



Research Article

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The Use of Social Media for Internal Communication within South African Local Government

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Abstract

Contemporary organisations have embraced a wide variety of social media platforms. Social media provide companies, institutions and government departments with the quickest way to communicate with employees. The platforms allow for instantaneous, two-way and cost-effective communication. This paper uses Grunig's two-way symmetrical as a lens to understand the challenges associated with the use of social media for internal communication within local government in South Africa. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, while qualitative data was gathered using interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings. Four categories of challenges emerged from the data analysed: lack of social media policies, compliance and adherence with the policy, and lack of organisational support. The absence of social media policy proved to be a significant factor that leads to the ineffective use of social media for internal communication. Municipalities with social media policies had few employees who knew about the policy, whereas the remainder failed to adhere to the policy. Lack of organisational support emerged as a challenge that hampers the use of social media for internal communication in local government. This paper contends that while the use of social media has increased significantly in municipalities, significant challenges associated with the management of social media need to be addressed if the Government Communication Policy is to be implemented effectively.

Keywords: social media; internal communication; local government; two-way symmetrical communication; social media policy

1. Introduction

Social media has become essential to many people's everyday lives worldwide. In South Africa, statistics show that Facebook is the most widely used social platform, with nearly 30 million people with active accounts. Facebook is followed by YouTube, that has an estimated 25,3 million users. LinkedIn has 10,2 million users, WhatsApp 9.9 million, Instagram 6,8 million, TikTok 6,4 million and

Twitter 2,85 million.

According to Mollet, Bromley, Gilson and Williams (2017), social media are computer-enabled systems that allow people to create user-produced content to share texts, pictures, videos and sound. The use of social media platforms such as blogs, social media sites, and social tagging is proliferating at an incredible pace (Kayode-Adedeji, 2017). Social media communication platforms are now widely used in businesses, organisations and government departments. In addition, Nurmandi, Almarez, Roengtam, Salahudin, Jovita, Dewi, and Efendi (2018) observe that local government is now adopting social media platforms to share information with employees. These platforms lessen the distance between people who live and work in different places and can now instantly share messages, videos, and photos. Bayrakdar, Yucedag, Simsek, and Dogru (2020) further posit that social media facilitate social communication, collaborations and content distribution. Jacobs and Spierings (2016) also note that social media are relatively cheaper technologies that require minimum expertise to have the same or even greater reach than traditional media. This paper contends that social media are affordable and efficient communication tools that should be harnessed as part of organisations' communication strategy. We argue that social media platforms can be valuable for improving engagement between municipalities and their employees. This can result in downstream benefits for citizens in various municipalities, particularly in South Africa, where service delivery remains a challenge.

With the advent of social media platforms and the wide range of benefits they bring to organisations, many governments and municipalities have begun to understand the need to adopt social media as part of their communication strategy. However, although adopting social media in governments and municipalities presents several opportunities, it also comes with several risks for organisations and employees. Roengtam, Nurmandi, Almarez and Kholid (2017) identify the need for guidelines and procedures when adopting social media as part of government communication in South Africa. They view this as critical in improving employee communication, engagement, government transparency, and public interaction. The guidelines and procedures provide a clear framework for government employees who use social media for formal government business and personal reasons.

According to Cornelissen (2020), the fast spreading of social media networks provides new possibilities for organisations and municipalities to communicate and engage with their internal and external stakeholders. Vorster (2016) further argues that social communication tools like Facebook and Twitter make it easy for professionals and organisations to engage with their stakeholders, influencers and peers, but only when used correctly and effectively. Thus, scholars agree on the benefits of adopting social media for communication purposes within municipalities and businesses. However, limited studies have examined how these tools are used and the challenges encountered in using them for internal communication, particularly in South African municipalities.

In light of this background, this study explores the challenges encountered by local government (municipalities) in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa in using social media for internal communication. The Eastern Cape province in South Africa experiences is plagued by some of the worst service delivery challenges in the country. This paper is organised as follows: it begins by providing an overview of the literature on social media, internal communication and local government of municipalities; it discusses the two-way symmetrical communication model followed by an explication of the methodology. Results are then presented and discussed before a conclusion is presented.

2. Literature Review

Studies on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and technological advancement in different fields have advanced a variety of definitions and descriptions of social media. The field of public relations and communication also provide various definitions of social media. Chew (2020) defines social media as internet-based applications of Web 2.0, which permit the formation and

exchange of user-generated content. Moyo (2019) points out that the term Web 2.0 describes how users apply the World Wide Web to share information. Differentiating social media from traditional media, He, Lee and Rui (2021) view social media as a growing communication technology characterised by the openness of participation, interactive dialogue, collaboration, and conversation. Several scholars have examined the utility of social media platforms in communication and engagement between organisations and their stakeholders. For example, Mafihlo (2015) conducted a study to explore citizens' views on how the government can effectively use Facebook to build public value. The study's findings showed that the government's use of social media for communication could encourage four key dimensions of shared value: citizen engagement, efficiency, transparency, and accountability. The four dimensions of shared value that emerged from the study resonate with Grunig's two-way symmetrical model that contends that for communication to add value to organisations, it needs to be underpinned by engagement, transparency, efficiency and accountability.

Municipalities are vast and highly hierarchical government organisations. Most of their employees work in different sites performing different functions that range from grass cutting, water and sanitation, community development, waste collection, roads and electricity, among others. These employees also need to receive communication just like other employees in managerial positions working in an office environment. Thus, municipalities must engage with their employees across hierarchies. Quirke (2017) posits that organisations that fail to engage in two-way communication with their employees struggle to attain coherence, integration and coordination in the workplace.

According to Quirke (2017), organisations need creativity, detailed planning, and monitoring and evaluation to improve internal communication. In the same vein, managers and communications officers must ensure that the following is achieved when communicating: accuracy, honesty, timeliness and a communication plan (Ngcobo, 2016). A wide range of literature on organisational communication and public relations has shown that effective communication is fundamental to building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between management and employees at an operational level. The South African Government Communicators' Handbook (2018) outlines the following as critical for effective communication at national and local government levels:

- i. Create a written communication strategy that is linked to the business and focuses on both deliverables and results; and
- ii. Conduct quantitative and qualitative research regularly on media platforms, products and language preferences for employees to understand organisational programs.

The two clauses cited above from the South African Government Communicators' Handbook show the importance of ensuring that a communication policy is known to all members of an organisation if effective communication is to occur. This presupposes the importance of establishing two-way communication between the organisation and its stakeholders.

Social media management is a developing area within the context of organisational communication. Limited academic empirical studies have produced evidence-based approaches and recommendations in this area. Extant research shows that the dominant perceptions around social media are that managers are facing challenges in coordinating and incorporating social media into organisational communication practices. Studies have also demonstrated uncertainties about the return on investment on social media (Tørning, Jaffari and Vatrappu, 2015). A review of recent literature on social media and organisational communication reflects a dominance of studies that assess social media features and a paucity of studies that examine social media functions in organisations (Zollmann, 2019). In the South African context, the use of social media for communication purposes between managers and employees in the municipal context remains an understudied area even though social media have become a crucial means of interaction between municipal authorities and employees in general. However, recent studies show that social media usage can also become deep-rooted in traditional frameworks that stress transparency and openness, interactive communication and engagement for internal communication. In this light, managing digital and social media platforms has become one of the most crucial responsibilities of Public

Relations and Communication managers today (Theaker, 2020).

Scholars such as Ramoroka (2019) posit that emerging countries like South Africa have great potential to achieve sustainable economic and social development if they exploit ICTs and effectively apply them to the local government sector. The use of social media in all spheres of government has become a global phenomenon. Falco and Kleinhans (2018) contend that social media facilitate two-way communication among employees in government departments. Furthermore, social media enables two-way communication with organisational publics, stakeholders, and partners. However, despite its utility, social media also brings challenges for government departments and organisations. According to DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison (2018), these challenges include employees having to adapt to the new communication culture and navigating the thin line between official and personal social media use.

Liao, Yuan, Dong, Yang, Fielding and Lam (2020) note that many government policy documents (Municipal Systems Act and the Municipal Structures Act) encourage the use of social media for engagement, particularly with the communities they serve. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) provides a framework for managing information and communication technology within municipal structures. All municipalities have the required ICT infrastructure, system and connectivity to fast-track services and improve efficiency (SALGA, 2020).

This study views internal communication as a critical facet of organisational communication, given that it plays a crucial role in nurturing and building employee relationships. This is achieved through sharing information, making sense of the information, and creating organisational culture and values. Cowan (2017) notes that internal communication allows for interactive decision-making, employee collaboration, information sharing and an environment that brings about productivity and builds a sense of organisational ownership. Therefore, internal communication is paramount to any organisation, whether in the private or public sector. Quirke (2017) observes that internal communication comprises staff members and their relationships. It involves the following common elements: messaging, the flow of the messages, purpose, and medium. Ewing, Men, and O'Neil (2019) also view internal communication as comprising the production and delivery of messages and facilitating an information flow among people in an organisation (Quirke, 2017; Ewing, Men, and O'Neil, 2019). Walden, Jung, and Westerman (2017) maintain that the internal communication environment reflects the data-collecting function of staff. It affords them vital information to understand organisational activities that lead to attaining organisational goals.

2.1 *A word on theory: social media use and the two-way communication model*

This paper used the two-way communication concept derived from Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Excellence theory to analyse the use of social media for employee communication in selected South African municipalities. The excellence theory is a general theory of Public Relations that presents two-way communication as a best practice for stakeholder engagement and communication (see Grunig 2013; Dozier et al. 2013; Grunig et al. 2013). The Excellence theory is interested in explaining how Public Relations can add value to the organisation and its publics. Grunig et al. (2013) state that organisations must communicate symmetrically using two-way communication with their publics to gain value. This results in high-quality relationships. Two-way symmetrical communication relies on openness, tolerance, trust and mutual interaction between the organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. It provides the institutions and the target audience (stakeholders) with an opportunity to interact in a balanced manner (Grunig et al., 2013). The notion of balanced two-way communication is a significant concept because it advocates for ethical communication and public relations. Thus, the practice of two-way communication is typically considered to be excellent and ethical in contemporary public relations literature.

Two-way symmetrical communication is understood to form the foundation of excellent Public Relations practice (Grunig, 1984). From this perspective, two-way symmetrical communication reflects a willingness of an organisation to attend to and respond to its strategic public's worries and

interests (Pearson, 2016:78). A two-way symmetrical model is interconnected with relationship management theory, and it encourages two-way communication. The two-way symmetrical model observes communication as a process that is not just about sending messages but also includes responding to the messages. Therefore, the two-way symmetrical model understands communication as the exchange of information, leading to relation-building.

Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model is becoming a valuable tool for evaluating how organisations engage with their employees in the era of social media (see Makwambeni and Matsika, 2022). Scholars such as Grunig (2009) have argued that social media platforms have the potential to make communication with stakeholders more strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible. However, some scholars contend that practitioners may still use social media in the same way of dumping information that favours the organisation to stakeholders. However, the advent of what some scholars call Public Relations 2.0 (see Matthee, 2011) shows the criticality of adopting social media tools to accomplish organisational goals of providing information to stakeholders and initiating dialogue among the different stakeholders.

3. Methodology

This mixed-method study was conducted in the Oliver Ronald (OR) Tambo District Municipality, which is in the jurisdiction of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. O.R. Tambo District Municipality consists of five local municipalities: Ngquza Hill Municipality; Port St. Johns Municipality; Nyandeni Municipality; Mhlontlo Municipality; and King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) Municipality (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council 2021:1). The study employed a mixed-methods approach to get insights on the use of social media from the purposively selected research participants (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2017). In the mixed methods approach, qualitative data were nested in the quantitative data to explicate the quantitative findings.

Quantifiable data was obtained using a questionnaire distributed to 28 employees with insight into the use of social media in the selected municipalities. The participants were selected purposively using the purposive sampling procedure. Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with municipal managers and selected employees across municipal levels. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability selection which allows the researcher to choose participants based on their knowledge of the subject addressed in the study (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2017; Makwambeni, 2013). The purposive sampling technique was used to tap into the deep insights the managers and employees have on social media and internal communication.

4. Findings and Discussions

The study's findings show that most surveyed municipality employees in the O.R Tambo District Municipality use social media for internal communication. However, they use social media irregularly. Some municipalities either do not have a social media policy, the social media policy does not guide employees, or there is no organisational support from the municipalities as proposed in Government Communication Policy (2018). Premised on the excellence theory, the two-way communication model, and literature on the use of social media for internal communication, these findings highlight the patterns of social media use, social media policy implementation, and challenges associated with organisational support.

4.1 Patterns of social media use in Municipalities

The study's findings show how the selected municipalities in South Africa generally use social media platforms for internal communication. Figure 1 shows that 100% of participants use WhatsApp daily, followed by 68% of participants who use Facebook daily. About 29% of participants stated that they

use Twitter daily. Instagram reflected 21% use from participants per day. YouTube and LinkedIn were the least utilised social media platforms, with 17.9% and 14.3%, respectively.

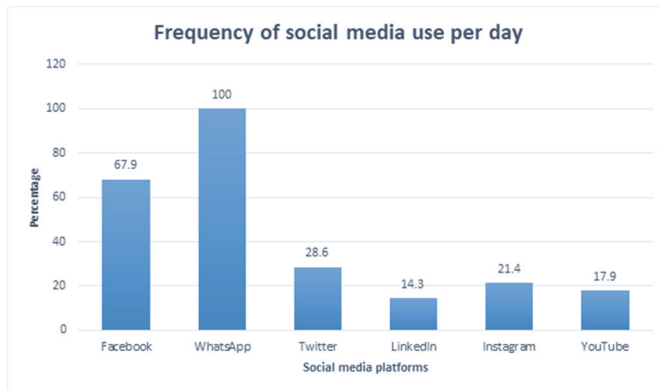


Figure 1: Frequency of social media use per day

Figure 1 further indicates how social media are increasingly used to communicate and engage with stakeholders in municipalities (Cornelissen, 2020). This increased appropriation of social media in the selected South African Municipalities aligns with Vorster's (2016) observation that social media tools make it easy for professionals and organisations to engage their stakeholders. However, the pattern of social media use for stakeholder engagement cannot be understood beyond the frequency of social media. To further understand how municipality employees use social media for internal communication in the local government sector in South Africa, the study delved into municipality employees' understanding of their social media policy and experiences of organisational support.

50% of the participants indicated that their municipalities had social media policies. However, the other 50% were either unsure, did not know, or were uncertain that their municipalities have a social media policy. This lack of awareness of social media use policies poses a challenge to effective internal communication. Social media policies are essential in so far as they guide employees' social media use. DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison (2018) note that the advent of social media brings challenges for government departments and organisations because of the need for clear frameworks to guide employees.

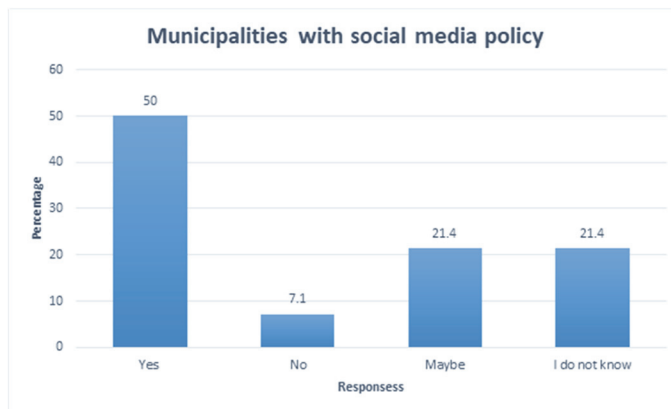


Figure 2: Municipalities with social media policy

The criticality of social media policies in municipalities is captured by one interviewee below, whose municipality has a social media policy:

Yes, we have a social media policy. It gives a clear understanding of the expectations and how we will manage the communication on social media. That way, we know what someone posts on social media, we also get to know how to react to that, and if I post something that is not right using the company's Facebook page, I know how they will discipline me. We need to know the dos and don'ts of using social media. You see.

The study's findings show that 50% of the participants pointed out that their municipalities have social media policies. This can be attributed mainly to the Government's Communication Policy (2018:34). The policy places the responsibility of managing communication policies on heads of the municipalities' communication departments. The results justify why 50% of participants stated that their municipalities have a social media policy. This finding was corroborated by respondents in management who averred that national policy guides their own communication policies. One municipal manager confirmed this:

In terms of the social media policy, we are guided by the Government Communication Policy, which requires us to set internal usage guidelines, implement and monitor social media usage in the municipality.

It is significant to note that while 50% of the respondents stated the existence of a policy, a sizeable number of respondents pointed out that although the policy exists, its guidelines are primarily disregarded by employees:

You tell [people] some policy sections, but they go ahead and set up their own private WhatsApp groups. So this means that we are not able to monitor what is said in those groups. It is a challenge that we face.

In terms of the awareness of social media policies, the figure below summarises employees understanding and awareness of municipalities' social media policies:

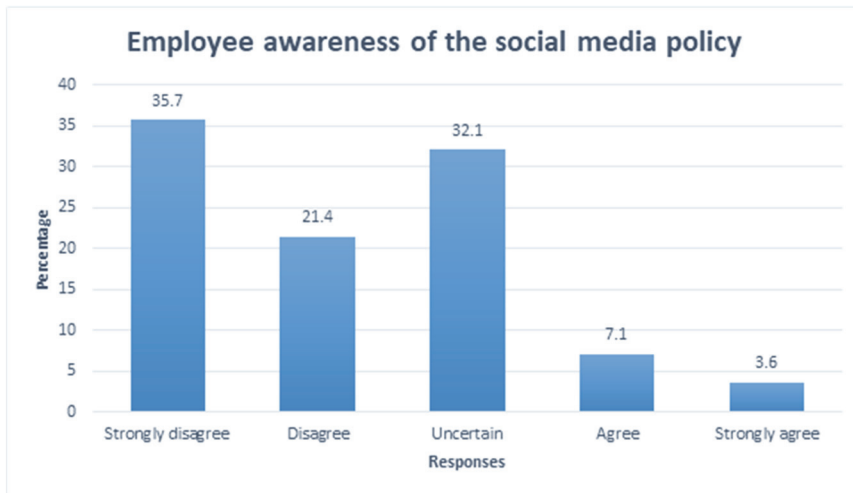


Figure 3: Employees' Awareness of the social media policy

The table shows that 3.6 % strongly agree, 7.1% agree, 32.1% are uncertain, 21.4% disagree, and 35.7% strongly disagree. It means that the majority of the participants are not aware of social media policies. One interviewee articulates below their lack of awareness of the policy as presented in the table above:

I have never seen social media policy within the municipality. So I doubt we do have such a

policy. Even if we have it, but we don't know it.

Lack of awareness of policy that guides the use of social media in municipalities in South Africa poses a significant risk to the effective use of social media for internal communication. It also reflects an apparent dissonance between municipal internal communication practices and national government policy.

4.2 Employee adherence to the social media policy

Government Communication Policy (2018:34) places the responsibility of administering social media policies of municipalities on communication personnel. It was within the study's purview to investigate whether municipal employees in South Africa adhere to social media policy. Our findings revealed that out of the employees knowledgeable about their local municipalities' social media policy, only 42% complied with it, with 10% indicating a lack of adherence. Notably, 46.4% of the participants were unsure whether municipality employees abide by the policy.

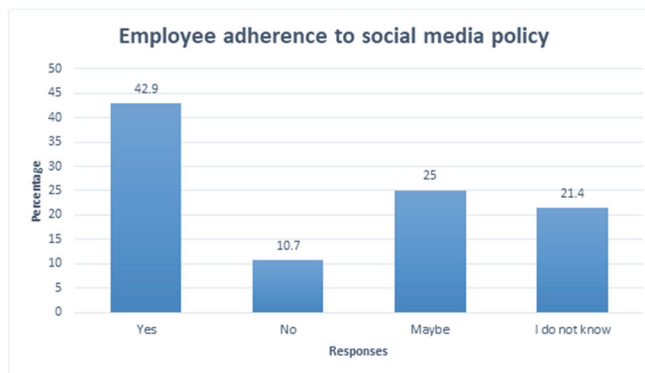


Figure 4: Employees' adherence to the social media policy

As argued above, one challenge preventing municipalities from deploying social media effectively has been the lack of social media policies in some municipalities. However, when respondents were asked whether their municipalities had an existing social media policy, the responses showed that some local municipalities have social media policies derived from the Government Communication Policy (2018:34). Social media policies are important as they guide everyday communication practices in municipalities. Social media policy clarifies organisations' expectations, and they expect employees to manage social media communication. The Government Communication Policy (2018) requires municipalities to set internal usage guidelines and implement and monitor social media usage. However, this becomes a challenge when no social media policy guides social media use in municipalities.

Our findings also indicate a tendency to disregard social media policy among municipal employees. These findings are at variance with Government Communication Policy (2018) and Government Communicators' Handbook (2018), which explicitly espouse the need for a clear policy and strategy to guide social media use. Although the excellence theory and the two-way symmetrical model precede the advent of social media in internal communication, particularly in local government, they imply that organisations must communicate in a two-way symmetrical manner with their publics. This involves gleaning the public's interests to build high-quality, long-lasting relationships using dialogic communication. In this light, Gruning's excellence theory applies to social media use for internal communication in local government.

On the other hand, Gruning (2009) warned that the use of social media might not be in line

with excellent public relations practice. This is challenging and risky as individuals begin using social media haphazardly and sometimes against municipal policies. The above observation has implications for the Excellence theory. Two-way symmetrical communication must be codified in the form of policies, which should be practised by practitioners in organisations.

4.3 Support for policy implementation

For municipalities to implement social media policy, they require resources. These resources include data to access social media sites, smartphones, and personnel to capacitate employees to implement the policy. The study's findings show that the selected South African municipalities do not support their employees with the requisite resources for exploiting social media. The figure below shows municipal employees' perceptions of the organisational support received in so far as social media use is concerned:

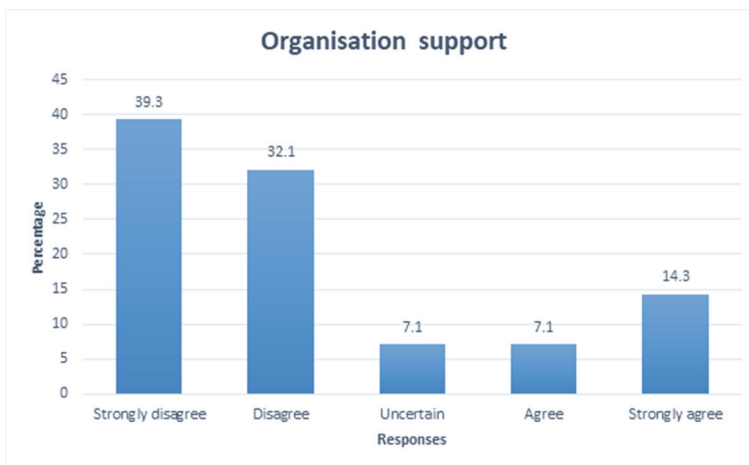


Figure 5: Organisational support

71% of the participants noted that their municipalities do not provide them with the required resources to exploit social media for work purposes. They indicated that they would need internet connectivity or data, a suitable device and personnel to help them successfully implement the policy and the attendant guidelines. One respondent noted the following:

Some employees have the necessary equipment to do their work remotely, but others do not have all of that. In this digital era, it would be nice for all employees to have laptops and connectivity, even at home.

Only 21% of participants agreed that municipalities provide adequate resources to enable them to use social media for work purposes.

Extant studies on organisational communication emphasise the need to underpin social media policy with two-way communication. Moreso, municipalities must provide employees with the requisite support and resources to enable employees to practice what is espoused in the policies. This support includes providing data to access social media sites, smartphones, and training to ensure employees can implement the policy. The study's findings revealed that local municipalities are not assisting employees with the necessary resources to ensure that they harness social media for internal communication. This challenge in integrating social media in municipalities corresponds with the findings of previous studies (see Zavattaro, French, and Mohanty, 2015).

5. Conclusion and Usable Insights

This article examined the challenges of using social media for internal communication in selected local municipalities in the O.R. Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The findings of the study revealed several challenges that hamper effective internal communication. Social media platforms are not fully integrated into local municipalities' communication strategies. Thus, some local municipalities do not have a social media policy that guides employees and management on social media use. However, even municipalities with social media policies show a lack of awareness of the policies and poor adherence to the policy precepts. These findings have several implications for internal communication in the local government sphere in South Africa: They suggest the need for local municipalities to adhere to Government Communication Policy (2018). They also indicate the need to integrate social media into local municipalities' broader communication strategies. Our findings also highlight the criticality of developing social media policies that guide employee engagement in the local municipalities studied. These policies should be made available to all employees across rank and file. This should be accompanied by specialised training of employees on social media and, more specifically, how to use social media for internal communication more ethically.

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