



# Development Communication in South Africa

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## Abstract

Despite a peaceful transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa is still considered to be a transitional democracy, due to high levels of social equality which has resulted in a rise in social protests. This chapter provides a brief overview of development communication strategies in South Africa within this context, focusing on the following key areas of media for social change: ICTs for development, health communication, and community radio and community television initiatives. In addition, a brief overview of the communication strategies of civil society activist movements is provided.

## Keywords

Development communication · Community radio · Community television · Health communication · ICT4D · South Africa

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## Introduction

South Africa experienced a peaceful transition to democracy in 1994, with the country's first democratic elections and the end of the system of racial segregation known as apartheid. Despite a shift in the political landscape, a number of inequalities persist to present day, as a result of the legacy of apartheid political and socioeconomic policy. South Africa is one of the most economically unequal societies in the world, with 10% of the population owning 90–95% of the wealth and high unemployment levels (Von Fintel 2017). South Africa has characteristics of both a developing and an advanced economy, with access to technology, a strong private sector and fiscal resources, etc., though half of the population live below the poverty line (Gillwald et al. 2012). The South African economy has been impacted by international and domestic factors such as low economic growth, continuing high unemployment levels, lower commodity and higher consumer prices, lower investment levels, and greater household dependency on credit, with 55.5% of South Africans living in poverty ([www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)).

South Africa is thus considered to be a young, transitional democracy. Since the country's first democratic elections in 1994, there has been a steady rise in community protests, as a response to the inadequate provision of services such as water, sanitation, housing, etc. Growing citizen frustration with the new government's failure to share the dividends of democracy and high levels of government corruption are most often listed as reasons for these sometimes violent protests, described by Alexander (2010) as a "rebellion of the poor." A range of social movements have also emerged in the late 1990s, with civil society groups confronting "questions of social exclusion in terms of gender, sexuality, education, labor status, access to land, housing and services, poverty and citizenship: issues which sit at the intersection of recognition and redistribution" (Ballard et al. 2005: 615).

The role of the media and communications sector has been highlighted as a central tool in facilitating the participation of citizens in development activities.

This chapter provides a brief overview of development communication strategies in South Africa and focuses on the following key areas: ICTs for development, health communication, and community radio and community television initiatives. The South African government has implemented a number of projects around the country, with the aim of strengthening development communication and empowering previously disadvantaged communities. In particular, multipurpose community centers have been set up and identified as spaces through which the government can dialogue with citizens and address socioeconomic inequalities. The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) was tasked by cabinet "to provide development communication and information to the public, to ensure that they become active participants in changing their lives for the better." ([www.thusong.gov.za/documents/policy\\_legal/gdc.htm](http://www.thusong.gov.za/documents/policy_legal/gdc.htm)) Concepts such as community-based or people-centered development, citizen participation, and public-private partnerships are found in many documents of the postapartheid state, with calls for community involvement across a range of sectors (Emmett 2000).

## ICTs for Development in South Africa

There is a relatively sophisticated ICT sector in South Africa after telecommunications reforms since the mid-1990s, but as Gillwald et al. (2012) argue, growth in the sector has not been accompanied by the primary policy objective of affordable access for all. In South Africa, the government has demonstrated the political will to drive programs aimed at improving the lives of the poor, through various policy initiatives. The Comtask Report, for example, mandated the government to establish Thusong Service Centres (multipurpose centers) to implement development communication (Naidoo and Fourie 2013).

The growth of the Internet and related technologies and platforms has created new possibilities for development in Africa. In the field of education, for example, ICTs have been listed as playing a number of roles, including providing a catalyst for rethinking teaching practice, developing the kind of citizens required in an information society, improving educational outcomes, e.g., pass rates, and improving the quality of teaching and learning (Jaffer et al. 2007).

There have been several initiatives related to the use of ICTs in education in South Africa, as one strategy for addressing teaching and learning challenges. Jaffer et al. (2007) explored the role of educational technology in higher education, with specific reference to the pressure on the sector to provide diverse graduates who can meet the social transformation and skill needs of the country. Specific challenges in the South Africa context include students' lack of academic preparedness, large and multilingual classes, and a range of other issues related to the previously unequal and racially divided educational system. The Fees Must Fall student protests highlighted these ongoing divisions in the higher education sector, with national protests highlighting various issues related to uneven access (Bosch 2016). Jaffer et al. (2007) list several ways in which ICTs can be used to respond to the range of educational challenges. These include using interactive spreadsheets to develop mathematical literacy skills, providing online feedback, using videos to simulate tasks such as video editing, and thus contributing to student learning experiences, as well as curriculum design.

The South African ICT sector has demonstrated dynamic growth, particularly with respect to growth of the mobile sector, though this growth has not met the national objectives of affordable access to the full range of communication services, and access to fixed broadband, for example, remains low in comparison to other lower-middle-income countries (Gillwald et al. 2012). The growth of mobile telephony has been a big factor with claims of penetration rates of over 100% and the availability of smart devices at lower costs, together with reductions in the cost of services (Gillwald et al. 2012). As Aker and Mbiti (2010) have shown, mobile phones or m-development can facilitate economic benefits by improving access to and use of information, creating jobs and income-generating opportunities, and being a vehicle for the delivery of financial, agricultural, health, and educational services.

There have been a number of projects set up by government which experience “sustainability failure” which means that they succeed at first but are then abandoned shortly thereafter. One example is the setup of a set of touch screen kiosks for remote rural communities in the North-West province, but the lack of recent and local content and lack of interactivity led to disuse, and the kiosks were later removed (Heeks 2002). Naidoo and Fourie (2013) argue that government communication often initiate projects which engage in partnerships with communities, but these are linear – communities do not have equal levels of influence and decision-making authority, preventing them from actively sustaining development efforts.

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## Health Communication

ICTs such as e-health, telemedicine, etc. are often considered ways to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban healthcare centers and to resolve challenges in the rural health sector (Ruxwana et al. 2010). The potential for mHealth, i.e., the use of mobile phone technology to improve health services is growing in South Africa as a result of the widespread availability of mobile phones, together with the low levels of literacy required to use them for this purpose (Leon et al. 2012).

However, in South Africa there is uneven access with some hospitals experiencing a limited number of computers, telephone services, and telemedicine equipment, while others had a wide range of these plus videoconferencing services. A study by Ruxwana et al. (2010) showed that while ICTs have the potential to improve the lives of people in rural communities, an Eastern Cape e-health project had limited success due to structural barriers such as a lack of computer equipment, skills, and poor or no internet connection.

While the international trend has been toward using a range of ICTs in health, cellphones have emerged as the most popular and cost-effective in Africa, with cellphone penetration on the continent increasing rapidly since the privatization of telephone monopolies in the mid-1990s (Bosch 2009).

There have thus been a range of mobile telephone-based provider-patient initiatives in South Africa, such as the Cell-Life Project which allows counselors to use mobiles to monitor the treatment and health status of HIV patients. Similarly, a company called On Cue uses a system to send SMS messages to patients reminding them to take their TB medication (Lucas 2008). Other projects include SIMPill which also helps patients to remember to take their medication, SMS helplines such as the Teen SMS Helpline of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group. Several other projects have been run, using mobile phones to improve patient referrals between local clinics and district hospitals and to facilitate communication between rural hospital doctors, e.g., photographing test results and sending them for instant analysis (Bosch 2009). A rural wireless tele-health system has been active in two remote rural areas of the Eastern Cape since 2004. There have also been initiatives focused on Mobile Deaf Communication and Mobile Finance.

## Community Radio

Unlike many other developing countries, South Africa has a constitutionally protected public broadcaster, and community, and private free-to-air broadcasters; and radio and television remain primary modes of information and education (Gillwald et al. 2012). The growth of community radio and community television projects have created opportunities for the use of media in development communication; and South Africa is one of the only countries which makes legislative provision for community radio stations. Community broadcasting is defined in Section 1 of the Convergence Bill as a broadcasting service that is fully controlled by a nonprofit entity and is carried on for nonprofit purposes; serves a particular community; encourages members of the community served by it, or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such a community, to participate in the selection and provision of programs to be broadcast in the course of such broadcasting service; and may be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships or advertising, or membership fees or by any combination of the aforementioned.

The nationwide nonracial elections of 1994 marked only the start of the restructuring of the broadcast sector (Barnett 1999), and community broadcasting was acknowledged for the first time and defined as “initiated and controlled by members of a community of interest, or a geographic community, to express their concerns, needs or aspirations without interference, subject to the regulation of the Independent Broadcast Authority—IBA” (Duncan and Seleokane 1998). Hence, community-run, nonprofit broadcasting has only been possible in South Africa since 1994, when the IBA was established in terms of the 1993 *IBA Act*. The IBA accordingly granted the country’s first set of community radio licenses in 1994–1995, which needed to be renewed every 12 months. In addition, the IBA granted 1-month “special-event” radio broadcast licenses to radio groups awaiting the outcome of longer-term license applications.

Globally, community radio stations give citizens a platform to create alternate public spheres for the promotion of local culture and language, as well as a space for dialogue and deliberation, and alternative political information in the face of concentrated media ownership. Radio is still the cheapest and most widespread medium, and in Africa it is particularly effective in reaching rural and illiterate constituencies. Community radio stations can provide local communities with development-related information, as well as a platform to engage in dialogue on a range of developmental issues. When community radio emerged and established itself in South Africa in the mid-to-late 1990s, it occupied a position that challenged the state-owned and commercial media that had existed until then (Hadland et al. 2006: 37). In allowing citizens to play a role in the production of community media, the medium fulfilled an important empowerment need and was seen to represent a radical shift in the country’s media industry (Bosch 2011).

The emergence of participatory community radio in South Africa in the post-apartheid era represented a key shift in the country’s media landscape. Until then media had been primarily owned and operated by the state and served as a propaganda tool. The opening up of the airwaves represented a major shift, and over

100 community radio stations around the country were granted broadcast licenses by the newly formed regulatory authority (Bosch 2006). These stations were tasked to “empower and educate the community,” though there has not been much policy guidance on exactly what this entails in practical terms. There are several types of community radio stations in South Africa – geographic stations broadcast to specific areas, campus radio stations are located at universities, and community of interest stations cater to specific groups and include the religious Christian and Muslim stations. The key features of community radio are as follows:

1. Access, i.e., they provide access to all members of the target community and act as a public forum, giving everyone a voice
2. Participation, i.e., they encourage participation of all in management, planning, and production.
3. Training is provided in content and radio production as well as physical maintenance of equipment, giving community members the ability to operate their own station and empowering them with technical skills.
4. Nonprofit, i.e., they may receive funding, but profit is plowed back into the community. In South Africa community radio stations are nonprofit Section 21 companies with Boards of Directors.
5. Community owned, i.e., the highest decision-making body is usually an annual general meeting which is open to all, and leadership structures are often horizontal.
6. Volunteer driven and mostly run by volunteers who sometimes receive only a small stipend to cover, e.g., transportation costs.
7. Local, i.e., content is predominantly local and relevant to the specific community served by the station (Tucker 2013).

The notion of community participation is premised on the assumption that there exists a “community” which can participate in development projects, though in South Africa the concept of community has become associated with other referents such as race or class (Emmett 2000). The audiences of community radio stations in South Africa were originally conceptualized as formerly disadvantaged, predominantly black communities; and community radio was a symbolic development, granting access to and demystifying media production processes for a group of people who had until then only had access to the state-owned propaganda media system.

However in more recent times, communities are seldom homogenous, which often presents a challenge for community radio stations. In addition, South African community radio stations face the primary challenges of financial and social sustainability. While many stations were originally funded by internationally based donors, this funding dwindled in the postapartheid era. This, together with the fact that stations target audiences that are not perceived as high priority consumers by advertisers, has resulted in many stations struggling financially and often relying on government funding to remain operational. Social sustainability refers to the notion that stations are strongly rooted in communities who feel a strong sense of affinity or

sense of ownership, which may result in financial contributions from local businesses, but this has been difficult for stations that attract socioeconomically and racially diverse individuals in urban areas, making it difficult to foster a sense of shared group identity. Stations rely on unpaid volunteers who rarely have broadcasting experience, resulting in a perception that community radio stations are “unprofessional.” The primary goal of community radio stations is their development orientation and focus on encouraging ordinary citizens to become media producers (and not just media consumers), which makes it difficult for stations to compete with the more “professional” commercial stations that are their primary competitors (Bosch 2011).

Despite various challenges, community radio remains a key tool for development communication in South Africa. Audience numbers for community radio stations continue to grow, demonstrating the popularity and need for these alternative platforms in an increasingly centralized media space. While community radio stations in South Africa are themselves diverse, there are many success stories of stations who play a key role in terms of development communication. Radio Khwezi.

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## Community Television

During apartheid, South Africa’s community media sector served as “a tool to counter state propaganda, inform, mobilise and educate the masses about their rights and to facilitate the building of strong community organisations” (Berger 1996: 4). Hadland, Aldridge, and Ogada (2006: 2) argue that the extent to which community media can play a role in participatory democracy is questionable without the presence of community TV, especially within the context of democracy in South Africa. While there was a strong postapartheid policy imperative in the case of community radio, the community TV sector remained without a position paper. It was only in August 2003 when ICASA released its *Local TV (LTV) Discussion Paper* that attention was turned to creating an enabling environment for community TV. It soon became clear that the struggle for public access to community TV still had a long way to go. For a long time, it appeared as if the political will to make community TV a reality was lacking, as the IBA and ICASA “sent mixed messages to community TV stakeholders eager to get on air” (Greenway 2005: 48). Finally, ICASA’s position paper on *Community Television Broadcasting Services* was released on 30 November 2004, with the paper calling for, among other things:

- Four-year renewable full-time licenses for nonprofit, South African-controlled local TV groups able to prove local support.
- An amendment of the community TV special-event license rules to allow for the awarding of special-event licenses of as long as 1 year in duration (instead of the current 1-month limit).
- Financing of the stations through adverts, sponsorships, and donors, provided the stations remain nonprofit (i.e., don’t have shareholders, don’t pay out dividends).

- A 55-percent South African local content quota for community TV broadcasters.
- License applications from community TV groups to begin sometime in the 2005–2006 financial year.
- No public or private/commercial community TV stations.

On distinguishing between the two types of community television, i.e., geographic and “community of interest,” ICASA has made it clear that the former will be favored. In the case of community radio, majority of the stations have adopted geographically defined interests (Armstrong 2005: 24). Today, there are five geographically defined television stations on air: *Cape Town TV* in Cape Town, *Soweto TV* in Johannesburg, *Tshwane TV* in Pretoria, *Bay TV* in Port Elizabeth, and *IKZN TV* in Richards Bay, and one community of interest, *TBN Africa*, which is also the oldest licensed community TV channel in the country. ICASA has also issued “test-licenses” to other stations such as *Fresh TV* and other community TV projects, including *Ekurhuleni TV* and *Alex TV*. However, until the launch of DTT, there is no new spectrum available for any other community TV stations (Thomas and Mavhungu 2013).

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## Social Movements and Nanomedia Strategies

Social movements in South Africa, and around the world, depend on the public discourse and to broaden the scope of their campaigns (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), though they often compete for media attention with many other issues and organizations, alongside the imperative of news values. Biases in coverage of social movement activities have been well documented, with limited media attention even though media discourse is a crucial source of strategic information for activists, upon which they base decisions and provide information for their future strategies. (Koopmans 2004). As a result of skewed media attention, social movement activists have tended to use smaller-scale media to publicize their struggles, including demonstrations, dress, slogans, murals, songs, radio, dance, poetry, and political theatre. Dawson (2012) has highlighted these strategies as examples of nanomedia, arguing that they play a key role in mobilization processes. The term nanomedia was coined by Mojca Pajnick and John Downing (2008), to refer to small-scale media, which includes alternative media such as community radio or video but also refers to “popular song, dance, street theatre, graffiti, murals, dress along with print, broadcasting, film and the internet” (Downing 2010: 2). The term “media” is used broadly to include the symbolic, ritual, and performative modes of communication. Further examples of nanomedia include flyers, jokes and songs, revolutionary pamphlets, dance performances, street theatre, and even the diapers worn by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who protested the Argentinian military dictatorship in the 1970s (Downing 2010). In South Africa, the most well-known example of nanomedia is the toyi-toyi street dance, which is often used in present-day protest marches and demonstrations.



South African social movements engage in a wide repertoire of strategies for internal mobilization, as well as for advocacy particularly in efforts to draw the state's attention to their problems. Civil society organizations and protest movements frequently employ traditional and "new" methodologies to achieve maximum impact. Members of these organizations cite pamphlets and t-shirts as critical mobilization tools, while murals and graffiti are also used to raise awareness about social issues. In addition, music and songs, together with protest marches, are commonly used to mobilize support, together with the tactic of physically occupying spaces which is commonly used.

In addition to nanomedia strategies, digital media is increasingly used for mobilization. Social media, Facebook and Twitter in particular, is used by activists in parallel with traditional media, to raise awareness about their campaigns and social issues. Twitter, for example, is used by activists to disseminate general information and organization events and news and is also seen as a useful mechanism to communicate with journalists in order to get mainstream media coverage. Facebook is often used by social activists for lateral linkages, to connect with similar movements locally and internationally. Social media was primarily seen as important for raising awareness and for networking with activist groups nationally and even internationally. While social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are widely used, they complement existing traditional and nanomedia strategies and are not the primary tool for civic engagement. However, activists do use social media as a tool used to enhance public engagement, coordinate offline action, and used for instant dissemination and exchange of information, in particular using it as a "choreography of assembly" (Gerbaudo 2012) to coordinate offline activities. But rather than being the primary method of communication and mobilization, digital and social media serve as complementary tools for South African activists (Bosch et al. 2018).

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## Conclusion

A range of government initiatives in the field of development communication exists in South Africa, but official government strategies often demonstrate a linear information-dissemination process which does not align with the basic principles of development communication, or Freirian notions of communication as participatory, dialogic, and reciprocal, because "communities are consulted but not fully involved" (Naidoo and Fourie 2013: 105). Moreover, in these projects, the feedback from communities is often not well structured, and monitoring and evaluation of projects are poor or nonexistent. However, in the South African context, participatory community media fills this gap. "Community media are strategic interventions into contemporary media culture committed to the democratization of media structures, forms, and practices" (Howley 2005: 2). Community media activists argue that the role of community media has risen to the fore as an invaluable tool to empower previously disadvantaged citizens (Opuku-Mensah et al. 1998). A range of community radio and community television projects fill the gap and provide local

communities with access to the media and a space for debate and dialogue in local languages.

With respect to ICTs, policy exists to facilitate the introduction of ICTs in communication strategies, but this is often not prioritized by government. Most people do not have broadband internet access – and the digital divide within the country limits the possibilities for the use of ICTs for social change. However, the growth of the mobile internet and increased access to feature phones and smartphones with internet capability represents an opportunity for e-democracy and m-health projects; and social media is increasingly being used in the campaigns of social activists and civil society organizations.

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