



IN PROFILE: USING CIVIC TECHNOLOGY TOOLS TO RECLAIM LOCAL DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Gaile Fullard and Rashaad Alli, Parliamentary Monitoring Group

Civic technology tools have been touted as a means to expand participation in the civic and democratic space; however, this assertion needs to be backed by facts, especially in the South African context. This case study reveals that technology has the potential for citizens to feel more engaged in the democratic space but raises questions about its reach.

BACKGROUND TO CIVIC TECHNOLOGY TOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The internet is increasingly accessed by South Africans due to the rise in the use of smartphones. The Minister of Telecommunications announced plans to double the mobile broadband¹ coverage to 80% of the population by 2019. The cost to communicate is however inhibiting nation-wide growth. As ICT platforms can be more interactive than traditional media, once the reach of ICT platforms is assured and the cost to communicate is lowered, one can deploy tools that will allow more voices to engage and interact. South African civic technology tools that aim to promote political participation therefore have to be viewed as prototypes – pioneering the way to come.

CASE STUDY: THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) works towards developing an active citizenry to ensure a responsive, accountable government. Our experience has, however, shown that engaging directly with one's political representatives is seldom seen as the means to a solution for South Africans who were historically denied access to political representatives.

The People's Assembly was set up to encourage this engagement in 2014. As a civic technology tool,

it aims to make South Africa's elected representatives less invisible and more available, and thus more accountable, while simultaneously helping people to connect with their national and provincial political representatives. A year after the website was launched, an online survey was conducted, and focus groups held to assess if the objectives were being met. A key recommendation was to accelerate the inclusion of local government, which was achieved in 2016.

The website has a sophisticated profile on each Member of Parliament (MP) that includes when and what an MP comments on inparliamentary meetings; how often MPs attend these meetings; as well as what their assets and business involvements are. Most importantly, it provides details of their assigned constituency office for individuals who want to engage with the MP directly.

When adding local government to People's Assembly, PMG found that a comprehensive list of ward councillor contact details does not exist. The Independent Electoral Commission provides only the contact details of the party provincial office or local municipal office, and despite government ensuring that each municipality has its own website (where such contact details could be included)¹, in total, it took six months of cajoling municipalities to release this information.

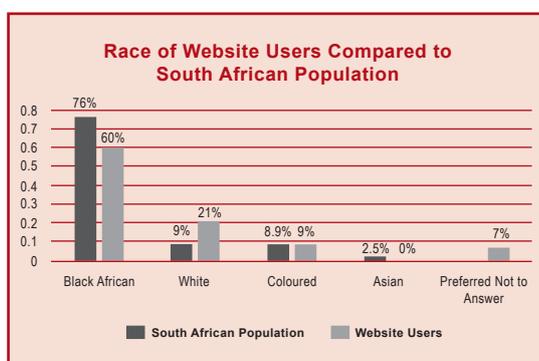
WHO BENEFITS FROM CIVIC TECHNOLOGY?

The online survey, investigating the impact of the People’s Assembly website, was conducted by the developers of the website, mySociety². Simultaneously, similar sites in developed countries (United Kingdom/United States) and in another developing country (Kenya) were surveyed. The findings from this research were presented at the Open Government Partnership Global Summit, in October 2015, under the title “Who benefits from civic technology?”.

The following results were shown from the 94 People’s Assembly users surveyed:

1. Demographics
2. User attitudes

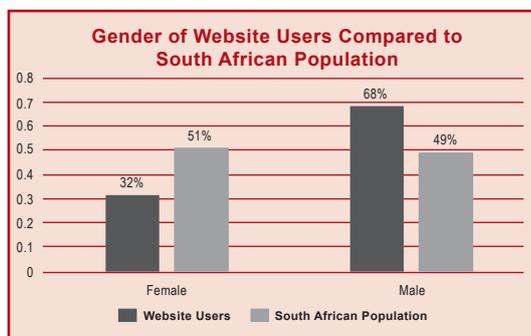
Race



In terms of race, the reach of the civic technology tool is called into question as the survey demographics do not reflect South African society³.

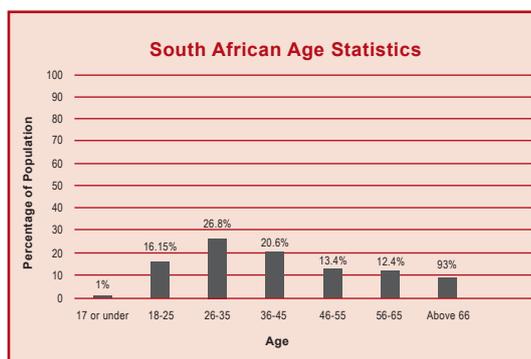
Gender

68% male and 32% female users, compared to 49% male and 51% female in the general population³.



Gender imbalance of users in South Africa is highly significant. This is also evident in the survey conducted in Kenya (72% male) and the UK (64% male), though not in the US (52% male).

Age

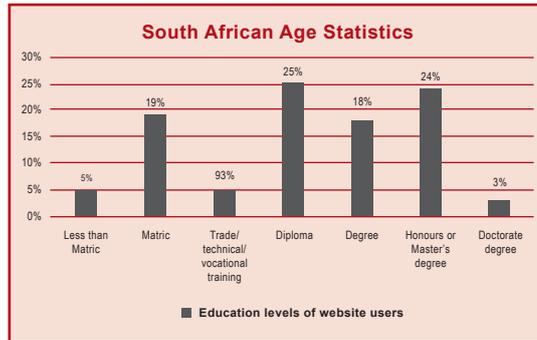


In South Africa, 65% of people using civic technology platforms are typically 45 or younger, and 44% are under 35.

The huge difference between developed and developing countries in this survey was age: 72% of users in developed countries are over the age of 45. In Kenya and South Africa, only 14% and 34% respectively were over the age of 45 which shows that civic technology is being embraced by the youth in developing countries.

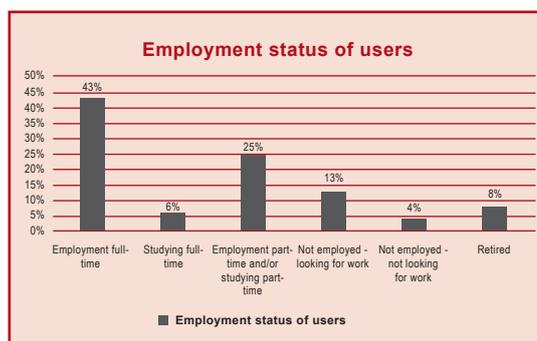
This has interesting implications for its future application to engage South African youth in active citizenship.

Educational attainment



Reach is a challenge for civic technology tools if only the well-educated are accessing them. The results show 55% of users are not university educated. The results on the surface appear positive, reflecting a broad spectrum of users with varying levels of educational attainment. However, South African 2011 census data³ shows only 12% of the population hold a degree-level qualification or above—this differs substantially from the 45% of People’s Assembly users with degrees. There is thus a significant lack of reach to people with a lower level of educational attainment.

Employment



In the fourth quarter of 2015, Statistics South Africa pegged the unemployment rate at 24.5% and the employment rate at 44.2%. This does approximate the demographics in the survey of users.

LOCATION: RURAL/URBAN

Respondents in urban areas represented 79% of the sample. The current urban-rural population ratio⁴ in South Africa is urban 63.6% and rural 36.4%. This result is the most telling about the reach of civic technology tools as the rural demographic, as in so many other arenas, is left disempowered without access.

USER ATTITUDES

Political engagement:

The majority of users are very interested in politics. Over 80% confirm they consume political news at least once per day.

User perceptions about the benefit of the tool:

- ✦ 97% of users said they would use this website again.
- ✦ In response to the question “Before today, have you ever contacted a Member of Parliament?”:
 - 60% said that they had not contacted a politician.
 - 24% said they had to ask for information.
 - 7% had made contact to make a complaint.
 - 17% had made contact for another reason.

This was an interesting finding when compared to the three other countries. In South Africa, 60% of respondents had never contacted a Member of Parliament, whereas politically engaged users in the other three countries had significantly made more contact with their representatives. South Africa’s electoral system at the provincial and national level is one of proportional representation, so representatives are not elected from geographic areas. There is a great deal of anonymity on the part of our political representatives. The lack of contact information for ward councillors perpetuates this at a local level. It encourages civic passivity in citizens who should

be accessing these representatives for mobilising support for specific interventions.

Of the people surveyed:

- ✦ 92% said seeing this information about their Members of Parliament enables them to hold MPs to account. Only 8% said it did not.
- ✦ 37% said that using the People's Assembly website made them more empowered (i.e. engaged/active) to a significant degree, and 48% said it made them more empowered in part.
- ✦ 20% indicated that after leaving the website, they would visit their constituency office
- ✦ 19% said they would contact a Member of Parliament about the issue that brought them to the website.

These responses show highly positive attitudes towards this tool and the potential for positive action from its use.

GOING FORWARD: LESSONS FROM THE SURVEY

A criticism of civic technology tools, especially in developing countries, has been that they often end up empowering the already empowered. So an important positive survey outcome has been the use of the tool by civil society networks, which play a key role in taking the information and packaging it suitably for their audiences, especially those without digital

access. Nonetheless, the demographic information revealed by the survey indicate that civic technology tools in South Africa have a long way to go in achieving equitable reach and usage.

The survey reflected that the users of the website do not represent South African society in its full diversity, however, it is hoped that including the local tier of representatives on the People's Assembly website in 2016 will extend its reach. Municipalities represent the sphere of government closest to the people, with basic services delivered by them. Ward councillors are the political representatives closest to communities. It is thus more likely that people will engage with civic technology if it is able to directly deal with community issues.

Going forward, it is important to remember that civic technology is still relatively new for many communities, and the digital divide needs to be overcome to fully unlock the potential of civic technology for developing countries so that it can be utilised as a tool to create spaces to engage duty-bearers in more inclusive democratic practices. This survey on the impact of the People's Assembly website revealed high confidence levels in civic technology websites, with the majority of users indicating that they would use the website again in future and believing that such tools help them to hold government to account; this indicates the potential for citizens to feel like, and thus become, empowered, engaged and active citizens.

REFERENCES

- 1 Minister of Telecommunications Budget Vote Speech 10 May 2016 <https://pmg.org.za/briefing/22492>
- 2 Who Benefits From Civic Technology? Rebecca Rumbul, my Society, October 2015 <https://www.mysociety.org/research/who-benefits-from-civic-technology>
- 3 Statistics South Africa Census 2011 http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=3839
- 4 Minister of Human Settlements Budget Vote Speech 3 May 2016 <https://pmg.org.za/briefing/22463>

NOTES

- ¹ There were a few remarkable cases of ward councillor contact details on these websites