

EXPLORING SOUTH AFRICANS' PREFERENCES FOR GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

Effective communication between government and citizens is a key component of democracy. Given the differentiated access to communication channels, the diversity of the South African population, and the increasing importance of information and communication technologies, how can the government better reach out to citizens? *Elmé Vivier, Diana Sanchez Betancourt, Dineo Seabe and Marie Wentzel* provide insights into the opportunities to improve communication between local government and citizens.

While the South African government provides a broad range of channels and technologies through which citizens can access information (e.g. municipal offices, *imbizos*, mass media technologies such as television and radio etc.), new and innovative information technology-based tools are constantly emerging. These range from municipal websites and social media platforms like Twitter to mobile phone applications such as that launched in 2014 by the Johannesburg Roads Agency for the public to report road-related problems using smartphones.

These developments are part of a broader global development trend to create smart cities, where local government systems (where technology is the cornerstone for providing services) and information communication technologies (ICTs) are key communication channels between government and citizens.

While this developmental path needs to be interrogated as a sustainable option for municipalities, a particular concern in the South African context is the potential of these technologies to transform the government-to-citizen and citizen-to-citizen interface. Will these serve to overcome or exacerbate the digital divide? After all, according to the 2011 census, although 16% of households accessed the internet through a cellphone, nearly 65% had no access to the internet at all, reflecting continued inequality and the importance to understand the value and scope of using various channels of communication.

Citizens' preferred channels to receive information

Within this context, and in an effort to better understand information flows between citizens and the state, the 2013 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) included a module on citizens' communication preferences for receiving information from local government. The survey included a sample of adults aged 16 years and older. Options included television, radio, print media such as newspapers or municipal newsletters, face-to-face engagements, and ICT media such as the internet and cellphones.

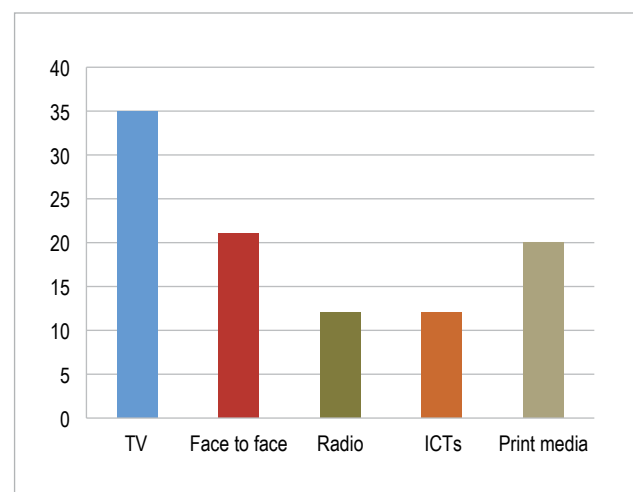
Television stood out as the most popular choice to receive information from the government.



The module formed part of the HSRC's work as a research partner for the national treasury-led Cities Support Programme, which recognises the importance of effective engagement between citizens and local governments in improving service delivery.

As Figure 1 shows, television stood out as the most popular choice to receive information from the government (35%), with print media and face-to-face interactions being nearly equal as the second most preferred communication channel (20% and 21% respectively). Radio and various information technologies were less popular overall (both at 12%).

Figure 1: Most preferred medium to receive information (national average)

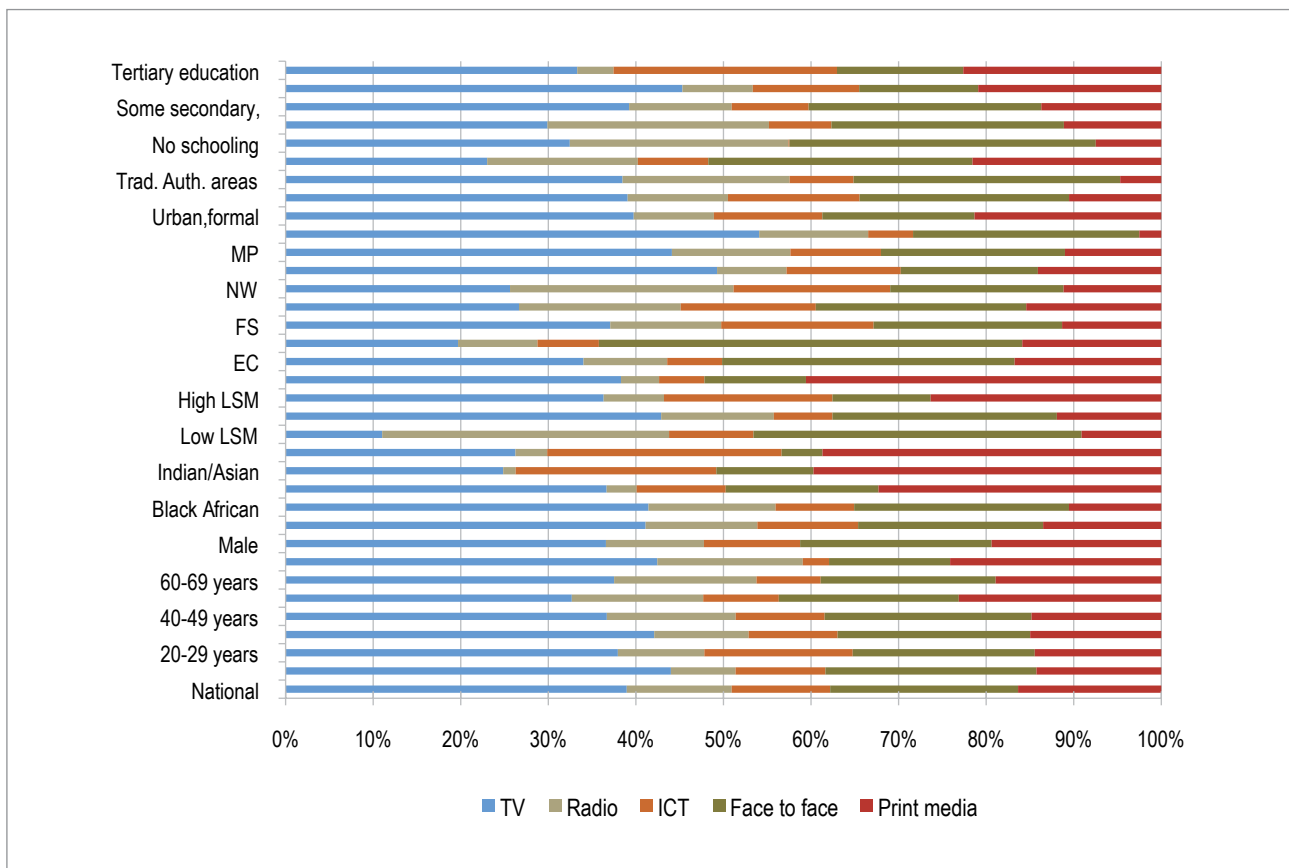


Source: HSRC SASAS 2013



When considering the results by age, gender, race, living standard measure (LSM), province, geotype and education, some significant differences between demographic groups emerged that did not fit the national pattern and illustrated some subtle but relevant nuances (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most preferred medium to receive information from local government



Source: HSRC SASAS 2013

Television, while still the medium of choice for most, and particularly popular in Limpopo (52%) and Gauteng (47%), was much less popular among those who lived in rural areas (and especially those in the Northern Cape), those with a low LSM, or among white and Asian groups.

Printed media was considered the most preferred communication medium for many white (37%) and Asian (39%) respondents and Western Cape residents (39%), even more so than television, and was most popular among older citizens and men.

Face-to-face engagements were preferred by respondents with no education.



Radio, on the other hand, showed mixed results across the spectrum of demographics. Only respondents from the North West selected radio equally with television at 25%, while those from the low LSM indicated a preference for radio at 31% (after face-to-face engagements).

Face-to-face engagements were preferred by respondents with no education (32%), or from a low LSM (35%) or medium LSM (25%), while high LSM and more educated groups, as well as residents of urban formal areas, showed the least interest in this form of direct interaction.

Finally, ICTs were rated the lowest of all the choices and were not the primary choice of communication channel of any demographic group. It did however feature among those with a tertiary education (25%), from the high LSM (19%), or from the Asian (23%) or white (26%) race groups. Those with no schooling, from traditional authority areas, and of the higher age ranges showed the least interest. Even among 20–29 year olds, who showed more interest in ICTs than any other age group, television and face-to-face still remained their preferred medium for information.

The government's communication strategies should take into account access to and preferences for specific communication channels.



Embracing a differentiated approach to government-citizen communication

As the research indicated, South Africans relied on different sources for information, and access (and by implication, social and economic conditions) remained a critical issue. Some specific matters deserve attention.

Firstly, the government's communication strategies should take into account access to and preferences for specific channels of communication. Additionally, low interest in specific media could indicate a need for greater education and awareness around those channels. For instance, greater emphasis could be placed on print media in the Western Cape as this was the most preferred communication channel, or in other provinces it may signal a need to enhance the use of radio and face-to-face engagements.

Secondly, for those with little or no education, access to technology may be the primary factor determining communication preferences. The lack of interest witnessed in major information technologies (ICT and in some instances, television and radio), and the limited reliance on print media, reflect socioeconomic disparities across the South African landscape. Education also played a major role in enabling individuals to optimise the potential use of ICT tools. Therefore, if local governments increasingly rely on ICTs as a major communication tool (under a smart city trajectory) without addressing issues of access and skills, this will pose a major challenge for effective engagement with citizens.

Finally, the results showed that across living standard measures, geographic spaces and even levels of schooling, people desired direct interaction with government representatives. Citizens and residents valued processes that built personal relationships and trust, which is essential for access to information to translate into meaningful engagement.

Conclusion

A better understanding of citizens' preferred channels of communication can help the government develop strategies to improve communication and to access target groups. In particular, a variety of strategies and technologies are needed to communicate with particular sectors of the population. While broad-based strategies remain relevant, understanding the nuances around communication preferences will allow the government to develop targeted campaigns that will permit more genuine communication tailored to specific needs, interests and capacities of particular demographic groups (e.g. youth, elderly and urban or rural dwellers).

Efforts to expand access to and the use of certain technologies should also take into account socioeconomic challenges, education and awareness. It is ultimately not only access to but also the use and value of communication tools that translates into meaningful engagement between the government and a better informed citizenry. ■

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