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The use of twitter as a service delivery communication tool: a case study of the Johannesburg roads agency

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ABSTRACT

Many local governments around the world have adopted Twitter as a tool to enable two-way communication with its citizens. Academics in the fields of Developmental Communication, Public Administration and Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have theorised that social media platforms have the ability to enhance the delivery of services by local governments (Guillamón, et al: 2016; Kavanaugh et al: 2012; Perlman: 2012). Based on this theory, the aim of this study is to determine how the Johannesburg Road Agency, a local government entity of the City of Johannesburg in South Africa, used its Twitter account as a tool to communicate with its citizens about service delivery relevant to the entity's scope of services. For the purpose of this study the researcher used a traditional case study research approach to illustrate how the JRA uses its Twitter account to engage in two-way participatory communication with its citizens about the services it must provide.

The data for the case study was collected through content analysis of policy documents, and interviews. The study's participants, namely the staff from the JRA's Customer Relations Management (CRM) department, were requested to provide information through these interviews and policy documents. The study found that the JRA uses strategies, policies, protocols and plans to manage its Twitter account with staff that is trained in customer relations management. The researcher argues clientelism is practised at the JRA as the entity's policy documents and staff members identify its citizens as mere customers paying for a service and not citizens of a democracy with definitive rights. The study further explored whether the citizens of Johannesburg, that use this method of communication with the JRA, find it useful.

The majority of participating citizens have expressed that they perceive this method of communication with the JRA to be useful, however, the researcher argues that this method cannot be seen as an appropriate method due to the internet access constraints that the citizens in the City of Johannesburg experience, which prevents the majority of citizens from having access to Twitter as a communication tool. The interviewed staff argued that communicating with citizens on Twitter, a public platform, makes them feel more accountable and makes the process more transparent, while admitting that in some instances they have to lie to citizens when there are problems

experienced. Therefore, the researcher concludes that the JRA has not fully utilised the opportunities that Twitter has to offer to realise participatory communication between the public service providers and citizens.