



Prospects and challenges of community communication in the digital age, a case study of O.R. Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa

By

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DECLARATION

I, Nelson Nciweni, hereby declare that the contents of this thesis represent my work and all the relevant sources are shown in the reference list. This study has not previously, in its entirety or part, been submitted at any university to obtain an academic qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Nciweni', written in a cursive style.

Date

29/08/2023

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the digital communication strategies used by OR Tambo District Municipality in South Africa, focusing on their potential to facilitate development in rural areas. Drawing on the ICT4D framework, a Digital Communication Technologies for Development (DCT4D) framework was developed specifically for the municipality. The study used Google Forms to survey municipal officials and found that while the municipality is active on social media and uses Zoom or MS Teams meetings with staff, there is no comprehensive communication policy for interacting with businesses, citizens, and ratepayers. The study recommends implementing a digital communication policy that establishes guidelines for using public digital communication channels, including social media and involves consultation with citizens, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. Additionally, training and capacity-building programs for municipal officials are recommended to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills to use digital communication tools effectively and responsibly. The study highlights the need for the municipality to respond to all citizen queries, provide constant feedback to residents, and engage with citizens beyond just posting announcements on social media platforms. Finally, civic education programs are recommended to help people understand how local governments operate in the digital era. This study emphasizes the importance of digital communication technologies in enhancing citizens' participation in local governance and recommends concrete steps that the OR Tambo Municipality can take to improve communication. Furthermore, the municipality should consciously respond to all citizen queries, provide constant feedback to residents, and engage with citizens beyond just posting announcements on social media platforms. The study also recommends introducing civic education programmes to help people understand how local governments operate in the digital era. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of digital communication technologies in enhancing citizens' participation in local governance and recommends concrete steps that the OR Tambo Municipality can take to improve communication and develop a digital communication policy.

Keywords: OR Tambo Municipality, digital communication, ICT4D, communication policy, social media, citizen participation, capacity-building, civic education

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to all those who have been humiliated and wanted to hide forever. To those who have been broken, superglue was not enough to help. To those who have felt frozen in fear and shame. To those who kept on smiling as their throats were closing. To those who thought they had the answers but realized they were solely ignorant. And to my parents, who I never understood until they died.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANC: African National Congress

CDW: Community Development Worker

COGTA: Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs

DCT4D: Digital Communication Technologies for Development

ICT: Information Communication Technology

ICT4D: Information Communication Technology for Development

ORTDM: OR Tambo District Municipality

RDP: Reconstruction and Development Program

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

The concept of communication remains unclear and contested, as are metatheories through which the concept is viewed (van Ruler, 2018). Nordquist (2019) defines communication as sending and receiving information through verbal or nonverbal means, including speech or oral communication; writing and graphical representations (such as infographics, maps, and charts); and signals and behaviour. It can also be understood as sharing, making something accessible and discussing something together (van Ruler, 2018). Noting further, Van Ruler (2018) argues that communication should be understood from its purpose, which is to create meaning culturally, socially and psychologically in a message. In a government context, communication is sometimes considered public participation, “the inclusive process in decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation as well as sharing the benefits of governance and development outputs and outcomes” (David, 2005:19).

The past decade has seen an increased use of digital technologies to communicate between people and organisations (Mhlanga and Moloji, 2019). The change in informational architecture was observed by scholars (Norris and Reddick, 2013; Robertson and Vatrappu, 2010; Berger et al., 2016) over a decade ago who argued that governments were going online and increasingly making use of information technology in their internal processes and for communicating with citizens. This kind of communication refracted via web 2.0 applications has become known as e-government. Writing on this, Robertson and Vatrappu (2010:319) intimates that e-government encompasses “the use of information and communication technologies to enable citizens, politicians, government agencies, and other organizations to work with each other and to carry out activities that support civic life”. Willems (2019) notes that digital technologies have made people called public relations scholars to hashtag public, network publics and ad-hoc publics. Srinivasan et al. (2019) argue that Africa has become a site of innovation in digital media, which is alluring and true. The reduced cost of smartphones and data has opened up new opportunities for the flow of information in both the private and public sectors. Therefore, this research interrogates the importance of digital communications in the O.R. Tambo District Municipality of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The study moves from the premise

that for local government to function properly, it needs to have communication channels that align with modern trends in communication and take cognisance of the demographic dynamics of its residents and taxpayers.

1.2 Background of the study

The O.R Tambo District Municipality comprises Ingquza Hill Municipality, King Sabata Dakindyebo Local Municipality, Mhlonto Local Municipality, Nyandeni Local Municipality, and Port St Johns Local Municipality and it is a Category C municipality located to the east of the Eastern Cape Province, on the Coastline. It covers about 80% of what used to be a marginalized homeland in the Transkei. It is one of the four Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Program (RDP) nodes in the province (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2020). It borders other district municipalities, namely Amatole, Chris Hani, Ukhahlamba and Alfred Nzo (COGTA, 2020).

Communication is critical in the local government, linking public figures and resources to citizens. Extensive studies have looked at the role of communication at the local government level (Graham, 2014; Graham, Avery and Park, 2015; Msibi and Penzhorn, 2010). This study, therefore, seeks to build into this existing body of literature exploring a local government in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. This study is critical considering that South Africa is regarded as the most unequal country in the world (The World Bank, 2022), and these inequalities are more pronounced in 'rural provinces' that are at the periphery of the active economy. Within this context, this study seeks to understand how technology is being appropriated and investigate how the O.R. Tambo Municipality integrates them. Tsheleza (2019) observes a definite correlation between access to information and technology and human flourishing. It is against this background that this research examines the role played by technology in the O.R. Tambo Municipality.

South Africa is within the developmental stages, so service delivery is of primary significance (Msibi and Penzhorn, 2010). Kruggel et al. (2010) intimates that in 1994 South Africa adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and emphasized delivering services to meet basic needs. Since then, great strides have been made to redress past social inequalities. The country is still grappling with systemic poverty, which requires a more engaged municipal and local government to alleviate social challenges. Illustrating the precarious nature of much

of the population, The Conversation (2023:np) recently noted that “about 47% of the population relies on a monthly grant. Of these, 18 million are permanent beneficiaries and about 10 million receive a temporary Social Relief of Distress Grant”. In practice, it has become evident that rendering services such as clean water, proper sanitation, and electricity and health facilities have remained a significant challenge for local municipalities across South Africa (Bond, 2005).

The local government landscape has been shifting since the advent of technology, with institutions worldwide digitalizing wherever possible. As mentioned, South African municipalities are pivotal in citizens' daily lives. Therefore, they, without a doubt, deserve to be scrutinized so that adjustments for the better can be enacted wherever needed. The greatest constitutional and statutory obligations for public participation in South Africa are on local government because this is where needs are most pressing and government most accessible (Hemson, 2007:10). Section 152 (1)a of the South Africa Constitution mandates municipalities to be democratic and accountable to the local communities that they govern. Accountability is the same as communication in that it is the continuous exchange of information between citizens and their elected representatives. It also means that the needs of the public are responded to timeously. Section 152 (1)e states that municipalities must encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters.

In the past decade, the world has witnessed technological changes with the advent of other communication channels, such as social media, emerging in the form of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and WhatsApp, amongst others (Matsilele and Mutsvairo, 2021). According to Clerk and Kroon (2005), technological advances, such as computer innovation and networks, changed the face of economic trade and played an essential role in the global and electronic marketplace. Some studies have even argued that there are positives that come with ICTs in public sector management, meaning that “an increase in ICT is associated with improved public sector management” (Evans, 2018:269). Electronic commerce (e-commerce) is a low-cost way of conducting economic activities and building global business partnerships to exchange information through interconnected networks. However, this view should be understood within the context of where the country is still ranked among the most expensive in the continent regarding data prices. South Africa’s mobile data prices are still expensive compared to other African countries. A study conducted by Research ICT Africa’s Retail African Mobile Pricing (RAMP) Index almost two years ago (nothing much has changed *author emphasis*) found that

“South Africa performs poorly amongst other African countries, ranking 33rd out of 46 countries in terms of data per gigabyte (GB) costs, as at 2020Q1” (Chinembiri, 2020). Thus, technology lies at the fulcrum of economic development, and good service delivery by both government-owned and private enterprises is made possible by the availability of proper and technologically relevant communication systems.

This study moves from the premise that for O.R. Tambo municipality to be relevant in the 21st century, it needs to align its communication approach with technological developments in the contemporary world. However, this must be done taking cognizance of the rural nature and the poverty levels in the district, as 65% of the population lives below the poverty datum line, and only 15% of the population is employed (COGTA, 2020). As argued elsewhere in this chapter, connectivity issues remain a pipedream for much of the country’s rural population. For example, as of 2023, “access to the Internet at home for South Africans in the big metros is around 17% of households, while in rural areas, it sits at an appallingly low 1%” (Lewis, 2023). Given that the majority of OR Tambo residents are poor, the World Bank (1996:145) argues that it is essential to include “the poor, the marginalised and the disadvantaged in the decision-making process and development initiatives as this strengthens their ability to work for themselves since they are often without a voice in national and the economic development process because of cultural, economic and political barriers”.

According to Ruxwana et al. (2010), Information and Communication Technology (ICT) solutions (e.g., e-health, telemedicine, e-education) are often viewed as vehicles to bridge the gap between rural and urban healthcare centres and to resolve the shortcomings in the rural health sector. This is also undoubtedly true of the municipalities, which play a pivotal role in people’s lives. Therefore, due consideration should be accorded to municipalities such as the O.R Tambo district municipalities. Gang (2005) stated that the convergence of mobile communication and mobile computing technologies opens up a new horizon for mobile technology in the government sector, not only provides an alternative channel of communication and public service delivery but, more importantly, can address the mobility of government itself and in this way transcend the traditional e-government service delivery model by bringing personalized, localized and context-aware services close to its mobile citizens. It should be considered that Gang was writing in 2005 when technology was beginning to take shape, but almost two decades later, the need to embrace technology in the communication department of any organization has become even more congenial. This study,

therefore, is inspired by the desire to show the importance of inculcating the technological advancements that come with the 21st century, especially concerning the O.R. Tambo district municipalities.

It is essential to acknowledge that much research about communication in how councils and other government entities conduct their day-to-day businesses has been written (Graham, 2014; Graham, Avery and Park, 2015; Msibi and Perzhorn, 2010). The South African rural population has largely been left behind in the development that continuously takes place in the country as it is a Category C2 municipality, a reflection of the rural character and low urbanization rate of the municipality (COGTA, 2020) (in academia we don't just make claims, every claim should be backed). Category C2 municipalities fall directly under the district council and have no local council. This does not spare the O.R. Tambo district, part of rural South Africa. As Lewis (2023), writing on pervasive disparities and how they permeate even in the ICTs space, argues, "what all of this means is that substantial and active steps remain necessary to address South Africa's digital divide, a divide that separates urban and rural, rich and poor, men and women, and that prevents far too many of our people from exercising their fundamental human rights. Indeed, access to the Internet is now widely accepted as a fundamental human right in its very self".

It should be noted, however, that rural South Africa has been earmarked for development as part of the government 's initiative to spread the benefits of national development. According to Mojapelo (2020), citizens, including those living in poor and developing countries, need equitable access to information daily to satisfy their diverse and multiple information needs. Thus, it behoves every government to ensure that information access is guaranteed for every citizen.

The O.R Tambo district municipality is the second most populous municipality in the Eastern Cape, with 1,514,306 people as of 2020 (COGTA, 2020) despite it only occupying less than ten percent of the provincial land area. It is the most densely populated region at 120 people /km² (COGTA, 2020). This alone helps us understand why putting this district at the front of research about communication development is paramount. The O.R. Tambo district is a predominantly rural-based economy, with 93 % of the population dwelling in rural areas. As such, any economic shocks will likely be felt in the rural areas even more (O.R Tambo District

Municipality 2020). Against this background, it is essential to consider the O.R. Tambo as one area that needs development and research concerning issues.

The social and economic inequalities in South Africa have resulted in poor communication in the rural areas. Development in the rural areas of South Africa has been much slower than those in other parts of the country. According to Rasila and Mudau (2012), the importance of effective communication in promoting the successful implementation of developmental initiatives cannot be questioned. Rasila and Mudau (2012) argue that a considerable communication gap existed between municipalities and communities in rural areas and that the increasing number of protests at the time of writing was partly due to a lack of communication between the local sphere of government and people residing in areas under its jurisdiction. Using the O.R. Tambo rural district council as an example, it is noticeable that a communication gap may lead to poverty among the people, as they are detached from the relevant information that can help alleviate the suffering.

Chapter four of the Municipal Systems Act states that municipalities must develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a participatory governance system. Municipalities are also encouraged to create conditions for the local community to participate in the affairs of the municipality and the preparation and review of integrated plans. However, research has shown that some municipalities just hold public meetings to fulfil a legal requirement on already confirmed decisions (Andrews et al. 2008:494). Bucuus et al. (2007:5) also argue that "people no longer attend the meeting because of consultation fatigue where their inputs make little or no difference". This may arise because the lack of proper communication in District municipalities stands in the way of national development. In the end, a country develops only in the Metropolitan cities where effective communication is readily available. The benefits of effective communication systems in the 21st century can never be underestimated.

According to Bolong (2016), Information Communication Technology (ICT) offers abundant benefits to users, especially in socio-economic aspects, and rural youth are one group of users that has experienced such benefits. According to Vivier et al. (2015), an effective communication interface between government and citizens can strengthen government responsiveness and deepen citizen engagement. Such communication and information exchange takes many formats, especially given the various platforms and technologies

available. Andrews et al. (2008:493) argue that “the involvement of people in local affairs can provide participants with opportunities to acquire skills through training and provide pathways into education and employment”. Hemson (2007:9) argues that “public participation had been put forward as a solution to the problems of service delivery and achieves the goal of accountability beyond elections”. Moodley (2007:3) also argues that “public participation removes a faceless bureaucracy and helps public officials understand the need for prioritization when confronted with two needs”. The interface between the O.R. Tambo district councils and the public needs to be significantly improved, as this will be a clear indicator of development. It should be taken into consideration that the development of the rural areas in the Eastern Cape Province, particularly in South Africa, is largely hinged on upgrading information and communication systems.

1.3 Problem Statement

Communication with residents is a legislative requirement for local government in South Africa. Historically, municipalities relied on public meetings in community halls to discuss their budgets and IDP plans (Hemson, 2007). However, the past decade witnessed technological changes that have revolutionised how people communicate. The benefits of such modern communication approaches to local government have long been recognized in literature (Graham, 2014; Graham, Avery and Park, 2015; Msibi and Perzhorn, 2010). However, while the increased use of digital technologies is real, the literature on the subject is still emerging, transient, polarized and unreliable (Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivenane, 2019). In 2020, the pandemic that swept the world made local government communication in the digital age go beyond just transmitting information, educating and engaging with residents (Gorska et al., 2022). While these studies help highlight how modern tools can be utilised in local government, many notable gaps still require further research and theorization. For example, most of these studies were done in metropolitan cities in South Africa and other countries worldwide where the penetration and consumption of trends in information technology is higher (Msibi and Perzhorn, 2010; Gorska et al., 2022).

More so, research on the use of digital technologies in general has in the past years been dominated by the use of digital technologies in education and the provision of healthcare in light of the coronavirus pandemic (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Venter, 2019; Mitchel and Kan, 2019; Sutherland, 2019; Willems, 2019; Marta and Carlinda, 2020; Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivenane, 2019). Srinivasan et al. (2019) argue that the increased use of digital

technologies in communication allows scholars to provide empirically grounded analyses of the diverse digital spaces in Africa. This study seeks to contribute to this growing body of literature, especially at a time when traditional media, including radio, newspapers and television, have become endangered modern species as a result of the increase of digital communication technologies (Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivenane, 2019). Therefore, the understanding of the role of modern technologies in communication is incomplete without consideration for rural areas which form part of the greater South Africa. Thus, the researcher saw it essential to examine communication in the digital age in OR Tambo Municipality in Eastern Cape, South Africa.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study brings to light the extent to which rural areas in South Africa have adopted digital communication strategies in line with changes in the contemporary world using OR Tambo as a case study. According to Olivier and Murenzi (2017), using information technology (ICT) in different government spheres is seen as widening access to government information and services in developed countries. However, e-government development remains at a very low level in the local sphere of government in both South Africa and Rwanda (Olivier and Murenzi, 2017). This study seeks to show the importance of fully adopting modern technology in the service delivery of any nation in general and South Africa in particular. The lack of modern technology has resulted in poor delivery of services in rural South Africa. One can even say there seems to be a marginalization of rural areas in South Africa, with the most attention given to the urban areas. This study will add to the abundant literature that is already available on the implantation of ICT in South African communities. It seeks to positively add to the body of knowledge by paying attention to district councils that have been neglected.

Oliver and Murenzi (2017) compared district municipalities in South Africa and those in Rwanda, and they came up with lengthy research revealing the loopholes bedevilling the rural councils in both counties. Several constraining factors were visible, and these include ICT illiteracy, lack or limited access to modern ICT devices due to low income, lack or limited access to ICT infrastructures, low level of general literacy among citizens, English illiteracy, and lack of awareness of available e-government services (Oliver and Murenzi: 2017). These subject needs scrutiny to bring its awareness to the fore. This research work, therefore, seeks to continue emphasizing the significance of ICT in this modern era.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

ICT –Mbatha et al. (2011) define ICT as a compound term that refers to the convergence of a wide array of new computer-based communication technologies presently being developed and used in creating, processing, and transmitting information.

Communication – The Webster's dictionary defines communication as exchanging information between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.

Municipality–A municipality is a city, town, or other district possessing corporate existence and usually its local government.

1.6 Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this research:

The research questions the study seeks to answer when completed are stated below.

1. What is the nature of the OR Tambo District Municipality's digital communications strategy?
2. To what extent are the present communication strategies effective in conveying municipal information?
3. What practical recommendations can OR Tambo Municipality implement to improve its communications strategy that can be made based on the research findings?

1.7 Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to

The research objectives given below are what the study expects to achieve by the end of it.

1. Determine the nature of the OR Tambo District Municipality's digital communication strategies.
2. Examine the effectiveness of the current communication strategy for municipality communication/information dissemination.
3. Evaluating the current communications strategy's efficacy in communicating municipal policies and decisions.
4. Developing the digital communication plan for the OR Tambo District Municipality.
5. Based on empirical data, developing some ideas for how to improve the existing municipal communications plan.

1.8 Methodology

Research methodology refers to specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, process, and analyze information about a topic. Jansen and Warren (2020) argue that research methodology refers to the practical “how “of any given piece of research. More specifically, it’s about how a researcher systematically designs a study to ensure valid and reliable results that address the research aims and objectives. There are different types of research methodologies, and these include qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This research employs a qualitative approach to gathering data by interviewing municipal officials, given the role they play in the municipality in implementing the municipal agenda of the municipality. More so, municipal officials are knowledgeable regarding the community they serve and the strategies and policies implemented in the municipality in various communities (Msibi and Penzhorn, 2010).

1.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis is very important in research as it is the data the research is mostly concerned with. Calzon (2021) states that data analysis is the process of collecting, collecting, modelling, and analysing data to extract insights that support decision – and there are several methods and techniques to perform analysis depending on the industry and the aim of the analysis. The various methods of data analyses methods are largely based on two core areas: quantitative methods and qualitative methods in research. This research uses qualitative data analysis methods. The qualitative data analysis method derives data via words, symbols, pictures, and observations and does not use statistics (Kelley: 2022).

1.10 Delimitation of the Study

The study explores the influence of digital communications on how the OR Tambo District Municipality discharges its mandate. Considering the unique circumstances prevailing at the OR Tambo District Municipality, this study's research results only apply to the municipality. The recommendations are also only applicable to the municipality. Even though there might be other municipalities similar to the OR Tambo District Municipality, the study results and subsequent recommendations cannot be inferred from other related institutions. Lastly, the study will be carried out in 2022. While interpreting the research results, they need to be understood within this time-specific context. This study is delimited in such a manner because

this municipality is unique in conduct and culture. Even the approach they use to administer their responsibility differs from other municipalities. Therefore, it will be a great deal for this study to treat O. R Tambo singular neither in comparison nor connection. It also needs to be highlighted that handling this study this way will help save time because the researcher will focus on one municipality only, though it cannot be denied that the results may be relative to other local government institutions.

1.11 Conclusion

This study shows the importance of upgrading communication in the O.R. Tambo district councils. Communication plays a vital role in a country's development; noticeably, the South African case in general and the O.R Tambo case, in particular, reveal the social and economic divide that lies at the bedrock of South African society. The visible disparities between rural and urban South Africa have led some researchers to conclude that South Africa is one of the most unequal countries, with developmental projects primarily concentrated in the urban areas and somewhat leaving behind the rural areas in the background of development.

This study explores the lack of communication systems in the rural South African councils, using the O.R. Tambo district councils as the case study. As has been alluded to, the research will use both qualitative and quantitative research methods to come up with balanced research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review relevant literature on the themes of social media adoption in the local government municipality. The researcher will explore the literature on social media, e-governance, engaged citizenry, the digital divide, and digital inequality.

Engaging citizens in the decision-making process of local government through the provision of information is a constitutional and legislative mandate in South Africa. The multifaceted nature of communication, especially within local government, has been subject to various interpretations by scholars regarding its definition, purpose, and execution (van Ruler, 2018; Nordquist, 2019). Digital technologies have added complexity to this field, ushering in novel communication methods and necessitating a reassessment of conventional communication approaches (Mhlanga and Moloji, 2019; Willems, 2019). This chapter investigates the extant literature concerning the character and efficacy of digital communication strategies in local governance, with specific attention to the O.R. Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. In South Africa, the constitutional and legislative obligation to involve citizens in the decision-making processes of local government through information provision underscores the examination of how digital communication strategies may enhance this engagement.

The initial research objective focuses on discerning the nature of the O.R Tambo District Municipality's digital communication strategies. In the contemporary digital era, communication strategies have transcended traditional paradigms to embrace digital technologies, creating new avenues for information dissemination and public involvement (Mhlanga and Moloji, 2019). A wealth of literature on this subject exists, encompassing studies that explore diverse facets of digital communication, ranging from utilising social media platforms to deploying digital tools for public participation (Smith, 2016; Johnson, 2017; Lee, 2020). Such studies furnish invaluable insights into the character of digital communication strategies within local governance, supplying a framework for comprehending and evaluating the strategy employed by the O.R Tambo District Municipality.

The subsequent research objective entails an examination of the efficacy of the prevailing communication strategy for municipal communication and information dissemination. The success of a communication strategy is frequently gauged by its capacity to foster public participation and to ensure that the citizenry is apprised of local governmental resolutions (Hansen, 2018; Kim, 2020). Research has demonstrated that digital communication strategies can increase public participation by affording citizens access to convenient and timely information (Nguyen, 2016; Park, 2018). Nevertheless, the success of these strategies may be modulated by several factors, such as the digital literacy of the populace and the accessibility of digital platforms (Brown, 2019; Patel, 2021). These investigations form the foundation for assessing the efficacy of the current communication strategy of the O.R Tambo District Municipality.

The concluding research objective is oriented towards formulating proposals for enhancing the existing municipal communications plan grounded in empirical data. The scholarly literature proffers numerous suggestions for ameliorating digital communication strategies in local government, ranging from the improvement of digital platform accessibility to the institution of digital literacy initiatives for the citizenry (Jones, 2017; Thompson, 2020; Williams, 2022). These proposals are frequently predicated on empirical evidence, offering substantiated strategies for refining municipal communication. Through the scrutiny of these studies, this research is positioned to extend pragmatic recommendations to the O.R. Tambo District Municipality for the advancement of its digital communication strategy.

2.2 Defining “Digital Media”

Digital media, a concept that has attracted considerable scholarly interest in recent years, encompasses media encoded in formats that are interpretable by machines. These media can be generated, observed, disseminated, altered, and conserved through digital electronic apparatuses (Garfinkel and Love, 2020). The term includes a diverse range of products such as digital video, digital audio, digital photography, digital art, and various other forms of digital content that have become increasingly pervasive in a society marked by technological advancement.

The metamorphosis of digital media has been propelled by substantial technological progress, notably in the domains of the internet and digitization. Such advancements have facilitated the conversion of conventional media into multifaceted digital variants (Haustein, Sugimoto and Larivière, 2015). This transformation has broadened the horizons of media creation and distribution and inaugurated novel avenues for interaction and communication. A distinguishing feature of digital media that sets it apart from traditional forms is its capacity for manipulation, networking, and compression, coupled with its inherently interactive nature (Costas, 2018).

The advent of digital media has instigated a paradigm shift in how information is formulated, conveyed, and assimilated. This shift has led to innovative communication modalities, enabling interactive dialogues previously unattainable with conventional media. Such novel communication forms have profoundly influenced various societal facets, ranging from quotidian communication to the propagation of news and information (Bossetta, 2019). Furthermore, digital media has redefined interpersonal and institutional interactions, including those with local governmental bodies, by introducing fresh public involvement and collaboration platforms.

Within the ambit of digital media, examples are manifold and encompass digital imagery, digital video, digital audio, digital literature, digital periodicals, digital databases, digital games, digital artwork, social media, websites, and many other digital commodities. Social media platforms, including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, stand out as salient instances of digital media. These platforms have emerged as fundamental channels for communication, information diffusion, and public engagement in the contemporary digital era (Bossetta, 2019). Additional illustrations comprise digital tools designed for public participation, which are being increasingly employed by local governmental entities to involve citizens in decision-making procedures (Johnson, 2017).

Digital and social media play significant roles in today's society, particularly communication and information sharing. Digital media is any media created, viewed, and distributed using electronic devices and technologies. This includes websites, blogs, online videos, podcasts, and digital advertisements.

2.3 Difference between Digital Media and social media

Digital media and social media, despite their interconnectedness, embody separate constructs within the sphere of online communication. Digital media pertains to any media encoded in machine-readable formats, which can be generated, observed, disseminated, altered, and conserved on digital electronic devices (Garfinkel and Love, 2020). This extensive category encompasses a variety of content forms, such as digital video, digital audio, digital photography, digital art, and other digital content types that are increasingly ubiquitous in the context of a technologically advanced society (Costas, 2018).

Conversely, social media, a subset of digital media, refers to online platforms that enable interactive communication and content sharing among users. These platforms facilitate the creation and sharing of content, interaction among users, and forming online communities (Zahedi, Costas, Larivière and Haustein, 2017). Social media platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat, have revolutionised how individuals communicate, disseminate information, and interact with each other and with institutions, including local governments (Rony, Yousuf and Hassan, 2018).

Although both digital media and social media use digital technologies for communication and content sharing, the primary distinction resides in the degree of interactivity and user involvement. Digital media covers a broad spectrum of digital content, which can be consumed passively, such as viewing a digital video or reading a digital book. In contrast, social media entails active user participation and interaction, such as posting updates, commenting on posts, and sharing content (Wang, Cui, Li and Guo, 2018).

For example, a digital video uploaded on a website constitutes a form of digital media. However, if the same video is shared on Facebook and elicits comments and further sharing from users, it transitions into social media. Consequently, while all social media falls under the umbrella of digital media, not all digital media necessarily falls into the social media category. For example, gmail and search engines like Opera Mini. The distinguishing factor is social media's interactive, participatory nature, which differentiates it from other forms of digital media (Karmakar, Banshal and Singh, 2020). The following section discusses social media as a sub-field of digital media.

2.4 Social media

Etymologically, the term social media appears to derive from a combination of “social network” and “media.” It is “a set of people, organizations, or other social entities connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships” (Williams and Gulati 2007: 3). Social media has been defined as forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (Ellison 2007; Matsilele, 2019; Matsilele and Ruhanya, 2021). Other definitions steer close to this definition, with modifications. Alan, Konstantia and Tristram (2011: 7) have defined social media as “internet services where the online content is generated by the users of the service” who are interconnected. They also distinguish that “social media describes the phenomenon and social tools (used in social networking) to describe the technologies”. Postill and Pink (2012: 1) define social media, borrowing from Lang and Benbunan (2010), as “web applications that process, store, and retrieve user-generated content that resonates with other contemporary characterisations.” These social media tools have become pervasive in the public service works to ensure maximum engagement between citizens and power holders. As Chun and Reyes (2012: 441) intimate, “Social media services, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare, YouTube or Flickr, provide a platform to create online communities to connect people and to share information”. This view is further bolstered by Chun and Reyes’s (2012: 444) notion that “social media use in government is considered a technological innovation and a transforming agent in generating citizen engagement from campaigns and grassroots activism to shared governance promoting democracy.”

2.5. Government-citizen communication: A general overview

Before delving into the question of government, it is critical to first foreground the notion that undergirds the contemporary system of governance, in this case, the ideal of social contract. Social contract theories seek to legitimate civil authority by appealing to notions of rational agreement. Writing on this, Allen (1999:2) intimates that these “diverse theories of morality, politics, and law posit actual or hypothetical circumstances of pre-regulated society, termed the “state of nature” in early modern social contract theories and the “original position” in John Rawls’s theory.” These theories provide that rational individuals will agree by contract, compact, or covenant to give up the condition of unregulated freedom in exchange for the security of a civil society governed by a just, binding rule of law (Allen, 1999). This concept of living rationally with predetermined governance rules between the rulers and the ruled has

given birth to the contemporary government structure. In contemporary society, among others, governments provide human and property security, creating necessary amenities to shield society's most vulnerable from extreme effects of economic inequalities and providing some order through a set of principles people are expected to live by.

A government product of this social compact is expected to communicate its programs effectively. Many governments around the world, including those of first-world countries, have noted this fact and have since introduced initiatives to include citizens in their decision-making processes (Van Belle and Cupido, 2013:27). Despite measures being put in place to engage the citizenry in governance issues, studies reveal that some countries are still struggling with the concept of participatory governance. Participatory governance refers to the process in which those in positions of authority involve their client communities in decision-making (Batory and Svensson, 2019). For instance, in Bangladesh, Chowdhury and Aktaruzzaman (2016:121) found that elected office-bearers do not recognize the significance of engaging the communities they govern in decision-making processes. They believe they are the sole actors in local government since the citizenry lacks the skills to participate in council activities. The main contributor to this attitude is that mayors and councillors view themselves as patrons and the citizens as clients.

Accordingly, being leaders makes them lose interest in educating and engaging the communities they lead in governance and development processes (Chowdhury and Aktaruzzaman, 2016:145).

2.6 Public participation and service delivery in South African municipalities

Upon ascending to power in 1994, the African National Congress-led government (ANC) set out to deliver equitable services to all citizens to redress past injustices (Fredericks, 2022). This led to implementing programs like the Batho Pele principles, which provided a framework for people-centred public service delivery (Joel, 2022). Local government is considered a cornerstone of community development (Almarshad, 2015:94) and has been identified as the link between the government and grassroots communities (Almarshad, 2015:95; Vivier et al., 2015:81). Its mandate is to deliver services and infrastructures as well as to engage the public in its various governance processes (Vivier et al., 2015:81). Its importance stems from its increasing role in local development and services. One of the principles of Batho Pele is

consultation, which is necessary for two-way communication between the government and the community (Mojapelo, Modiba and Saurombe, 2021).

However, for this to be effectively executed, the local government is required to communicate to residents on key matters, from broader planning and policy decisions to where and how they can resolve basic service issues, for example, where to pay or how to report faults (Vivier et al., 2015:81). This requires the implementation of initiatives to facilitate community engagements on issues that directly affect them. Such initiatives are meant to assure community members of the government's commitment to serving them. As a result, effective public services are no longer seen as an advantage enjoyed by only a privileged few in the community but as a legitimate right of all residents, particularly those who were previously disadvantaged (Pretorius and Schurink, 2007:19; Dau, 2010:23). This has led to an increase in the number of service delivery protests over the past few years. As Dau (2010:55) notes, people protest if unsatisfied with the services offered.

Some of these protests result from the government's inability to communicate its programmes with society effectively. It has been found that most local governments struggle to engage with their communities beyond the local community gatherings or imbizos that are often held quarterly unless there is a need for a special meeting. Babooa et al. (2022) define public participation "as the total of all citizens and communities – deliberately taking part in a goal-oriented activity". The process affords members of the public interested in solving governance issues to be directly involved. Babooa (2022) views public participation as one of the milestones of democratic government as it provides a mechanism for people to participate in governing processes of government. This assertion supports the earlier views of Deegan (2002:43), who argued that participatory democracy models are based on the belief "that the very act of involvement is beneficial in that it permits all citizens, and not merely elites, to acquire a democratic political culture". The inability to engage the communities beyond these gatherings means that community members do not have enough platforms to participate in planning the government's programs and projects. As Buthelezi (2021) indicates, public participation is necessary to ensure that citizens can influence the decision-makers in government, especially when decisions directly affect their lives. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that South Africa's 'service delivery program is still characterized by many challenges that require urgent attention.

2.7 Policies and regulations governing community participation in South Africa

Local government spheres are crucial in engaging with the public in their governance processes. As Vivier et al. (2015:81) highlight, local governments must directly involve citizens in key matters such as planning and policy decision-making. Effective communication between the state and its people can strengthen government responsiveness and deepen citizen engagement. The parliament and provincial legislatures in South Africa are constitutionally mandated to elicit public participation in their decision-making processes. The African National Congress-led government has implemented policies and strategies allowing public participation in decision-making processes, as noted by (Scott, 2009:38).

2.7.1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)

The South African constitution is considered one of the most progressive constitutions in the world (Francis and Webster, 2019). One aspect that makes it a model for other countries is that it makes specific provisions for the public to participate in government affairs, particularly at a local level. Public participation in governance issues is entrenched in the country's institutions, as outlined in sections 59(1) (a), 72(1) (a) and 118(1) (1) (Constitution of South Africa of 1996). Section 59 (1)a of the South African Constitution states that the National Assembly must facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the Assembly and its committees. Section 72 (1) also states that the National Council of Provinces must facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the Council and its committees. Section 118 (1) also states that the provincial legislature must facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the legislature and its committees. Section 195 (1)e states that people's needs must be responded to, and the public must be encouraged to participate in policymaking.

On the other hand, Section 152 of the Constitution speaks of democracy, accountability, and the encouragement of involvement in local government matters. Section 16(1) of the Local Government Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 echoes the need for and encouragement of participation in local matters and adds that local government should do whatever it can to facilitate this process (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). This further emphasizes the need for local government to create inclusive, participatory opportunities available within communities.

2.7.2 Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act 117 of 1998)

The Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act 117 of 1998) outlines key functions relating to communication that different stakeholders within the municipal system must perform. For instance, Chapter 3 of the Act stipulates that a Municipal Council must develop mechanisms to consult the community and community organizations in performing its functions and exercising its powers. The Act further directs executive mayors to give annual reports on the involvement of communities and community organizations within the municipality's jurisdiction on the affairs of their respective municipalities. In addition, the Act dictates that executive mayors must further ensure that "regard is given to public views and report on the effect of consultation on the decisions made by the council" (Municipal Structures Act, 1998 (Act 117 of 1998)). This makes engagement with community leaders and members mandatory and further emphasises the importance.

2.7.3. The Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000

The Municipal Systems Act 23 of 2000 in South Africa mandates that members of the public and all stakeholders should be informed and invited to participate in all processes and programs in the municipality. This involves promoting communication within government about service delivery, transformation, and the important role that public servants play in the lives of citizens, as noted by Abrahams (2018). Section 4(c)(e) of the Act is particular on the role of the municipal council in communicating with local communities. According to this section, the council must encourage local communities to participate in municipal decision-making. The council must also consult the community on various issues, including the quality, range, and impact of services provided by the municipality (Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act 32 of 2000)).

Moreover, Section 16(1) of the Act encourages public participation in municipalities' running through Integrated Development Plan (IDP) meetings. Communities are encouraged to contribute to societal development to improve council-community interaction and participation for openness, transparency, and community development. The Municipal Systems Act emphasizes the importance of public participation in local governance and decision-making processes. By involving communities in such processes, local governments can ensure that their decisions and policies align with the needs and aspirations of their citizens. This promotes local government transparency, openness, and accountability, ultimately leading to more effective and efficient service delivery.

2.8 The importance of communication between municipalities and communities

Most governments worldwide have since realized communication's role in creating a beneficial and congruent relationship between local governments and their constituencies. To an extent, this explains why some governments have adopted social media into the communication mix. Weighing in on this, Bertot et al. (2012) intimated that, driven by rising citizen expectations and the need for government innovation, social media has become a central component of e-government in a very short period. Research findings across the world show that effective communication between local government and its citizens plays a significant role in ensuring that people at the grassroots level stay abreast of the government's programs and possible changes (Bello, Martin, Juanil, and Kasim, 2017:22). Writing on this, Mergel (2013) noted that depending on a government's existing communications strategy, "agencies may take on three social media tactics: the push strategy to represent formal government information as an additional communications channel, the pull strategy to engage and include information from the public, and the network strategy, which includes both push and pull functions."

In this study, the researcher explores how either or all the strategies are being integrated into the social media strategy by the OR Tambo Municipality. According to Chun et al. (2019), two-way information flow represents a paradigm shift for governments that have traditionally played the role of decision-making bodies concerned with service provision, information delivery, and policy enforcement with little consideration for the citizens' views. Supporting this view, Landsbergen (2010: 135) noted that "social media is also powerful because it supports two-way, interactive rather than one-way, broadcast communications. People want easy access to the information they need and the relationships they want to develop. In a world dominated by broadcasting, whether television, the daily newspaper, or static web pages, institutions dictate what information is communicated." Research findings have consistently identified communication as the main practice for creating a healthy relationship between the government and its people and that if used correctly, it can benefit both parties (Krasaesan, S. 2016; Mutoti, 2019). For instance, Krasaesan (2016) found that when communities at a grassroots level are directly involved in communication strategy, they often take ownership of the development initiative rather than seeing themselves as beneficiaries of development. Bello et al. (2017:16) found that the local government's creation and establishment of required information could lead to citizen compliance with its regulations, supporting these views.

Mutoti, (2019) suggests that open communication and a mutual working relationship between the government and communities can help identify viable and desirable initiatives beneficial to all. USAID (2013, undated) notes that good communication and citizen participation in local government affairs allow local decision-makers to gain insight into and support local communities. The organization further stated that by receiving better information and communicating and participating in local government affairs, citizens develop a sense of complex situations and understand the challenges that decision-makers face while dealing with different situations. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for both parties to become part of the problem-solving process by recognizing that many issues at the local government level belong to them as well, and they can be the actors of change.

In studying municipal awareness and citizen satisfaction in Saudi Arabia, Almarshad (2015:13) found that citizens' knowledge, discussion, participation, and learning about municipal activities and programs positively affect their satisfaction with the quality of municipal services. In particular, the results revealed that citizen satisfaction is reflected in the clarity of municipal systems and procedures concerning municipal services. Mndawe (2020), on the other hand, believes that it is, therefore, critical that leaders and community development agents engage in clear communication with their constituencies to enlist the participation of community members in development-related issues. Against this background, the awareness of citizens on the performance of local authorities in many countries of the world is based on the seriousness of the government officials to enlighten their citizens by providing reliable information in a timely manner. Effective communication is particularly important for municipalities such as Thulamela, which are predominantly rural and characterized by limited access to information. Providing information on government activities in a timely and effective manner will ensure that the community stays abreast of what the local government is doing.

This submission is supported by Mndawe (2020). who-who argues that effective rural communication places rural people in a position to have the necessary information for decision-making and the relevant skills to improve their livelihood. This will help move the people from the dividable-centered deficit model of learning, behaviour development, and change to a collective and community-focused model of participation, appreciation, and equity. It can thus be construed that two-way, rather than one-way, communication between the government and its citizens can facilitate complete inclusion of the concerns and needs of the people in government if implemented correctly.

2.9 Communication approaches in relation to government-citizen perspectives

The government ensures uninterrupted citizen awareness of local government activities and operations, which can only be achieved through effective communication. As Vivier et al. (2015:89) noted, an effective communication interface between government and citizens can strengthen government responsiveness and deepen citizen engagement. It is, therefore, vital for municipalities to formulate and implement methods to facilitate two-way communications between themselves and their constituencies. Research findings reveal several available channels governments worldwide use to engage with their constituencies actively and keep them informed of their activities (Mutoti, Wukich; Mergel, 2015:711). Such platforms promote citizens' capacity to advocate for their interests and hold local officials accountable for their decisions and activities (Almarshad, 2015:25). According to Wukich and Mergel (2015:709), these approaches can be divided into three approaches, namely, the traditional one-on-one communication strategy, one-to-one strategies, and many-to-many strategies.

2.9.1. One-On-One Communication Strategy

The challenge with this method is that unlike other methods, such as two-way communication, one-on-one communication is often unidirectional, with the information constantly cascading from the government to citizens (Wang and Lim, 2011:81). Ordinary members are not allowed to participate in the government decision-making process, which leads to unrest, protests, and unhappiness within communities. The government often uses bulletin board systems, website information, press conferences, press releases, and official speeches to inform citizens about decisions (Vanni, 2019).

2.9.2 Two-Way Communication Channels

A 'two-way communication' is a process through which two or more parties communicate through a request and response approach. Through this process, government officials and ordinary community members meet and freely engage with each other on various issues (Yilmaz, 2019). It is important to note that the process does not necessarily need to be done in person but can be conducted through emails and online channels (Ahmed and Sacks, 2014). Unlike one-on-one communication, this method seeks to raise awareness, increase understanding, and motivate active participation in public affairs. This means governments using this method often organize public events and meetings to promote two-way

communication. These activities are often used to promote communication between elected officials and citizens and to generate ‘grassroots’ (locally organized) activities that involve citizens through solicitation of their views (Tanaka, 2007:145).

In the South African context, the most common two-way communication channel that local governments use is that of the Mayoral Imbizos. Imbizo is a uniquely South African face-to-face communication channel between publicly elected representatives and citizens (South Africa News Agency, 2016). Mahlatse, Baloyi, and Lubinga (2017:6) note that the main motivation behind Imbizo gatherings seems to be a need for interactive community mobilization rather than matters raised by the community members during these meetings. Public representatives often use the Imbizo meetings to update the electorate on the government's progress in implementing its community projects and programs (South Africa News Agency, 2016, undated). For instance, government departments such as the Department of Social 17 Development, Department of Health, South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), South African Police Services (SAPS), and Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) often use these meetings to conscientize community members about the services they render and how they can access them. These meetings also allow ordinary community members to ask questions and seek clarity from government officials on various issues that affect them.

2.10 One-To-Many Communication Channel

Of the three approaches, the one-to-many strategies represent a common approach to communicating with the public (Gastil, 2008 in WUkich and Mergel, 2015:709). Chiou and Lee (2013) noted that most governments have now resorted to using Social Networking sites (SNSs) to communicate with the masses. These sites provide the government, its councillors, and MPs with an efficient interface for simultaneously distributing information to many others (Chiou and Lee, 2013). Besides disseminating information, these platforms allow instant feedback from the community members, allowing two-way symmetric communication. Therefore, it is unsurprising that in South Africa, most local municipalities now have Facebook and Twitter pages as one-to-many communication platforms where information about their activities is posted to reach many viewers simultaneously (Mutoti, 2019). This social media platform also allows for instant feedback from the targeted communities.

However, while the one-too-many strategies seem the most preferred, as Wukich and Mergel (2015:710) argue, the absence of other approaches in how governments communicate with their constituencies could be problematic. Their argument suggests that the government’s online presence on social networking sites where most citizens interact with their associates is likely to result in citizens expecting it to be always available to interact with them how they interact with their online friends (Ducci et al., 2021).

2.11 Information Management Channel in South Africa

A good communications strategy is essential in ensuring that local governments keep the communities they serve abreast of their service delivery program. Furthermore, communication is identified as the key driver of public participation. The following diagram shows how information should be cascaded between the municipality and the communities under its jurisdiction.

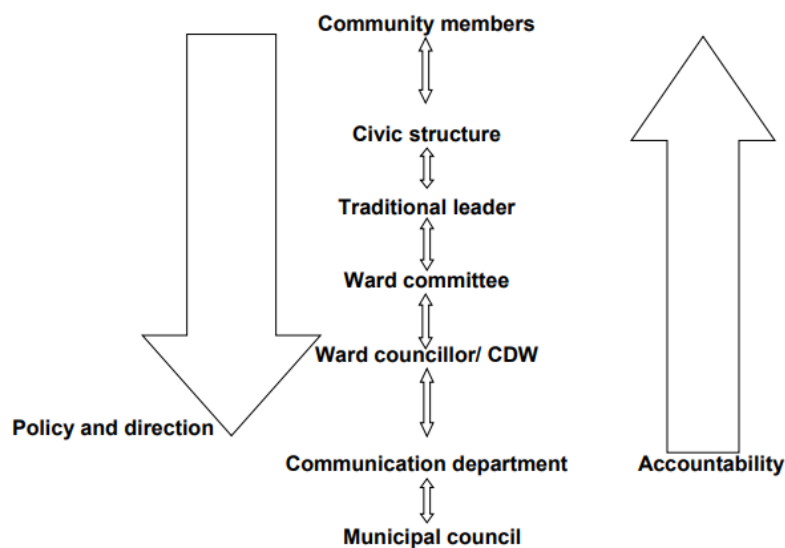


Fig:1

Communication management flow (Information management channel)

Source: South African Local Government Association (SALGA) (2011). Guideline Document on the Roles and Responsibilities of Councillors, Political Structure, and Officials.

The above diagram shows how information should flow from the municipal council to community members and from community members back to the council. It seeks to indicate policy development direction versus accountability direction regarding information flow.

2.11.1. Community Members

Community members are the recipients of all services provided by the municipality. In line with the Batho Pele Principle, they should always know the kind of services they will be provided. Information should always be handy to these members. For clarity, the following are the Batho Pele principles:

- Consultation.
- Service Standards.
- Courtesy.
- Access.
- Information.
- Openness and Transparency.
- Dealing with complaints.
- Giving Best Value (Zondo, 2022).

2.11.2 Civic Organisation or Structure

Selby (2018) states that civic structures occupy prominent positions in several Black areas throughout South Africa. From their inception in the early 1970s as grassroots structures that vehemently resisted state oppression, they mushroomed into highly influential organizations with complex roles. In this case, they are regarded as part of the information channel to the ordinary citizen.

It is important to note that while civic organisations and structures were prominent in the fight for independence, these have limited influence in contemporary politics. Some civic organisations include Community Policing Forums (Musuguri, 2018).

2.11.3 Traditional Leader

A traditional leader is one in rural areas where all community meetings will be held within his site. He authorises meetings at the village level. Like ward councillors, traditional leaders are seen as “community-based tools that are used in speeding up service delivery within their jurisdictions” (Xaba, 2020). Their roles are stipulated in several government prescripts and regulations. For instance, section 29(1) of the Municipal Systems, 2000 (Act No.32 of 2000) states that traditional authorities should be consulted on the drafting of an Integrated Development Plan (IDP). This statement supports the earlier proclamation outlined in section

81(3) of the Municipal Structures, 1998 (Act No. 177 of 1998). The Act stipulates that the Council must allow the leader of authority to express their views before deciding on any matter that directly affects the area of traditional authority. It is, therefore, essential to regard them in the channel of information flow.

While traditional leaders are explicitly mentioned in the constitution as a recognised group and play a significant role in local government, it is essential to note that some ‘leaders’ are not mentioned. Still, these are important all the same in the dissemination of information to their constituents: these include business leaders and religious leaders.

2.11.4 Ward Committees

According to the Handbook for Municipal Councillors (2006), ward committees are made up of members of a particular ward who residents of the ward choose to advise the ward councillor. Vivier et al. (2015:83) note that ward committees are the key participatory structures for local government. This view is consistent with that of Uster (2022), who contends that these Committees exist mainly to ensure participation in local government, making them the fundamental mechanisms for communication with the public. A ward committee is a formal communication channel between the community and the municipal council. They are also expected to support councillors by building healthy relationships with communities (Uster, 2022).

Ward committees have been established to raise issues with the ward councillor and inform residents about planning decisions and projects that the council undertakes that impact the ward. However, despite being the disseminator of government information to the public, it is apparent that ward committees are currently not functioning as envisaged. For instance, in assessing the role of public participation in IDP in the Thulamela municipality, Siphuma (2009:154) established that these committees are ineffective as key mechanisms for communicating with the public. The findings further revealed that disseminating information from the municipality to ward committees and the public is currently ineffective.

2.11.5 Ward Councilors

Ward councillors are legislatively mandated to consult with communities by hosting quarterly ward committee meetings. A Ward Councillor sits in council on behalf of constituencies. They convey decisions taken by the council to constituencies (South African Local Government Association (2018). According to Reddy (2016), local governments should communicate well to strengthen their ward committee structures. Ward Councillors have been identified as key stakeholders in this regard. Continuous public consultations enhance local government's transparency, credibility, and integrity in the eyes of the public. However, despite the critical mandate these Councillors are expected to play, research findings reveal that they seldom carry it out (World Bank, 2019; Mutoti, (2019). In assessing the relationship between traditional leaders and Ward Councillors in the Mquma local municipality, Mhlanga Mutoti (2019) found that ward councillors did not schedule meetings with communities as expected. The World Bank (2018, undated) noted that councillors are seldom held accountable for failing to hold these meetings. This they attribute mainly to the fact that citizens are not even aware of their mandate as councillors. The situation is often exacerbated by the fact that the communication links between councillors' ward committees and the communities at a grassroots level are often insufficient (The World Bank, 2017).

2.11.6 Community Development Workers

Community development workers (CDWs) are public officials who work with municipalities where they live to bridge the gap between service provision by the government and access by communities. They have been identified as one of the many key stakeholders the government has put in place to create a synergy between local governments and their constituencies. For this reason, they are often defined as 'participatory change agents' whose primary role is to help members of the communities in which they live (Mutoti, 2019). CDWs must address the lack of information, knowledge, and poor communication that communities experience concerning government services. (South African Local Government Association, 2006, undated). They are expected to conscientize people, particularly the poor, about their constitutional rights regarding service delivery and to help them understand how to participate in the development plans for their communities (Raga et al., 2012:235).

However, despite the significance of their role, the World Bank has found that CDWs are confronted with many challenges that hinder them from effectively implementing community facilitation. One such challenge, as identified by the World Bank, is the poor mentoring and support that CDWs receive from the departments from which they are seconded. The World Bank concludes that lack of support results in their potential to foster communication between citizens and states remains underutilized.

2.12 Communication Channels/Forums Used by Municipalities in South Africa

As highlighted, an effective communication interface between government and citizens can strengthen government responsiveness and deepen citizen engagement. In South Africa, research shows that the government uses a variety of platforms nationally and locally to provide information, as well as receive information from individual residents and communities (Vivier et al., 2015:81). What follows are some of the most common communication channels that South Africa's municipalities use to engage with communities they serve.

Looking at South African municipalities, it appears they use a combination of verbal, written and non-verbal communication. This is usually achieved through the following communication channels:

- Social Media
- Videoconferencing
- Instant Messaging Platforms (e.g., WhatsApp groups)
- Physical meetings (Imbizos)

So far, literature indicates that, for the most part, these platforms and channels are available. However, their effectiveness is below par because some of the platforms are unmanned for the most part (Fuzile, 2021).

2.13 Factors Influencing Organizational Communication

Belina and Rama (2022) described various factors influencing effective communication in the work organization. The Formal Channels of Communication are endorsed and probably controlled by managers, including regular memos, reports, and staff meetings (Mohan, 2019). Formal channels can inhibit the free flow of information between organization levels. This is the most common but difficult to achieve, especially if the management is less competent in decision-making, as there is less control over the subordinates. Formal channels influence

active communication by informing employees of organization news, policies, standards, objectives, and trends.

Belina and Rama (2022) state that job specialization facilitates communication within differentiated groups. Members of the same group are likely to share the same interests, objectives, time horizons, tasks, and personal styles. However, the problem with this communication is the likeliness of inhibiting communication between highly differentiated groups due to probably different interests. This becomes problematic in public organisations where the communication personnel are expected to communicate with a wide and diverse community audience.

2.13.1 Internal Communication and Cross-cultural Problems

All communication is cultural - it draws on how people have learned to speak and give nonverbal messages. They do not always communicate the same way daily since factors like context, individual personality, and mood interact with various cultural influences people have internalized that influence our choices. Communication is interactive, so an essential influence on its effectiveness is the relationship with others (Belina and Rama, 2022).

The challenge is that even with all the goodwill in the world, miscommunication is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. Miscommunication may lead to conflict or aggravate conflict that already exists. People's understanding of the world, their place, and their relationships with others differ across different cultural, religious and community groups. Cross-cultural communication is usually outlined and demonstrated by examples of ideas, attitudes, and behaviours involving four variables.

Nonverbal communication is hugely important in any interaction with others. Its importance is multiplied across cultures. This is because people look for nonverbal cues when verbal messages are unclear or ambiguous, as they are more likely to be across cultures (especially when different languages are being used) (Vrij, Hartwig and Granhag, 2019). As the familiarity with these four other starting points increases, people are cultivating cultural fluency - awareness of how cultures operate in communication and conflict and the ability to respond effectively to these differences (LeBaron et al., 2022). Each of the four variables discussed -

time, personal responsibility and fate, face and face-saving, and nonverbal communication - is much more complex than it can convey. Each of them influences communication and can be responsible for conflict or escalating conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misinterpretation. A culturally fluent approach to conflict means working overtime to understand these and other ways communication varies across cultures and applying these understandings to enhance relationships across differences (Sekiguchi, 2016).

When communicating, it is essential to highlight the significance of observing cultural differences within an organisation. It is important to note that while this is significant for international organisations, it tends not to be a problem for South African municipalities. This is because most of the employees in these organisations tend to be of the same homogenous group (Enwereji and Uwizeyimana, 2021). Therefore, in the South African context, the impact of cultural differences in the communication process is minimal.

2.13.2 Information Communication Technology

The country's new advent of information technologies has led to new communication opportunities (Vivier et al., 2015:83). These range from municipal websites to mobile applications and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Vivier et al. (2015:83) found that the government and its citizens have since resorted to using these platforms to communicate and interact. Government efforts to expand access to ICTs and to market government services through ICTs, especially in rural areas, have largely taken the form of community centres called Thusong Service Centres (TSC) or Digital Community Hubs (DCHs) (Vivier et al., 2015:83). These provide computers for people to “access information related to business, government, education, banking, and more; they are also expected to enhance the capacity of communities in utilizing ICTs” (Vivier et al, 2015:83).

It is also important to highlight that just like businesses and individuals, municipalities face infrastructure problems that might hinder their communication with the outside client communities. Some of the challenges include those within the power and ambit of the municipalities, like old and obsolete equipment (Ranchod, 2020). This is usually the result of budget cuts. Some other challenges include poor internet connection, especially in those areas without a fibre network, load shedding and general power failure (Van der Meulen, 2011).

2.14 Factors Hindering Effective Communication Between Municipalities and Citizens

Despite guarantees made in the country's constitution and other prescripts, its institutions still struggle to involve community members in its decision-making processes fully. Scott argues that many of these institutions are still confronted by implementation challenges. The author attributes this problem to a lack of a uniform approach and set of minimum standards for public participation within the country's legislative sector (Scott, 2009:65). These views are consistent with the findings of the State of Local Government Report, published in 2009.

The findings reveal that increased service delivery protests demonstrate the vagueness of the communication channels between government and communities, leading to communication breaking down. This is attributed to municipalities' trend of investing inadequate investments in public participation strategies, structures, and processes, including communication and complaint management systems (State of Local Government in South Africa report, 2009). Not having a transparent communication mode allowing for full participation limits a government's sources of options and ideas. This also exposes the process to corruption, which the report found would be addressed through public scrutiny if citizens were more involved.

Research findings further reveal that community members' general lack of interest in government programs often renders its communication strategies ineffective. According to The World Bank (2020, undated), the communication gap between politicians and citizens is that people choose to remain quiet even when they wish to talk. This is attributed to citizens' belief that they will not be heard even if they speak out, rendering their efforts fruitless (The World Bank, 2022, undated). Community members' reluctance to speak out could also be attributed to their lack of trust in elected leadership and their disillusionment with the government's inability to deliver services (Mutoti,2019). Mosotho noted that the community may no longer trust the elected leadership's ability to deliver on programs and projects effectively. Citizens may also be disillusioned with the government's constant inability to address their needs due to the lack of funding.

2.15 Understanding Communication Barriers

Communication barriers form a significant part of this study as they identify potential problems with the communication methods. Various authors (such as Zadtyi, 2021; Hall and Stubbs, 2022; and Fielding, 2022) have identified barriers to communication (Rani, 2016). Some of

these barriers include language, for example. This is especially true in areas like the City of Cape Town with multiple languages. Consequently, there is a need to ensure that the language is pushed out in the languages that the communities understand. The barriers tend to be similar, focusing on climate, environment, trust, language, prejudice, gender, etc. No matter how good the communication system in an organization is, unfortunately, barriers can and do often occur (Spires and Shackleton, 2018). These barriers interrupt the flow of communication from the sender to the receiver, thus making communication ineffective. According to Looney (2022), in overcoming the communication barrier, careful communicators can conquer barriers in several ways. Half of the time, the battle in communicating successfully is recognizing that the entire process is sensitive and susceptible to breakdown. Like a defensive driver anticipating problems on the road, a good communicator anticipates problems in encoding, transmitting, and decoding (Rasila and Mudau, 2012). Strategies to overcome barriers will differ depending on the type of barriers present. Several communication barriers can usually be summarised as being due to intrapersonal, interpersonal, technological, structural, and cross-cultural factors.

2.15.1 Intrapersonal Factors

Interpersonal factors involve trust between sender and receiver, noise, personality, individual perceptual errors, and lying and distortion (Hellriegel and Slocum, 2007:328). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2008: 163) add that the credibility of the information source, the climate (feelings that either limit or encourage the content and frequency of the message), and sender-receiver similarities can inhibit effective communication in a social service organization. Building trust means being honest, not omitting information or keeping secrets from your external stakeholders. Because once your audience finds out that you are keeping a secret, they won't be able to trust you anymore. Keeping secrets requires keeping track of the lies to build bigger lies to bury the previous lies. Dealing with interpersonal factors should involve sensitivity because most government officials have a reputation for not caring about community members. Trust is also compromised if issues communicated and promised are never delivered and addressed effectively by those in local authority, thus creating a barrier to communication (Downs, DeWine and Greenbaum, 2020).

Steinberg (2007:149) suggests that intrapersonal factors create biases in our interpretations of ourselves, others, and the events around us. Cappelletti (2022) refers to these as the intrapersonal variables influencing communication. They include rumours about your

personality traits, past experiences, backgrounds, and the defence mechanism you use to resolve problems and anxiety. A cultural barrier arises when two individuals in an organization belong to different religious backgrounds or regions. MLM comprises 99% of Xhosa speakers, while Sotho, English, Zulu, and Afrikaans speakers comprise 1% (Mnquma Local Municipality, 2014).

According to O'Neil (2005), the human communication process is more complex than it initially seems. Much, if not most, of our messages in face-to-face contact are transmitted through paralanguage. These auxiliary communication techniques are highly culture-bound. Communication with people from other societies or ethnic groups is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding if their culture and paralinguistics are unknown to you or ignored. In terms of this factor, MLM might not experience challenges because most of the population is Xhosa speaking and culturally Xhosa. This does not, however, mean that they may avoid communication challenges altogether.

The South African government has created the Office of the Public Protector to handle and investigate complaints from the public against government agencies or officials. According to a report (Department of the Western Cape, 2013), the Public Protector can recommend corrective action and issue reports. However, the challenge is that the Public Protector has no offices in MLM. Nevertheless, trust and relationships are built and maintained through honest dialogue. The Municipality would have to take a leading role in having those conversations, good and bad; however, those in the process assist in alleviating any negative interpersonal perception that might exist with the external stakeholders, which could be a communication barrier in the long run (Munzhedzi, 2016).

2.15.2 Technological Factors

Technological factors include language and meaning, non-verbal cues, media effectiveness, and information overload (Smit, Cronje, Brevis, Vrba, 2010: 417). Unison (2015:4) further adds that changes in technology, including a rise in automation in the workplace and the development of the internet, have transformed how many businesses work. During the last two decades, South Africa and the rest of the world have been subject to an onslaught of electronic communication. The consequences of this technological surge have been to make employees more available and to blur organizational boundaries. The time factor has become almost non-

existent, as messages can be communicated almost instantaneously Pereira, F., Correia, R., Pinho, P., Lopes, S. I., and Carvalho, N. B. (2020). Haurovi (2019) states that, unfortunately, this access and speed have resulted in the demise of some necessary communication elements. E-mail, for example, does not provide the facility of non-verbal communication that face-to-face meetings do. Emotions and nuances cannot be conveyed, and affiliation needs are not addressed. Video conferencing allows people to see each other but does not provide the answer for those people with a high demand for social contact.

According to Conrad (2014), whether it's a small institution or a small municipality like OR Tambo, fostering effective communication is critical to success. No company can succeed long-term if its stakeholders do not communicate with one another, and this lack of communication will quickly become evident in the form of missed opportunities for engagement. The OR Tambo Local Municipality has a website for internal and external stakeholders. Considering the prevailing circumstances in OR Tambo, of the high unemployment rate, low levels of education, and poor accessibility, this study assesses if MLM's use of technology is meaningful and relevant. For example, do the constituencies know about the website and have the computer literacy and technology skills to assess the information? Furthermore, the technological progress, advancement, and infrastructure in rural environments are less developed than in urban areas. Besides technological factors, structural factors also contribute to communication barriers.

2.15.3 Structural Factors

Structural factors focus on aspects relating to the sender's status, the target group's size, spatial constraints (physical distance between sender and receiver), and serial transmission (changes that messages undergo as they are successively communicated from layer to layer). Ndinisa, (2017). Add that the organizational structure has an essential influence on the ability of members of the organization to communicate effectively. Things like the physical distance between the sender and the receiver may prevent the recipient from seeking immediate clarification.

However, due to advances in modern communication technology, this barrier has been mainly overcome. MLM offices in the town centre cater for a wide variety of communities, some approximate kilometres from the town centre. Distance sometimes delays communication,

which means that, at the time of arrival to communities, the communication is most likely outdated, and this will be a barrier to MLM's effective communication (Ndinisa, 2017). However, argue that it is not all about words; one of the reasons that face-to-face communication is so effective is that numerous factors can help us interpret the message, in addition to what a person is saying. Only a small percentage of a face-to-face message is conveyed by words. The rest is done by facial expression, tone of voice, gestures, and body language.

Structural factors should not be seen as a hindrance to effective communication but rather as an opportunity for more engaged and human interactions with the constituencies of OR Tambo. It also allows the Municipality to innovatively think of new external communication activities to address the different needs, frequency, and approaches of external communication to the municipality's stakeholders. It calls for the Municipality to be creative and innovative and embrace technological advancement to deliver communication effectively.

2.15.4 Cross-Cultural Factors

In a country such as South Africa, the diversity of cultures imposes a range of hurdles that must be overcome in areas such as organizational communication. Culture determines the distinctive ways different populations, societies, or smaller groups organize their lives or activities in terms of language, religious beliefs, economic beliefs, social values, physical characteristics, and use of nonverbal cues. Cross-cultural communication occurs when a message sent by a member of one culture is received and understood by a member of another culture. Ndinisa, (2017). explain that knowing and understanding cultural differences plays a large part in improving communication effectiveness. Although the population of MLM consists mainly of Xhosa speakers, Xhosas can be divided into different tribes but distinct heritages. The main tribes are the Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bomvana, Xesibe, and Thembu.

Consequently, the municipality must scan the environment and be sensitive to cultural cues. Effective cross-cultural communication is essential for the communication strategy of every institution, and it is a critical component of the community involvement plan. In establishing or identifying the different cultures through demographic research, the municipality can be alert to verbal and nonverbal cues that affect communication.

In addition, one can observe and understand the behaviours of different cultures and follow their lead in interactions with them. Cultural stereotypes can also play a formidable role in barrier enforcement. Municipalities should adopt a specific audience-centred approach to understand their target audience's knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs through audience research methods. This requires aligning benefits and offers available from the municipality with each audience segment by considering its beliefs and attitudes. Grouping target audiences according to their audience segment means that their specific fears can be addressed, and a formidable communication plan worked out with each segment (Cele, 2021) asserts that communication can be successful only when the receiver understands the meaning of the message sent by the sender.

Some communication barriers may block the communication process and prevent the sender from transmitting his ideas meaningfully. Other factors are perceptual and language differences, restrictive environments, distractions, deceptive tactics, and communication networks. Overcoming communication barriers requires vigilant observation and contemplation of potential barriers in a particular instance of communication. Strategies to overcome the obstacles will differ from one context to another, depending upon the type of barriers present. The fundamentals of external communication also suggest that communication barriers get addressed to communicate with the targeted constituencies effectively. Appropriate and effective external communication is about accurate, on-time communication and with correct external communication tools.

2.16 What Is External Communication?

Gopal (2009: 8) states that external communication is communication with government and private agencies. It is an essential feature of all businesses. All suppliers, customers, financial institutions, support organizations, public and other environmental organizations external to the company must communicate with it for various business dealings. Effective communication with those outside a company brings in order, builds goodwill, and ensures the continued existence and growth of the business or institution.

According to Walker et al. (2018), external communication occurs in at least three major forms: (1) advertising and promoting products and services, (2) creating and maintaining a desirable public image for the organization, and (3) shaping the public opinion on issues important to the

organization. No group or organization can function without effective and adequate communication systems, and external stakeholders form part of the bigger picture of any organization. Orders and policies must be transmitted, and problems and their solutions must be identified. External stakeholders or audiences are just as important as internal stakeholders in communication.

Walker (2018) states that traditionally, communication concerned with image-building has been the responsibility of public relations practitioners. The area has expanded to include investor relations programs and programs to communicate about risk and crises. In addition, many organizations have expanded external communication to include a new function – identifying and tracking public issues that concern the organization. An organization might try to respond to public criticism or influence public opinion on important issues by advocating its position in the public arena. Messaging and effective external communication can assist in developing a good relationship between the municipality and its environment. They may also influence the wider environment by informing and changing attitudes in the various target groups (MacDonald and Hammer, 2007: 3).

Other important reasons for external communication include the development of trust, social responsibility, transparency, and professional ethics, all supporting the overall goal of protecting local government. MacDonald and Hammer (2020) further explain that establishing trust and confidence is not trivial. The regulatory administration must be proactive in its approach to stakeholder management and communication. External communication is a critical function centrally involved in key aspects of an organization's communications with the external world, presenting service information to external stakeholders and perspectives on important issues to the media. As the function that represents the voice to the external world, external communication needs a clear understanding of its services, priorities, and responsibilities, which include external communications group services, building bridges, working effectively in the integrated stakeholder partnership, forging accountability, and clear roles among external stakeholders together with communicating the value of communications in institutions such as municipalities.

2.17 The Role of Government, Municipality, and Citizens

ANC emphasizes that the actors in a network are related; therefore, no actor can exist in isolation, be it human or nonhuman. This network enables the achievement of a goal; in this case, it's using public ICTs to empower and enhance citizens' participation. Chapter One mentioned that government, citizens, information, public ICTs, environment, and technology are significant actors in the network for public ICTs to enhance and empower citizens' participation.

The following diagram zooms into the network's three most vital actors. Of the three actors, the municipality is added as the fourth actor so that the relationship between the actor and the other actors and their roles can be explained in the context of municipalities in South Africa, which form part of the government. The actors are the government, municipality, public ICTs, and citizens.

Government's Role: The government, being the main financial provider of public ICTs to the citizens in South Africa, establishes the initiative to build public ICTs for the citizens. The role of the government will be to establish the legal and institutional framework, start pilot projects, and develop national or regional support (Sule, 2020). The government reduces its roles as a support function; this is done by giving full responsibilities to the municipalities.

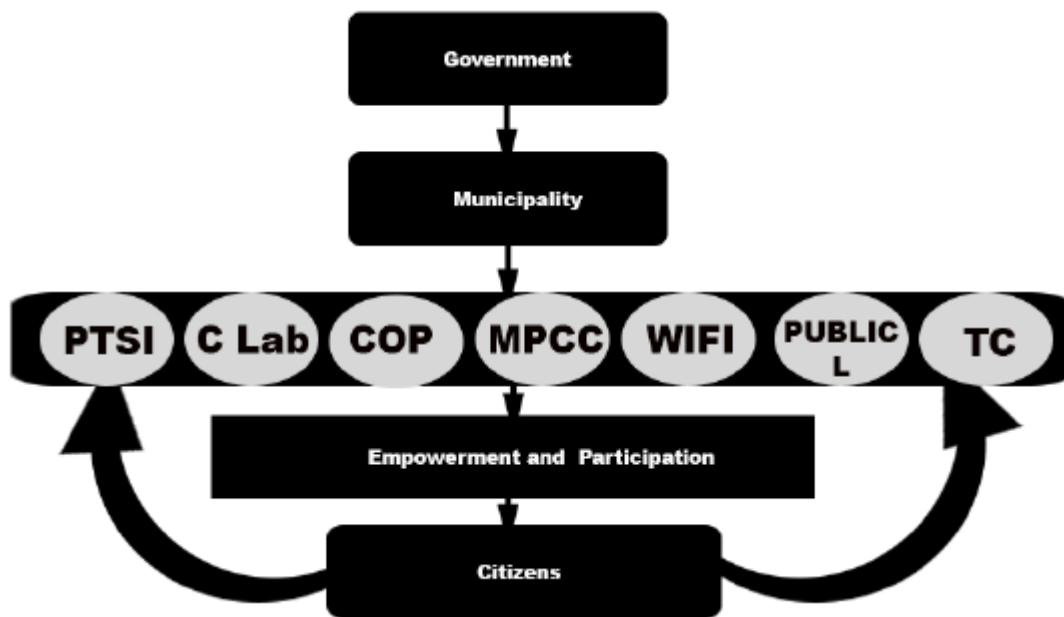
Municipality's role: The municipality is tasked with implementing and regulatory responsibilities. Since municipalities deal directly with the citizens, they are responsible for ensuring public ICTs empower and enhance citizens' participation. This will also make them responsible for providing training and support to the citizens, thus ensuring that these public ICT centres are fully functional.

Citizens' role: Citizens are the reasons why public ICTs exist. This is because they are the main users of public ICTs, according to (Turken and Eyuboglu, 2021). Citizens use public ICTs to keep themselves informed and know what is happening worldwide to become active participants in improving their lives. As actors in a network, government, municipality, and citizens must work together. None of the three actors should abandon their duties, which might lead to the network not being fully and effectively functional. The diagram that follows

diagrammatically demonstrates how each of these three actors connects in fulfilling the use of public ICTs to empower and enhance citizens ‘participation.

Public ICTs’ role: Public ICTs are at the centre of the citizens ‘empowerment and enhancement of their participation. Public ICTs are a powerful tool that can empower and enhance citizens’ participation in education, politics, agriculture, and health (Roberts, 2022). Public ICTs empower and improve citizens’ participation in various ways or aspects. Roberts (2022) further explains that public ICTs are mostly used to empower and enhance citizens’ participation in education, agriculture, health, and politics. Each of these sectors is explained individually, and a flow diagram illustrating how the use of public ICTs can empower citizens and enhance their participation in the mentioned sectors or aspects is given below.

Figure 2.1 Flow of interaction



Source: Ndlovu, 2016

Through the municipality, the government provides public ICTs to the citizens. These public ICTs aim to enhance citizens’ participation and empower them in the education, health, political and agricultural asp. For empowerment to be possible, there is a need for the community to utilize these public ICTs. To enable citizens to participate without hindrances, the municipality should ensure that these public ICTs are fully functional.

2.18 Use of Public ICTs by Citizens

According to Wahab et al. (2022), illiteracy is one of the major factors around the globe that affect citizens' use of public ICTs. Roman and Colle further state that citizens across the globe will face limitations in using public ICTs and accessing ICT services if they are not well-trained on how to use the equipment. Wahab (2022) argued that for citizens to utilize public ICTs, the content of service and information offered in these public ICTs must be relevant to the local context. In that way, the participation of citizens will increase, and so will empowerment.

A study by Njeru (2014) highlighted the importance of training citizens to use the equipment. They also added that it is vital to shape and maintain an infrastructure that fits citizens' needs and offers a supportive learning environment that enables participation and empowerment. In their study, Yusop et al. (2022) claimed that the location where the public ICT is situated is very important because it can lead to the public ICT being used or not being used. This was also supported by the study conducted by Ngwenyama and Chigona. (2022). which also pointed out the importance of the location of public ICT. In this study, it was pointed out that public ICTs located in urban areas are easily accessible as compared to those in rural areas.

The study conducted by Hunt (2022) suggested that most citizens do not use public ICTs because of the staff that works in these public centres. This is because some employees are also not literate; therefore, they cannot assist citizens when they need help. Hunt recommended that employees and leaders in public ICTs should be trained and given technical support skills. According to him, this is because, with its well-trained staff, citizens will not use public ICTs, negatively affecting citizens' participation and empowerment. According to Gomez (2012), poor quality infrastructure, the complete absence of infrastructure (such as internet and electricity), and the cost of connectivity also prevent citizens from using public ICTs.

2.19 Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on the review of the existing literature on the Municipal communication channels in this digital age and their implications on service delivery. The chapter starts by reviewing the nature of communication between local government and the citizens. This was followed by the review of the information Management channel commonly used by municipalities in South Africa. The literature further reveals an open communication channel between government and community members can benefit both parties. The literature review

further revealed that although open communication is beneficial, many factors still hinder effective communication between municipalities and citizens. The study further discussed ICT and factors hindering its fruition in local municipal governments. The following chapter will discuss the methodology of the research.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to explore the theoretical framework of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) as a lens to examine the potential of digital communication technologies to facilitate development in rural areas. This chapter delves into the origins of ICT4D, its various dimensions, and the principles underpinning it. Ultimately, this chapter builds on the ICT4D framework and develops a theoretical framework for Digital Communication Technologies for Development (DCT4D) tailored explicitly to OR Tambo District Municipality. While ICT4D has been praised for its potential to improve people's lives in rural areas, it has also faced criticism for being too technologically deterministic, not considering local cultural and social contexts, and creating new forms of inequality. The chapter also discusses these criticisms and how they can be addressed in the context of digital communication technologies in rural municipalities in South Africa.

3.2 The ICT4D

The ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) is one of the popular theoretical frameworks among the disciplines of development studies, information systems, sociology, and communication science in explaining the potential of development in developing countries using digital technologies (Steyn and Van Greunen, 2014). The premise of the framework is that increased access to information and communication technologies can enable people in developing countries to access essential services, communicate more effectively, and participate more fully in economic and social activities (Qureshi, 2015). Its origins can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s when the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to drive development was first recognized by scholars and practitioners (Qureshi, 2019). However, it was not until the 1990s that the concept gained prominence due to the emergence of the internet and other digital communication technologies that transformed how information was accessed, shared, and used (Kleine, 2010). Some notable scholars who contributed to the development of ICT4D as a theoretical framework include the works of James S. Coleman and Michael J. Piore (1996) on the role of information in economic development and the work of Amartya Sen (1999) on the importance of capabilities and

freedom in development as well as C.K. Prahalad (2002), who wrote about the potential of ICTs to enable low-income communities to access essential services. More so, Castells (1996) highlighted the importance of networks and communication technologies in shaping social and economic development.

International organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) "Global Development Network" project launched in 1998 championed ICT4D. More so, the World Bank (2000) championed "Bridging the Digital Divide", which aimed to increase access to ICTs in developing countries. These projects were all aimed at increasing and harnessing the potential of the internet to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration. Since then, ICT4D has continued to revolve, incorporating many activities, from basic connectivity initiatives to more complex projects to build capacity and promote sustainable development. Today, ICT4D is a critical tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promoting inclusive and equitable development worldwide (Qureshi, 2019). Over the years, the ICT4D framework has been refined and now incorporates various theories and perspectives, including social constructionism, capability, and human development approaches.

ICT4D is rooted in the belief that poverty, inequality, and lack of access to essential services can be addressed using digital communication technologies in developing countries (Qureshi, 2015). In other words, the framework argues that access and usage of digital technologies improve people's lives in developing countries (Castells, 1996). It is, therefore, not surprising that one of the critical dimensions of the ICT4D framework is access, which entails the ability to access both physical access to devices and infrastructure, as well as access to relevant content and services. ICT4D theorists emphasise equitable access to digital communication technologies to reduce inequalities (Qureshi, 2015).

Another dimension of the ICT4D is individual usage, such as using mobile phones to access information or communicate with others, and collective usage, such as using digital platforms to collaborate with others or advocate for change (Boeri, 2016). Usage can be defined as how people use digital communication technologies. The third dimension of the ICT4D framework is impact, which refers to how digital communication technologies can positively affect development outcomes, such as increased economic opportunities, improved access to health and education, and enhanced political participation (Zheng et al., 2018).

3.3 Principles of ICT4D.

In addition to dimensions, the ICT4D framework proposes fundamental principles for the effective use of digital communication technologies for development, such as sustainability, empowerment, participation, and local ownership (Roztocki, Soja and Wesroffer, 2019). More so, the framework emphasises consideration of local context in designing digital technologies and considering the needs and perspectives of the people who will be using them.

ICT4D is underpinned by several principles, such as the participatory Approach that emphasizes involving local communities and stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of digital technology initiatives (Heeks, 2008). This participatory approach is grounded in the belief that local ownership and participation are essential for sustainable and effective development outcomes

More so, ICT4 recognizes the importance of considering developing countries' social, cultural, economic, and political contexts in designing and implementing digital technology initiatives (Kumar and Best, 2006). This contextualization is based on the recognition that the context of developing countries is vastly different from that of developed countries and that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate.

The ICT4D framework emphasises that digital technology initiatives are financially and environmentally sustainable and have a lasting impact on the development outcomes they seek to promote (Afuah, 2003). Similarly, ICT4D emphasizes the importance of building local capacity to design, implement, and maintain technology initiatives. This includes providing training and support to local stakeholders and promoting the development of local technical and managerial skills (Heeks, 2008). The ICT4D framework puts gender equality front in the design and implementation of digital technology initiatives so they are accessible and relevant to women and girls and that they do not perpetuate existing gender inequalities (Kumar and Best, 2006)

Just like any other theoretical approach, ICT4D has been subject to criticism and debates. ICT4D has been criticised for reinforcing existing inequalities and widening the digital divide between developed and developing countries. The infrastructure and skills required to use digital technologies are often limited in developing countries (Qureshi, 2019).

ICT4d has been criticised for being driven by a Western bias that assumes that Western technologies and approaches are superior and can be easily transferred to developing countries

without considering the context (Grunfeld, 2011). As a result, some ICT4D projects failed as they failed to take into consideration the peculiarities of the local context; hence, ICT4D has had limited impact despite the increasing availability of digital technologies due to a lack of relevant content and a lack of local ownership and participation in the design and implementation of digital technology initiatives (Qureshi, 2015).

3.4 Applicability ICT4D to OR Tambo Municipality

Building on the ICT4D framework, a theoretical framework for Digital Communication Technologies for Development (DCT4D) is proposed to understand digital communication potential in OR Tambo District Municipality. DCT4D framework can be used to evaluate digital communication technology interventions that can support sustainable development outcomes in rural municipalities in South Africa where access to traditional forms of communication, such as newspapers, radio and television, is somehow limited. This study argues that digital technologies such as mobile phones, social media, and messaging apps have become essential communication and information dissemination tools beyond urban communities.

The first dimension of the DCT4D framework is access, which ORTDM is where there is limited connectivity and infrastructure. For digital communication technologies to work and for communities to connect, it is essential to assess the affordability of broadband networks/mobile data and the availability of devices such as smartphones and laptops.

The second dimension of the DCT4D framework is content, essential for promoting locally relevant and context-specific information and services that support development outcomes such as health, education, and economic opportunities. In evaluating digital communication technologies in ORTDM, the study looks at whether the content being shared or disseminated is relevant to the needs and interests of the residents of ORTDM, such as information on agricultural practices, rain season, traditional ceremonies or healthcare services.

The third dimension of the DCT4D framework is capacity building, which is necessary to develop digital literacy skills and effectively use communication technologies. This means that ORTDM must have programs and workshops to train individuals and communities, particularly those in remote rural areas, to use digital communication technologies. This can be done in partnerships with institutions of higher learning in the Eastern Cape, local organizations and businesses to provide opportunities for practical application of these skills.

The fourth dimension of the DCT4D framework is governance, which is important for protecting privacy, security, and access to information. ORTDM must have policies that support the responsible use of digital communication technologies so that they are not used for nefarious activities and to promote hatred, tribalism and racism.

Finally, the fifth dimension of the DCT4D framework is participation, essential for ensuring that communities are engaged in designing, implementing, and evaluating digital communication technology interventions. In ORTDM, involving communities in decisions that affect their lives is essential for community-led needs assessments, consultations, and mobile-based citizen reporting tools. The assessments and consultations provide new opportunities for public participation, facilitating communication and feedback and promoting transparency and accountability, thereby building stronger and more responsive local governments that better serve the needs of ORTDM residents. Rural residents should easily report issues such as dysfunctional boreholes and outbreaks of livestock diseases, as well as report broken bridges using their mobile phones. In addition, ORTDM may use social media platforms to publish information about budget allocations, public meetings, and other essential matters. In the past, residents of ORTDM lacked access to information due to limited mobility and limited opportunities for public participation as they are often located very far away from community halls where meetings usually occur.

In short, the DCT4D framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the unique circumstances of ORTDM. By focusing on improving access, developing locally relevant content, building capacity, promoting good governance, and encouraging participation, digital communication technologies can be leveraged to support sustainable development outcomes in these communities.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated the potential of digital communication in promoting development in rural municipalities, particularly when applied through frameworks such as ICT4D and DCT4D. While the ICT4D framework has been criticized for its top-down approach and lack of attention to power dynamics, it remains a useful theoretical tool for understanding the complex relationship between digital technologies and development. By highlighting the importance of access, infrastructure, capacity building, governance, and content, the ICT4D framework can help guide the design and implementation of digital communication interventions in rural municipalities in South Africa. However, the DCT4D framework,

building on the principles of ICT4D, considers the specific context of ORTDM and emphasizes the importance of community engagement and participation in the design and implementation of digital communication technologies. By focusing on local needs and priorities and promoting community ownership and agency, the DCT4D framework can help ensure that digital communication interventions are effective and sustainable.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The research methodology chapter plays a crucial role in establishing the foundation of the study. By clearly outlining the research approach, design, data collection, and analysis methods, this chapter aims to enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings. It ensures that the research process is transparent and aligns with the research objectives, ultimately providing valuable insights into the prospects and challenges of community communication in the digital age in O.R. Tambo District Municipality.

4.2 Research Design

Keyton (2010) defined research as discovering answers to questions by applying scientific and systematic procedures. This discovery “follows procedural traditions that have been tested, validated, confirmed, and accepted by social scientists of many disciplines over time” (Keyton, 2010:13). In executing this investigation, the researcher uses an applicable and relevant design. Mouton (2009:55) defines the research design as the “plan or blueprint” of the research, while research methodology is the actual execution of the work as spelt out in that “plan”.

There are two main research methodologies used in scientific research, and these are qualitative and quantitative research. The type of information being evaluated has an impact on the choice. Employing an acceptable approach to generate reliable and accurate data and conclusions is vital. As a result, the researcher's chosen approach influences the researcher's design, sample policy, data-collecting devices, and investigation.

The researcher chose to make use of a qualitative research design. This is because the study seeks to elicit the perceptions of those responsible for implementing the communications strategy at the OR Tambo District Municipality. Du Plooy (2009) intimates that qualitative research methodology refers to research that is explanatory, interpretative, and constructs qualitative aspects of communication experiences. Weighing in on this, Keyton (2010) defines qualitative research as general research in which the researcher is the primary observer or data collector. This researcher leans on Patton (1990:13), who posits that “[q]ualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail”. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to determine how the municipality implements the digital communications strategy and the extent to which this might have some influence. For this study, the researcher

relies on Patton (1990), who observes that the qualitative research methodology allows a researcher to approach “fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis,” contributing to qualitative inquiry's depth, openness, and detail. Consistent with a qualitative methodology, which seeks to determine the influence of digital communication, the study used the interpretive paradigmatic position. The interpretive paradigm is one through which researchers see the world through the interpretations and perceptions of the research participants.

4.3 Qualitative Approach

The advent of the digital age has revolutionised how communities communicate and interact. With the increasing penetration of digital technologies, it has become essential to understand the prospects and challenges of community communication in this new era. This case study focuses on the O.R. Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It aims to explore the importance of digital qualitative methods in researching this topic.

Digital qualitative methods use digital technologies and platforms to collect, analyze, and interpret qualitative data. These methods have gained significant traction recently because they provide rich and nuanced insights into the research topic. In the context of the prospects and challenges of community communication, digital qualitative methods offer several advantages.

Firstly, digital qualitative methods allow researchers to conduct interviews and focus groups remotely without needing physical presence in the study area. This is particularly relevant in the O.R. Tambo District Municipality case, which may have geographical and infrastructure limitations. By utilizing digital technologies such as video conferencing and instant messaging platforms, researchers can overcome these barriers and engage with a diverse range of participants. This ensures a wider representation of community voices and perspectives in the research.

Secondly, digital qualitative methods enable researchers to capture real-time data and observations. In the digital age, community communication continually evolves, with new platforms and technologies emerging regularly. Researchers can stay abreast of these developments using digital methods and capture the most up-to-date information. For example, researchers can analyze social media conversations and trends, online forums, and digital communication platforms to understand how community members interact and communicate.

This real-time data provides valuable insights into community communication in the O.R. Tambo District Municipality.

Additionally, digital qualitative methods allow for the analysing of large volumes of data more efficiently and systematically. In the case of community communication research, a vast amount of content may be generated online, such as social media posts, comments, and discussions. Manual analysis of this data would be extremely time-consuming and prone to human error. However, digital qualitative methods, such as automated text analysis and data mining techniques, can process and analyze this data quickly and accurately. Researchers can identify recurring themes, sentiment analysis, and communication patterns within the community, providing a comprehensive understanding of the prospects and challenges of community communication.

Furthermore, digital qualitative methods facilitate the engagement and participation of community members in the research process. The digital age has empowered individuals to share their opinions and experiences easily through online platforms. Researchers can leverage these platforms to gather insights directly from community members. For example, online surveys, focus group discussions using video conferencing tools, and online interviews can be conducted to collect qualitative data. Engaging community members in the research process ensures their inclusion and enhances the validity and credibility of the research findings.

First and foremost, the digital age has revolutionized communication processes worldwide. With the extensive use of digital technologies, understanding the prospects and challenges of community communication requires a research approach that aligns with this digital landscape. Therefore, digital qualitative methods, such as online surveys, email interviews, virtual focus groups, and social media analysis, will allow researchers to capture the dynamic nature of community communication in the digital age.

One scholar who emphasizes the importance of digital qualitative methods in researching communication in the digital age is Kozinets (2010). Kozinets argues that digital platforms provide unique opportunities for researchers to observe and engage with communities in ways that were not possible before. Additionally, he highlights the value of employing netnography, an ethnographic research method conducted online, to understand virtual communities. In the case of O.R. Tambo District Municipality, digital qualitative methods will enable researchers

to analyze online forums, social media discussions, and other digital platforms where community members communicate.

Moreover, using digital qualitative methods can overcome geographical barriers and ensure inclusivity in research. Often, conducting traditional face-to-face interviews and focus groups can be challenging, especially in rural areas like O.R. Tambo District Municipality. Digital methods, on the other hand, can reach a wider audience and allow for the participation of individuals who might not have access to physical research locations. Researchers can ensure a diverse range of participants and obtain a more representative sample by employing digital qualitative methods.

In terms of digital literacy and access, the challenges faced by communities in the digital age are crucial to address in this research. Scholars like Warschauer (2004) underline the importance of considering the socio-economic and infrastructural factors that impact digital access. Using digital qualitative methods, researchers can collect data about the level of internet penetration, access to digital devices, and digital literacy of community members, which are essential for analyzing the prospects and challenges of community communication.

Furthermore, using digital qualitative methods in this research can provide real-time data and capture the immediate experiences of community members. Unlike traditional qualitative methods that rely on memory or retrospective reporting, digital methods can offer insights into current and ongoing communication practices. This real-time data is valuable for understanding the rapidly changing digital communication landscape and identifying emerging challenges and prospects.

Several scholars have highlighted the advantages of using real-time digital methods. For example, Madge et al. (2012) discuss the benefits of using digital ethnography to study online communities. They argue that online environments provide unique opportunities for observing interactions and behaviors as they occur. This real-time data can be essential in capturing the nuances and complexities of community communication in the digital age, especially in the case of O.R. Tambo District Municipality, where digital communication dynamics might still evolve.

4.4 Quantitative Research

Du Plooy (2009) notes that quantitative research is largely observable or experimental and is based on measuring quantity or amount. Mouton (2009) agrees that quantitative research deals with many people, making it easy to draw conclusions or generalisations. This methodology is also called empirical, meaning that “researchers study that which can be perceived and classified or measured” (Du Plooy, 2009:15). This methodology is also called positivist as it applies “objective, universal laws when researching human communication” (Du Plooy, 2009:22).

Quantitative communication researchers believe this research can be ‘value free’. They also believe that their study is objective rather than subjective (normative) statements (Matsilele, 2013). Greener (2008) opines that quantitative research methodology is based on the deductive approach, which begins by looking at theory and then goes on to develop a hypothesis on that theory that relates to research, then goes on to test that theory. Quantitative research foregrounds positivism, which postulates that only phenomena known through our senses (smell, hearing, touch, taste, and sight) can produce ‘knowledge’.

As Matsilele (2013) observed, the quantitative approach is often associated with research designs such as surveys or experimental designs. Writing on this, Mouton (2009) argues that this approach uses mostly questionnaires, structured observation and physical measurement as techniques to collect data. In qualitative methodology, the researcher designed an interview guide for the respondents. The topics in the interview guide contained one central research question with three sub-questions. A combination of two methods or more is regarded as triangulation (Neuman, 1997:151; Du Plooy, 2009:40). Neuman (1997:151) posits that triangulation entails using different types of measures or data collection methods. Du Plooy (2009:40) further notes that triangulation can also be regarded as using “two or more theories, types of sampling, investigators, sources of data and /or data-collection methods”. Each method has its weaknesses and strengths; hence, combining methods assists in enhancing the research being undertaken.

4.5 Research Population

A research population is a group of people or elements with similar characteristics that interest the researcher, which makes those people collectively interesting to the researcher (Majid, 2018). It is from this research population that research participants for the study will be drawn. The research population comprises individuals or elements that share the same characteristics.

Consequently, when the researcher poses questions to research participants drawn from the research population, they are assured that they communicate with people well-versed in the issue.

This study's research population comprised employees responsible for communication at the OR Tambo District Municipality. These elements of the research population were specifically chosen because they can present answers to the efficacy and influence of digital communication in the municipality. Because this group shares the same attributes (working in a municipal environment and being responsible for disseminating information), the researcher saw it fit to consider them as a homogenous group constituting a research population. This group is informed and knowledgeable enough on the subject, and they were able to offer some insights on the subject.

However, analysing South African municipalities with communication policy approaches taken here is problematic. For example, in George Municipality, the speaker of the council, the executive mayor, and departmental heads are considered key persons in communication, and lastly, the media liaison office and customer care teams (George Municipality, 2015). Similarly, in Ugu Municipality (2016), people mandated to convey municipal messages include traditional healers, ward councillors, and municipal water boards. This means that communication is not a responsibility of the communication department, but everyone in authority in a municipality has a communication responsibility.

It should be highlighted that the study did not interview residents to hear their perspectives on the effectiveness of current communication approaches by ORTDM mainly because of the complexity of the municipality in that it has five municipalities under it. Doing so in all municipalities would have demanded a lot of resources not at the researcher's disposal.

4.6 Sampling

In a research context, sampling is the process in which the researcher picks the desired research participants from the population (Sharma, 2017). Because, in most instances, it is not logistically possible to interview all the members of a given research population, sometimes only a small representative section of the research population must be interviewed. This process is what is known as sampling.

4.6.1 Sampling Type

This study is going to make non-probability sampling. This is also known as purposive sampling. This sampling method is employed when the researcher knows the type of people they will interview. It is purposive because the researcher knows the people who can present the information they want. Purposive sampling is important because instead of looking for a subset of the research population representative of the larger group, the researcher looks for the people best placed to provide the required information even though their opinions might not be consistent with the larger group.

4.6.2 Sampling Size

A sample size is the number of elements picked from the research population that will constitute the list of research participants (Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, and Kingstone, 2018). The sample size is determined primarily by the research design chosen for the study. For this study, which is qualitative, the researcher intends to have a sample size of ten participants. It is expected that this number is small enough to be manageable but large enough to achieve data saturation.

4.7 Data Collection Tools

Following the classification of the population and sample size determination and identification, data collection begins with technologies employed to acquire information from participants. Data collection is the systematic acquisition and measurement of information on variables of interest to react to queries, test hypotheses, and assess outcomes (Cesário, 2019). Qualitative data collection approaches, such as gathering raw data from the source, can be used to gather information from primary data. Various tools are used to obtain both primary and secondary data. These methods include online Surveys, one-on-one interviews, and document analysis (Chaleunvog, 2017).

After contacting ORTDM, the municipal manager informed the researcher that the municipal staff were too busy to be available for face-to-face interviews. Instead, the researcher was advised to create Google Form questions and send the link to a particular email addresses and did likewise. This approach is evidence of the use of digital technologies in communication wherein interviews do not necessarily need to be face-to-face. More so, the answers come readily transcribed, removing the unnecessary burden to the researcher of transcribing the interviews. More so, remote working had become the modus operandi of the municipality,

which made it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews. The municipality was not considerate of doing online interviews with their staff using staff computers for cybersecurity. However, the greatest disadvantage of this approach was that the researcher was denied the opportunity to ask probing questions when the responses came. The researcher noted some sections where responses were two-word answers. As a qualitative researcher interested in the description of verbatim quotes, this was somehow discouraging.

iii. Document analysis: It is a sort of qualitative research in which documentary material is analyzed, and specific issues are addressed utilizing a systematic approach (Karppinen and Moe, 2012). When utilized in triangulation, documents validate or reject explain or expand on results from numerous sources, which helps to eliminate bias (O'Connor, 2019). This study used journal articles and a comparison with six municipalities that have communication policies in South Africa.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis combines figures and evidence to solve a research problem (Deeks et al., 2019). It is imperative to get answers to the research question. In this qualitative methodology, narrative data analysis is the most important analytical method.

In line with the qualitative methodology employed in the study, thematic analysis was used as the primary analysis method. Since the data was already transcribed, the researcher used computer-aided qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti to group the data into themes. The data was arranged according to themes such as digital technologies currently in use in ORTDM, citizen engagement through social media content creation, driving forces of digital communication adoption in ORTDM, and the advantages of digital technologies. The discussion also discusses challenges of digital technology adoption in ORTDM, such as lack of skills and funding, institutional and structural weaknesses, and resistance to change.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research on digital communication in OR Tambo Municipality, several ethical considerations were considered. The first ethical consideration was informed consent, whereby the researcher obtained permission from the municipal manager and informed the research participants about the research process. The participants were made aware of their rights and the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained from an informed position. This is important in protecting the participants' autonomy and ensuring they are not coerced

into participating in the research. The second ethical consideration was protection from harm. The researcher took all necessary measures to ensure that participating in the research did not lead to harm of any kind on the part of the participants. This includes ensuring that the questions asked in the Google forms were not offensive or triggering and that no participant was put in a position that would cause them discomfort or distress. The third and final ethical consideration was confidentiality and anonymity. To protect the participants' privacy, the researcher ensured that no personally identifiable information was collected. The Google forms did not ask for personal identifiers such as position in the municipality, names, age, or gender. The participants were not asked to provide any information that could expose their identity, and the information they provided will be kept in a secure place to ensure that their anonymity is maintained.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the research design and philosophy that influenced this study. The researcher also clarified that the researcher sent Google form questions to the participants at the instruction of the municipal manager. While this approach was beneficial in removing transcription work from the researcher and presented the researcher with data ready for analysis, it also denied the researcher the opportunity to ask probing questions as some answers provided by participants were not good for a think description. The following chapter highlights how data collected through Google Forms were presented into themes such as digital technologies currently in use at ORTDM, citizen engagement through social media content creation, driving forces of digital communication adoption in ORTDM, and advantages of digital technologies, amongst others. The discussion also discusses challenges of digital technology adoption in ORTDM, such as lack of skills and funding, institutional and structural weaknesses, and resistance to change.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings derived from a comprehensive study of the digital communication landscape at the OR Tambo District Municipality. This research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of digital communication strategies employed by the municipality and assess their effectiveness in disseminating information and communicating policies and decisions to various stakeholders. This investigation was guided by the following objectives: determining the nature of the municipality's digital communication strategies, examining their effectiveness, evaluating the efficacy of the current communications strategy in conveying municipal policies and decisions, developing a digital communication plan for the municipality, and offering data-driven suggestions to enhance the existing municipal communications plan. Collected data suggest that there is no formal digital communication plan or policy. Such digital communication is already happening.

The study findings reveal crucial insights into the municipality's digital communication practices, highlighting areas of success and identifying challenges that need to be addressed to optimise the overall communication strategy. By thoroughly examining the existing communication infrastructure and its effectiveness in achieving the municipality's communication goals, the study provides a solid foundation for developing a tailored digital communication plan that caters to the specific needs and requirements of the OR Tambo District Municipality. This will formalise digital communication, which is already happening on an ad-hoc basis.

Moreover, the research findings pave the way for implementing innovative ideas and recommendations to improve the current municipal communications plan based on empirical data gathered during the investigation. This chapter provides an overview of the current state of digital communication within the municipality. It is a roadmap for developing and enhancing the municipality's digital communication efforts. By understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by the OR Tambo District Municipality, we can work towards creating a more effective and robust communication strategy that benefits all stakeholders and fosters greater transparency, engagement, and collaboration. Current digital communication tools include

emails, SMS, Social Media platforms and Instant Messaging applications, some extensions of Social Media platforms.

5.2 Adopting digital communication.

Consistent with communication methods adopted from the mid-90s, conventional communication from the municipality to the communities they served was unidirectional. This was mostly in the form of letters, notices, posters and, in some instances, radio advertisements. What defined this communication was not the mode through which it was transmitted (radio and television, by then qualified as digital platforms). Instead, the absence of public feedback from the community defined the communication. With the adoption of digital communication in social media, for example, there is now a dialogue between the municipality and the community it serves.

This was confirmed by Respondent 1 who highlighted that:

Respondent 1: *“Back then, our communication was one-way where we relied on letters, posters, and radio ads. There was no community feedback. However nowadays, social media has transformed this, creating a real dialogue with the community, which I believe is a significant shift.”*

Respondent 2 further added that:

Respondent 2: *“The missing link in the communication we had during mid-90s? Community feedback. Enter social media, it is a game-changer, fostering a meaningful rapport between the municipality and the community. A welcome shift.”*

5.2.1 Understanding of Digital Communication

The understanding of digital communication found in the dataset reflects the consensus in the literature, which emphasising using social media platforms, online tools, and technology-based communication as key components of digital communication (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

In the dataset of interview transcripts, respondents shared their understanding of digital communication, reflecting the consensus found in the literature. Digital communication encompasses using social media platforms, online tools, and technology-based communication

as key components. This includes email, blogs, online letters, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The interviewees highlighted the importance of using digital tools for communication, such as email, video conferencing, and voice chats, among other technical tools. Effectively using these tools can lead to cost savings, increased transparency, and improved engagement between officials and the public. The Municipality can enhance internal and external communication processes by leveraging digital tools.

This is captured in the verbatim quote below:

Respondent 3: *It saves a lot of effort, money, and time. It creates a sense of transparency, allowing everyone to engage and greater portability and flexibility.*

To improve the effectiveness of existing digital communication platforms, respondents suggested keeping up with technology updates, training employees, and seeking feedback from the audience. By staying abreast of technological advancements and regularly updating systems, the Municipality can ensure that its digital infrastructure remains relevant and functional. Additionally, actively engaging with the audience and responding to their queries, reviews, and opinions can help build and nurture relationships, resulting in more effective communication. The need for better training of municipal employees is captured below.

Respondent 2: *Think of the best way to incorporate digital Communication. First, they need to Provide employees with a unified communication platform training, be specific about communication rules, Configure notifications and have productive meetings.*

5.2.2 Adoption of Digital Communication in O.R. Tambo Municipality

On the adoption of digital communication in O.R. Tambo municipality, respondent 2 uttered that:

“O.R. Tambo District Municipality has embraced the used of digital communication. The municipality adopted this type of communication for the purpose of effective communication and has been doing this through emails. This is evident in the increased usage of digital platforms as the method of communication since the Covid-19 period.”

From the response above, it is apparent that, officials at O.R. Tambo Municipality use digital tools such as emails and video conferencing to enhance work efficiency. The use of digital tools can lead to cost savings, increased transparency, and improved engagement between officials and the public. By continuing to explore and adopt digital tools for communication, the Municipality can enhance internal and external communication processes, ultimately resulting in better service delivery and public satisfaction.

Respondent 3 also highlighted that:

“As O.R. Tambo municipal, we are leveraging digital tools like emails and video conferencing for efficiency and cost savings. This shift is in line with global trends, but we are experiencing a challenge, that is, slow adoption due to political instability. A clear plan and digital policy are crucial for a successful transition.”

Thus, the adoption of digital communication platforms in O.R. Tambo Municipality is consistent with the global trend of organizations and institutions increasingly embracing digital communication methods (Mergel, 2013). However, the slow adoption due to political instability and lack of council approval is a challenge documented in the literature (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes, 2010). While acknowledging the significance of digital communication, it is essential to point out that some communication cannot be done digitally. This is more so in the case of communication between the Municipality and some government organisations where the security of the data being transmitted is paramount.

Digital transformation and adoption are key themes in the interview transcripts, with respondents emphasizing the need for O.R. Tambo Municipality to develop a clear plan for incorporating digital communication. This includes creating a digital policy and following a step-by-step approach to ensure a smooth transition. Respondents recognize that digital transformation can offer numerous benefits to the Municipality, such as increased efficiency and cost savings.

5.2.3 Strategies to Promote Digital Communication in The Municipality

The municipality's strategies, such as utilizing social media platforms, conducting virtual meetings, and sending digital newsletters, align with best practices in digital communication literature (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, and Flores, 2012). This is confirmed by one of the respondents, as seen below:

Respondent 2: *Digital posters that are constantly circulated on the traditional communication platforms, e.g. emails - informing the public, stakeholders, and the staff on the new digital platform that ORTDM is using has been proven to be a strategy that is capturing everyone's attention.*

Some strategies that might be employed to use social media platforms effectively include starting with tools that people already use in their day-to-day lives. These include email, Instant Messaging applications and various Social Media platforms. Once the people, both the municipality employees and the communities they serve, are conversant with the technologies and reach near ubiquity, it becomes possible to adopt them formally into the municipal communications plan and policy once these become available. Additionally, the skills from becoming familiar with these technologies can be leveraged to prepare municipal workers and communities for more digital communication tools like virtual meetings.

5.2.4 Extent of Adoption and Effectiveness of Digital Communication Strategies

The mixed success of digital communication strategies in the municipality underscores the challenges organisations face in implementing and promoting digital communication. The resistance to change and lack of understanding among some community members is a common barrier to the widespread adoption of digital communication technologies (Graham and Avery, 2013; Korupp and Szydlik, 2005).

Respondent 1 had to mention that:

“Barriers like resistance to change and community members’ lack of understanding persist. However, there is need to create a clear process plan that will also convince the council to adopt it.”

Despite these challenges, the municipality's efforts to transition from paper-based communication to digital platforms demonstrate a commitment to embracing technological advancements and improving communication with the community. Overall, the themes and insights found in the dataset of interview transcripts on the digital situation at OR Tambo District Municipality align with the existing literature on digital communication, highlighting the importance of embracing technology, overcoming barriers, and implementing effective strategies to promote digital communication in organizations and institutions. This was confirmed during interviews where there was near unanimity that there is a need to adopt digital technologies to keep in time with emerging digital tools.

Respondent 3 supported this claim by articulating that:

“These strategies are leading to where they will be no more Mass Meetings or limited number of people during community visits because they will know people will access all information through digital platforms.”

5.2.5 Strategic Planning and Implementation

Strategic planning and implementation were identified as crucial factors in enhancing the effectiveness of digital communication within the Municipality. Respondents suggested a well-defined strategic plan, constant system updates, and ongoing employee training were essential. Seeking feedback from the audience and nurturing relationships with stakeholders can also contribute to successfully implementing digital communication strategies. This is illustrated below:

Respondent 3: *The best way to activate a new audience is to keep feeding them new information or giving them something to do once they have signed up to receive your communications. But be sure to do the same for your existing audience.*

Respondents emphasized the need for a well-thought-out plan incorporating digital communication at O.R. Tambo Municipality. A step-by-step approach and developing a digital policy are crucial to ensure a smooth transition to a more digitally driven institution. This involves assessing the current state of digital communication, identifying areas for improvement, and creating a roadmap for implementation. Strategic planning, which encompasses setting goals, allocating resources, and monitoring progress, is essential for the

successful execution of digital communication initiatives. This was emphasized by the respondent who suggested that:

Respondent 2: *“In my opinion, I believe that strategic planning is vital for O.R. Tambo Municipality’s digital communication success. A well-defined plan, constant updates, and ongoing training are essential. Feedback and nurturing relationships with stakeholders contribute to effective implementation.”*

This response aligns with the views of Bharadwaj et al. (2013) who highlighted that, strategic planning and implementation are critical elements in enhancing the effectiveness of digital communication. The respondents' suggestions for a well-defined strategic plan, constant system updates, and ongoing employee training resonate with the existing literature on the importance of strategic planning in the digital transformation process (Mithas et al., 2013). It was also emphasised that there would be a need for training staff in using digital tools and how best to communicate with the communities via these tools.

Respondent 3: *“Workshops and trainings using virtual meetings are very key in enhancing the effectiveness of digital communication within the Municipality. This will provide new information and activities that will not only activating new audiences but also maintaining engagement with existing ones.”*

5.2.6 Employee Training and Development

Employee training and development emerged as a vital theme, with respondents suggesting that proper workshops and continuous training should be conducted to educate officials and other employees about digital communication tools. By providing employees with the necessary skills, the Municipality can ensure a successful implementation of digital communication strategies and enhance the effectiveness of existing platforms. In a developing world like South Africa, many communities still have no access to broadband internet networks and technology to give them training on these platforms. Many only receive training if they attend schools with computers and technology as subjects or if they enter higher education or the workplace.

This was summed up by respondent 2 who mentioned that:

“Employee training is of great importance. For example, workshops and continuous training are essential for digital communication tools as they ensure successful strategy implementation, enhancing existing platforms. However, in most cases we experience challenges in accessing good internet, thereby limiting training opportunities for many communities.”

In addition, it was gathered that training and upskilling employees in digital communication tools is vital for successfully implementing digital communication strategies within the municipality. By conducting proper workshops and providing continuous training, the municipality can equip employees with the necessary skills to utilise digital tools effectively. This enhances the effectiveness of existing digital communication platforms and helps create a digitally competent workforce that can adapt to the rapidly evolving technological landscape. It is also important to mention that workers are not the only ones who need adequate training.

Thus, Respondent 2 suggested that:

“Training in the form of attending workshops and continuous education are necessary. This will then promote successful strategy implementation and platform effectiveness.”

5.2.7 Advantages of Digitisation

Respondents identified several advantages of effective digital communication tools. For instance,

Respondent 1 cited that:

“Digital tools offer cost-effectiveness, time-saving, and transparency. They enhance engagement and redirect resources. Embracing digital transformation in O.R. Tambo saves time and resources for pressing needs.”

Respondent 2 also highlighted that: Respondent 3:

“From my experience, efficiency and improved engagement are advantages of digital tools. Embracing digital transformation at O.R. Tambo saves resources and improves resource allocation.”

The advantages articulated by the respondents underscore the importance of embracing digital transformation, O.R. Tambo Municipality which can save resources, time, and effort, that can be redirected towards other pressing needs. Additionally, digital communication tools can create a sense of transparency and allow everyone to engage, fostering a more inclusive and participatory environment.

The advantages of effective digital communication tools, including cost-effectiveness, time-saving, transparency, and increased employee engagement, are well-established in the literature (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). The respondents' views on the benefits of digital transformation support the existing research on the potential of digital communication tools to improve organizational performance. The effective use of digital tools for communication, such as emails and video conferencing, can lead to cost savings, increased transparency, and improved engagement between officials and the public (Chui et al., 2012). The respondents' emphasis on the importance of digital tools aligns with the existing literature on the role of digital communication tools in enhancing organizational efficiency (Leonardi et al., 2013).

5.2.8 Challenges in Embracing Digital Communication

The challenges cited by the responses included:

Respondent 1: *“We are facing challenges in terms of Monetary issues and a time consuming for training of staff.”*

Respondent 2: *“The main challenge is government underestimating the power of this technology and not giving themselves enough time to explore the benefit of the technology. The other challenges are those who are currently benefiting from the non-usage of digital communication, therefore do not want to embrace the benefits of the digital communication as it will affect them personally.”*

Respondent 3: *“Our main challenge is lack of skill and competencies.”*

Respondent 4: *“We have a challenge of older employers who resist change as well as lack of trainers.”*

Despite the numerous benefits of digital communication, the responses above highlight the challenges associated with its adoption. The challenges associated with digital communication adoption, such as the lack of trainers and potential resistance from older employees, are acknowledged in the literature (Kotter, 2012). To address these challenges, O.R. Tambo Municipality should invest in digital infrastructure and continuously support employees during the digital transformation. This may involve hiring in-house trainers, offering tailored training programs, and creating an inclusive learning environment that caters to employees of all ages and skill levels. Addressing these challenges through targeted investments in digital infrastructure and continuous employee support can help organizations overcome these obstacles and reap the benefits of digital communication (Westerman et al., 2014). Most of the challenges identified by the respondents were not necessarily logistical issues. Instead, these were challenges consistent with a developing country like South Africa. Such structural challenges included limited spectrum, limited equipment, and inadequate skills for the municipality and client communities to use existing technologies optimally.

5.2.9 Youth Involvement in Digital Communication

Today's youth is engaged in the online digital, with Generation Z becoming digital natives. The respondents emphasised the role of youth in driving digital communication adoption within the Municipality. For example, respondent 2 said that:

“Youth involvement in digital communication is crucial for O.R. Tambo Municipality's success. By recruiting more young people and leveraging their skills, we can drive digital adoption, creating a more digitally driven institution.”

This response highlights the importance of involving youth in digital communication processes, where their skills and knowledge can be used to improve the use of digital tools and platforms. This approach can contribute to a more digitally driven institution in the long run. Youth involvement in the digital communication process is perceived as a positive step toward increased digital adoption at O.R. Tambo Municipality, as the youth have been perceived as today's digital natives. By recruiting more young people and leveraging their skills and knowledge, the Municipality can tap into a valuable resource that is more likely to be familiar with digital tools and platforms. This approach can contribute to a more digitally-driven institution, better equipped to meet the challenges of today's digital age.

The role of youth in driving digital communication adoption is supported by existing literature, which emphasizes the potential of young people as digital natives in fostering innovation and change within organizations (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009). Literature recognizes the value of involving youth in digital communication processes (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009). The respondents' emphasis on the role of young people in driving digital communication adoption within O.R. Tambo Municipality supports the existing research on the potential of youth to foster innovation and change within organizations.

Thus, Respondent 3 highlighted that:

“We need to have young people at the municipality to drive innovation. In other words, O.R. Tambo Municipality can benefit by involving young people in digital communication processes.”

5.3 Discussion and Key Insights

5.3.1 Discussion

The interview transcripts provided insights into respondents' understanding of digital communication, the adoption and use of digital communication in O.R. Tambo Municipality, and the strategies employed to promote it. Key themes identified include the growing importance of technology-based communication and the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The adoption of digital communication by O.R. Tambo Municipality reflects the global trend of organizations increasingly embracing digital communication. However, challenges like political instability and lack of council approval have hindered the full adoption of these methods, as documented in the literature.

Strategies used by the municipality include leveraging social media platforms, virtual meetings, and digital newsletters. These approaches align with best practices found in digital communication literature. Despite the mixed success of these strategies, the municipality's transition from paper-based communication to digital platforms demonstrates a commitment to technological advancements and improved communication with the community.

Digital transformation and adoption have become essential for organizations today (Kane et al., 2015). Incorporating digital communication strategies, such as those suggested by the respondents, aligns with the growing consensus on the benefits of digital transformation (Berman and Bell, 2011). Utilizing digital tools for communication is crucial in today's rapidly

evolving technological landscape (Papadopoulos et al., 2013). The respondents' suggestions for adopting tools such as emails, video conferencing, and voice chats align with current research on the importance of digital communication tools in enhancing the organizational efficiency (Leonardi et al., 2013).

The other finding from the study is how indispensable training is to achieve success in digital communication. The importance of employee training and development in digital communication has been well-documented in the literature (Serrat, 2017). By providing employees with the necessary skills and knowledge, organizations can ensure the successful implementation of digital communication strategies (Schneckenberg, 2009). Employee training and development are crucial in successfully implementing digital communication strategies (Serrat, 2017). By providing employees with the necessary skills and knowledge, organisations can enhance the effectiveness of digital communication platforms (Schneckenberg, 2009). The respondents' suggestions regarding employee training are consistent with these findings.

Enhancing existing digital communication platforms Improving the effectiveness of existing digital communication platforms has been identified as a critical factor in enhancing organizational efficiency (Papadopoulos et al., 2013). The respondents' suggestions for keeping up with technology updates, training employees, and seeking feedback from the audience align with the existing literature on the importance of continuous improvement in digital communication processes (Leonardi et al., 2013).

Furthermore, respondents advised the municipality to invest in high-quality and up-to-date digital communication tools like computers, tablets, and cell phones. This recommendation is supported by the literature, which emphasizes the importance of acquiring appropriate digital communication tools for effective communication in public organizations (Alshehri et al., 2012). To achieve this, public organizations should regularly assess their digital communication tool needs, considering user requirements, compatibility with existing infrastructure, and long-term sustainability. Public organizations can enhance their digital communication capabilities by investing in the right tools and better serving their stakeholders (Heeks, 2005).

As a recommendation, the respondents shared various strategies for implementing digital communication, such as benchmarking from similar municipalities and embracing technology

as a new working form. These insights align with the literature on the importance of strategic planning and implementation for successful digital communication in public organizations (Fang, 2002; Netchaeva, 2002). Public organizations should develop and implement comprehensive digital communication strategies that outline clear objectives, targets, and performance indicators to improve digital communication. These strategies should be regularly reviewed and updated to align with organizational goals and evolving technological advancements (Bannister and Connolly, 2015).

Overall, the themes and insights from the interviews align with existing literature on digital communication, emphasizing the importance of embracing technology, overcoming barriers, and implementing effective strategies to promote digital communication in organizations and institutions.

5.3.2 Summary of Findings

The dataset of interview transcripts provides valuable insights into respondents' perspectives on incorporating and enhancing digital communication within the O.R. Tambo Municipality. The themes and critical insights identified from the dataset align with existing digital communication literature and highlight the importance of strategic planning, employee training, embracing digital tools, and involving youth in driving digital communication adoption.

1. **Digital Transformation and Adoption:** The respondents suggest that the O.R. Tambo Municipality should develop a digital communication policy, invest in the necessary infrastructure, and implement a step-by-step approach to digital transformation. These recommendations are consistent with the literature, emphasizing the need for organizations to adapt to the changing technological landscape (Berman and Bell, 2011; Kane et al., 2015).
2. **Employee Training and Development:** To ensure the successful implementation of digital communication strategies, the respondents advocate for employee training and development for existing staff and newly recruited youth. Providing employees with the necessary skills and knowledge is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of digital communication platforms (Serrat, 2017; Schneckenberg, 2009).

3. **Utilization of Digital Tools for Communication:** The respondents emphasize the importance of adopting digital tools such as emails, video conferencing, and voice chats to enhance work efficiency within the municipality. These digital tools can lead to cost savings, increased transparency, and improved engagement between officials and the public (Chui et al., 2012; Leonardi et al., 2013).
4. **Harnessing the Potential of Youth in Digital Communication:** Involving young people in driving digital communication adoption within the municipality is considered essential by the respondents. The role of youth in fostering innovation and change within organizations is supported by the existing literature (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009).
5. **Enhancing Existing Digital Communication Platforms:** The respondents recommend continuous improvement of existing digital communication platforms, including keeping up with technology updates, training employees, and seeking feedback from the audience. These suggestions align with the literature, highlighting the importance of enhancing organizational efficiency through practical digital communication tools (Papadopoulos et al., 2013; Leonardi et al., 2013).
6. **Advantages of Effective Digital Communication Tools:** The respondents highlight the benefits of digital communication tools, including cost-effectiveness, time-saving, transparency, and increased employee engagement. These advantages are well-established in the literature and underscore the potential of digital communication tools to improve overall organizational performance (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014).
7. **Overcoming Challenges to Embrace Digital Communication:** The respondents acknowledge the challenges associated with digital communication adoption, such as the lack of trainers and potential resistance from older employees. To address these challenges, they suggest investing in digital infrastructure and providing continuous support to employees during the digital transformation. These recommendations align with existing research on overcoming barriers to digital transformation (Kotter, 2012; Westerman et al., 2014).

To summarise, the findings from the dataset underscore the need for the O.R. Tambo Municipality to embrace digital communication to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance public engagement. To achieve these goals, the municipality should focus on strategic planning, employee training, adopting digital tools, involving youth, and continuously improving existing digital communication platforms. Addressing the challenges associated

with digital transformation and providing ongoing support to employees during the process will be crucial for successfully implementing digital communication strategies within the municipality.

5.3.3 Key Insights: Specific Challenges at OR Tambo District Municipality

1. **Limited Access to Resources:** Respondents identified limited access to resources, such as data, insufficient budgets, and inadequate computer equipment, as significant obstacles to implementing digital communication at O.R. Tambo Municipality. This issue persists due to minimal resources and a lack of proper planning and strategizing. In public organizations, limited access to resources has been recognized as a common challenge in implementing digital communication (Bannister and Connolly, 2015). Insufficient funding and resource allocation can hinder the adoption of digital technologies and impede the desired outcomes (Ndou, 2004). Additionally, some respondents pointed out the importance of proper budget allocation for digital communication tools and equipment. This aligns with existing literature, emphasising the need for adequate financial resources to support implementing digital communication initiatives in public organizations (Heeks, 2005; Srivastava and Teo, 2008). To address this challenge, public organizations should prioritize budget allocation for digital communication, considering the specific needs of each officer and department. This may involve conducting a thorough assessment of current resource allocation and identifying areas where additional investment is needed to support digital communication efforts (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016).
2. **Skill and Competency Gaps:** The lack of skills and competencies, particularly computer literacy and the ability to adapt to new technology, were identified as significant hindrances. This is exacerbated by the rural surroundings of the municipality and the reluctance of some staff members to embrace change. Many public organizations struggle with digital literacy and competency gaps among employees, which can negatively impact the adoption of digital communication technologies (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016). Developing the necessary skills and competencies is crucial for the effective implementation and use of digital communication platforms in public organizations (Mergel, 2013).

3. **Network Coverage and Infrastructure Issues:** Respondents mentioned poor network coverage in certain areas of the district and load shedding leading to poor connectivity as factors impeding the full implementation of digital communication. The lack of reliable and accessible infrastructure can significantly hinder digital communication in public organizations (Alshehri et al., 2012). Addressing infrastructural challenges is a prerequisite for successful digital communication adoption (Netchaeva, 2002).
4. **Management and Political Involvement:** Inefficient management, lack of proper planning, and political involvement were cited as additional reasons that hinder digital communication adoption. The presence of uneducated elected councillors contributes to this challenge. In public organizations, management and political factors can play a critical role in shaping the success of digital communication initiatives (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Good governance, transparent decision-making, and strong leadership are essential for fostering digital communication adoption (Heeks, 2005).
5. **Demographics and Employment:** The ageing workforce within the municipality and the decline in the employment rate, particularly among the youth, pose challenges for fully implementing digital communication. Demographic factors such as age, education, and employment status can influence the adoption of digital communication in public organizations (Fang, 2002). Addressing these demographic challenges is crucial for promoting digital communication usage and fostering a digitally inclusive society (Helsper, 2012).
6. **Unequal Access to Resources:** While some respondents believe that resources such as computers and the internet are adequate, others claim that not all officials have equal access to these resources. There is a perceived shortage of high-quality computers and a need for better resource allocation. Ensuring equal access to digital communication resources is essential to digital inclusion in public organizations (Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2014). Addressing these disparities is essential for promoting a more inclusive and effective digital communication environment (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016).
7. **Insufficient Training and Support:** Respondents highlighted the lack of regular workshops and training on new developments and changes in communication as a barrier to digital communication implementation. Emphasis is placed on moving away from traditional methods and providing employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to digital communication platforms. Training and support are critical factors for successful digital communication adoption in public organizations (Srivastava and Teo, 2008). Providing adequate training and support can help

employees understand better and use digital communication tools, fostering a more effective and efficient communication environment (Mergel, 2013). The respondents emphasized the importance of regular training and skill development in digital communication. This aligns with the literature, highlighting the need for continuous training and capacity building to successfully adopt digital communication tools in public organizations (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Helsper, 2012). To address this need, public organizations should develop and implement comprehensive training programs that target specific skill sets required for effective digital communication. Additionally, organizations could consider collaborating with external partners or industry experts to provide specialized training and support for employees (Mergel, 2013).

8. **Outdated Equipment and Technology:** Respondents highlighted the need for updated equipment and technology to improve digital communication in the context of public organisations. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasising the importance of updated technological infrastructure for effective digital communication (Ndou, 2004; Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2014). To address this issue, it is recommended that public organizations regularly assess their technological infrastructure and invest in up-to-date equipment that can facilitate seamless digital communication (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016). By staying abreast of technological advancements, public organizations can ensure they are well-equipped to leverage the benefits of digital communication.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided valuable insights into the OR Tambo District Municipality's digital communication strategies and their effectiveness in disseminating information and communicating municipal policies and decisions. Through a comprehensive examination of the municipality's current communication strategy, the study was able to assess its efficacy and identify areas where improvements can be made.

The research findings have highlighted the importance of staying up to date with digital communication technologies and providing adequate resources and training to municipal staff to ensure the successful implementation of digital communication initiatives. Furthermore, the study noted the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of communication strategies to ensure they effectively reach target audiences and fulfil the municipality's communication

objectives. Based on the empirical data gathered, the study developed a digital communication plan for the OR Tambo District Municipality that builds on the strengths of the existing communication strategy while addressing its weaknesses. The plan includes recommendations for enhancing digital communication infrastructure, increasing staff training and capacity building, and fostering a more inclusive and transparent communication environment.

By implementing these recommendations, the OR Tambo District Municipality will be better equipped to harness the power of digital communication in promoting transparency, fostering citizen engagement, and ensuring the effective dissemination of essential information to its constituents. In turn, this will contribute to a more informed and engaged public, ultimately enhancing the municipality's ability to meet the needs and expectations of its diverse community.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

According to Ndlovu (2016), the conclusion chapter is a synthesis of the whole thesis and covers the summary of the research findings, conclusions arrived at during the study, recommendations and suggestions for further researches. The South African government has seen improvements in enhancing citizens' participation and empowerment. This improvement came through the use of public ICTs. Public ICTs have made access to information for citizens easy. This information may be related to education, health, politics and agriculture. The government's use of public ICTs to empower and enhance citizens' participation has closed the gap between those who can afford to access information and other services offered in public ICTs and those who do not have the means to do so. As a result, the poor and the rich have an equal chance to be empowered and access different kinds of information. This study aimed to investigate the digital communication strategies employed by the OR Tambo District Municipality and evaluate their effectiveness in conveying municipal information.

The research questions focused on the nature of the municipality's digital communication strategy, the effectiveness of present communication strategies, and recommendations for improving the communications strategy based on the research findings. To achieve these objectives, the study examined the current communication strategy for municipal communication/information dissemination, evaluated the current communications strategy's efficacy in communicating municipal policies and decisions, and developed a digital communication plan for the OR Tambo District Municipality. Based on empirical data, the study's findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive and effective digital communication strategy that can better serve the needs of the OR Tambo District Municipality and its stakeholders. The following section provides recommendations for doing so.

6.2 Key Findings from Literature

The digitalization of municipal communication has been a topic of increasing interest in public administration. The specific focus on the OR Tambo District Municipality's digital communication strategies allows for a detailed assessment of its current strategy's effectiveness and a potential improvement plan.

Understanding the nature of the digital communication strategies used by municipalities requires a comprehensive look into the adoption of digital communication channels. Mabillard, Zumofen, and Keuffer (2021) found a low adoption rate of social media platforms in Swiss cities, even in a technologically advanced context. In Portugal, Correia, Cunha, Carvalho, and Sousa (2023) found digital communication's potential underutilized in low-density destinations. Similar observations may be pertinent to the OR Tambo District Municipality.

Regarding the effectiveness of municipal communication, Masueme (2015) emphasized the significance of e-participation, hinting at the importance of interactive communication. Cloete (2012) noted the lessons learned from South Africa's e-government initiatives from 2001-2011, which could provide insights into the current state of digital communication. Tangi et al. (2022) and Duygan, Fischer, and Ingold (2023) emphasized the role of organizational factors and technological readiness in determining e-maturity and digital process innovation, respectively. In the COVID-19 era, the role of digital communication has been amplified, with Grawe (2022) and Clement, Esposito, and Crutzen (2023) underscoring social media's role in internal communication and the resilience of local public administration. Mwadiwa and Maleho (2022) focused on the digitilisation of corporate communication amidst the pandemic, which may serve as a valuable lesson for the OR Tambo District Municipality.

Regarding communicating municipal policies and decisions, Cegarra-Navarro, Pachón, and Cegarra (2012) studied how e-government can foster citizen engagement with local affairs. Additionally, Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2021) explored the role of ICT in smart service delivery, which may be relevant in improving the current communication strategy.

Finally, Enwereji and Uwizeyimana (2022) conducted a qualitative study on the readiness of South African municipalities for smart city initiatives. Their findings could provide a

benchmark for developing the digital communication plan for the OR Tambo District Municipality.

Therefore, the literature suggests that a successful digital communication strategy requires understanding the digital landscape, the organization's readiness, and the target audience's needs. It should also capitalize on the potential of social media and e-government initiatives for interactive communication (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2012; Grawe, 2022). The existing strategies and experiences from different contexts can guide the development of an improved communication plan for the OR Tambo District Municipality. Effective digital communication strategies have been a key focus in many studies, with several recommendations emerging from the literature.

1. **Emphasize Interactivity and Engagement:** Digital communication strategies should emphasize interactivity and engagement, as these are crucial for building relationships with the audience (Kent and Taylor, 1998). E-participation, for instance, fosters a two-way communication process and enhances the quality of the interactions (Sæbø, Rose, and Skiftenes Flak, 2008).
2. **User-Centred Design:** A successful digital communication strategy should consider a user-centred design, focusing on the needs and preferences of the target audience (Rose, Sanford, and Norman, 2011). Information should be presented in an accessible, easy-to-understand format to increase public understanding and engagement.
3. **Use of Multiple Platforms:** Leveraging multiple platforms can also be beneficial in reaching diverse audience segments. It's essential to understand the demographic profiles of different platforms to target messages effectively (Perrin and Anderson, 2019).
4. **Content Strategy:** Crafting compelling, relevant content is essential. Consistent messaging across platforms can help build a strong, recognizable brand identity (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Content should be updated regularly to keep audiences engaged and informed.
5. **Evaluation and Adaptation:** Regular evaluation of digital communication strategies is key to ensure effectiveness. Analyzing metrics such as engagement rates, followers,

and web traffic can provide insights into what is working and what needs to be improved (Paine, 2011).

6. **Training and Capacity Building:** As the digital environment rapidly evolves, it's crucial to invest in ongoing training for staff to keep up with new tools and trends (Breckenridge, 2008).
7. **Data Protection and Privacy:** In an era of increasing concern about data privacy, organizations must ensure that they have strong measures in place to protect the data of their stakeholders (Clarke, 2001).
8. **Crisis Communication Planning:** Digital communication can be an effective tool in crisis management. Developing a digital crisis communication plan can help organizations respond quickly and transparently to crises (Coombs, 2007).

6.3 Key Findings from Empirical Data

Theme 1: The Journey of Digital Transformation and Adoption

The journey towards digital transformation and adoption emerged as a critical focal point from the interview transcripts. The respondents stressed the necessity for the O.R. Tambo Municipality to devise a coherent blueprint for introducing digital technology into their communication framework. This involves creating a comprehensive digital policy and executing it in phases to guarantee a seamless transition. It was acknowledged by the interviewees that a well-planned digital transformation could yield myriad advantages, such as heightened efficiency and reduced operational costs, which would have a significant positive impact on the Municipality's functioning.

Theme 2: Prioritizing Employee Training and Skill Development

A core theme highlighted was the need for intensive employee training and skill development. Respondents proposed that targeted workshops and ongoing training programs are necessary to familiarize officials and other employees with digital communication tools. By equipping their workforce with the requisite digital skills, the Municipality can ensure the successful deployment of digital communication strategies and also augment the effectiveness of existing digital platforms.

Theme 3: Embracing Digital Tools for Effective Communication

The significance of leveraging digital tools for communication was emphasized by the interviewees. They advocated using various digital platforms, such as emails, video conferencing, voice chats, and other technical tools for enhanced communication. By effectively incorporating these tools, the Municipality can realize significant cost savings, bolster transparency, and foster improved interaction between officials and the community. This, in turn, can significantly boost the efficiency of both internal and external communication processes.

Theme 4: Engaging Youth in the Digital Communication Landscape

Youth participation in the digital communication landscape was stressed by the respondents. They believed that by recruiting and engaging more young people in digital communication processes, the Municipality could tap into their digital skills and knowledge to bolster using digital tools and platforms. This strategy could lead to a more digitally oriented institution, setting the stage for a future-ready municipality.

Theme 5: The Dual Advantage of Cost-effectiveness and Efficiency

Cost-effectiveness and efficiency were identified as substantial benefits of digital communication tools by the respondents. They articulated that by wholeheartedly embracing digital transformation, the Municipality could save considerable resources, time, and effort. This would facilitate superior resource allocation, which holds immense relevance given the current economic challenges faced by the district municipality.

Theme 6: The Role of Strategic Planning and Effective Implementation

The importance of strategic planning and effective implementation was underscored as critical factors in amplifying the effectiveness of digital communication within the Municipality. The interviewees called for a robust strategic plan, continual upgrades of systems, and consistent training initiatives for employees. They also highlighted the importance of obtaining feedback from the audience and cultivating strong relationships with stakeholders to ensure the successful rollout of digital communication strategies.

Theme 7: Navigating Challenges in the Path of Digital Communication

In addition to the plethora of advantages digital communication offers, respondents also acknowledged the challenges that could arise during its adoption. These challenges

encompassed issues like a dearth of training personnel, the need to outsource training services, and resistance from older employees uncomfortable with embracing new technologies. To mitigate these challenges, it was suggested that the Municipality should invest heavily in digital infrastructure and extend consistent support to employees throughout the digital transformation journey.

Theme 8: Challenges in embracing digital communication

Despite the numerous benefits of digital communication, the respondents also acknowledged the challenges associated with its adoption. These challenges include the lack of trainers, outsourcing training services, and resistance from older employees who may find it difficult to adapt to new technologies. To address these issues, the Municipality should invest in digital infrastructure and provide continuous support to employees during the digital transformation. While the multitude of advantages of digital communication is undeniable, the respondents also recognized the difficulties with its implementation. These challenges encompass the scarcity of trainers, the necessity to outsource training services, and the reluctance of older employees who might struggle to adjust to novel technologies. To tackle these hurdles, it's suggested that the O.R. Tambo Municipality should make substantial investments in digital infrastructure and extend unrelenting support to employees throughout the digital transformation journey. This could mean bringing onboard in-house trainers, designing personalized training modules, and fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere that caters to employees across all age groups and proficiency levels.

Theme 9: Youth involvement in digital communication

The interviewees underscored the crucial part played by the younger generation in spearheading the adoption of digital communication within the Municipality. By actively engaging more young individuals in digital communication procedures, the Municipality can harness their expertise and familiarity with digital tools and platforms. This strategy can significantly aid in the evolution of a more digitally oriented institution, better prepared to navigate the complexities of today's digital era.

The participation of the youth in the digital communication process is seen as a constructive move toward broader digital adoption within O.R. Tambo Municipality. By onboarding more young individuals and capitalizing on their digital savvy, the Municipality can access a vital asset, typically more acquainted with digital tools and platforms. This strategy will help foster

a more digitally-inclined institution, effectively equipped to meet the demands of our contemporary world.

The respondents' focus on the role of the younger generation aligns with existing scholarly literature, highlighting the youth's potential as 'digital natives' to bring about innovation and transformative change within organizations (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009). This emphasizes the importance and value of engaging young people in digital communication.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that the OR Tambo Municipality develop a communication and digital communication policy that goes beyond an ICT policy solely for workers. Such a policy should establish guidelines for using public digital communication channels, including social media, and how they can be used to engage citizens in local governance. This policy should be developed in consultation with citizens, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that it is responsive to their needs and concerns. Additionally, the policy should be accompanied by training and capacity-building programs for municipal officials to ensure they have the necessary skills to use digital communication tools effectively and responsibly. By doing so, the municipality can enhance its transparency and accountability to citizens, thereby improving citizens' empowerment and participation in local governance.

It is also recommended that the OR Tambo municipality increase its engagement with citizens beyond just posting announcements on social media platforms. The municipality should consciously respond to all citizen queries and provide constant feedback to residents, especially on implementing its programmes. Facebook and Twitter spaces to hold meetings with the youth can also be explored to inform them about potential opportunities available in the province and the country in general.

To overcome network challenges in OR Tambo municipality, the municipality can utilize its Nyadeni Centres as free Wi-Fi hotspots, where constituents can access the internet. Municipal libraries and community centers should also provide free Wi-Fi access for effective communication.

The study further recommends introducing civic education programs that can help conscientize members of communities at the grassroots level about the significance of participating in government-related issues. These programs can also help people understand how local

governments operate in the digital era. This understanding will enhance the municipality's relationship with its citizenry, reducing the number of service delivery protests.

The municipality should not displace traditional communication approaches through conventional leaders, posters, and community development workers, especially in a rural municipality with most poor residents. The municipality should consider utilizing its existing Community Development Workers (CDW) as information and communication agents, delivering much-needed training in communities related to external communication, and exploring alternative effective means of communication.

The municipality should engage more with citizens than simply using digital platforms to post announcements. It should respond to all citizen queries, even if their phones are unreachable. The municipality can also use Facebook and Twitter spaces to hold meetings with the youth to inform them about opportunities available in the province and the country.

The municipality must put measures in place that will provide constant and reliable feedback to their constituencies on the implementation of its programs in a timely and effective manner to ensure that community members stay informed. The municipality should respond to people's complaints on social media, provide constant feedback to residents, and implement civic education programs that help conscientize members of communities at the grassroots level about the significance of participating in government-related issues.

6.5 Limitations and Future Work

The study faced certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the researcher could not conduct face-to-face interviews with municipal officials due to limitations set by the municipality. Instead, the researcher had to use Google Forms to gather information, which resulted in some officials answering offside in most instances.

Secondly, it should be noted that the study's findings are limited to OR Tambo Municipality and may not apply to other municipalities in South Africa. Therefore, caution must be exercised when generalizing the study's results to other municipalities.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into using digital communication to empower and enhance citizens' participation and increase transparency within the

municipality. Future studies could build on these findings and investigate how public ICTs can be effectively used in other municipalities to enhance citizens' participation and increase transparency in local governance.

Future research can focus on developing a framework that describes how the government can use and ensure that public ICTs are used to empower and enhance citizens' participation in local governance. Additionally, a study of the overall effectiveness of public ICTs in youth empowerment and participation in South Africa can be conducted to provide insights into how public ICTs can be leveraged to improve youth engagement in local governance

6.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate the nature of the OR Tambo District Municipality's digital communication strategy, its effectiveness in conveying municipal information, and practical recommendations for improvement. The study found that the municipality's current communication strategy had room for improvement, particularly in clarity, consistency, and accessibility. The study suggests that the municipality could benefit from developing a digital communication plan, implementing a more robust social media strategy, and improving stakeholder communication.

Overall, this research highlights the importance of effective digital communication strategies in local government and provides insights into how municipalities can improve communication efforts. By addressing the challenges identified in this study, the OR Tambo District Municipality can improve its digital communication strategy and better serve its constituents.

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