area that is supported by social media is employment services. Job openings are posted on these social media platforms and City of Cape Town and City of Johannesburg use the LinkedIn platform for employment services. These posts generally lead to another area of participation, which is Discourse.

Discourse

In some cases, the posts made by the municipalities lead to discourse between citizens on these social media platforms. Citizens make comments on the posts and respond to comments from other citizens. This usually leads to a back-and-forth discussion on the original content posted by the government.

Consultation

Consultation usually is not executed directly on the social media pages; information about public consultation opportunities within the provinces and municipalities are posted. These posts generally have details of the time and venue of the consultation event or a link to the form on a website if it is an online consultation process. The Western Cape Province is most adept at using social media for consultation. The province hosts monthly Question & Answer sessions with the premier and other government officials on Facebook Live.

Crisis/Emergency Management

Social media is used also in *Emergency Management* by the South African government. Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, City of Cape Town, and Western Cape Province used social media to keep citizens updated on fires, storms, floods, and droughts in their regions. Information on safety, road closures, relief efforts, and how citizens could help was posted on the respective pages of these organizations. Emergency management is a core business function of the government and is one way social media has been integrated into government around the world (Krzmarzick, 2013).

The use of social media for crisis management has seen an increase within all provinces and municipalities since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Governments are sharing information constantly with citizens on daily stats, advisories on mask wearing and hand washing, projects including distribution of Personal Protection Equipment and establishment of hospitals and testing centers, and appreciation posts for emergency workers. According to the United Nations, the COVID-19 pandemic has renewed and anchored the role of digital governments, especially in the areas of online content delivery of digital services and crisis management (United Nations, 2020).

Community Building

Most provinces publicized projects targeted towards building the community on social media. Examples of such posts encouraged citizens to volunteer in organizations, such as their local neighborhood watch. The Western Cape municipality uses social media to empower their community by hosting webinars targeted towards upskilling citizens and educating small business owners.

The participation of citizens in issues of government in South Africa can be described as superficial, based on the analysis of provincial and municipal social media platforms. Most communication is one-to-many. This form of communication using social media is described as top-down, from the government to citizens, and is criticized as lacking support for bi-directional information exchange (Hand & Ching, 2011). Only one organization uses social media in an interactive way to answer questions from citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

A cursory exploration of social media use by the South African government might give the impression that implementation of public participation has been achieved using these platforms. This is because all provincial and metropolitan municipalities have a social media presence and post regularly. Between 2017 and 2020, the South African government adopted social media as a standard for communication with citizens. This is evidenced by the increase in the number of active accounts. In 2017, many of these accounts had been abandoned or had very little activity. On closer inspection, these accounts are used for public announcements, news updates, and streaming meetings. Social media for participation is still in its infancy and is ideological. Even though social media has been touted as a tool for public engagement and participation, this purpose is yet to be achieved. This is congruent with Arshad and Khurram (2020) who state that social media use in CDEs is still in the informational stage and is used mainly for announcements and news updates. The push strategy proposed by Mergel (2013) best describes this stage. This inability of government organizations to go beyond the information broadcasting phase has been highlighted in research (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014).

Opportunities to use social media in more participation activities exist through features of some platforms, such as online surveys and polls. Using these features, public deliberation, consultation, and participatory spatial planning would be impactful and substantial. Social media platforms also support live streaming whereby citizens have access to town hall meetings, council meetings, and other stakeholder meetings that would keep them informed. Though the live streaming feature is being used consistently, only one municipality uses this feature to achieve two-way communication by allowing citizens to ask questions.

Regarding information posted, government organizations should post content relevant to community living which was seen to attract higher levels of engagement from citizens. A lack of relevant information hampers the process of adoption. One way of ensuring content is relevant to citizens is to engage in a pull strategy where citizens are encouraged to produce content. Mickoleit (2014) pointed out that governments that use a pull or networking strategy in engaging with citizens reach a much larger audience and have better engagement than governments using a push strategy.

Government organizations should be selective about the platforms they use. Engaging with citizens on a platform that resonates with them has been identified as a best practice for social media in government (Harper, 2013). It was evidenced in 2017 that government organizations in South Africa create profiles on several platforms but eventually abandon some of these platforms. This could have been due to a lack of staff expertise in running these platforms, a lack of content for the platforms, or a lack of engagement from citizens. Government organizations should endeavor to research what platforms their constituents are most familiar with and then utilize those platforms. The increase in the use of social media platforms by all provinces and municipalities seen in 2020 seems to coincide with the need to update citizens on water shortages, power outages, and the COVID-19 crisis. In recent years, South Africa has faced challenges in these areas due to drought and poor infrastructure in the power sector, which has affected citizens' lives and require constant communication from the government.

This study set out to explore the ways in which government organizations in South Africa currently use social media. The exploration involved determining what social media platforms are used most and what participation activities these platforms are used for. The exploration was done using the Tambouris et al.'s (2007) E-participation Framework to review the social media pages of the provincial and metropolitan municipal governments. The social media platforms used most in South African

government organizations are Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms have the largest user base in the country. These platforms are used mostly for information provision; however, participation areas, such as service delivery, consultation, and discourse were also identified.

The paper contributes to the discussion of social media as a tool for e-participation in South Africa by presenting an outlook on the current situation of social media use. An understanding of social media use within South Africa lays a foundation for developing a better strategy for public participation. The study was limited to larger government organizations and therefore presents best cases within the country. Further studies could explore if and how smaller municipalities in rural areas of the country use social media. It also should be noted that the study presents a snapshot of provincial and municipal activities on social media at two periods in time.

This paper is part of a larger research study that aims at developing a model for a more effective and structured approach to public participation using social media. The development and implementation of the model will be presented in a future research paper.

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