

## The Utilisation Of the *Facebook* Social Media Platform to Communicate with The Public on Governance and Service Delivery Matters

Lakela Kaunda and Ricky M Mukonza  
*Tshwane University of Technology*

### Abstract

The paper explores the usage of Facebook as an interactive platform by the eight metropolitan municipalities to inform citizens and to engage them on governance and day to day service delivery issues during the COVID-19 pandemic which limits face to face public participation. The e-government framework as well as public participation and social media theories form the theoretical backdrop of the qualitative study. A survey of the official Facebook pages of the eight metropolitan municipalities has been undertaken informed by the United Nations three-point e-participation survey scale. A content analysis is undertaken of the information posted on the pages by the municipality, the responses and comments of the followers or users of the page as well as the response of the municipality to the comments of the users. Conclusion is drawn on the manner in which the municipalities utilise the Facebook pages to communicate with citizens, which is unidirectional. Lessons are gleaned on the need for more interactive and effective usage of Facebook for two-way engagement or electronic public participation (e-participation) with the public.

**Keywords:** e-government, e-participation, e-service delivery, public participation, social media

### Introduction

Local government is described as the sphere that is closest to the people. Municipalities provide basic services that people utilise daily. These include water, electricity, refuse removal, working street lights, cutting grass on the verges of roads, road maintenance as well as promoting local economic development and job creation. The Constitution of the Republic (1996), the White Paper on Local Government 1998 and the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act direct municipalities to create conditions for the local communities to participate in the work of municipalities and in decision making processes. Municipalities are obliged by law to undertake these responsibilities in consultation with the people. Public participation is thus the cornerstone of the country's local government system. Members of the public are able to participate through formal structures such as ward committee meetings and public meetings. Given the advent and growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the adoption of e-government mechanisms by government, the public is able to access services digitally and to communicate with government through online and social media tools. Social media has brought along a powerful capability of being an interactive social engagement tool. Government can thus engage in two-way communication with citizens in real time without waiting for a long time for responses. Social media can thus enhance e-participation and make engagement

between government and the people possible even during times of the COVID-19 pandemic which has restricted the halting of face to face meetings for a long time.

This article explores the usage of social media, in particular Facebook platform by the eight metropolitan municipalities to engage in two-way communication with the public. The qualitative research approach has been utilised in the study by scrutinising the content of the Facebook pages of the municipalities. The United Nations e-participation survey three-point scale as a yardstick (Le Blanc, 2020) has been used as a guide in assessing the government usage of the Facebook pages. This tool is used to distinguish between the provision of information, consultation and decision-making in e-participation engagements on the side of governments. It has been found that municipalities use the first part of the scale in their communication efforts. They share information on the Facebook pages but do not consult or involve the public in decision making using the platform. They also do not interact and engage the users on the pages on an ongoing basis, which defeats the purpose of e-participation in particular and public participation in general.

### **The social media landscape**

New trends have come to the fore in the communication arena over the years. Internet or computer based media are becoming part of mainstream tools used by governments to communicate with the public. Internet-based media includes portal websites, video sites, search engines, social media, online games and electronic commerce as well as media based on handsets being defined as mobile media (Luo & Harrison, 2015). Social media generally refers to the computer-based and internet based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities (Dollarhide, 2020). The social media networking sites referred to in the literature include Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. In terms of uses, Facebook allows users to create their own profiles on which they can upload pictures and videos as well as share messages, Twitter enables users to tweet short messages on their walls which attracts comments from other users while WhatsApp is a mobile social network which allows the sharing of information, pictures, videos, voice notes and other vital messages (Apuke, 2016). People communicate and share information 24 hours a day in an interactive manner, and anyone can create content for social media and share it as and when they want to do so (Jordaan, 2019).

The Social Media Engagement Theory interrogates the interactive and engagement feature of the social media. The theory presents that social media represents a new business model as users generate content with other users and they can modify, share and re-use the content regardless of the original intention of the creator (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Users benefit from socially interacting with other users while organisations providing the social media platform gain a captive audience for advertising and business intelligence. For business, the two-way process is beneficial as users engage and provide their views on products (O'Brien, 2018). The impact of social media usage is assessed through Social Media Analytics tools which indicate how users engaged with content that was posted on a social media platform, for

example, how many people “liked” or viewed a post on a Facebook page (Driver, 2018).

Internet penetration reports point to increased access to the Internet and mobile phones in South Africa. DataReportal’s Digital 2021 South Africa report, which contains the latest statistics for the internet, social media and mobile phone usage, indicates that there are more than 100 million cellular phone connections in the country (Kemp, 2021). This is about 169% of the population, given that some people have more than one cellular phone. The report adds that there were 25 million social media users in January 2021 which translated to 41.9 percent of the population. Meanwhile, the 2021 Social Media Landscape report for South Africa, produced by technology monitoring companies Ornico (2021) and World Wide Worx (2021) indicates that among social networking sites, Facebook remained the most popular platform in the country, with an estimated 27 million local users. WhatsApp and YouTube were the most used with about 93% of internet users using these platforms each month, the report states. Globally, Facebook reports that more than 2 billion people around the world use the platform with about trillions of posts (Lada, Wang & Yan, 2021). Facebook has been chosen for the study given that statistics of social media usage indicate that it is the most popular and most widely used platform given the statistics provided. The abundance of mobile phones augur well for public participation as they can be utilised for this purpose. However, this was found not to be the case in a study of m-government (mobile government) in Polokwane Municipality by Mukonza (2013), who found that the usage of the tool was a missed opportunity in urban local government. Mukonza argued that the affordability of mobile devices, particularly cell phones provide opportunities for members of the public, including the poor to participate in public affairs. The study found that urban local government institutions were not taking full advantage of the benefits brought about by e-Government.

The conceptual framework: Promoting e-participation and the involvement of the public in governance

The paper explores the usage of e-government mechanisms by the metropolitan municipalities to enable and promote e-participation and interact with the public. E-participation is regarded as a subset of both public participation and e-government (Pavlia and Sharma, 2019). E-participation is described in the literature as participation in political processes pertaining to governance, aided by information and communication technology (ICT) tools. For example, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) defines e-participation as the fostering of civic engagement and open, participatory governance through ICTs. On the other hand, Lindner and Aichholzer (2020) define e-participation as encompassing all forms of political participation and making use of digital media, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement.

E-participation is linked to the promotion of e-democracy. Moss and Wojcik, define e-democracy the term as referring to the relationship between democracy and new media and ICT and posit that the term may encompass a wide range of democratic practices beyond the formal institutions of representative government and politics.

Pavlia and Sharma (2019) define e-democracy as the online activities of governments, elected representatives, political parties and citizens for democratic processes, which

includes political or current affairs discussions and online consultations between representatives and their constituents. The common thread in the definitions is the usage of ICTs to promote democratic processes including public participation and political communication. The common factor in the definition of e-government is the provision of government services through the usage of ICTs while e-governance refers to the usage of ICTs broadly in government and outside of government in a country. The literature indicates that although e-government and e-governance are used interchangeably at times, the meaning is not necessarily the same. Mukonza (2014:501) views e-government as focusing on government operations, with particular concern on issues of efficiency and effectiveness, which tends to leave citizens out of the decision making processes while e-governance on the other hand changes the relationships between government institutions and the environment which includes business and civil society. Maleka (2016) like Mukonza (2016) also asserts that e-governance is broader than e-government. According to Maleka (2016), e-government potentially empowers citizens by providing them with an alternative channel for accessing information and services and interacting with government while e-governance implies 'electronic governance' which is broadly concerned with using ICT at various levels of the government. Meanwhile, Broome (2015) concurs that governance is a much broader term through which society solves its problems and meets its needs. It encompasses the political, administrative and public spheres which comprise civil society, including individuals, organizations and the media, posits the author.

The South African government defines e-Government as referring broadly to the innovative use of communications technologies, including mobile devices, websites, applications and other ICT services and platforms, to link citizens and the public sector to promote collaborative and efficient governance (Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services, DTSP, 2017:4).

E-government operations may take three forms; Government-to-Government (G2G), which is the sharing of data and conducting electronic exchanges within government departments and entities, Government-to-Business (G2B) which involves digital information sharing between government and the private sector and Government-to-Citizen (G2C) which include applications that enable citizens to ask questions of government agencies and receive answers in addition to services such as filing income taxes or renewing driver's licenses and others designed to facilitate people's interaction with government as consumers of public services and as citizens (Pavlia & Sharma, 2019; DTSP, 2017). The official government social media platforms would form part of the G2C services provided by government which enable a two-way communication process with citizens.

### **Public participation in the South African context**

E-participation is drawn from public participation which is institutionalised as a mechanism of engaging the public on issues relating to government and governance. The principle of public participation has an important background and meaning in South Africa given that the black majority was previously excluded from government

and from decisions that affected their lives during the period of apartheid colonialism. This exclusion was eloquently explained by former President Nelson Mandela in his statement from the dock, when he related several repressive decisions and laws that were passed without the consultation of the black majority (Mandela, 1964).

The definitions of public participation from various scholars centre around the involvement of stakeholders or the public in the decision-making processes, with differences in nuances especially with regards to the goals and impact. Quick and Bryson (2016) define public participation as the direct or indirect involvement of stakeholders, who may include citizens, in decision-making about policies, plans or programmes in which they have an interest. Pypers and Bassuday (2016) refer to a process by which parliament, the provincial legislatures and municipalities consult with the people, especially interested or affected individuals, organisations and government entities, before making decisions. The authors emphasise that such participation should be two-way process that promotes effective communication and should also be a collaborative problem-solving mechanism.

The surveyed literature also indicates that public participation process may not always act in the interest of the public but may serve those of the authorities. Bobbio (2018) views public participation as a practice that at times involves compliance without ensuring meaningful engagement. The author posits that policymakers often involve citizens when they need resources that they find difficult to obtain without their participation. For example, the authorities may need political resources such as legitimacy or consensus or to avoid conflicts or simply to secure compliance (Bobbio, 2018). In a classical work on the subject, Arnstein (1969) takes a critical look at how citizen participation takes place through an eight-step ladder of citizen participation which illustrates degrees of citizen participation from to eight. From the bottom-up, Rung 1 and 2 there is no genuine participation, Rungs 3 and 4 are levels of “tokenism” that allow people to think they have a voice while they have none, Rung 5, is a higher level tokenism where the ‘have-nots’ are allowed to advise while the power-holders retain decision making powers. Rung 6 is partnership which enables citizens to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional power-holders while in Rungs 7 and 8 the citizens are in control and it is the ideal model of citizen participation. Arnstein thus raised an important issue of how genuine the participation of the public is and should be.

### **The Metropolitan Municipalities under review**

The shape of the country’s municipalities is laid out in Section 155 of the Constitution of the Republic (1996) and the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, 1998 which specify three categories of municipality: metropolitan, local municipalities and district councils. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC, 2021) describes the municipalities as follows; metropolitan municipalities are big cities, local municipalities comprise towns and their surrounding rural areas while district municipalities coordinate a number of local municipalities in a region. The eight metropolitan municipalities are the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in East London and Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape

province, the City of Cape Town in the Western Cape, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, City of Johannesburg and the City of Tshwane in Gauteng Province, EThekweni Metropolitan Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal and Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality in Bloemfontein (IEC, 2021).

The profiles of the municipalities are provided by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA, 2020). These are as follows;

Gauteng Province: Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality is home to 3,7 million people, comprising 1,2 million households. The city contributes a third to the national GDP and is home to the OR Tambo International Airport which is the main gateway to South Africa. The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality contributes 28.4 percent to the Gauteng economy. It has a population of 3,5 million people with 1,1 million households and is the fourth biggest metro in the country. It houses the Union Buildings which is the seat of government and several national government departments as well as over 130 foreign embassies. The City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality is described as the most advanced city in Africa, with a population of more than 5.5 million people. It contributed 14.9% to national Gross Domestic Product in 2018. The city is home to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and more than 70% of South African companies have their headquarters within the City of Johannesburg.

KwaZulu-Natal Province: EThekweni Metropolitan Municipality is home to 3.9 million people, accounting for 34.7% of the total population of the KwaZulu-Natal province. According to the 2016 Community Survey there were 1 125 765 households in eThekweni. The city is the economic powerhouse of KwaZulu-Natal and contributes 59.88% or R468 billion to the provincial GDP.

Free State Province: Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality has 861 651 inhabitants with 276 905 households. The Mangaung economy is the largest in the Free State Province and contributes R98.1 billion (1.8%) of the economy.

Eastern Cape Province: The Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality has a population of 893 157 people and is home to 1.5% of South Africa's population and 264 258 households. Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality has a population of 1.26 million people as at 2018 and thus housed 2.3% of South Africa's total population. The municipality has a total of 368 518 households.

Western Cape Province: The City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality is home to about 4.4 million people with 1 234 317 million households. It is the second largest economic centre after Johannesburg and is the legislative capital of the country housing Parliament. Cape Town is the tourism hub of the country.

## **Report on The Content of The Facebook Pages**

The study moves from the premise that the social media platforms have enabled government to keep in touch with citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic which has made face to face public participation limited if not impossible. The first COVID-19 case was reported in the country in March 2020 (National Institute of Communicable Diseases, 2020). The pandemic immediately changed the way people work, live and play given the measures instituted to minimise its spread. The South African government introduced a national disaster management system which involved

lockdown alert levels which required that people stay at home or attend public gatherings and workplaces in reduced numbers and limited times, as announced by President Ramaphosa in March 2020 during a special address to the nation (Ramaphosa, 2020).

This study has focused on the period November 2021 which is the period of the local government elections which took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. A content analysis of the Facebook pages was undertaken. Information sought from the Facebook pages was the number of followers of the official page, the type information posted by the municipality, the responses and comments of the members of the public or followers, the nature of engagement on the page, for example whether the information flow is multi-directional or one way. The three-point scale that has been used by the United Nations e-government survey since its inception (Le Blanc, 2020:5) has been utilised in studying and analysing content on the municipal Facebook pages. The three-point scale distinguishes between the provision of information, consultation and decision-making.

It has been established that all South Africa's metropolitan municipalities have an official presence on the Facebook platform. The followers of each municipal page as at 11 November 2021 was as follows; EThekweni Metropolitan Municipality had the largest Facebook following compared to the other metros which is 354,980 as at the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2021. In Gauteng province, the City of Tshwane had 247 761 Facebook followers, the City of Johannesburg 180 485 while the City of Ekurhuleni was followed by 185 747 Facebook users. In the Western Cape, the City of Cape Town had 275 295 Facebook followers while Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality in the Free State had 16 590 followers. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality in Gqebera had 67942 Facebook followers while the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in East London with 53601 followers.

The municipalities post information daily on their pages for public consumption, with the exception of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. The busiest municipalities in terms of daily posting of information are EThekweni, City of Cape Town, Ekurhuleni and the City of Joburg. All eight municipalities use their Facebook pages to share information, with minimal two-way interaction with the public or the users.

### **The common themes in the various municipal pages**

The themes that have emerged with regards to the information shared by the municipalities and that which the users wish to engage on are: service delivery interruptions and maintenance, infrastructure development, announcements of public event, consultations on policy or bylaws or surveys and the introduction of new municipal political leadership following the 2021 local government elections. The themes are discussed below including the type of information posted by the municipalities and the response by users.

#### **1. Service delivery interruptions**

Service delivery issues, in particular the provision of water and electricity are a common feature on the eight municipal Facebook pages. Some of the electricity outages are announced by the municipalities as forming part of planned maintenance. Water outages are announced periodically by municipalities as well. The responses of

the public demonstrate anger and frustration. EThekwini, Cape Town and the City of Joburg Metropolitan Municipalities respond to the complaints of the users through providing links to fault hotline call centres. There is no two-way ongoing discussion and explanations of the causes of the outages. The hotline number response is provided on an adhoc basis.

### **The examples of the outages and responses are as follows:**

An announcement of planned maintenance in Germiston scheduled for 2 December 2021 which would cause a power outage is announced by Ekurhuleni Municipality on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November. The users responded with anger: *"Heban, Clayville doesn't have power since 12 izolo (yesterday)", "How can you do this when you cannot even restore the areas that have been out since Saturday 1 pm. This is disgusting service"*. Other users wrote: *"Graceland doesn't have electricity."* The outcome of the recent election in the area featured as well when one user wrote: *"DA is failing us"*. The Democratic Alliance leads the coalition government in the municipality. A user responded to the DA criticism: *"DA mayor was only elected a week or two ago. She does not do magic so let us give her a fair chance to make changes and get it working."* The municipality did not respond to the posts. In KwaZulu-Natal on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021, the eThekwini Municipality published a list of areas affected by a power outage as well as contact details to log the fault. The users reacted; *"Forever out of power... Adams Rural. Supply goes off for more than 10 hours. This is not normal. Just went off again now, we have to wait for supply to be restored at least at 15:30 tomorrow, Sawpitt Area, Adams Rural... Your consultant did not take the fault complaint because she wants a transformer number!!"*, another user wrote: *"When will the power be back at KwaMashu D Section?"*. There are more posts complaining and no responses to the comments by the municipality.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality published an announcement on 25 November 2021 that the electricity faults call centre would be temporarily closed. *"Welcome to the ANC regime way of service delivery. You got what you voted for"*. The African National Congress (ANC) leads the new coalition government. There is no response from the municipality and users begin engaging amongst themselves. *"So we sit with no power and no department can assist, we have been told to contact the NMB (Nelson Mandela Bay) call centre but they are unable to get hold of any electrician or advise on what the fault is so we must just accept that this is what it is"* and the same user wrote again: *"Power back, once I managed to get hold of them this morning I was impressed with their turnaround time. Get a thumbs up from me"* while another one wrote: *"same boat no electricity since Sunday, electrician came but still no power."* Another user asks the first user who posted and later obtained electricity, *"Kate... were you able to get any help, I am also sitting in the dark"*, with her response *"Jabulisile, no they can only send an email and advise of the fault there is no way to get assistance until tomorrow and they not sure if there will be assistance available tomorrow or if the staff are allowed back at the call centre. No contingency plan in place"*. The users are discussing amongst themselves and assisting each other with information. There is no response or engagement from the municipality.

The City of Tshwane on 21 November 2021 posted an alert about a power outage in Centurion due to a lightning strike. The responses were as follows: *"Why is electricity*

in Elarduspark Park off again. REALLY????.” And another response: “What time is power going to be restored in Eco Park Centurion. Can we have a proper update.” Another user responded, posting a message said to be from a councillor on the outage which she said she had obtained from a contact on “these pages”. There is no response from the municipality. Mangaung Metro announced on 20 November 2021 that it had paid Bloem Water and was in talks with same to ensure full restoration of water services and one of the responses went as follows: “And you actually say you deliberately inconvenienced Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality residents while you had monies to pay creditors...” There is no response from the municipality.

Buffalo City Municipality announced a water outage in East London areas on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 with a promise that the water would be restored in the afternoon. Comments indicate that the promise was not kept. “BCM is there any news on the water issue? Please be honest and frank and allow us to make additional plans with correct information at hand. Not everyone has a swimming pool or tank connected that can be used to shower. Most of us need to work.” Another Facebook user responded: “Afternoon has come and gone and still no water in Nahoon Valley Park as promised by yourself earlier of water to be restored by afternoon, besides water being necessary for hydration and hygiene we are also in the middle of a pandemic, please advise?”. There is no response from the municipality to the several comments on the same issue.

## 2. New infrastructure or maintenance announcements

Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality published an announcement on 25 November 2021 about the Hauweng bus infrastructure that had been designed to accommodate people with disabilities. One of the users wrote in response: “It is not like there is a shortage of public transport in MMM. Just create job opportunities and forget this nonsense”. The municipality did not respond to the comments. Meanwhile, on the 26 November 2021, the City of Cape Town thanked customers for their patience during routine maintenance of electrical infrastructure and indicated that routine regular planned maintenance takes place daily in various parts of the city. The city received positive responses as follows: “At least you do maintenance” and another user: “Just grateful you do maintenance,” while another also wrote: “Maintenance done in Glencairn on Wednesday. Very efficient with only a couple of interruptions.”

On 25 November 2021 the City of Cape Town posted a statement from the Mayor on his impressions of the sewer spills in the city and possible solutions. The comments were as follows: “I am so glad to hear this. Please stay on top of the sewage as NO ONE deserves to live with a non-existent or broken sewage system...” Another resident indicates that she needs help with sewage spillages in her area too and others advise her to email the member of the mayoral committee and also to speak to the local councillor. There is no response from the municipality to the inquiry. Others tag the mayor directly. “Dear Mr Mayor, you are lucky if all of the 5 spills you reported were attended to. I’ve been battling to get city officials to attend to a diesel spill into the sewers in Lakeside which will end up in Zandvoei. I’ve reported online, personally been to visit the health inspector – 14 days later, this has not been resolved...” There is no response from the municipality despite the user having tagged both the mayor and the member of the mayoral committee. Another user writes: “I would like to meet the mayor. There are a lot of things that I would

like to discuss with him." There is no response from the municipality. Another user complains and provides several reference numbers and cases that have been "closed but nothing was done". There is a response from the city "Good afternoon, we are following up on your reference numbers and will be in contact with feedback." This response indicates that municipal officials and leaders select what to respond to and what to ignore.

### 3. COVID-19 awareness and vaccination messages

The eight metropolitan municipalities feature a lot of information on COVID-19 on their Facebook pages. The posts include alerts about rising numbers, vaccination sites, COVID-19 prevention methods and information on trends. The responses from the users tends to be negative or cynical and responses also deflect and ask service delivery issues instead.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, EThekwini Municipality posted information on the new COVID-19 adjusted levels following an address by President Ramaphosa. The responses from the residents were primarily about water and electricity outages. "We do not have water in the Sawpit area it's been a whole week now. Aniscabangeli nina (you don't care about us, researcher's translation)". The municipality responded with contact details of where the fault can be reported: "Hi, Thandeka Myeza please call 0803111 111 toll-free, WhatsApp 0731 148 3477 or email...". On the same day, the Ekurhuleni Metro municipality also posted COVID-19 prevention methods and the President's speech on the COVID-19 lockdown. The responses from users also focused primarily on water and electricity. For example, "We have power outage here at Clayville ext 71 since yesterday around 13:00 are you aware of it?" and: "Food is getting rotten". The municipality had earlier on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 posted an alert that the President would address the nation that evening on the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses included the following: "How, when we don't have electricity in some parts of Rondebult", "How because we don't have electricity in Phumula our phones will be off soon", "Bring back electricity Ekurhuleni" and "How are we supposed tune in to the family meeting without electricity?".

The City of Tshwane Metro posted on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 2021 information on rising COVID-19 cases in the city. Some of the comments were as follows:

"But you fail to mention that a week ago the Department of Health decided to change the way COVID cases are reported. They now add the rapid test result which we all know gives false positives. See the media statement (attached).". Another user posted: "This is no longer about lives and diseases it's all about wanting to have power and control over people destroying our democracy and constitution under the guise of planned variants and waves we're not stupid." On the 29<sup>th</sup> of November Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality also posted the speech of President Ramaphosa on COVID-19 and the new variant Omicron. A user responded: "No waste collection for 2 weeks in a row. Bins are full flies are all over. That is another pandemic," and a comment "Very interesting" which is accompanied by an infographic stating that the World Health Organisation had known about the variant since November 2020. Another users asks "When is the water project being finished?" There is no response from the municipality on the issues asked.

### 4. Introduction of new municipal leadership following local government

elections

The City of Cape Town announced its new leadership on 29 November 2021 and invited the public to hear the new mayor share his vision for the City on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. The responses included; *"I hope Mr Mayor you are going to debate/cancel this nonsense monthly water/electricity levies being billed to the rate payers... and also the taxes we are being billed on these levies."* Other residents respond to the post: *"I don't think they'll be able to do that but they can at least reinstate the basic free water a month,"* and another *"I doubt they will do away with levies, new cash cow."* This is another example of users responding to each other without intervention or provision of information by the municipality.

EThekwini Municipality invited people to obtain the municipal newsletter to meet their new councillors in a post on 26 November 2021. Some users requested an electronic link of the newsletter which was provided by the municipality in response. Other users wrote: *"First serve the PEOPLE and fulfil your mandate with service delivery ASAP... Then we will meet YOU"*, and another: *"Oh please... show us some grand improvements in public safety and security instead"*. Other users asked about councillors for each area for example: *"Ngubani elase Mosely Park, Northdene? (who is the councillor for Mosely Park, Northdene?)"* The municipality responds by inviting the respondent to download the municipal newsletter for the information.

Taking advantage of the introduction of new councillors, a user complained about claims he said were made by a returning councillor of Ward 95 in Folweni area in EThekwini that he had built a library in the ward. *"Was there any budget allocated to building a library in Folweni Ward 95 to start with? If there was this sort of budget allocated what happened to the funds that were allocated? If he insists that the Library was built can he please show where in Folweni it was built??..."* The municipality responded as follows to the user: *"Hi Ismail, please note that this was sent to the relevant department and we are waiting for response"*. The response indicated the value of using the Facebook page as a two-way communication medium and e-participation tool. It is not clear whether the information was provided to the user.

##### 5. Posts about forthcoming events

Municipalities have also posted information on forthcoming events such as fashion shows, business fairs, environmental events. The responses to the events also tend to be complaints about service delivery issues. On the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2021 eThekwini Municipality invited the public to attend a market called the I-Heart Market to take place at Moses Mabhida Stadium where they can buy food, furniture and jewelleries among other wares. The responses from the Facebook followers were to question the event and also to demand services such as water. For example: *"Why are you advertising the regular retail markets? You need to change the name of the unit that runs the sector from business support and retail markets unit to No support and retail markets units..."* Another user asked: *"Are these the original people who started the original market or did you guys shut down the original guys so you could put your own people in to line your own pockets?"* There is no response from the municipality. Another user responded: *"Wonderful news but please fix my water meter that has been gushing water for more than 14 hours"*.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021 the City of Tshwane posted about the Birding Big Day which would take place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November. The users responded with service delivery issues: *"We don't have electricity in extension 11 and 8 since the early hours of the morning in Soshanguve South Ext 8 and 11"* and *"we don't have power as well in some parts of Atteridgeville."* On the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 the City of Joburg announced that the Joburg Open golf tournament would be hosted by the city at the Randpark Golf Club featuring international golfers. The comments by users included: *"Is playing golf part of service delivery?"* Another comment questions commitment: *"Not even one week in and already playing golf...if this was a newly-elected ANC mayor hmmm, I wonder what the DA would have had to say then."*

#### 5. Consultations and Interventions Requiring Public Response

Some of the posts by municipalities refer to policy issues, bylaws or prescripts that require comment from the public. A public notice was posted inviting comments on the City of Tshwane Events Compliance Bylaw and it attracted three comments. Two of the comments request load shedding schedules and the third is a spam post on love potions with none engaging the policy document. Ekurhuleni Municipality issued an invitation to members of the public to comment on its draft Integrated Waste Management Plan on its Facebook page. The responses from users focused on immediate service delivery issues such as refuse not being removed for six weeks, failure to cut grass and electricity outages in specific areas mentioned. A user chastises the municipality for using Facebook to seek comments and advises the undertaking of a roadshow instead to ensure inclusion of others not on social media. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021 the City of Joburg posted information asking the public to participate in a survey on the solicitation and illegal payment of bribes to the Johannesburg Metro Police Department officers. The comments included the following: *"Being on drug dealers payroll, allowing our city to be dominated by illegal foreigners when are you dealing with hijacked buildings and illegal immigrants?"* and another user said: *"The city has no reputation with the state of our CBD, drug peddling and human trafficking."*

On 24 November 2021 Mangaung Metro posted information reminding users of the announcement made on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August announcing the approval of a debt incentive scheme for residential customers and non-profit organisations. Users responded as follows

*"We must get the flat rate, Gauteng decided to remove all debts for residents why can't you do the same"* and another user: *"What discourages us to pay for services is because there are other areas where people are not even billed. In the townships people don't even get statements it's as if they are not even expected to pay".*

#### 6. Job opportunities

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 the municipality posted information looking for seasonal lifeguards, cashiers and cloakroom assistants for pools with largely positive responses. *"These days u guys are advertising jobs, thank you for coalitions or else kids would have drowned because of the comrade the ANC would have given the job to friends"* and *"I do love seeing these posts, they do give me a purpose, I hope one day I get to score a vacancy from Joburg"* to which the municipality responded: *"Best wishes"*. An inquiry is also posted:

*Why is Orlando Swimming pool not open?*” and the municipality responded with *“pools that aren’t open are going through upgrades”* and the user responded further *“City of Joburg there is no sigh of upgrade there since last year”* and another user responded *“Sadly everything takes soooo long!”*. The post also attracted a light-hearted municipal response when a user asked *“Where are the lifeguards taking the pools”* and the response from the municipality is: *“to a good time lol”*. The exchange demonstrates the value of two-way communication with citizens which would be useful if it related to serious matters such as service delivery or policy issues and on an ongoing basis.

The City also posted information announcing a partnership with National Treasury inviting unemployed South African youth to participate in the Infrastructure Skills Development Grant (ISDG). A user asked for a clearer application form and the municipality responded with assistance to obtain the via an online link. Another user complained that the opportunity does not apply to people who are over the age of 35 and the municipality directed the user to the general vacancies page.

In Nelson Mandela metro the municipality announced on 26 November 2021 that the new municipal leadership would assist in resolving a potential bottleneck in the implementation of work opportunities for which R400 million was set aside. There is only one response to the post which states: *“Electricity has been off since yesterday in Motherwell NU3, the call centre cannot assist as the matter is with the electricity department...”*

## Findings

The e-participation purpose is served as the users as members of the public engage on governance issues and in particular service delivery. The posts and engagement on the Facebook pages indicate that the public is concerned about service delivery issues, in particular the reliable supply of water and electricity. Several posts express anger and frustration at the interruptions of water and electricity services. In some cases the municipalities announce planned outages and promise a return to service at a particular time or day. When the period of the promised return passes, residents seek information from the Facebook pages but there is usually no update and no response to the questions and inquiries. EThekweni Municipality, City of Joburg and the City of Cape Town occasionally respond to one or two posts by providing the call centre where the faults can be reported. There is no feedback that is provided on the page. Users raise the service delivery issues regardless of the post by the municipality. For example, a post announcing a forthcoming fashion show or business fair may attract comments about water or electricity outages.

COVID-19 is a regular theme on all the Facebook. Municipalities post information reminding residents of the prevention protocols such as the wearing of fast masks, washing of hands, sanitising and social distancing. They also use the page to announce vaccination sites and campaigns as well as to share speeches of the President on the pandemic. The responses of the public tend to be cynical or negative in almost all pages. Respondents indicate lack of faith in the statistics, the science and the need for vaccination in the majority of posts. They instead direct the municipality to service delivery issues. For example, a response to a City of Cape Town COVID-19 awareness

post on 28 November 2021: *"How about that electricity update I requested hours ago,"* and another user said *"Rather you worry about non-existence of water and electricity,"* while another added: *"Focus on electricity and leave COVID alone."* There is no response from the municipality to any of the posts.

Information on new infrastructure such as bus services is welcomed, but also tends to attract comments about possible corruption or *"jobs for friends"*.

The election of new councillors has been welcomed in the Facebook pages, however with warnings about service delivery imperatives and the need to put people first and avoid corruption. eThekweni residents wanted to know the names of councillors for each ward which indicates that there is an opportunity for the municipalities to use the page to share such information to enable the public to know the local leadership better. Job opportunities are much sought after.

The snap survey indicates that Facebook pages are not ideal for the sharing of information that requires feedback, or the consult on policy issues and bylaws as the residents either respond flippantly or through raising service delivery issues that are not related to the matter. For example, the Draft Integrated Waste Management Plan of the City of Ekurhuleni and the City of Tshwane Events Compliance Bylaw requests for feedback did not receive more than two comments. A user advised Ekurhuleni not to share such information on Facebook given the digital divide and lack of access by other residents.

Further research can explore the different responses to infrastructure maintenance announcements in municipalities. An announcement in Cape Town is welcomed by users who praise the municipality, for example: *"at least you do maintenance"* and *"just grateful you do maintenance."* but in Durban and Ekurhuleni such an announcement results in the municipality being chastised and accused of incompetence. At Ekurhuleni an announcement of an outage induced by planned maintenance was greeted with: *"How can you do this when you cannot even restore the areas that have been out since Saturday 1 pm. This is disgusting service."* EThekweni Municipality shared a media statement for information purposes announcing that repairs to the Mahatma Gandhi Sewerage pump had been completed and provided an apology for the inconvenience. Among the comments from users accuse the municipality of incompetence and dereliction of duty for failing to maintain the pump station and ensuring that an alternative pump is available.

### Recommendations

E-government has made it possible for government to provide services using ICT-enabled platforms such as social media. Given the centrality of public participation in local government and that it is institutionalised, social media platforms provide a convenient communication tool for municipalities to communicate with citizens on an ongoing basis. The platforms have become more important given the COVID-19 pandemic which brought about restrictions of physical or face to face mass meetings. The analysis of the pages has indicated that the municipalities do not use the pages as consultation tools or as tools to aid decision making through obtaining the views of the public on policy issues or programmes, but use it mainly to share information

in a unidirectional way. It is also not advisable to use the pages for consultations on policy issues. It is instructive that the interest shown in the Draft Integrated Waste Management Plan of the City of Ekurhuleni and the City of Tshwane Events Compliance Bylaw was minimal and that the users responded with comments related to service delivery interruptions. The municipalities may therefore need to use other platforms to seek feedback or comments on policy issues. The pages are helpful for gauging public views on service delivery.

The management of the pages and the resources allocated to social media is beyond the scope of this paper. It was not ascertained whether municipalities have fulltime staff monitoring the Facebook pages. Such staff need to be ready to respond to the inquiries and comments posted to build a constructive and interactive relationship. The tone of the comments from the public is negative towards government in the majority of cases. Municipalities would also need to utilise experts in various fields to respond to public comments through the social media teams to ease the frustration and empower citizens with knowledge in an empathetic way. Some of the misleading comments on COVID-19 for example would need a rebuttal without delay on the pages.

The need to respond to the comments and queries from the public is critical and lack of responses exacerbate the frustrations. A user summed it up in this manner responding to the new bus service at Mangaung on 25 November 2021: *“The most offensive thing about this page of Mangaung Municipality is that they would throw things here for the information of the citizenry which is a move I applaud. However, when we give feedback on what they have provided, they keep quiet and not interact which defeats the whole objective of having this page in the first place”*. None of the municipalities engage the public on an ongoing basis and respond to the inquiries or explain. The common response is the provision of a call centre number for electricity or water outages or links for job vacancies. Users at times assist one another with information in other instances in the absence of a response from the municipality.

## Conclusion

The article explored the usage of the Facebook platform by South Africa’s metropolitan municipalities to communicate with the public as part of e-participation efforts to keep in touch with citizens in the mist of COVID-19 pandemic. The content analysis of the Facebook pages has indicated that municipalities use the pages to share information but without engaging the users on an ongoing basis on service delivery issues. The municipalities share information on service delivery interruptions, COVID-19, investment promotion, sports events and other activities. Users respond to the posts but tend to raise service delivery frustrations which are not responded to consistently, save for the supply of hotline numbers for the municipal call centres.

The capability of the Facebook platform as an interactive engagement tool is not fully utilised given the lack of ongoing interaction and responses. In addition, the analysis of the content also indicates that the Facebook page is used by the followers to keep track of service delivery interruptions and other announcements. Policy

issues posted have not elicited responses or comments relating to the content of the documents and the majority of comments in responses to issues by users relates to service interruptions or lack of services in a particular area. More formal physical mechanisms such as public meetings or ward committees would be more ideal for consultations on policy issues. A further study looking into the social media strategies as well as human and financial resources allocated to manage the social media platforms in the metropolitan municipalities will contribute further to the body of knowledge in e-government and e-participation.

## References

- Apuke, O.D. (2016). Social and traditional mainstream media of communication: Synergy and variance perspective. *New Media and Mass Communication*, 53: 83-86.
- Broome, P.A. (2015). Before e-Governance and e-Government, back to basics! The case of Caribbean (Online). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015603106> (November 8, 2021)
- Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page. (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/BuffaloCityMetro/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page. (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/CityofCT/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- City of Joburg Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page: (Online). Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/CityofJoburg/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page. (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/CityOfEkurhuleni/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page. (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/CityOfTshwane/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- Di Gangi, P.M. & Wasko, M.M. (2016). Social media engagement theory. *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing*, 28(2): 53-73.
- Driver, S. (2018). Guide to Social Media Analytics. Business News Daily, 18 April. (Online). Available: <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/10694-understanding-social-media-analytics.html> (October 12, 2021).
- Dollarhide, M. (2020). Social media definition. *Investopedia*. (Online) Available: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/social-media.asp> (August 03, 2021).
- EThekweni Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page: (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/eThekweniM/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- Jordaan, L. (2019). Broken beats: The state of South Africa's newsrooms. *The Media Online*, November 5. (Online). Available: <https://themediainline.co.za/2019/11/broken-beats-the-state-of-south-africas-newsrooms/> (October 21, 2021).
- Kemp, S. (2021). Digital 2021 South Africa. (Online). Available: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-south-africa?rq=SOUTH%20AFRICA%20> (November 8, 2021).
- Le Blanc, D. (2020). E-participation: a quick overview of recent qualitative trends. (Online). Available: [https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2020/wp163\\_2020.pdfv](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2020/wp163_2020.pdfv) (November 3, 2021).
- Lada, A, Wang, M & Yan, T. (2021). How does news feed predict what you want to see? Facebook, January 26. (Online). Available: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/01/how-does-news-feed-predict-what-you-want-to-see/> (November 4, 2021).
- Luo, Y & Harrison, M.H. (2019). How citizen journalists impact the agendas of traditional media and the government policymaking process in China. *Sage Journals* March 25. (Online). Available: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436419835771> (12/07/2021).

- Mandela, N.R. (1964). I am prepared to die. Nelson Mandela's statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial, April 20. (Online). Available: [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS010&txtstr=prepared%20to%20die](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS010&txtstr=prepared%20to%20die) (October 23, 2021).
- Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page: (Online). Available: <https://www.facebook.com/MangaungMetropolitanMunicipalityOfficial/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- Maleka, M. C. (2016). Strengthening Local Government: An application of e-governance. *Journal of Public Administration*, 51(1).
- Moss, G & Wojcik, S. (2019). E-democracy/E-participation. (Online). Available: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com> (November 2, 2021).
- Mukonza, R.M. (2014). E-governance: a new paradigm in public administration. (Online). Available: <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC158064> (12/10/2021).
- Mukonza, R.M. 2013. M-Government in South Africa's local government: A missed opportunity to enhance public participation? (Online). Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2591888.2591966> Accessed: 07/12/2021].
- National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD). 2020. First case of COVID-19 announced... (Online) Available from: <https://www.nicd.ac.za/first-case-of-covid-19-announced-an-update/#::~:~:text=The%20Minister%20of%20Health%2C%20on,Natal%20who%20travelled%20to%20Italy.> [Accessed: 15/10/ 2021].
- Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Page. (Online). Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/NMBayM/> (November 8-11, 2021).
- Ornico. The SA Social Media Landscape Report. (2021). (Online). Available: <https://website.ornico.co.za/?s=2021+social+media+landscape> (Online). (09/09/2021).
- O'Brien, T. (2018). Why Social Media is Important for Your Business. (Online). Available from: <https://www.timetrade.com/blog/why-social-media-engagement-is-important-for-your-business/> (October 23, 2021).
- Palvia, S.C. J & Sharma, S.S. (2019). E-Government and e-governance: Definitions/domain framework and status around the world. (Online). Available: [http://governance40.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/E-Government\\_and\\_E-Governance\\_Definition.pdf](http://governance40.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/E-Government_and_E-Governance_Definition.pdf) (October 29, 2021).
- Ramaphosa, C. 2020. Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on Measures to Combat Covid-19, 15 March. (Online). Available from: <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/press-statements/statement-president-cyril-ramaphosa-measures-combat-covid-19-epidemic.> [Accessed: 23/06/2020].
- South Africa. (1996). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as adopted by the Constitutional Assembly on 8 May 1996 and as amended on 11 October 1996. Pretoria: Government Printer. (B34B-96).
- South Africa. Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. (2020). Municipal Profiles. District Development Model. (Online). Available: <https://www.cogta.gov.za/ddm/index.php/documents/> (October 23, 2021).
- South Africa. Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). More about municipalities. (Online). Available: <https://www.elections.org.za/content/Elections/2016-Municipal-Elections/More-about-municipalities/> (October 25, 2021).
- South Africa. Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 7 of 2000. Government Gazette 21776. Government Printer.
- South Africa. Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services (2017). Government Gazette November 10, No 41241. Government Printer.
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA). (2015). 15 Years of Developmental and Democratic Local Government 2000-2015. (Online). Available: <https://www.salga.org.za/> (July 21, 2021).

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. What is E-Participation? (Online). Available: <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/eparticipation> (November 11, 2021).

World Wide Worx. The SA Social Media Landscape Report (2021). (Online). Available: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/internet/502583/the-biggest-and-most-popular-social-media-platforms-in-south-africa-including-tiktok/> (November 09, 2021).