

The HSRC and our partner organisations, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), presented their work at the conference of the World Social Science Forum 2013 (WSSF) on the theme, 'Social transformations and the digital age', in Montreal in October.

As stated at WSSF 2013, the role of digital technologies has become a major focus of social research. These technologies, with social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia and WikiLeaks, have the transformative potential 'to challenge traditional hierarchies in politics, science, and the media', at the same time noting the downside of how these technologies can also be used for slandering, hoaxes, misinformation, narcissism and the loss of privacy.

Digital technologies reach far beyond social media and have affected nearly all areas of society in the form of computers and the networks that enable them to communicate with one another. 'They have changed how people think about themselves, how work is organised, how knowledge is produced, and how access to information is regulated. Education, healthcare, shopping, agriculture, finance, security, leisure have all been deeply affected by information and communication technologies,' the WSSF programme states.

In this special edition of *HSRC Review*, we present seven articles based on papers delivered during different sessions at the WSSF 2013. These articles cover a wide range of topics, such as citizen engagement through the internet; the successes achieved by homeowners using social media; transformation through human rights films; an analysis of how the media reports on Africa; access to ICTs in rural areas; the social dynamics of innovation for rural development, and social media's role in democracy.

## Enhancing digital citizen engagement: lessons from South Africa

Digital technology (ICT) has an important role to play in enhancing South African democracy. In an interconnected world, Web 2.0 and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MXit and YouTube fulfil the role of 'public sphere' by facilitating social interactions as well as civic and political participation, maintains *Narnia Bohler-Muller*.

It is clear that the South African government must keep up with ICT trends, and develop and update communication policies for the constructive use of digital platforms. These must be informed by citizen needs and democratic principles of openness, transparency and accountability.

### 'New' ways of enhancing democratic participation

The innovative use of ICTs can enhance democratic practices, as no substantial limits to participation in time and space exist. Thus, digital democracy is an addition, not a replacement, for dialogue practices. According to Zimbabwean media expert, Last Moyo, new media augments the scope and breadth of democratic engagement. Furthermore, in creating space for a plurality of voices, ICT platforms are more interactive than traditional media, such as radio, television and film, which tend to be linear and do not facilitate conversations.

A review of literature on participation in the public sphere illustrates the diversity of forms that such participatory

initiatives may take. For instance, some studies distinguish between instrumental and normative participation.

Instrumental or indirect participation refers to a one-way process of information exchange in order to gain citizen acceptance of policy, and where the roles of citizens are limited to that of voters or passive recipients of services.

The normative form, or direct participation, refers to processes where citizens actively engage in planning, policy-making and decision-making, and is believed to engender a sense of community, to enhance social cohesion and to enrich democracy. Citizen, civic and community engagement processes should take into account the ways in which new media can be used differently to entrench a culture of normative or direct participation.

### Some relevant statistics

The *South African Social Media Landscape 2012* report found that social networking in South Africa had crossed barriers and divides, mainly in terms of age and geography. The fastest growing group of Facebook users in terms of age was



people older than 60, which saw a user increase of 44%. This was compared to the 19–30 age group, which saw a user increase of less than 20%, and the teenage group, where a user increase of less than 10% was observed.

An important dimension of digital communication in the South African context is the prevalent use of mobile phones to access the internet and social media platforms. The 2011 national census reported that the proportion of households owning mobile phones had increased from 31.9% in 2001 to 88.9% in 2011. Although almost 65% of all South African households still did not have access to the internet via landline computers, a large proportion used their mobile phones to access the internet.

In a survey conducted in 2011/2012, Research ICT Africa found that the mobile phone is now a major point of entry for internet usage on the African continent. According to its figures, the internet in South Africa is accessed through mobile phones by 70% of the total number of internet users in the country.

Public libraries, internet cafés and access to free WiFi via digital hubs also enhanced availability to online communication tools and addressed some issues related to the high cost of data in South Africa.

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### **South African government policy**

In the *Proposed ICT Policy Review Framing Paper* (22 April 2013), the government recognises that its policy related to ICT is outdated and that efforts must be made to connect all South Africans in a way that enhances democracy. The framework document is useful in that it defines ‘communications’ broadly to include telecommunications, broadcasting and postal services as well as new communications technologies.

**The Department of Communications ... recognises broadband as a strategic tool in building a knowledge-based economy.**

The new communication policy adopted by the government should be based on the principles articulated in the framing paper and should also be informed by what is already happening on the ground. Furthermore, the Department of Communications’ *Consultation Document on the Proposed National Broadband Policy for South Africa* (2013) recognises the benefits of improved broadband infrastructure in South Africa, and also recognises broadband as a strategic tool in building a knowledge-based economy.

The department identifies the following benefits of adopting a better policy on broadband:

- Supporting economic development and growth;
- Increasing access and improving delivery of essential social services such as education, health, electronic government and public safety; and
- Minimising the digital divide.

It is therefore clear that South African policy-makers are aware of the benefits of connectivity, and that infrastructure growth is required in this area. The new Minister of Communications, Yunus Carrim, published the National Integrated Policy Green Paper for public consultation on 24 January 2014. The green paper states in its introduction that ICTs are important in building an information society and knowledge economy as envisioned in the NDP (2011). This vision necessitates government to facilitate the provision of seamless information infrastructure that will enable access to the creation and consumption of a wide range of converged services required for effective economic and social participation.

### ***Mobilitate as a tool to monitor local government service delivery***

Mobilitate ([www.mobilitate.co.za](http://www.mobilitate.co.za)) is an online platform that enables citizens to actively participate in improving service delivery and holding local government accountable. Its mission is ‘to enable, foster and promote the communication, collaboration and participation of all citizens, communities and government toward a prosperous South Africa for all.’ Its vision is to enable a country that embodies and promotes the five principles of networked intelligence, namely collaboration, openness, sharing, trust and integrity, and interdependence.

Individuals register with Mobilitate and can then lodge service delivery complaints or concerns on the website in a specific area, linked with Google Earth. All logged issues in the area are mapped, with each category of issue indicated in a different log in such a way that progress can be tracked and councillors and municipalities rated in terms of responsiveness. In addition, online groups of residents associations and community organisations can be created to discuss service delivery issues collectively. By December 2013 the Mobilitate website had about 27 000 registered users and received up to 40 000 visits a month. The service is also available as an app for Apple and Android devices.