

Internet applications in the political sphere: Perceptions and views of political institutions in South Africa

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Introduction: The pervasiveness of global forces in societies

The era of globalisation is typified by global forces that are eroding traditional boundaries and loyalties in all countries. Examples are economic forces such as the worldwide diffusion of goods, services, capital and investment. A principle driving force behind these processes is said to be the spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that provide the necessary platform for an emerging "information" economy (Wilenius, 1998). However, globalisation is not confined to economic processes alone; rather, it is "the confluence of economic, political, social and cultural factors interacting on a world scale thanks to the expansion of knowledge, information, trade and technology beyond geographical borders and poles of economic activity" (Morales-Gomez, 1997). Societies and individuals are therefore, much more than in the past, confronted with changes and new dynamics that are now challenging them to invent and adapt political structures, social norms and institutional arrangements to cope with transnational flows of capital, people, goods, environmental resources, ideas and images.

In the political sphere, globalisation has created the opportunity for people to mobilise more easily and to form alliances around issues of common interest, such environmental issues, gender issues, etc. In some cases these alliances have formed strong pressure groups, eventually influencing decision-making in the direction of democracy. This so-called "third wave of democratisation" (Karl *et al*, 2002) is a fast-tracking process and does not always coincide with established political geographies and it poses a threat to old authoritarian norms. The speed and volatility of these processes, such as the rapid flow of images and information, are often at odds with slower, more deliberative processes of decision making.

Within the political arena, various models of democracy exist. These models differ in terms of variable such as the participation levels and preferred communication technologies utilised for participation. In contrast to representative democracy models in which elected representatives make political decisions on behalf of the public, there is the direct democracy model, in which people vote directly on all issues affecting them (Pisturino, 1998). Toffler (1990) has argued that new technologies should afford citizens such an opportunity to directly vote on various referenda, greatly limiting the power of elected representatives. Advocates of this "push-button-democracy" (Nulens, 1999:29) approach,

champion the Old Town meeting concept where public opinion was simply measured by the "yes" or "no" of individual citizens. Direct democracy networks therefore require equipment that can tally votes and publish poll results as fast as possible. This type of countrywide media facilitation of democracy is not a viable option in South Africa where there is a marked urban-rural digital divide.

Thompson (1995) argues that existing types of democracies such as representative democracies can, with the help of the media, become deliberative democracies. Deliberative models emphasise the role of public discourse in the political process. Debates and dialogues are of primary importance to this approach (see Rheingold, 1993), and they can take place via communication technologies that play the role of providing a public debating arena (Gaynor, 1996), similar to the public sphere as advocated by Habermas (1989). This approach strives to bind people together in ongoing discussions about political issues affecting communities.

The deliberative model of democracy requires technologies that can simulate face-to-face discussions and interactions on political issues. The Internet is one such technology that can be used for facilitation of political communication and processes. For the purpose of this study, the term "teledemocracy" will be used to refer to this type of facilitation of deliberative political processes by means of the Internet. This term can be applied in many ways, and it essentially describes the electronic mediation of political dialogue. Other terms similar to this concept are "electronic democracy" (Doherty, 1999), "wired democracy" (McTavish, 1996), and "democracy at a distance" (London, 1995).

Diverging perspectives on the facilitation of political processes by means of the Internet.

Scholars have opposing views regarding the potential of teledemocracy (in the sense of facilitation of political processes by means of the Internet) to either enhance or impede the democratic process. This is partly because theorists not only differ in terms of the effect they believe ICTs can have on populations, but they also differ in terms of their perceptions about the degrees to which technologies can influence individuals or societies. For example, a distinction can be made between academics that support "hard" (or strong) and "soft" (or weak) technological determinism (Chandler, 2000). Hard technological determinism refers to the extreme stance that a particular ICT is either a sufficient condition determining social thought, organisation and development, or at least a necessary condition for certain impacts on society. Soft technological determinism claims that the presence of a particular ICT is an enabling or facilitating factor leading to potential opportunities or impacts, which may or may not be taken up in particular societies or periods. According to this view,

other mediating factors are involved and the mere existence of a technology does not inevitably lead to its use or impact (Finnegan, 1988:38).

In addition, scholars as well as political stakeholders are divided into opposing camps with regard to the impact of ICT on society. These two opposing viewpoints, the "utopian" and "dystopian" perspectives (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 1997) also exist with regard to the feasibility of teledemocracy in their constituencies, and will now be discussed in more detail.

The "utopian" perspective on the impact of ICT on society propagates the view that the information age heralds global access to information for all people on an unprecedented scale. This global access is expected to open opportunities to citizens that will "... empower people, enable them to lobby, monitor policy, learn, collaborate, campaign and react" (UNRISD, 1997).

This pro-technology stance supports the notion that in the political sphere, the Internet will increasingly be utilised for purposes of communication and information provision by political institutions and role players. People and organisations will ultimately be empowered to participate in public decision-making. Proponents of this view therefore favour teledemocracy (in the sense the Internet could be used to facilitate deliberative political processes), and they believe that the use of the Internet could ultimately help transform even modern representative democracies (Keskinen, 1998).

This positive perspective on teledemocracy is premised on the views and perceptions such as the following:

- Teledemocracy will foster increased civic participation in the democratic process.
- Access to information will make people better informed.
- Two-way communication will facilitate broader participation in policy discussions and decision-making.
- Teledemocracy will facilitate or direct communication between citizens and policy makers.
- Teledemocracy will create innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate on key public issues.
- Teledemocracy will help guarantee equal access to information to large numbers of citizens.
- Teledemocracy will provide improved access to government information and services (London, 1995).

On the other hand, the "dystopian" perspective on the impact of ICT on society holds that Internet use in political processes will result in a

pseudo-democracy emerging, allowing participation in marginal decisions only. It also holds that the proliferation of the Internet in the home will individualise information consumption to a degree that makes the formation of democratic public opinion no more than an illusion (UNRISD, 1997). Proponents of this view are therefore sceptical of the likely success of teledemocracy as defined in this study, and are likely to have views and perceptions such as the following

- Teledemocracy can create an imbalance of power.
- Quality, not quantity is the measure of democratic participation.
- The potential for propaganda and misinformation is great when the Internet is used to facilitate political processes.
- Bringing citizens into the discussion by means of the Internet could prolong and confuse issues.
- New forms of direct democracy may short-circuit representative government.
- New forms of communication will displace standard news practices (London, 1995).

From the above it is clear that views and perceptions of political stakeholders on ICT impacts are important, as they could determine whether or not ICT-related initiatives are successful or even attempted. Equally important are their views on the level of societal involvement that should be allowed in governmental decision making processes. Over the last few years the South African government has consistently come out in favour of both societal involvement in decision-making, and the use of the Internet for the diffusion of information. Examples of the former are the consultative Green Paper and White Paper processes leading up to the enactment of governmental legislation, as well as government stipulations that make consultation with relevant stakeholders a prerequisite for different types of official approval (e.g. the affording of community radio licenses). Second, the government's positive view towards the Internet is illustrated by the existence of the many government-related Web sites, by its "Government Online" initiative for information provision on political issues, as well as by its use of the Web and e-mail to elicit comments on issues (e.g. on e-commerce legislation).

This stance of the South African government augurs well for the growth of teledemocracy in the country. However, the question arises, do other political parties, institutions and organisations have the ability to respond to and also the inclination to use the Internet for political purposes? As it was not known how political institutions and organisations perceived teledemocracy, it was decided that a study focusing on the perceptions of political stakeholders was needed. The study described in this article therefore consisted of a survey that was conducted among a sample of South African political bodies and that was aimed at investigating their views and perceptions with regard to teledemocracy.

Research questions and aim of study

In South Africa there is currently a prominent digital divide between urban and rural areas. This has had definite implications for communication initiatives of those political parties/organisations whose followers largely reside in rural constituencies. The use of the Internet for political purposes has traditionally therefore not been high on the communication agenda of political bodies outside of government.

However, as government has increased its use of the Internet for political purposes, and as access to the Internet has increased in the country – also in rural areas as the result of numerous government and other community and development initiatives – the situation has started to change. IDASA (the Institute for Democracy in South Africa) has for example launched a number of ICT-related initiatives (e.g. the PIMS Monitor, EpoliticsSA, and the Chapter 2 Network) to strengthen public participation in politics (Fleming, 2001). Similarly, SANGONeT (South African Non-Governmental Organisation Network) provides a variety of politically-relevant information services to civil society via ICTs (Barnard, 2003).

It seems inevitable that political bodies will increasingly use all media at their disposal, including the Internet, for their political purposes. There is therefore a need for research in South Africa that will address this issue. In the light of the forgoing discussion, the main research question posed by the current study was:

- (a) What are the views of politically-orientated institutions and organisations in South Africa on their use the Internet, and
- (b) what are their perceptions on how the Internet could impact on democratic processes in the country?

The aim of this exploratory research study was to obtain from political institutions and organisations information that could cast light on the issue of how likely it was that the Internet would contribute to a deliberative democracy in South Africa. More specifically, the views of the institutions were to be obtained with regard to their use of the Internet (including their views on benefits and problems associated with such use), as well as their perceptions with regard to the following research sub-questions:

- Will the use of the Internet enhance or impede democracy?
- Will the Internet empower or weaken government?
- Will access to information via the Internet make people in South Africa better informed?
- Will communication via the Internet facilitate broader participation in political policy discussion and decision making in South Africa?

- Will the Internet facilitate direct public participation in governance through direct communication between citizens and policy makers?
- Will the Internet create innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate on key public issues?
- Can the Internet create an imbalance of power in South Africa?
- How great is the potential for propaganda and misinformation when the Internet is used by political institutions in South Africa?
- Will the bringing of citizens into political discussions via the Internet confuse political issues?
- Could new forms of direct democracy via the Internet short-circuit representative government in South Africa?

How the study was conducted

The study consisted of interviews being conducted among a selected sample of politically active institutions and organisations. To make this possible, the first step was compiling a list of qualifying representative political bodies. The main criteria used for inclusion in the study's sample were that the institution or organisation should be:

- a) South African,
- b) functioning within the political arena (e.g. as a political party, grouping or pressure group) and
- c) reasonably well known and likely to have Internet facilities.

This resulted in the following institutions or organisations being involved in the study: United Democratic Movement (UDM), Afrikaner Vryheidstigting (AVS), Freedom Front (FF), New National Party (NNP) and Democratic Alliance (DA), Gay and Lesbian Organisation - Pretoria (GLOP), Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), Congress of South African Trade Unions COSATU, South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), Department of Housing, National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Transport User Group (TUG), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), SA Housing Trust, Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA), South African Environmental Project, Mamelodi Heritage Forum (MAHEFO), SaNGONet, National Institute for Crime Prevention and Re-integration of offenders (NICRO), South African Gunners' Association (SAGA); Centre for Democratic Communications (CDC), South African National Cancer Association (SANCO).

This sample of institutions and organisations was therefore selected on the basis of predetermined criteria and convenience, and not by means of statistically random sampling procedures. This means that only descriptive statistic procedures (and not inferential statistics) could be used to process the responses, and that the results are not necessarily generalisable to a specific larger population of institutions/organisations.

All selected institutions were first approached by telephone with the request to participate. The research was introduced to them according to the introduction on the front page of the questionnaire, and they were asked whether someone could visit them to conduct the interview. Fourteen organisations indicated that they would rather have the questionnaire send to them by e-mail, and so this was done. The other institutions were physically visited and interviewed by fieldworkers. In this way a total of 28 questionnaires were completed.

Views on the use of the Internet by politically orientated institutions and organisations

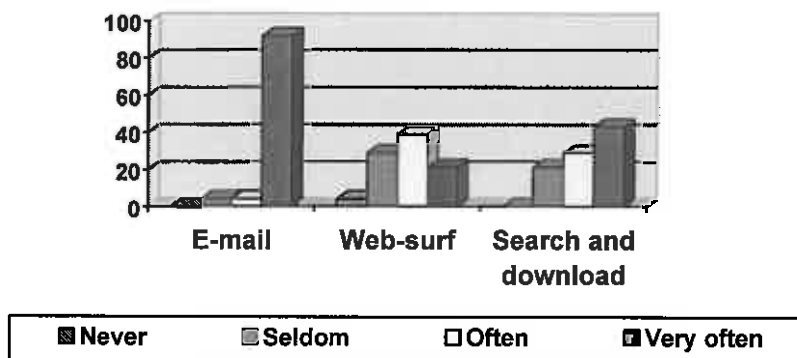
(a) Views on Internet capabilities

It was clear from the responses obtained that the **capability to provide information** and **two-way communication capability** of the Internet were seen as the most important facets of the Internet by the responding political institutions (e.g. about four-fifths of the responses described each of these two capabilities as "very important"). In contrast, the ability of the Internet to mobilise popular support, and also its ability to influence public opinion, were not regarded as being so important (less than half of the responses described these two capabilities as being very important).

(b) Views on Internet facilities and benefits

The feature of the Internet utilised most by the sample of political organizations and institutions (see Figure 1), was its **e-mail facility**. This facility was used mostly for communication purposes both within the organisation and externally. Suggested changes that could result in more beneficial use of the e-mail facility centered around providing better training of users and wider access to e-mail facilities. Other issues that were also mentioned were the download time being too slow, the information overload and the high financial costs.

Figure 1: Internet facilities utilised most



With regard to **Web use**, it was reported that a large variety of sites were visited by the organisations, but it was evident that these sites visited corresponded closely with the field of interest of each organisation. The purpose of these visits was mostly to gather and update information, to do networking and marketing and to share information with appropriate role players. Asked what could be changed to better their Web facilities, the following suggestions were made: Partners should update their Web pages more regularly, a list of "favourites" should be compiled in order to avoid searching through endless information that is not applicable, main indexes should be created on important themes i.e. HIV/AIDS, and people should be trained better.

Almost three-quarters of the institutions stated that they used the Internet often or very often for **searching and downloading of information**. The type of information downloaded varied and incorporated a wide variety array of topics that mainly related to the core of the organisations. Suggestions that were made to better the functioning of this facility were better training, better hard and software and wider subscriptions to other databases. Some respondents also wanted the software to be user-friendlier in order for a wider audience to be able to operate this Internet function.

(c) **Views on Internet benefits**

Asked what **other benefits** associated with the Internet they also viewed as being desirable, the respondents mentioned that the Internet could provide timeous information on a variety of educational, economic and social issues, which could assist in decision-making processes. It was also mentioned that previously marginalised communities could now also participate more as they were less isolated.

Suggestions that were made on how the Internet could be used to obtain more support and benefits, essentially revolved around the issue of accessibility and marketing. The respondents felt that the Internet should be accessible to more people, especially expanding into the under-resourced rural communities. Strong emphasis was placed on an effective marketing strategy for the Internet, including using Web pages, creating more links, lobbying and campaigning. A few respondents also mentioned the issue of better and more effective training.

(d) **Views on using other media for providing political information**

When provided with a list of communication media and asked how effective each one was for giving political information through to people, the following was found:

- Respondents held the view that **radio** was the most effective way of giving political information through to people (*Very effective* = 79%, *Effective* = 14%, thus *Effective + Very effective* = 93%).

- **Television** was also regarded highly (*Effective* + *Very effective* was also 93%, but only 50% regarded the medium as *Very effective*).
- **Word of mouth** and **newspapers** were next in line as effective ways of providing people with political information (*Effective* + *Very effective* was 86% in each case).
- The percentage of the respondents describing the **Internet** as being *Effective* was 64%, while only 18% viewed it as *Very effective* (thus *Effective* + *Very effective* totalled 82%).
- **Political meetings** featured at the bottom of the list (*Effective* + *Very effective* totalled 80%).

(e) Problems and concerns regarding the use of the Internet

About a third of the respondents indicated that they encountered some problems regarding the use of the Internet. Most of the problems expressed, centred round the issues of affordability, lack of suitable training, and software and hardware difficulties. It was mentioned that the costs of maintaining the systems were high, that telephone costs were high and that general administrative costs in companies have escalated since the introduction of the Internet. The lack of training and technical skills needed for operating these systems were also frequently mentioned as problems. The issue of the possible misuse (for private purposes) of the Internet and the subsequent decrease in productivity was also mentioned. Concerns regarding the issue of accessibility were also raised. It was stated that some organisations did not have the infrastructure or financial means required for accessing the Internet, and would therefore automatically be excluded from using this communication technology.

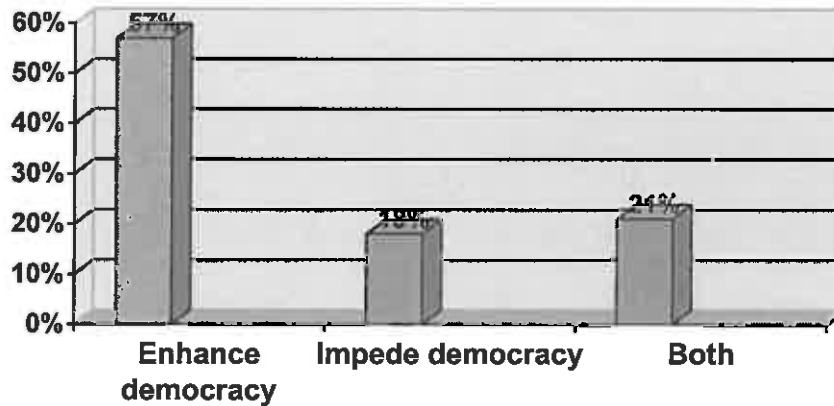
Perceptions of how the Internet could impact on democratic processes in South Africa

(a) Perception on whether or not the use of the Internet would enhance or impede democracy in South Africa

The majority of the respondents were of the opinion that the Internet could enhance democracy in South Africa (see Figure 2). They did not dispute the fact that the Internet was an important tool for information delivery and to influence decision-making. However, the majority of the respondents were also extremely concerned about the issue of access. They were concerned that the current trend of Internet penetration, which entrenches the marginalisation of the poor, should urgently be reversed. It was suggested that the government should formulate a clear and committed plan for expanding electronic communications to peri-urban and rural areas. They were rather sure that if the issue of

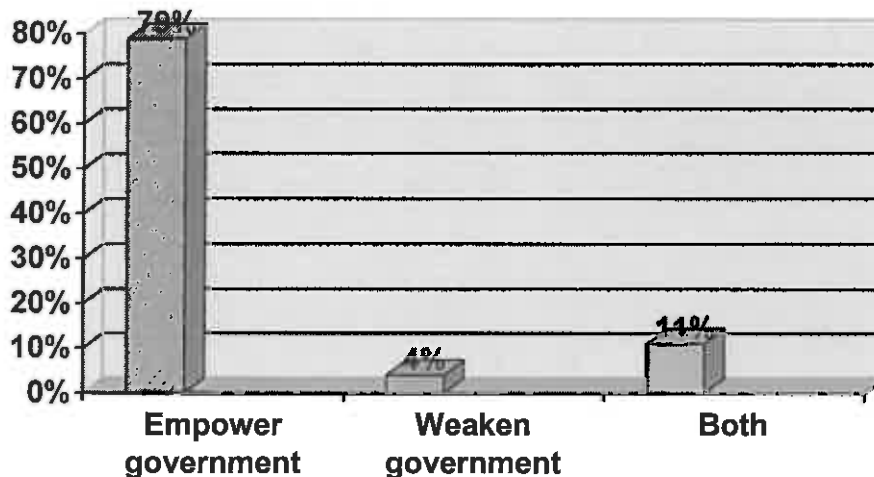
access were not addressed, the Internet would not be able to ensure a more representative democracy.

Figure 2: Responses to the question: "Will the Internet enhance or impede democracy in South Africa?"



(b) Perception on whether or not the Internet will empower or weaken government

Figure 3: Responses to the question: "Will the Internet empower or weaken government?"



About four-fifths of the respondents felt that the Internet would empower government (see Figure 3), especially from an information sharing, communication and transparency point of view. They felt that access to better and faster information had great potential for improving the performance of government, as information could be distributed much more rapidly and cheaply. Even in inter-governmental spheres, access to

databanks could improve efficiency. The respondents did however mention that government would only be empowered in this regard if the government employees were well trained in the usage and usefulness of the Internet. The respondents who had reservations about this issue (those who answered in the negative or indicated both options) stated that although government might raise its profile, it might also alienate those that do not have access.

(c) Perception on whether or not access to information via the Internet would make people in South Africa better informed

More than three-quarters of the respondents felt that access to information via the Internet would make people better informed. They qualified this by stating that access to information would enhance public opinion, people would be better informed about global issues and that it was a direct form of communication. The respondents that disagreed with the statement were of the opinion that the some people might not have the resources or might not be literate, and therefore would not be able to utilise this technology. Respondents' suggestions that training on the functionality and workings of the Internet might ensure that people become better informed. Respondents also commented that disadvantaged communities should be given more access and entry points to the Internet, and that a culture of fostering and appreciating information should be sought.

(d) Perception on whether or not communication via the Internet will facilitate broader participation in political policy discussions and decision making in South Africa

Almost two-thirds of the respondents (64%) agreed that the Internet would facilitate broader participation in political party discussions and decision making in South Africa. It was stated that this mode of communication was a constructive problem-solving method that flattens hierarchical structures. Respondents that were sceptical about the influence of the Internet on political party discussions and decision-making, mainly attributed it to the lack of access in some communities, and to little interest in party political discussions. One person also mentioned that South Africans still believe in "visible participation" in politics. Suggestions to facilitate broader participation in political party discussions and decision making in South Africa again centred on the issue of broader access, and on better education and awareness programmes.

(e) Perception on whether or not the Internet will facilitate public participation in governance through direct communication between citizens and policy makers

Approximately 61% agreed that the Internet would facilitate direct public participation in governance through direct communication between citizens and policy makers. Twenty one percent of the respondents were not sure of this issue while 14% disagreed with the statement. Those respondents who agreed with the statement thought that the nature of this technology made it possible to bring governance closer to people, and that it was a very convenient method of communication. Global problems could be identified and communicated more easily. Issues impacting on the level of Internet impact on public participation in governance were again the issues of access, education, training, awareness and costs.

(f) Perceptions on whether or not Internet use will lead to innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate

This question elicited the following responses. Seventy one percent argued that the Internet would definitely create innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate on key issues. They stated that the Internet was a powerful and "effortless" medium of getting information. The way in which the Internet engaged with the public was also novel and different, i.e. competitions, polls, forms, bulletin boards, calendars, sounds, images, etc. It was also stated that even children were able to access this medium.

On the other hand, 14% of the respondents were unsure about this issue, and the main reasons given were again the issue of lack of access, lack of education and the lack of training. These reasons were also stated by the 11% who did not think that the Internet would create innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate.

(g) Perceptions on whether or not the Internet can create an imbalance of power in South Africa

The respondents were divided on the issue of whether or not the Internet could create an imbalance of power in South Africa. Those who thought that the Internet could create an imbalance of power stated that the access to information was a critical component of power and without equal access there can be no balance of power. These respondents agreed that the wealthy and educated would have the advantage, and the poorer and illiterate part of the nation would be most disadvantaged. It was suggested that the government should facilitate access and make the Internet and other information tools more affordable.

Those respondents who stated that the Internet would not create an imbalance of power argued that the Internet was only a medium of spreading information, and not a power tool. They also stated that people

have a choice, that they could make their own decisions, and that the Internet could educate and empower all people.

Asked what should be done in order to ensure that the Internet does not create an imbalance of power, the suggestions revolved around the issue of equal access, basic literacy education and education and training in general. The respondents were also concerned about the high financial costs involved in maintaining an Internet connection and argued for a cheaper rollout. The respondent suggested that the issue of access should be addressed by government and the private sector by means of installing Internet connections in schools and in community centres. Strong emphasis was also placed on basic literacy courses, and on better education and training for people in general.

(h) Perceptions on the potential for propaganda and misinformation when the Internet is used by political institutions in South Africa

About a third of the respondents agreed that the potential for propaganda and misinformation was great when the Internet was used by political parties or institutions in South Africa. Almost as many people (29%) felt neutral on this issue, while 40% disagreed with the statement. Those who said that the Internet would enhance propaganda and misinformation gave the following reasons: There are no "checks and balances" with regard to the type of information that is provided on the Internet. Information is free and accessible to everyone and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions.

The respondents who disagreed with this statement were of the opinion that the Internet was no different from any other information providing medium i.e. radio, television and newspapers. These forms of media also have the potential of misinforming and propaganda and information via the Internet will not significantly change anything. One respondent also stated that the Internet was subject to the same type of criticism and challenges as other media, and that this media would therefore also somehow strike a balance.

Respondents differed with regard to how this issue should be addressed. Some respondents aired the view that people have the right to all information, while other respondents felt that the public should be protected against propaganda and that information should be regulated. The responses essentially centred around striking balance between the right to access of information, the right to freedom of expression and association and a need to regulate a medium that has the potential for abuse.

(i) Perceptions on whether or not bringing citizens into political discussion via the Internet could confuse political issues.

The respondents were to a large extent convinced that political discussions via the Internet would not confuse political issues. According to them, the Internet would rather add more dimensions to political issues, it would afford citizens the right to raise their own opinions and participate in public discussion, and it would serve to enlighten and educate people. The respondents that disagreed with this view were mostly concerned with the subjectivity of the content of the information and the lack of accountability.

When asked what needed to be done or changed in SA in order to ensure that the Internet would not confuse political issues, the respondents stated that the authenticity of information and the sources should be verified, reporting should be to be objective, and people should be educated and trained. The public's political intelligence also needed to be developed.

(j) Perceptions on whether or not new forms of democracy via the Internet will short-circuit representative government in South Africa.

The respondents in this study were mostly of the opinion that new forms of democracy via the Internet would not short-circuit representative government in South Africa. They based their view mainly on the perceptions (a) that a small percentage of South Africans were connected and therefore the impact would be minimal; (b) that participation of people in politics was part of South Africans culture and would not be replaced by a virtual political world, and (c) that the type information that the Internet provided was more likely to enhance representative government.

Conclusions

From the views elicited from the sample of political institutions and organisations that were interviewed in this study, the following can be concluded: First, those facets of the Internet that were seen as being most important for promoting deliberative democracy processes in the country, were the Internet's ability to provide information, and its two-way communication capabilities. The feature of the Internet utilised most by the respondents for political purposes, was its e-mail facility. Another benefit associated with the Internet was the timely way in which information could be obtained for political decision-making processes. However, the respondents also held the view that radio and television were currently more effective media for giving political information through to people. Most of the problems expressed with regard to

teledemocracy centred round the issues of Internet affordability, a lack of suitable training, and software and hardware difficulties.

It can also be concluded from the study that the political institution's perceptions on how the Internet could impact on democratic processes in the country were generally reflective of an optimistic or utopian perspective on teledemocracy. There was however one important proviso: the Internet could only contribute to a deliberative democracy in South Africa if the government ensured better access to all. According to the representatives of the political institutions and organisation that were interviewed, the worst-case scenario would be if the Internet continues to be the exclusive preserve of those with political and economic power. Access to information and communication was perceived as still being denied to the masses that have neither the education nor the access to the technology required to benefit from it. This was seen as possibly resulting in a situation where those that are politically naïve becoming subject to propaganda. Also, only those political institutions with financial resources and good Web sites would be able to invite participation, while those with no access would be left out in the cold.

Access to the Internet was seen as possibly being broadened through education and other initiatives making the technology more widely available in poorer schools and communities - if the government was willing to subsidise these facilities. Citizens would then be better informed, and they would have the opportunity to do their own research, to communicate their views and to and seek information from a wide range of political parties and government officials. They could then join or establish organisations using the Internet to mobilise public opinion and political pressure with respect to general and specific social and economic issues.

It was further felt that those involved in government should recognise not only the dangers and limitations of the Internet, but also its strengths. The attempted spread of access points should be done in a sustainable and realistic way, making use, as much as possible, of civil society initiatives and existing community based structures. Assistance should be devolved to the local level to allow solutions appropriate to the situation to develop naturally. Public participation through the Internet e.g. voting, policy opinion would be desirable, as well as more transparency and accountability with regard to government issues. If government did not take service delivery seriously, especially with regard to facilitating Internet access to the poor, it could lead to the creation of an anti-Internet attitude among people involved in governance. This would mean that an integrated government Internet strategy could become a pipe dream. Internet space in South Africa would then in all likelihood turn into a purely private and commercial realm, thereby worsening the negative effects of the urban-rural digital divide. The respondents felt that

government should have a clear, co-ordinated and coherent Internet strategy to address these issues.

In summary, the Internet was perceived to have a significant role to play with regard to political and democracy issues in South Africa. It was however realised that if certain problems (the lack of access, the lack of basic and computer literacy, and the lack of training) were not adequately addressed by means of an integrated government Internet strategy, the ability of the Internet to impact positively on democracy in South Africa would be very limited.

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