Telecommunications should be regarded as both a basic utility as well as a basic human right.

Governance and e-participation

E-participation can be described as ICT-supported participation in government and governance. Such processes may include administration, service delivery, decision-making and policy-making. E-participation is therefore closely related to (e-) governance participation.

The need for the term emerged as citizen benefits and values have traditionally received less attention than those of service providers in e-government, and it became clear that the roles of citizen and customer had to be distinguished.

A more detailed definition sees e-participation as 'the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives.' This definition includes all stakeholders in democratic decision-making processes and goes beyond top-down government initiatives.

In 2012, the LG ICT Network launched a model e-participation project together with a number of selected local authorities. They were given SMS credits and a direct call number. Citizens could then use these numbers to submit their proposals or complaints, and to report incidents such as power failures, burst pipes and potholes. Equally, the local authority could use the system to inform residents about scheduled council meetings, festivals or anticipated restrictions. The system is integrated into the local authority's normal email system and is entirely voluntary.

This project is showing early signs of success. In Emakhazeni, a rural authority in the province of Mpumalanga, there has been a significant fall in the number of complaints about poor services, and public attendance at council meetings has increased dramatically over the same period.

Such activities help to improve the quality, transparency and general image of local government, as well as encourage people to participate more actively in processes that enhance democracy through citizen participation.

Affordability, accessibility, availability: the way forward

The above examples provide a snapshot of what is possible, especially in facilitating normative civic and political engagement at the local level. But, needless to say, ICT platforms are not much use by themselves, and should be seen as complementing and enhancing processes that are already in place.

In an interesting development, the Right2Know (R2K) campaign is calling for a 'right to communicate' to be recognised in South Africa. In its submission to the parliamentary hearings on the cost of communication (1 August 2013), R2K focused on the fact that telecommunications should be regarded as both a basic utility as well as a basic human right. Section 16 of the 1996 Constitution recognises a right to receive or impart information or ideas.

It is clear that the government has a role to play in ensuring that all South Africans are able to exercise this right to communicate via various platforms. For this reason, limited connectivity and the high costs of data should be addressed, and new policies developed and adopted to ensure that voices are heard – and responded to. ■

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Social media:
a driver for improved citizenship

Could using social media simply to keep in touch with others and meet new people possibly lead to better citizenship? A study by *Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Logan Molyneux* and *Pei Zheng* attempts to answer this and other questions on social media and democracy.

Using the internet and social media to look for information, including news, has been linked to greater political participation. But social media is used for much more than simply seeking out information; it is also playing a vital role in encouraging citizenship, especially among younger people.

Some research suggests that younger generations may be participating in democratic processes in different ways compared to older generations, and that these digital natives may use different forms of communication and expression to do so.

In a study which surveyed a panel of US adults in two waves, about six months apart in 2010, participants were asked how they used social media, how they expressed themselves online and to what extent they participated in the political process (whether in person or online).

The results suggested that even using social media to keep in touch with others could lead people to expressing themselves politically, thereby putting them on a pathway to participation. The results contributed to an understanding of the role of social media in the democratic process. This understanding may aid engagement efforts and expand the range of activities that political communication researchers study.

Using social media to keep in touch with others could lead people to expressing themselves politically.

Informational social media use
Social media, as the name suggests, was designed for users to keep in touch with friends and develop social networks. Yet, researchers have found that social media is also widely used as a source of news. As an example, the official Twitter accounts of news organisations such as the *New York Times* and CNN are among the top-ranked Twitter accounts worldwide.

People seek information via social media because it provides information quickly and in a flexible way. Moreover, social media makes news interactive, thus extending forms of political participation. When reading news on social media, one can share opinions by mentioning, forwarding or commenting on the news. One can also donate or vote through social media.

All this can be done with far fewer resources than have generally assumed to be necessary for political participation. Accordingly, this study aimed to learn more about how informational use of social media could be positively related to political participation. As expected, our results showed that the more people turned to social media to keep up with what was happening around them, the more they also tended to participate in democratic political activities.

The more people turned to social media to keep up with what was happening around them, the more they tended to participate in democratic political activities.

Political expression on social media
Interestingly, the connection between getting news on social media and participating politically may not always be direct. In other words, using social media for news may start people on a path that eventually leads them to participate, but what stops do they make along the way?

One such stop is political expression, or using social media to post or share political content. The way social media is structured facilitates group interaction and discussion by lowering barriers to entry. It is easy to join groups, make new connections and begin discussing common interests.

When people use social media to read news, political or informational postings, they may be more likely to begin posting such content themselves, or at least commenting on it and discussing it with their friends.

Our results confirmed a relationship between using social media for news and political expression on social media. Talking about politics, in turn, is likely to lead people to action. Expressing yourself requires that you take action on your

thoughts and ideas by sharing them. Having done this, it may be easier to take further actions, eventually leading to participation.

When people use social media to express their political views they may end up participating as well, both online and offline. Results from the survey showed a strong connection between political expression on social media and both online and offline political participation.

Findings revealed a small but notable connection between relational social media use and political expression.

Relational social media use

As mentioned earlier, people use social media for much more than getting news and information. In fact, those informational uses most likely form a small part of how social media is actually used. Could using social media simply to keep in touch with others and meet new people possibly lead to better citizenship?

Sociologists have noticed that people with more connections to other people, especially in a community, tend to be more active in that community and in politics. Social media, it turns out, helps people make more connections and gives them the opportunity to interact with new groups of people – people they might not otherwise interact with. Specifically, users of social media are able to simultaneously maintain several groups of friends that may never cross over during real life, and this greater variety of interactions is what is key here.

Psychologists suggest that people develop different aspects of themselves in order to fit into whatever group they're participating in. So the more people use social media, the more groups they interact with. The more groups they interact with, the more aspects of themselves they are likely to develop. The more they develop different aspects of themselves, the more likely it is that they begin to develop a political self.

Our study put these thoughts to an empirical test in order to find out whether using social media to interact with others would lead people to begin expressing themselves online. Findings revealed a small but notable connection between relational social media use and political expression.

New pathways to participation

Each of the previously mentioned social media 'connections' can be combined to form a model that describes how using social media can lead to political participation, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Results of SEM model of social media uses, social media political expression and political participation.*
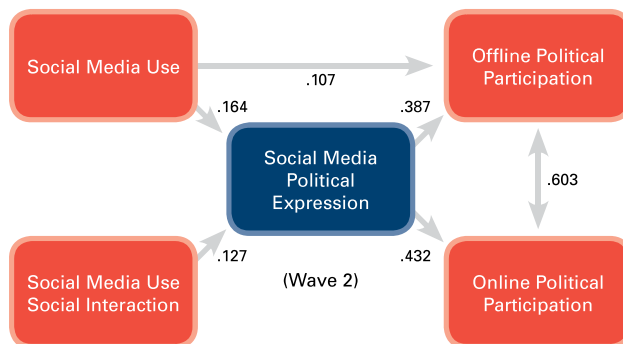
Using social media as a source of news has a direct connection to offline political participation and online and offline political expression. Using social media for interaction has a connection to online and offline political participation via political expression.

These findings support the work of other researchers who suggest that some people are inventing new models of citizenship and finding new ways to participate in the democratic process. ∎

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* Note: Sample size = 312. Path entries were standardised SEM coefficients (Betas) at $p < .05$ or better. The effects of demographic variables (age, gender, education, race and income), political antecedents (political efficacy and strength of partisanship), media use and discussion network size (online and offline) on endogenous and exogenous variables were residualised. Model goodness of fit: $\chi^2 = 1.69$; df = 3; $p = .63$; RMSEA = .000, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.001, SRMR = .012). Explained variance of criterion variables: political expression $R^2 = 6.7\%$; offline political participation $R^2 = 16.3\%$; and political participation online $R^2 = 17.8\%$. This theoretical model was also bootstrapped based on the standard errors with 1 000 iterations, converging in 960 iterations and with a 95% confidence interval.