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THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN ENHANCING COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF OR TAMBO DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

This study delved into the digital communication strategies of the OR Tambo District Municipality in South Africa, a region characterised by its rural nature and high poverty levels. The aim was to understand the character of the Municipality's digital communication strategies, evaluate their efficacy, and propose evidence-based recommendations for enhancement. The study was predicated on the necessity for local governments to align their communication strategies with technological advancements whilst considering the socio-economic realities of their constituents. The research employed a comprehensive examination of the current digital communication tools, platforms, and techniques utilised by the Municipality, and assessed their effectiveness based on their reach, accessibility, and impact. The study identified areas of strength and weakness in the current communication strategies and proposed recommendations for enhancing digital communication within the Municipality. The findings underscored the importance of inclusive and effective digital communication strategies in local governments, particularly in rural areas. The study concluded that the OR Tambo District Municipality could enhance communication, improve service delivery, and foster greater engagement with residents by effectively leveraging digital technologies. The research contributes to the burgeoning body of literature on digital communication in local government and provides a roadmap for other rural municipalities seeking to leverage digital technologies to improve their communication strategies.

Keywords: digital communication, local government, strategic communication, organisational communication, OR Tambo District Municipality

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation era has profoundly influenced organisational communication methods, with local governments being no exception. This transformation is particularly prominent in the South African context, where legislative requirements mandate local governments to maintain communication with residents (Hemson 2007). The OR Tambo District Municipality, situated in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, presents an intriguing case for exploring the impact of digital transformation on enhancing communication, given its rural character and high poverty rates (COGTA 2020).

Numerous researchers have emphasised the significance of robust communication systems in local governments (Graham 2014; Graham *et al.* 2015; Msibi & Penzhorn 2010). These studies have illuminated the potential advantages of modern communication approaches, including digital technologies, for local governments. However, much of this research has centred on metropolitan cities, where information technology trends have higher penetration and consumption rates (Msibi & Penzhorn 2010; Gorska *et al.* 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated the necessity for local governments to transmit information digitally and to educate and engage with residents (Gorska *et al.* 2022). Despite the growing use of digital technologies, the literature on the subject remains emergent, transient, polarised, and unreliable (Srinivasan *et al.* 2019).

This study aims to augment the expanding body of literature on the utilisation of digital technologies in local government communication, particularly in the context of rural areas like the OR Tambo District Municipality. The research questions guiding this study encompass understanding the nature of the Municipality's digital communications strategy, evaluating the effectiveness of current communication strategies, and formulating practical recommendations for enhancing the Municipality's communications strategy based on empirical data.

The study is predicated on the notion that for the OR Tambo Municipality to remain relevant in the 21st century, it needs to align its communication approach with technological developments in the contemporary world. However, this alignment must consider the district's rural nature and the high levels of poverty among its residents (COGTA 2020). As argued by the World Bank (1996: 145), it is crucial to include "the poor, the marginalised, and the disadvantaged in the decision-making process and development initiatives" – a notion that can be expanded to include the context of digital communication strategies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The initial objective of this research is to ascertain the nature of the digital communication strategies employed by the OR Tambo District Municipality. This involves a comprehensive examination of the current digital communication tools, platforms, and techniques utilised by the Municipality. The focus is on comprehending how these strategies are designed and implemented, and how they align with the Municipality's overarching communication objectives. This objective is pivotal as it

establishes a foundation for understanding the current state of digital communication within the Municipality, a necessary step towards identifying areas for enhancement (Graham *et al.* 2015; Gorska *et al.* 2022).

The subsequent objective is to scrutinise the effectiveness of the current communication strategy for municipal communication/information dissemination. This involves assessing the reach, accessibility, and impact of the Municipality's digital communication strategies. The effectiveness of these strategies will be evaluated based on their capacity to convey municipal information to the residents, particularly the marginalised and disadvantaged who often lack access to digital technologies (Srinivasan *et al.* 2019). This objective aids in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the current communication strategies; thereby providing a basis for recommending improvements.

The final objective is to formulate practical recommendations for enhancing the OR Tambo District Municipality's communications strategy based on empirical data. This involves analysing the data collected from the first two objectives and using it to propose evidence-based recommendations for improving the Municipality's digital communication strategies. These recommendations aim to ensure that the Municipality's communication strategies are not only effective in conveying information but also inclusive, considering the socio-economic realities of the district's residents (COGTA 2020; Srinivasan *et al.* 2019). This objective provides a roadmap for the Municipality to enhance its communication strategies in line with the digital transformation trends in the 21st century.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The emergence of digital communication within municipalities has garnered significant interest in recent years, with a burgeoning body of literature investigating its potential to revolutionise public service delivery and citizen engagement. Extensive studies have been conducted on the adoption and utilisation of digital communication in municipalities, highlighting the increasing prevalence of digital tools and platforms in municipal communication strategies (Bonsón *et al.* 2015). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, and Instagram, have been identified as particularly important tools for municipalities, enabling them to reach a wide audience and facilitate two-way communication with citizens (Mergel 2016). Furthermore, the use of websites, email newsletters, and mobile applications have also been noted as key component of digital communication strategies in municipalities (Criado *et al.* 2013).

The advantages of digital communication in municipalities are well-documented in the literature. Digital tools and platforms can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of municipal communication, enabling municipalities to disseminate information quickly and broadly (Bertot *et al.* 2010). Moreover, digital communication can facilitate greater transparency and accountability, as it allows citizens to access information about municipal activities and decisions with ease (Meijer & Thaens 2018). Digital communication can also foster citizen engagement by providing platforms for dialogue and participation (Mossberger *et al.* 2019).

However, the literature also highlights several challenges associated with the use of digital communication in municipalities. These include issues related to the digital divide, privacy and security, and the need for technical skills and resources (Bertot *et al.* 2010). The digital divide, or the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, can limit the reach and inclusivity of digital communication strategies (Norris & Reddick 2017). Privacy and security concerns can also pose challenges, as municipalities must ensure that they protect sensitive information and comply with data protection regulations (Bannister & Connolly 2014). Additionally, the effective use of digital communication requires technical skills and resources, which may be lacking in some municipalities (Gil-Garcia *et al.* 2014).

In response to these challenges, the literature suggests several strategies that municipalities can employ to leverage digital communication effectively. These include investing in digital infrastructure, providing training for staff, and developing clear policies and guidelines for the use of digital tools and platforms (Mergel 2016). Furthermore, municipalities can engage in benchmarking and learning from best practices, both within their own country and internationally (Bonsón *et al.* 2015). Finally, municipalities can seek to involve citizens in the design and implementation of digital communication strategies to ensure that these strategies meet the needs and preferences of their audience (Mossberger *et al.* 2019).

The role of digital communication in enhancing citizen engagement is a recurring theme in the literature. The advent of digital platforms has transformed the way municipalities interact with their constituents, enabling a shift from one-way communication to two-way dialogue (Mossberger *et al.* 2019). Social media platforms, in particular, have been identified as powerful tools for citizen engagement, allowing municipalities to solicit feedback, address concerns, and involve citizens in decision-making processes (Mergel 2016). However, the literature also cautions that the use of digital platforms for citizen engagement requires careful management, as these platforms can also be used to spread misinformation or incite controversy (Bonsón *et al.* 2015).

The literature also highlights the importance of strategic planning in the use of digital communication by municipalities. A well-defined digital communication strategy can guide municipalities in selecting the most appropriate tools and platforms, defining clear objectives, and measuring the effectiveness of their efforts (Gil-Garcia *et al.* 2014). Such strategies should be flexible and adaptable, allowing municipalities to respond to the rapidly changing digital landscape (Bannister & Connolly 2016). Moreover, the literature suggests that municipalities should consider their unique context and audience when developing their digital communication strategies to ensure that these strategies are inclusive and responsive to the needs of their constituents (Mossberger *et al.* 2019).

Training and capacity building are also identified as crucial elements in the effective use of digital communication by municipalities. The literature suggests that municipalities should invest in training for their staff to equip them with the skills needed to use digital tools and platforms effectively (Mergel 2016). Municipalities should consider partnering with external experts or organisations, to access specialised skills and knowledge

(Gil-Garcia *et al.* 2017). The literature also highlights the importance of leadership in driving the adoption and use of digital communication, suggesting that municipal leaders should champion these efforts and foster a culture that values innovation and experimentation (Bertot *et al.* 2010).

Finally, the literature underscores the importance of evaluation in the use of digital communication by municipalities. Regular evaluation can help municipalities assess the effectiveness of their digital communication strategies, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate the value of these efforts to stakeholders (Bannister & Connolly 2016). Evaluation methods can include surveys, analytics, and feedback mechanisms (Mossberger *et al.* 2019). However, the literature also notes that evaluation can be challenging due to the complexity of digital communication and the difficulty of measuring intangible outcomes such as citizen engagement or trust (Gil-Garcia *et al.* 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilised in this study is qualitative, as the research aims to understand the perceptions of those responsible for implementing the communications strategy at the OR Tambo District Municipality. The qualitative approach was selected due to its capacity to explore the ways in which the Municipality is implementing the digital communications strategy and the extent of its influence (Hu 2015). The interpretive paradigm, which interprets the world through the perceptions of the research participants, was employed.

The research population consisted of employees responsible for communication at the OR Tambo District Municipality. These individuals were specifically selected due to their ability to provide insights into the efficacy and influence of digital communication in the Municipality. However, it is important to note that communication is not solely the responsibility of the communication department; everyone in authority in a municipality has a communication responsibility (George Municipality 2015; Ugu Municipality 2016).

Data collection was conducted using Google form questions sent to specific email addresses provided by the municipal manager. This approach was necessitated by the fact that the municipal staff were not available for face-to-face interviews. This method of data collection is evidence of the use of digital technologies in communication, where interviews do not necessarily need to be conducted face-to-face (Chaleunvog 2017).

Document analysis was also employed as a data collection tool. This is a type of qualitative research in which documentary material is analysed and specific issues are addressed using a systematic approach (Karppinen & Moe 2012). This study utilised journal articles as well as a comparison with six municipalities that have communication policies in South Africa.

Finally, the data was analysed using thematic analysis, a common method in qualitative research. The data was arranged according to themes such as digital technologies currently in use at the OR Tambo District Municipality, citizen engagement through social media content creation, the driving forces of digital communication adoption in

the OR Tambo District Municipality, and the advantages of digital technologies (Deeks *et al.* 2019). This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the data and provided insights into the role of digital transformation in enhancing communication in the Municipality.

RESULTS

Comprehension of digital communication

The dataset aligns with the literature consensus, which underscores the use of social media platforms, online tools, and technology-based communication as integral components of digital communication (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The respondents underscored the significance of employing digital tools for communication and proposed staying abreast of technology updates, training personnel, and soliciting audience feedback.

Digital communication adoption

OR Tambo District Municipality officials utilise digital tools such as emails and video conferencing to enhance work efficiency. However, challenges such as political instability and lack of council approval have slowed the adoption process (Bertot *et al.* 2010).

Strategies for digital communication promotion

The strategies employed by the Municipality, which include the use of social media platforms, conducting virtual meetings, and distributing digital newsletters, align with best practices in digital communication literature (Bonsón *et al.* 2012).

Adoption extent and effectiveness of digital communication strategies

The mixed success of digital communication strategies within the Municipality underscores the challenges organisations face in implementing and promoting digital communication (Graham & Avery 2013; Korupp & Szydluk 2005).

Strategic planning and implementation

Strategic planning and implementation were identified as critical factors in enhancing the effectiveness of digital communication within the Municipality. The respondents highlighted the necessity for a well-defined strategic plan, constant system updates, and ongoing employee training.

Employee training and development

Employee training and development was a significant theme, with the respondents suggesting that appropriate workshops and continuous training should be conducted to educate officials and other employees about digital communication tools.

Advantages of digitisation

The respondents identified several advantages of effective digital communication tools, including cost-effectiveness, timesaving, transparency, and increased employee engagement. By embracing digital transformation, OR Tambo District Municipality could conserve resources, time, and effort.

Challenges in embracing digital communication

Despite the benefits of digital communication, the respondents acknowledged the challenges associated with its adoption. These challenges include the lack of trainers, the outsourcing of training services, and resistance from older employees.

Youth involvement in digital communication

The respondents emphasised the role of youth in driving digital communication adoption within the Municipality. By recruiting more young people and involving them in digital communication processes, the Municipality could leverage their skills and knowledge to improve the use of digital tools and platforms.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Insights derived from the interview transcripts elucidate the understanding of digital communication, its adoption, and usage within the OR Tambo District Municipality, along with the strategies employed to foster its promotion. Key themes constructed encompass the escalating significance of technology-based communication and the employment of social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp. The adoption of digital communication by the OR Tambo District Municipality reflects the global trend of organisations increasingly embracing digital communication methods. However, impediments such as political instability and the lack of council approval have hindered the full adoption of these methods, as corroborated by the literature.

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

Digital transformation and adoption have become indispensable for organisations in the contemporary world (Kane *et al.* 2015). The incorporation of digital communication strategies, as suggested by the respondents, aligns with the growing consensus on the benefits of digital transformation (Berman & Bell 2011). The utilisation of digital tools for communication is crucial in today's rapidly evolving technological landscape (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2013). The suggestions from the respondents for adopting tools such as emails, video conferencing, and voice chats align with current research on the importance of digital communication tools in enhancing organisational efficiency (Leonardi *et al.* 2013).

Another finding from the study is the indispensability of training in achieving success in digital communication. The importance of employee training and development in the context of digital communication is well-documented (Serrat 2017). By equipping employees with the necessary skills and knowledge, organisations can ensure the successful implementation of digital communication strategies (Schneckenberg 2009). The suggestions from the respondents regarding employee training are consistent with these findings.

Improving the effectiveness of existing digital communication platforms has been identified as a key factor in enhancing organisational efficiency (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2013). The suggestions from the respondents for keeping abreast of 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, the respondents advised the Municipality to invest in high-quality and up-to-date digital communication tools such as computers, tablets, and cellular telephones. This recommendation is supported by the literature, which emphasises the importance of acquiring appropriate digital communication tools for effective communication in public organisations (Alshehri *et al.* 2012). To achieve this, public organisations should conduct regular assessments of their digital communication tool needs, considering factors such as user requirements, compatibility with existing infrastructure, and long-term sustainability. By investing in the right tools, public organisations can enhance their digital communication capabilities and better serve 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 way of work. These insights align with the literature on the importance of strategic planning and implementation for successful digital communication in public organisations (Fang 2002; Netchaeva 2002). To improve digital communication, public organisations should develop and implement comprehensive digital communication strategies that outline clear objectives, targets, and performance indicators. These strategies should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain aligned with organisational goals and evolving technological advancements (Bannister & Connolly 2015).

KEY INSIGHTS

The dataset of interview transcripts yields valuable insights into the perspectives of respondents regarding the incorporation and enhancement of digital communication within the OR Tambo District Municipality. The themes and key insights identified from the dataset align with existing digital communication literature, underscoring the importance of strategic planning, employee training, embracing digital tools, and involving youth in driving digital communication adoption.

Digital transformation and adoption: the respondents suggest that the OR Tambo District 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, emphasising the need for organisations to adapt to the changing technological landscape (Berman & Bell 2011; Kane *et al.* 2015).

Employee training and development: to ensure the successful implementation of digital communication strategies, the respondents advocate for employee training and development, both 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).

Utilisation of digital tools for communication: the respondents emphasise 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).

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 organisations is supported by the existing literature (Prensky 2001; Tapscott 2009).

Enhancing existing digital communication platforms: the respondents recommend continuous improvement of existing digital communication platforms, including keeping abreast of technology updates, training employees, and seeking feedback from the audience. These suggestions align with the literature, which highlights the importance of enhancing organisational efficiency through the effective use of digital communication tools (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2013; Leonardi *et al.* 2013).

Advantages of effective digital communication tools: the respondents highlight the advantages of digital communication tools, including cost-effectiveness, timesaving, transparency, and increased employee engagement. These advantages are well-established in the literature and underscore the potential of digital communication tools to improve overall organisational performance (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014).

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 process. These recommendations are in line with the existing research on overcoming barriers to digital transformation (Kotter 2012; Westerman *et al.* 2014).

CONCLUSION

This article offers insights into the digital communication strategies of the OR Tambo District Municipality. The findings underscore the importance of aligning communication strategies with technological advancements, particularly in the context of rural municipalities. The study identifies the current state of digital communication within the Municipality, assesses the effectiveness of existing strategies, and proposes evidence-based recommendations for improvement. The research highlights the need for inclusive communication strategies that consider the socio-economic realities of the district's residents, thereby contributing to the broader literature on digital communication in local governments.

The research underscores the importance of continuous improvement and adaptation in the face of rapidly evolving digital technologies. The findings suggest that the OR Tambo District Municipality, like other rural municipalities, can leverage digital technologies to enhance communication, improve service delivery, and foster greater engagement with residents. The research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication in local governments and provides a roadmap for other rural municipalities looking to enhance their communication strategies in the digital age.

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