

latter that forms the primary focus of this paper but, in so doing, the overlap between all three threads has to be acknowledged and factored into the discourse.

In the first section of this paper, the international context of ICT and social media usage by government is outlined. This is followed by a brief examination of the South African government's understanding of ICT-enabled governance, and an overview of social media usage by autonomous civil-society organisations in their engagement with the state, i.e. as tools of activism. However, the use of social media has not only supplemented the discourse of social activism, it has also reshaped it, hence the need to recognise some of the risks and critiques that attach to the use of social media in this manner. Finally, the likely scope for expanded digital engagement and activism is analysed in relation to key demographic trends in South Africa.

ICT AND GOVERNMENTS INTERNATIONALLY

The potential to use ICTs and social media to facilitate organised political and civic interactions between citizens and states has long been recognised, if weakly explored. ICT researchers such as Holzer and Kim (2007) have refined a discourse of *digital governance* suggesting that this includes both digital government (delivery of public service) and digital democracy (citizen participation in governance). These researchers based their insights on the *Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide Survey* which assesses the practice of digital governance in 100 of the world's most wired (ICT enabled) municipalities by subjecting their websites to a survey covering 98 indicators (2007:24).

Holzer and Kim (2007) noted that the internet, and therefore also social media, is a convenient mechanism for citizens to engage their government and possibly also to decentralise decision making.

However, even across some of the most sophisticated websites, the potential for online participation was still underdeveloped. What emerged, however, were a handful of innovative practises where municipalities (in Seoul and Helsinki for example) used their websites in conjunction with social media to conduct online surveys or polls and to engage citizens in community discussions of important public-policy issues via blogs, bulletin boards, or e-discussion forums. The same websites also typically made provision for reporting crimes and violations of administrative laws and regulations (Holzer and Kim 2007).

McLoughlin and Scott (2010) echo the view that ICTs have the potential to positively impact on government transparency, responsiveness, and accountability and to empower citizens by improving information flows between government and citizens. They caution, however, that much rests on the political will of the state to take up such opportunities. Governments that choose not to take up these opportunities will eventually be confronted by the reality described above, i.e. that, outside the framework of orderly governance and *provided spaces* for good governance, ICTs and social media are effective tools against state-sponsored repression and despotism. As Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe (2011:8) note:

Social media activists, bloggers, tweeters and speak-to-tweeters keep the world updated even if the television cameras have been switched off... In essence, the over-regulation of the right to freedom of expression and association cannot achieve its ends in the context of connected societies where ordinary citizens - most of them young - cannot easily be manipulated or controlled.

Clearly ICTs and social media can fulfil this e-governance potential only if citizens can access and use the technology. This is where new social media (e.g. mobile phones) have opened up the internet as an alternative medium for citizen communication or participatory democracy (see Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe 2011).

ICT AND GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The concepts of e-government and e-governance are already well established in the South African discourse of participatory democracy. Farelo and Morris (2006:3) of the South African Department of Public Service and Administration and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research's Meraka Institute understand e-government as 'the use of ICT to promote more efficient and effective government, facilitate more accessible government services, allow greater public access to information, and make government more accountable to citizens.' The study into the use of ICTs to promote local participatory democracy (SALGA and GIZ: 2011) noted the importance of distinguishing between *e-government* as ICT use within government for efficiency objectives, and *e-governance* which looks at ICT use in the interactions between government and civil society. The study also found good practical examples of ICTs being used to enhance efficiency and convenient service (e-government), but less evidence of digital enhancements of citizens' participation in local governance (e-governance). Effective e-government practises include the following:

- * The City of Cape Town's use of ICTs for basic customer transactions, where a 'new online self-help utility has been launched to invited constituents and is in use by 30000 beta users (registered email clients of CT). Most of the

online transactions available to call centre staff can now be operated independently by the constituents themselves, for instance, submission of meter readings, submission of motor vehicle licensing information, job applications, etc' (SALGA and GIZ 2011:130).

- * The Department of Health, and the primary health care sector in general, including role-players like the Treatment Action Campaign, have used mobile technology to monitor adherence to TB treatment and to record the progress of community-based projects. Further use of social media like Facebook, Twitter and Mxit is planned for increasing the uptake of HIV counselling and testing and TB screening and for improving communication with target groups (SANAC 2011).

In the realm of non-structured or unregulated interactions between government and civil-society groups such as social movements, NGOs and ratepayer associations, the SALGA and GIZ study found much anecdotal evidence of the use of web-based platforms, e-newsletters and mailing groups, issue-based blogs and other digital technologies. In general, however, this form of independent ICT usage for engagement purposes is under-researched and not fully analysed (SALGA and GIZ 2011:88–89).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS TOOLS OF ACTIVISM

According to Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe (2011), the term 'social media' generally refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share and search for information without having to log into any specific portal site or portal destination. International media coverage of political and social conflict has highlighted how ICTs have boosted the potential of citizen groups to mobilise,

co-ordinate events and campaigns, and shape news coverage when interacting with the state. Mobile technologies such as cell phones, smart phones, and iPads are now acknowledged tools for social activism and have been in evidence at barricades and picket lines all over the world in 2010 and 2011. In these settings, social media are often used to greater strategic advantage than rocks and petrol bombs—see Mernit (2011) and Papic and Noonan (2011).

Similarly, regimes confronting popular uprisings have begun to take the role of social media more seriously. The Mubarak government in Egypt, for instance, quickly identified the threat posed by social media in organising protests and after initially trying to block certain sites, eventually disconnected every internet service provider in the country.² The ICT world did not back down however. Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe (2011:3) describe Google's innovative response:

Google devised a way in which people could still voice their opinions without being connected to the internet. This new communication tool was dubbed 'Speak to Tweet' and it allowed anyone with a voice connection to dial one of three international numbers and have their voice messages sent out as tweets with the word #egypt added as a 'hashtag' (user-generated coding for searchable terms and keywords) to the links. People could thus call these numbers and voice their solidarity, concerns and opinions about the protests by having their phone voice messages converted into tweets.

According to Papic and Noonan (2011),

The situations in Tunisia and Egypt have both seen an increased use of social networking media such as Facebook and Twitter to help organize, communicate and ultimately initiate civil-disobedience campaigns and street actions. The Iranian "Green Revolution" in 2009 was closely followed by the Western media via YouTube and Twitter, and the latter even gave Moldova's 2009 revolution its moniker, the "Twitter Revolution".

Social media have also played a major role in civic organisation for anti-capitalist demonstrations in western countries where the objective is economic change, e.g. *Occupy Wall Street*, rather than regime overthrow. Furthermore, social media have allowed activists and participants to not only organise and manage such events but develop their own media and news profiles by recording and uploading footage of the events and the response by the authorities (Papic and Noonan 2011). Social media also seem to have opened up new strategic opportunities for organisations, for example, leveraging the participation of high-profile personalities, such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Above all it has been very successful in generating an extensive on-line network of discussion and debate.³ From the diverse discourse on the role of social media in participatory governance (protest, activism, social mobilisation etc.), the following forms of functionality seem to be key (Haider 2011:1):

- * enabling interaction, organisation and cooperation towards more effective and swift action around a particular social or political issue
- * lowering the costs of the above
- * allowing a community of interests or collective identity to coalesce

- * expanding and accelerating communication and the flow of information for stronger transparency and accountability.

These factors enhance the ability of citizens to track and engage government decision making and policy shifts.

Whether viewed as spontaneous and popular uprisings or manipulated campaigns to achieve regime overthrow, these world-changing events have seen ICTs used to hugely enhance citizens' power vis-à-vis the state. Shirky (2011) describes various international examples where ICTs and social media completely redefined the manner in which people vent their dissatisfaction with government and government policy. Shirky shows how ICTs greatly boost the potential of citizen groups to mobilise, coordinate events and campaigns and shape news coverage when taking on the state. Citing recent uprisings in Iran and Thailand, Shirky, however, cautions that the effective use of social media does not guarantee an enhancement of democracy where political repression is severe and sustained. In fact social media tools may be most effective 'where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government' (2011:2).

Neither is the use of digital technology for political purposes, inherently restrained nor purely civic. The most publicised forms of political engagement — including those cited by Alam (2011), Mäkinen and Wangu Kuira (2008) and Mernit (2011) — are often violent, anarchic and tread a fine line between civic activism and insurrection. Such movements are, nonetheless, widely regarded as a legitimate response to the well-known problem of democratic deficit',⁴ and seem to underline the fundamental assertion made by Shirky, i.e. that 'communicative freedom is good for political freedom' (2011:3).

ICT enabled protests and social movements, including protests around poor municipal service and state corruption, cannot therefore be entirely delinked from formal participation in well-regulated political systems in South Africa, as previously described by Fakir (2009). The use of social media in protests and social mobilisation should not be seen as inherently anti-statist, threatening to national sovereignty or simply an extension of political power. 'The more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere' (Shirky 2011:3). Drawing partly on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Shirky also shows that in circumstances of revolutionary change, *all* communicative technologies, and not just digital formats, have the potential to act as instruments of democratisation. The key attribute of social media is its ability to promote interaction or a discretionary level of participation, as Alam (2011:19) observes:

Social media is important not only because it is a medium through which information spreads, but also because it provides an opportunity, responsibility, and choice for the receptor as to what an individual will do with the information. It is in this capacity that people maintain agency and categorize themselves as passive bystanders or active participants.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Some might find irony in the spectre of social media being used against globalisation and the forces of neoliberalism. The development of mobile technologies has, after all, been driven by some of the world's most opportunistic entrepreneurs, and by opportunities to make obscene profits out of consumer fixations with gadgetry and promises of

instant gratification or definitive change. As Shirky (2011:4) concedes, ‘most people simply use these tools for commerce, social life, or self-distraction’ (although, as he points out, the same may be said of other media).

A well-established critique of mobile technologies is that they enable a less than healthy tendency among young people to self-publicise and communicate personalised trivia in a manner that can easily be dismissed as frivolous and even antisocial. Shah, Stremmelaar, and Jansen (2010:14) are concerned about these characterisations, arguing that they set up a false discourse around social media and its impact on activism:

On the one hand were narratives of euphoria, where every new gadget, new tool, new instance of adoption and abuse was celebrated as the ringing in the new, the ushering of the age of dawn; the euphoria almost couched in the language reminiscent of the promise of the Revolution in the early twentieth century... The euphoria narrative is countered by the growing tales of despair... a bunch of superstars (notorious but with star value nonetheless) stand in for the deep and dire dangers that these young generations are in. They are addicted, distracted, lack political consciousness or empathy, and are so seduced by immersive webs that they are neglecting their apportioned role in societies.

Linked to this, Gladwell (2010) identified the problem of ‘slacktivism’—the idea that the costs or sacrifices of social activism are reduced to the point where short-term sentiment and easy gestures of resistance or solidarity replace commitment and dedication. Social media allows the commitment of activist groups to go largely untested, cautions Gladwell. The

strong commitment and individual sacrifices, that are required to legitimate and give credence to a social cause, are not prerequisites of ICT activism. Thus social media may cause activist movements to overreach their own institutional and organisational capabilities before they have sufficiently matured—a risk also noted by Papic and Noonan (2011).

Anyone can publish on social media, including those whose agendas may be racist, sexist, violent, narcissistic, anti-democratic or just poorly conceived and half-baked. By way of example, Mäkinen and Wangu Kuiru (2008) have described how social media were used to further destabilise Kenya during a period of political turmoil that included ethnic violence.

SIDESTEPPING INTELLECTUAL, LEGAL AND ETHICAL FILTERS

In addition to the acknowledged risks of its exclusive use by political or social elites, its exploitation for managerial/privatisation purposes and its manipulation for political power rather than civic empowerment, social media poses other risks. One such risk is the capability to sidestep the intellectual, legal and ethical filters that apply to mainstream media. Anyone can publish on social media, including those whose agendas may be racist, sexist, violent, narcissistic, anti-democratic or just poorly conceived and half-baked. By way of example, Mäkinen and Wangu Kuiru (2008) have described how social media were used to further destabilise Kenya during a period of political turmoil that included ethnic violence. Haider (2011:8) summarised the problem as follows, ‘During the 2007–2008 presidential election crisis in Kenya, the use of mobile phones made it cheap and easy to spread hateful and violent messages that contributed to mob violence’. From a democratisation point of view, the absence of filtering or regulation of content can, therefore, be a double-edged sword as Alam

(2011:18) notes: 'Information gathered, however, is not always reliable and can be manipulated by parties for ulterior motives, especially in politically charged environments'.

CONFUSING THE MEDIUM WITH THE MESSAGE

Proponents of social media as tools of social change also tend to confuse the message with the medium. Citing Ottaway and Hamzawy as well as Radsch, Haider (2011) notes that the labelling of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia as 'Wiki and Twitter revolutions' detracted from the economic, social and political grievances that inspired these uprisings. Had social media not been in use, analogue technology, faxes, telegraphs etc. would have been used for much the same purpose, albeit with reduced efficiency and impact. Contrary to those who would seek to invent new political discourse around ICT and social media, these technologies do not in

service efficiency and cost-cutting measures through improved technology and modernity. The ICT industry has countless proponents of e-government who are mainly in the business of selling advice, services, systems and software, all requiring some degree of privatisation or outsourcing.⁵ The predicted benefits for public administration and government are ostensibly huge, but the promises often remain just that — promises and visions. The tendency towards hype has spread from the basic systems improvement (e-government) to the field of e-governance, that is, those critical interactions between state and society. Finger and Pécoud (undated:3), for example, talk about substituting the need for government to have direct transactions with the public by 'digitalizing the customer interface' — all in the name of a shift that would see the state acting as the *regulator* rather than the provider of services.

ENGAGING THE STATE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

In roughly the same period that social media were deployed for political ends, South Africa experienced a dramatic increase in the number of community protests (variously ascribed to poor services, lack of accountability by officials and weak provisions for public participation), which peaked at an average of nearly 18 protests per month in 2009 (Karamoko and Jain 2011:1).

Very little documented evidence has been published on the use of social media in such protests and other forms of activism. However, Nonkululeko Godana (in Shah et al. 2010) describes the use of Twitter by rape-survivors and their friends or support groups to draw attention to sexual violence and the associated failings of the justice system and school authorities. Godana describes the effectiveness of one victim's brave choice to recount her ordeal on

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themselves inspire or motivate social reform and political change but, as Castells (2007) notes, they do give rise to new forms of insurgent politics and enable political action that could not have been conceived without these technologies.

HYPE AND PRIVATISATION

Social media and ICTs in general, are also the tools in trade of *new* public-management practitioners seeking to shrink government and extend public-

Twitter as a storytelling exercise, which mobilised other victims and their supporters. The subsequent development of a bond between friends and supporters culminated in the formation of an activist group, a campaign and even a dedicated song on one of South Africa's music video channels.

Two key points need to be made about the political use of social media; firstly, such opportunities are also available to the state (and other political actors) and, secondly, for governance purposes, social media offers considerable utility to governments that seek to streamline service efficiency or to govern on a participatory basis. Some governments are obviously aware of and anxious to explore the connection between social media and effective engagement with the state. As a case in point, in 2008 the British prime minister appointed a minister for e-government who proceeded to solicit comments and input on government activities through the popular Twitter service (see Peters and Abud 2009). What is perhaps most surprising is that governments seem to have woken up to these possibilities very belatedly and only after being wrong-footed by the power of social media in enhancing the organisation and impact of protest activity.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Assumptions about the online impact of mobile technologies and social networking need to be treated with caution. South Africa, for example, has high levels of access to mobile phones. However, in 2010, there were just 2.5 million Facebook users in South Africa—a figure that is roughly the same as European countries that have much smaller populations. South Africa's Facebook use is, however, well short of that in other developing nations such as Indonesia (which has 21 million

users), the Philippines (12 million users), Mexico and Colombia (both at 9 million users), as well as a number of other South American countries that have between 3 and 9 million users (Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe 2011:2).

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While South Africa has the second highest number of Facebook users in Africa (exceeded only by Egypt) actual internet access is significantly higher in Nigeria, Morocco and Egypt. For particular countries, therefore, relative levels of internet access do not automatically translate into similar levels of social media usage. In South Africa, roughly half those who access the internet use Facebook, whereas only 9.4% of Nigeria's internet users choose Facebook. In total, Africa has about 100 million internet users and 17 million people access Facebook, making it the most visited site amongst those who do have internet access (Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe 2011:4). By this yardstick alone, Facebook is by far the most popular form of social media in Africa. As of 2012 then, social media seems to be a significant element of internet usage, but since only about 10% of Africans access the internet, the usage and significance of social media should not be overstated. As Mäkinen and Kuira (2008) warn, there is every possibility that social media will remain the tools of elites—reformist or otherwise.

The SALGA and GIZ (2011) study cited earlier provides a useful overview of ICT access and usage in South Africa as of 2011. The study found that web-based ICT interventions have limited relevance for the majority of South Africans unless facilitated by intermediaries, such as specialist community-based organisations, NGO programmes or social movements that deliberately set out to work with ICTs. The study also noted that NGO networks, like the Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN), provide some level of electronic interface for civil-society organisations working on issues of local governance—mainly a website, newsletter and email groups.

Unsurprisingly, the study found far more prevalent use of social media by activist groups serving middle-class constituencies. The study also found that, in response to the increasing crisis in local government, many new and existing ratepayer associations in the more affluent areas have formalised their structures and now have well-designed websites with social media links including blogs, e-forums and other platforms. Social media are thus deployed for direct advocacy work, such as tracking and commenting on developments in policy, services, rates increases, tariffs, environmental issues and development control lobbies. The study notes that ‘Engagement with local government is strong and often conflictual’ (2011:85) and that alliances have been formed with business interests, such as the real-estate industry. The National Ratepayers Association, for example, claims to have about 320 member associations across South Africa and makes extensive use of electronic posts to update news of local campaigns, and to inform its members of expert views on issues such as property tax, etc.

At the other end of the political and economic spectrum, social movements such as Abahlali

baseMjondolo have their own websites and use social media to engage targeted municipalities, generally in a critical manner. These increasingly sophisticated social media or advocacy platforms are used to criticise failures in local governance and to resist what are seen as unjust municipal actions against informal shack settlements and other marginalised groups (SALGA and GIZ 2011). The SALGA/GIZ study also forecast that increasing levels of digital maturity could see municipalities using social media and web-based technologies to link with independent social movements, ratepayers, NGOs and organised business in order to facilitate debate or interaction.

Projections on the use of social media for political and social activism in South Africa are difficult due to a range of sometimes contradictory possibilities. Access to cell phones is very high but internet access is available to few. For basic co-ordination and organisation, mobile technologies therefore have great potential. For more sustained and coherent lobbying and advocacy, social media are more likely to be used by well-organised or relatively affluent groupings in the near future. Interesting exceptions to this are the social movements already described who have both a mass following and digital capability.

Lessons from Kenya suggest that, in times of political tumult, South Africa may be vulnerable to the abuse of social media by political groups or figures that seek to advance their cause through appeals to ethnic, racial or religious based identities. However, civil society in South Africa might find a less urgent need for social media, provided that its Constitution continues to be effective in protecting freedom of expression. Social media have found great utility in other African uprisings due to the absence of social and political frameworks that entrench freedom of expression—including well-

developed and independent media networks. South African media is still relatively free and information flows fairly easily between the state and civil society. Attempts to curb this could see social media assuming much more prominence. For the more economically marginalised, social media, especially mobile technologies, offer the opportunity to supplement protest and resistance with technology-based engagements that carry coherent messages. This may overcome the perception that such protests are purely spontaneous, politically opportunistic or simply a reaction to short-term service failure.

CONCLUSION

Social media and ICTs in general are set to play a key role in South African political and social activism. As demonstrated in the 2011 SALGA and GIZ study, important groupings in civil society are already making effective use of these mediums. However, the direct use of social media by the poorest and most marginalised constituencies is unlikely to grow significantly in the short-term due to limited internet access. Two key factors could impact on this. Firstly, mobile technologies, which have relatively high coverage, could see increasing usage for co-ordination and public communication functions. Secondly, social movements and aligned civil-society organisations are likely to play an important role as *advocacy intermediaries* for such groups and will carry their voices into social-media-based debates.

Innovative developments in e-government and e-governance are already evident in South Africa's better-performing government departments and

municipalities, and this trend is likely to continue. However, ICTs cannot in themselves supply water or keep the lights on, and will thus be subject to the current levels of basic service (in)efficiency. In order for state departments and municipalities to meet basic service standards, emphasis will almost certainly be on customer convenience and streamlined services rather than participatory governance. In those rare cases where government commits to 'digital democracy', the use of social media for protest and criticism may be somewhat pre-empted. The government should, however, accept that independent engagement via social media fills an important gap in a maturing democracy.

There appears to be little documented research that clearly analyses the use of social media in South African civic-municipal activism and community protests, but recent national debates about restrictions on the media and freedom of expression, in particular the so-called Protection of Information Bill, have seen social media used widely and effectively. Journalist Mvelase Peppetta noted, 'With journalists and other media practitioners being so prominent and active on social media (Twitter in particular) it's hardly surprising that the fight against the bill has largely happened, and been coordinated, via social media. On Twitter, four of the Top 10 trending topics in South Africa are related to the controversial bill.'¹⁶ This suggests that social media exists as a form of democratic backstop to a possible regression in formal systems and media freedom, or even to the democratic deficit that seems to afflict maturing political systems.

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NOTES

- ¹ The study was produced by SALGA with support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) as part of their Strengthening Local Governance Programme. The study can be accessed at <http://lgict.org.za/document/study-potential-utilize-information-and-communication-technologies-ict%E2%80%99s-promote-inclusion->

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- ² <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110202-social-media-tool-protest> Retrieved 3 November 2011.
- ³ See, for example, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-10-17/news/30289923_1_social-media-protesters-videos/2 Retrieved 3 November 2011.
- ⁴ This term refers to the idea that ostensibly democratic institutions, and especially governments, are prone to lapses in democratic practice that may, for example, impact negatively on parliamentary democracy or the perceived integrity of public representatives. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_deficit)
- ⁵ See for example the 'Process and Systems Overview Using Gartner's Hype Cycle' (SALGA and GIZ 2011).
- ⁶ Mvelase Peppetta, South Africans Take to Social Media on Black Tuesday in 'Secrecy Bill' Protest. *Memeburn*, 22 November 2011. <http://za.news.yahoo.com/south-africans-social-media-black-tuesday-secrecy-bill-050137072.html>. Retrieved 24 February 2012.