



Public Sector Communication in the Digital Age

Insights and Influences from the Global South

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Public sector communication in Southern Africa cannot be understood outside the factors shaped by the region's historical context, political transitions and, subsequently, the need for transparent and inclusive governance. This is also the case in the rest of the African continent where effective public sector communication is crucial in promoting transparency and accountability, thus fostering public trust in government institutions. Fundamentally, as Okigbo and Eribo (2004) posit, information and communication play a significant role in development. In recent times, a proliferation of scholarly works has emerged, addressing the detrimental repercussions of ineffective government communication with the public in the African context. These discussions are particularly pertinent as African nations endeavour to construct development-focused and citizen-centric institutions (Adeola, Katuse & Twum, 2022).

Notably, Adeola et al. (2022) have made significant contributions with their comprehensive two-volume edited work, which revolves around marketing communication themes encompassing branding, public relations, trade fairs, exhibitions, and public sector communications. The first volume, *Public Sector Marketing Communications Volume I: Public Relations and Brand Communication Perspectives*, prominently underscores the vital role that public sector marketing communication assumes in bridging the divide between society and the government. "Building a relationship with the public through appropriate communication tools



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and platforms,” they argue, “is sacrosanct to restoring public sector image and trust” (Adeola et al., 2022: vi). This notion closely aligns with the objectives of this current book, *Public Sector Communication in the Digital Age*. Adeola, Katuse and Twum additionally contend that their endeavour revolves around disseminating conceptual and theoretical research regarding the marketisation of Africa’s public sector as it aims to engage effectively with the public it serves (Adeola et al., 2022).

In the second volume, *Public Sector Marketing Communications* (Adeola, Twum & Katuse, 2023), the authors delve into both traditional and digital perspectives, offering another convergence with the subject matter at hand. Nonetheless, their foundational premise that the enhancement of public sector image and trust in Africa necessitates the judicious utilisation of suitable marketing communication tools and platforms remains pivotal. There exists scant evidence to counter the argument that strategic communication and its associated tools play a significant role in facilitating interactions between the government and its citizens. This, in turn, fosters inter-governmental and inter-agency cooperation, ultimately fostering a citizen-oriented public sector (Adeola et al., 2023).

While strategic communication tools are posited to play a critical role in citizen and public sector relationships, this current book introduces a more nuanced and ideological perspective, as evidenced by Radebe in Chapter 9. Indeed, in the digital era, there is little doubt, as suggested by Adeola, Twum and Katuse (2023), that the digital revolution presents an opportunity for public sector institutions to align their communication strategies with new technologies, notably by leveraging social media platforms. Several chapters in this volume, such as those authored by Kaunda and Mukonza and Sitto-Kaunda, demonstrate the extent to which digital platforms are shaping the dynamics of how the public sector engages with the citizenry.

Notably, social media has become a cornerstone of public sector communication, as elucidated in volumes like *Social Media and Africa's Public Sector: Perspectives on Contemporary Issues*, which focuses on developing a systematic approach to comprehending the transformations in Africa's public sector social media landscape (Adae, Twum, Hinson, Duh & Odame, 2023). Arguments have been advanced regarding the integration of social media practices into the operational activities of African public sector institutions, aiming to deliver enhanced value to African citizens and consumers of public goods and services (Adae et al., 2023). In the context of this book, these concepts are, *inter alia*, analysed through the praxis of the contributing authors.

South Africa's Evolving Public Sector Communication Landscape

Expectedly, South Africa's public sector communication landscape underwent significant changes in transitioning from the apartheid era to a democratic dispensation (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005; Glenn & Mattes, 2012). For the purposes of this book, by public sector we refer to the part of the country's economic and administrative structure that is owned, operated or controlled by the government. This encompasses various government agencies, departments, ministries and other public institutions responsible for delivering public services, implementing government policies and managing public resources (Mutula & Wamukoya, 2009). However, as it will emerge later, the concept of the public sector is applied within the framework of the state, which, as outlined in the constitutional provisions, is divided among the three branches: the executive (Cabinet), the legislature (Parliament), and the judiciary (Courts of Law). This division aligns with the fundamental principle of the separation of powers (Munzhedzi, 2017).

Before democracy, and particularly during the formal apartheid era (1948–1994), the government exercised strict control over communication channels. This was a clear and

deliberate communication strategy to shape public discourse and maintain its oppressive policies. Maseko elucidates this point in this volume. In fact, the media was prohibited from reporting on liberation politics or banned organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). During apartheid, government communication and state-controlled media served as propaganda tools to promote the apartheid ideology and suppress dissenting voices (Tomaselli, 1997). Often, the concept of ‘national interest’ was invoked (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). On the other hand, independent media outlets were subjected to severe restrictions and censorship that limited the flow of information to the public (Radebe, 2006).

The advent of democracy in 1994 ushered in a new era for public sector communication and, notably, represented the inauguration of a democratic government for the very first time. Various aspects of this communication system underwent some serious transformation, with the new democratic government not only recognising, but compelled by its historical principles and mission – and later the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) – to respect the significance of transparency, accountability and citizen engagement as critical components of governance. Democracy signalled an end to repressive state regulation of the media (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). With media freedom and freedom of expression among the rights enshrined in the new Constitution (Radebe, 2021), the foundation for a more open and inclusive communication environment was laid.

Today, South Africa boasts one of the most independent media landscapes in the Global South. Of course, the concept of media independence remains nebulous since the so-called independent media are largely controlled by commercial interests, with advertising and market interests sustaining the funding model. This is also largely the model that has been adopted by digital media platforms. Nevertheless, the commercial print media remains concentrated (Govenden, 2022) and controlled by four oligopolies (Chiumbu & Radebe,

2022). Therefore, public sector communication is a pivotal bridge for the information gap between the government and citizens, fostering a sense of participation and ownership in the democratic process.

Of course, the advent and rapid growth of digital technologies, which have become ubiquitous in South Africa (John, Maama, Ojogiwa & Mubangizi, 2022), has also revolutionised public sector communication. Communication technologies have provided the public sector with much-needed impetus to engage confidently with citizens. In particular, the internet penetration rate, the proliferation of mobile communication, and the ever-growing presence of social media platforms have created new avenues to disseminate information and engage citizens. With South Africa having one of the highest internet and smart phone penetration on the continent (Osei-Appiah, 2021), the burgeoning role of digital technologies is unsurprising. Suddenly, the public sector possesses the ability for real-time interactions with citizens while providing access to government services and information, as discussed by Kaunda and Mukonza in this volume. Of course, it remains to be seen whether these technologies have been effectively utilised beyond being employed to profile government leaders.

Nevertheless, the government is aware of the potential of digital platforms in enhancing citizen engagement and transparency. Hence, many government leaders, from the president to cabinet ministers to the lowest officials, all have some form of social media presence. For example, President Cyril Ramaphosa uses platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) where he has 2.6 million followers, over and above platforms such as Facebook, to drive his engagements. The government has taken advantage of digital technologies through initiatives such as online consultations, e-participation platforms and open data portals (Solomon & Van Klyton, 2020). These efforts are crucial in promoting inclusivity, participation and accountability in the public sector.

These technological developments notwithstanding, challenges with digital communication persist. The digital divide remains a significant hurdle pertaining to access, affordability and, to some extent, digital literacy among different segments of the population (Matli & Ngoepe, 2020; Cariolle, 2021). The challenges of language barriers and cultural considerations are also well documented and affect the potential of public sector communication from reaching diverse communities.

It is precisely these contextual factors with which this book grapples in its endeavour to unravel and theorise the public sector communication landscape, primarily in South Africa, in the context of growing digitisation. Whereas significant progress has been made by the government in its communication efforts across the public sector, thoroughgoing efforts are imperative to overcome some of the challenges and harness the opportunities presented, especially by digital communication platforms.

Factors Influencing Public Sector Communication

The role of infrastructure

For any communication to be effective, robust and reliable infrastructure is essential. Infrastructure, in this context, encompasses various technological and physical components that enable seamless and efficient communication within the public sector. Of course, they have a social dimension (Mamalipurath & Notley, 2022) and are fundamentally value laden since they are closely connected to information and communication flows, and the underlying economic base (Prodnik, 2014).

One crucial aspect of communication infrastructure is information technology (IT). Indeed, technologies have profoundly transformed various facets of contemporary society. They have revolutionised communication methods, information access, work processes, business operations, government interactions and social interactions. Their

pervasive influence now extends to the socio-economic landscape, playing an important role in the lives of all citizens (Roztock, Soja & Weistroffer, 2019). Digital communication platforms have emerged as a vital cog of the communication infrastructure. These platforms encompass email systems, instant messaging applications, video conferencing tools and social networks, among others. Although they have enabled the state's communication with citizens through real-time interactions, allowing the state to disseminate public announcements, policy updates and other essential information to citizens in a timely manner, such platforms are not without challenges. Nevertheless, social media, in particular, is generally recognised for its potential to enhance government communication with the public, improve operational efficiency and increase responsiveness to public concerns (Mwaura, Carter & Kubheka, 2020).

South Africa continues to be ranked among the most unequal societies globally, with a significant prevalence of poverty persisting and opulence co-existing, and hence the importance of physical infrastructure should not be downplayed. Therefore, physical public engagements, such as through *izimbizo* (gatherings), should remain important. Radebe, in this volume, argues that, although useful when properly executed, with benefits for citizens, citizen engagement should not be treated like a silver bullet and thus should be examined for its ability to play the fundamental role of redistribution of power in class-divided societies. Indeed, in supporting effective public sector communication, infrastructure is crucial and forms the foundation for seamless information exchange and stakeholder engagement.

The impact of varying levels of literacy

Literacy, whether media, digital or health literacy, remains one of the contentious issues when dealing with public communication. Any effective communication is dependent on the recipients' ability to decipher and decode transmitted messages. However, varying levels of literacy among citizens and communicators can significantly influence the clarity and

efficacy of messages. South Africa has an adult illiteracy rate of about 12%, with about 4.4 million adults still illiterate when compared with the global average of 14%. Literacy is essential in communication since it denotes the ability to “identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (Khuluvhe, 2021: 4).

In an unequal society such as South Africa with diverse educational backgrounds, levels of literacy can vary significantly. Nevertheless, low literacy levels can hinder the comprehension of the communication by the state, leading to inadequate public engagement and basic understanding among certain segments of the population. There is a dialectical relationship between the transmitters and receivers of information since communicators who are inadequately trained may struggle to convey information accurately and understandably, leading to potential miscommunications and inefficiencies.

Effective communication skills

Effective communication is another fundamental aspect that plays a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between the public sector and citizens (McCombs, 2002). Public sector communicators have a critical responsibility in disseminating information to the public and fostering a clear understanding of the policies, initiatives and services of the state. Indeed, the public sector’s ability to communicate effectively is fundamental and communication skills to achieve this goal are paramount.

Communication is the backbone of transparency, accountability and trust-building between the public sector and citizens. As Maseko posits in this volume, effective communication must ensure, among other things, that the public is well-informed about the decisions of the state, public policies and administrative processes. The ability to communicate clearly is crucial in democratic societies where transparency in public institutions is required and hence

the significance of providing free access to information is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of democracy (Androniceanu, 2021). One of the central reasons why effective communication skills are vital in the public sector is the complex nature of state information. Given the intricate technical information and legal jargon that government must sometimes deal with (As-Saber, Srivastava & Hossain, 2006), effective communication skills become useful in translating this information into accessible language that the public can comprehend. Communication skills play a pivotal role in reducing information asymmetry between the state and citizens.

In the post COVID-19 era, the era of crisis and emergencies, clear public sector communication is paramount. During disasters or public health crises, the government's ability to communicate vital information promptly and clearly can save lives and maintain public order. As Lubinga argues in this volume, effective communication plays a vital role in informing, persuading and maintaining healthy behaviour among citizens of any society. Again, communications skills help prevent misinformation and panic by providing accurate guidance to the public.

Indeed, effective communication fosters public understanding of the state's actions, leading to increased trust and confidence in public institutions. Transparent communication practices contribute positively to increased inclusivity and citizen empowerment in public engagement. Transparent communication is regarded as "an essential aspect of rationality, progress and good governance" (Florini, 2007; cited in Mohelská & Sokolová, 2017: 236). An informed and engaged public is crucial for democracies, enabling constructive feedback and possessing the agency to hold public officials accountable. It is also argued that such an informed citizenry reduces the levels of distrust in state institutions and their decisions. Certainly, evidence from some studies suggests that the benefits for the public sector from citizen engagement are equally tangible, valuable and, of course, varied (Nambisan & Nambisan, 2013).

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Possessing effective communications skills is also beneficial for public institutions and officials as they contribute to improving their image while enhancing their credibility and perceived competence. Various scholars have found positive associations between perceptions of government and their responsiveness (Liao, Yuan, Dong, Yang, Fielding & Lam, 2020) and thus citizens are likely to participate if they are confident of the government's ability to respond timeously and in their best interest (Sjoberg, Mellon & Peixoto, 2017; Mansoor, 2021).

The significance of effective communication notwithstanding, public sector communicators face numerous challenges in driving messages to the public. Among the challenges are bureaucratic red tape and hierarchical structures that act as barriers to transparent and effective communication. Excessive bureaucracy and red tape in the public sector, just as in the private sector, has a negative influence on the performance of various management systems including communication (Welch & Pandey, 2007). Over and above this, differing communication preferences among diverse populations, such as South Africa's, can complicate the process of disseminating information to the public effectively.

To overcome these challenges, public sector communication must prioritise skills development, among others, as the basis for effective communication. This includes prioritising and incorporating digital platforms, social media and other emerging technologies that can help bridge the gap between the government and the public, reaching a broader audience and engaging citizens more effectively. While the South African government has a relatively high presence in social media, the country still faces many challenges pertaining to the use of digital platforms, such as the digital divide and language barriers (Mwaura et al., 2020). Nevertheless, with high internet and smart phone penetration in the country (Ndulu, Ngwenya & Setlhalogile, 2022), it is logical to invest in communication training programmes for public sector communicators, enhancing their abilities to convey information clearly and concisely.

The significance of accessible communication channels

To reach diverse audiences and enhance engagement with the public, accessible communication channels are essential. Moreover, accessible channels, encompassing both traditional and digital platforms, play a pivotal role in facilitating effective converged communication and engagement with audiences. In a nutshell, communication channels serve as conduits for disseminating information, ideas and messages to a broad spectrum of individuals, transcending geographical, cultural and linguistic barriers.

Traditional communication channels, such as print media, television, and radio, have long been instrumental in reaching diverse audiences since they offer an established and credible means of mass communication, particularly in regions where internet penetration remains limited or uneven. Even in the context of crisis communication, as argued by Coombs (2020), the mix between traditional and digital channels is critical. Hence, thinking “creatively about how to reach the non-digital constituents” under difficult circumstances is important (Coombs, 2020: 995). Although the digital media is on the rise, traditional media still holds sway in rural and marginalised communities and therefore it remains an indispensable tool for engaging with hard-to-reach populations. In many societies such as South Africa’s, community media has proven to be the mainstay when engaging the rural and marginalised populations (Shahzamal & Hassan, 2019).

Social media platforms, in particular, are now perceived as acceptable in citizen engagement to drive delivery of services such as healthcare (Stellefson, Paige, Chaney & Chaney, 2020). On the other hand, digital channels empower individuals to participate actively in public discourse and decision-making processes, fostering a sense of inclusivity and empowerment among diverse communities.

Of course, accessibility is a crucial factor in ensuring the effectiveness of communication channels in reaching diverse audiences. However, contextual factors such as language

and cultural diversity, as well as socio-economic factors, including the technological divide, are some of the vital factors to consider. Therefore, public sector communication initiatives must be deliberate in being inclusive in the context of South Africa's diverse population. Identifying accessible communication channels is part of the paramount consideration to heighten engagement, increase trust and enhance understanding among the public. We must of course guard against a binary approach in linking engagement and trust. Scholars like Petts (2008) correctly caution against the misplaced optimism that enduring trust is unlikely to spring from engagement itself. Nonetheless, the significance of accessible communication channels, be they traditional or digital, cannot be underestimated in reaching diverse audiences and enhancing engagement.

Media power and public sector communication

The media wields substantial power and influence in shaping public perception and significantly influences the effectiveness of public sector communication. Through its control over information dissemination, agenda setting and framing, the media holds immense power in constructing narratives that influence how the public perceives events and issues (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2018), including government actions. However, it is imperative to acknowledge its limitations since, for example, it has been argued that the South African media tend to portray government negatively (Radebe, 2017). This negative framing is sometimes attributed to the media's lack of transformation, leading to views that its power and hegemony still resides in the hands of the white capitalist class (Jacobs, 2004; M&G Data Desk, 2019).

This situation has led to successive state presidents, from Nelson Mandela to Thabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma, arguing that this arrangement of media power is used as a tool against the political power of the African majority (Radebe, 2020). The media in South Africa has largely positioned itself as a 'watchdog' against the black elites through state corruption, while on the other hand neglecting corruption in the private

sector perpetuated by white capital. Hence it has been accused of racism (Wasserman, 2006; Duncan, 2009) since it largely frames government institutions negatively.

However, there are instances where the media frames public institutions, such as South Africa's supreme audit institution, the Auditor-General of South Africa, positively. Of course, among the drivers of this framing by the media have been, for example, the adverse audit outcomes issued, which are used to frame the government negatively. This has also been the case with other public institutions such as the Public Protector of South Africa under Thuli Madonsela, who was singled out as a corruption buster. It was the findings against the government that catapulted the institution into the limelight. The media power also resides in its agenda-setting function, which is particularly influential in directing public attention to specific issues and topics, while also downplaying or neglecting others (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009). As a result, public sector communication efforts may be overshadowed or distorted by the media's selective focus, thereby affecting the issues that dominate public discourse. Notwithstanding the reduction of the gatekeeping power of traditional media due to the emergence of social media (Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli & Müller, 2022), traditional media remains important in the public sector communication mix for ensuring a wider reach of citizens.

Furthermore, media framing determines how events and policies are presented, influencing the public's interpretation and understanding of government actions (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). By adopting specific frames, the media can either enhance or undermine the effectiveness of public sector communication, shaping the audience's perceptions and attitudes towards governmental initiatives. Moreover, the media's role as a gatekeeper, determining which information is disseminated and how it is presented, can influence public trust in government communication (Shoemaker & Vos, 2014). Biases, sensationalism or partisan reporting can lead to public scepticism, hindering the efficacy of public sector communication efforts. Nevertheless, the

media has significance influence and implications for public sector communication.

Political climate impact

The political climate exerts a profound influence on public sector communication. Political factors, in particular, significantly shape the way the public sector communicates with the public. Expectedly, political environments are characterised by power struggles, competing ideologies and varying interests, all of which influence the design, content and delivery of public sector messages. The public environment is a highly politicised and contested space influenced by various factors. One such key aspect is the framing of government initiatives and policies. Governments, for example, often tailor their communication to resonate with their political base or to appease influential interest groups. This is a function of news frames, which are the imprint of power (Entman, 1993). Consequently, messages may be strategically crafted to emphasise certain aspects while downplaying or omitting others, potentially influencing public perceptions and attitudes.

Fundamentally, political dynamics play a role in determining the accessibility and transparency of public sector communication. In periods of heightened political polarisation, for whatever reason, including authoritarianism, some governments may restrict information flow to control the narrative and suppress dissent. In the digital age, censorship and attempts to restrain the internet are common practices. There are many instances across the world where there has been a shutdown of the internet as a whole (Denisova, 2017). Conversely, during times of political openness and accountability, governments may prioritise transparent and inclusive communication to maintain public trust (Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask & Ecker, 2021).

The choice of communication channels is also influenced by the political climate. Governments might opt for traditional media to reach broad audiences during

election campaigns, while using digital platforms to engage with specific demographic groups. Such strategies align with the political objectives of maximising voter support and mobilising constituents. For example, Sitto-Kaunda, in this volume, posits that the South African government employs e-government strategies when it attempts to reach citizens for voting purposes. Essentially, the political environment significantly shapes public sector communication and thus comprehending these dynamics is key, especially when it comes to the assessment of public sector communication.

Some Outcomes of Effective Public Sector Communication

The role of information dissemination is paramount in shaping an *informed citizenry*. Effective public sector communication not only ignites the agency of citizens but equips them with knowledge that empowers them to critically comprehend the socio-political landscape and the underlying power structures. In the context of the evolving communication landscape, characterised by the maturation of social media and the decline of mainstream institutional journalism, there is a trend towards re-evaluating the processes through which information is produced, distributed, assimilated and acted upon, including platforms, analytics, algorithms, ideological media and rogue actors (Entman & Usher, 2018). On the one hand, informed citizens are empowered to advocate for their rights and demand equitable distribution of resources, fostering collective mobilisation for social justice and community development (Wampler, 2000). On the other hand, they are enabled to challenge dominant narratives and question policies that perpetuate inequalities, thereby fostering accountable governance and empowering citizens to engage in responsible decision making (Silver, Scott & Kazepov, 2010).

Another crucial aspect of public sector communication is the establishment of *increased public trust* in government institutions and officials. The challenges previously raised

notwithstanding, this is intrinsically linked to transparent and open communication practices. Transparent communication has been argued to foster a sense of accountability and responsiveness, allowing citizens to better comprehend the decision-making processes within the government. Indeed, advocates of greater citizen participation posit that this approach may, among others, “promote democracy, build trust, increase transparency, enhance accountability, build social capital, reduce conflict, ascertain priorities, promote legitimacy, cultivate mutual understanding, and advance fairness and justice” (Callahan, 2007: 1183). Therefore, by providing clear and accessible information, officials can bridge the gap between the governing elites and the governed, promoting a sense of inclusion and reducing feelings of alienation among citizens (Bellamy, 2008).

The encouragement of *meaningful public engagement* in governance processes is important in fostering a sense of ownership and inclusion among citizens. Effective communication that prioritises transparency and accessibility allows citizens to understand and participate in decision-making processes. To this end, e-government is vital in enhancing transparency of decision-making processes (see, for example, Kaunda and Mukonza, in this volume) as it offers opportunities for citizens to directly participate in decision making (Ndou, 2004). Through such engagement, individuals feel empowered to voice their concerns and contribute to policy formulation, challenging the notion of governance as a top-down process controlled by the ruling elite (Althusser, 1971). Meaningful public engagement enables citizens to actively shape their communities and advocate for their rights, thus challenging dominant power structures and promoting a more equitable distribution of resources (Chomsky, 1997).

The Book’s Structure

The aforementioned factors define the timeliness of this volume, as each chapter intricately engages and addresses the

relevant inquiry concerning the significance of public sector communication in the digital age.

In Chapter 1, **Themba Maseko** reviews the role of the government communication system in South Africa. This is done in the context of the transition from an autocratic apartheid state to our current democratic constitutional dispensation. He explores ways in which government communicators could navigate through ethical dilemmas brought about by the transition. This chapter grapples with ethical dilemmas that confront government communicators, given that the area has not been theorised sufficiently. Maseko helps us identify the gaps and this is what makes this chapter timely and a must-read.

Chapter 2, by **Lakela Kaunda** and **Ricky M Mukonza**, presents a critical assessment of the utilisation of Facebook as a social media platform for public engagement and service delivery purposes. The chapter focuses on South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities' Facebook pages and their engagement with citizens. Social media, it is argued, with its interactive capability, enables real-time communication with the public. This underlines the urgency of exploring the use of Facebook, and by extension other social media platforms, by South Africa's local government. Indeed, it is becoming apparent that not only can social media be ignored, but local governments must embrace an interactive approach when employing social media platforms. They also highlight the inextricable link between service delivery and communication effectiveness between municipalities and citizens.

The use of strategic communication by local government in collective bargaining has not been adequately theorised in South Africa. With a number of strikes – some illegal – Chapter 3 by **Pay Shabangu** compels us to confront this critical discourse in the context of our highly contentious collective bargaining structures in South Africa as he analyses the challenges in local government collective bargaining and proposes solutions to these. Again, this is another area to which public sector communicators must pay close attention

as it frames employee/employer stakeholder relationships in the public sector.

Chapter 4 by **Karabo Sitto-Kaunda** continues with the focus on the public sector communication, but this time using the election as a lens. The chapter explores stakeholder engagement as a key pillar of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), in its communication endeavours. Fundamentally, digital and social media is argued to have helped to shift the stakeholder engagement relationship, moving the power of communication into the hands of recipients, such as potential voters. With the increased use of e-government strategies in South Africa for citizen engagement, the evolution of the IEC's communication strategy to digitally led strategic communication activities and its implications are assessed in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, **ML Dingalo** engages with the complexity of public sector communication and the unique environment within which it is practised. The fundamental questions of transparency, accountability and the right to access information from public sector entities are argued as cornerstones of democratic societies. Thus, the chapter explores the citizens' need of information in their quest to understand the entities constituted to serve them and the manner in which policy decisions are made and implemented. Concomitantly, these policies impact on the citizens in their everyday lives. However, how so though, is the critical question with which this chapter grapples.

Chapter 6 further explores the realm of public sector communication, with **Maphelo Malgas** and **Andiswa Mrasi** delving into a critical issue related to the challenges faced in effectively implementing communication strategies for development programmes aimed at small businesses within South Africa. This chapter revolves around the core premise of offering an encompassing and contextually tailored perspective on the prevailing landscape of public sector communication, specifically zeroing in on entities entrusted with fostering the growth of small businesses in

South Africa, notably the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) and Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA). Ultimately, the primary focus of this chapter rests on presenting a comprehensive proposal for enhancing public sector communication. This proposition entails the introduction of a structured framework designed to facilitate the effective communication of support initiatives tailored to the unique needs of small businesses operating in the South African context.

Elizabeth Lubinga begins the theme of citizen engagement in Chapter 7, albeit from the healthcare perspective. The chapter argues that public health communication is critical to informing, persuading and maintaining healthy behaviour among citizens of any society. However, resource-constrained developing countries such as South Africa are increasingly committing more financial resources to health, which underscores the exigency of using public health communication as a tool to educate and develop a health-literate populace. Most health problems, including both communicable and non-communicable diseases, are preventable and prevention is the most cost-effective strategy to ensure good health among health-literate populations. The chapter is underpinned by multiple theories relevant to public health communication in order to reflect on the behaviour change required globally and in South Africa.

Vincent Tshuma and **Sibongile Mpofo** continue with the public health communication theme in Chapter 8 where they argue that the strategic dissemination of health information is required to advance the health of the public. Therefore, tailored and targeted messages to individuals, groups and wider communities are key in promoting public health. More so, in the era of digital revolution, the expectations have been that such advancements would aid public health communication efforts to reach an inclusive population and ensure the wellness of society, and ultimately contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tshuma and Mpofo focus on the health communication policies of regulatory bodies and the private sector in

Zimbabwe to integrate vital communication in promoting eye and vision health. They identify the communication strategies employed within this sector, together with specific messages regarding eye health and how these contribute to the larger frame of the SDGs.

In Chapter 9, **Mandla J. Radebe** critically analyses the concept of citizen engagement which, he argues, has been valorised as a silver bullet that will drive participation in liberal democracies. It is assumed that citizens will be enabled to make their inputs and benefit in the process. The chapter argues that when properly examined, this seductive concept is unable to play the fundamental role of redistribution of power in class-divided societies such as South Africa's. Instead, in most instances, it is employed to placate the marginalised underclasses and thus is a useful tool to negotiate consent on behalf of the ruling capitalist class. To this effect, the chapter presents some thoughts on approaches to theorising and implementing citizen engagement in the Global South context. It concludes by advocating for a new public sphere that will empower the subaltern to achieve the objectives of redistribution of power through meaningful citizen engagement.

Anna Oksiytycz argues in Chapter 10 that the calls for, and declarations of commitment, to transparency have come from many quarters, putting both government and business organisations under increased scrutiny. Various players, such as the public, media and civil society, are placing emphasis on government and public sector organisations becoming more transparent and consequently accountable to the citizens. The chapter grapples with transparency and accountability as key issues, considering that in South Africa corruption, mismanagement, fraud, misappropriation of funds and other malaises have been identified at all levels of government. Oksiytycz posits that information is not neutral and that providing information is a process loaded with subjectivity, reflecting deliberate choices and the established institutional order and culture. To this end, principles of communication

should be applied by governments to foster transparency and its outcomes: accountability, engagement and efficiency.

In providing the concluding remarks to the book, Karabo Sitto-Kaunda provides an overview of the significance of public sector communication to engage citizens. She also draws our attention to the effectiveness of digital technologies to aid in driving more effective strategic communication from public sector organisations, along with the challenges with respect to implementation to date. That COVID-19 and the subsequent period of lockdown forced organisations, including those in the public sector, to rely increasingly on digital communication, is discussed throughout the volume to understand the relational effects among stakeholders of governments. The volume concludes with an understanding of the strategic role citizens play for all government-related public sector communication, which is primarily based on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the service delivery levels received.

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