Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

Communicating for Development using Social Media:

A Case Study of E-Inclusion Intermediaries in Under-Resourced Communities

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Abstract

South Africa is committed to accelerating the roll-out of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development at all levels. E-inclusion intermediaries (e-IIs) are used in the country to bridge the digital divide and to create equal opportunities for citizens to benefit from using ICTs. E-IIs are established mainly in under-resourced communities by private, public and third-sector organisations to provide physical access to ICT services for free or at a very low cost. The aim of e-IIs is to make ICT services affordable for and accessible to marginalised and poor community members, who can use the ICT to support community development.

The debate is ongoing regarding the contribution of e-IIs towards community development due to, in part, the lack of quantifiable evidence to support the impact that the e-IIs have on development in the communities. Furthermore, despite the existence of e-IIs in communities, there still are community members who do not use the e-IIs. This has been attributed to the lack of awareness of the e-IIs and the services they provide. This lack of awareness is often blamed on the ineffective communication strategies of e-IIs. E-IIs are accused of relying heavily on traditional communication channels and conventional mass media, which do not share information and create awareness effectively in the communities.

The increased uptake of modern technologies, such as the Internet and mobile devices, in South Africa has created new opportunities to communicate with community members to share information and create awareness. Social media, for instance, which are mostly accessed through mobile devices, have made communication more accessible and inexpensive for community members with limited skills and resources. Social media have also become popular among development actors in their attempt to direct policy, create awareness and garner community members' support for development interventions. Arguably, e-IIs could also benefit from using social media, which have become popular in some communities, to communicate with community members in order to create awareness of the e-IIs, the services they provide and the benefits of using ICTs to support community development.

The investigation undertaken in this study was twofold. Firstly, it explored the services that are provided by e-IIs and how they support community development and secondly, it explored how

e-IIs communicate for development, paying special attention to the use of social media by e-Iis communicate with community members. The investigation focused on e-IIs in under-resourced communities of the Western Cape Province of South Africa. This study used qualitative multiple case to studies with site visits, interviews and focus group discussions with e-II representatives and community members.

The findings of this study indicate that e-IIs provide much-needed physical access to ICTs for marginalised community members in under-resourced communities. With the evolving needs of community members, e-IIs have also evolved to offer different services beyond providing ICT access. The e-IIs, however, face various challenges that hinder their ability to provide adequate and quality services that fulfil community needs. These challenges include a lack of adequate funding, staff and resources. E-IIs can struggle to make an impact in the communities if the development actors that establish them consider the provision of physical access to ICTs as the end goal. Community members' physical access to ICTs does not guarantee community development. In addition to physical access, equal attention should also be paid to the social context and environment to ensure that the technology is appropriate and that community members understand the need and value of the technology, as well as possess the digital skills to use them meaningfully.

The findings also show that e-IIs struggle to develop effective communication strategies that create awareness, share information, promote the use of ICTs and facilitate engagement with community members. The e-II staff often have little knowledge about their community members' information and communication needs, and the most appropriate and effective communication media, yet this knowledge is necessary to develop effective strategies. Social media could be effective communication media to use in pursuing specific developmental goals. From this study, the e-IIs that used social media benefited from low-cost and participatory communication approaches that built networks to share information and create awareness. This study also found that social media were most effective when they were appropriate for the e-IIs' target audience and were used strategically by digitally skilled and knowledgeable e-II staff.

The findings of this study can be used by policy planners to inform broader national development policy and ICT policy and more specifically ICT4D interventions and communication for development strategies. For example, regarding e-inclusion approaches in under-resourced communities, this study found that there is a need to shift from techno-centric driven approaches towards more participatory, community-driven and development-centric approaches. This will help to ensure that the e-IIs and the e-inclusion approaches they use are appropriate for the social environments and address existing development challenges in the communities.

This study also contributes that developing effective communication for development strategies requires e-II staff and any other development actors to know their community's communication landscape. This encompasses knowledge about community members' information and communication needs (sought gratification), and accessible, affordable and used communication media. This knowledge also includes information about possible power relations (based, for example, on socio-economic status, race, and religion) in the community. These relations can influence the formation of social networks, as well as the flows and ways through which community members communicate. Effective communication for development strategies would ideally enable the e-IIs to create awareness, share information, promote the use of ICTs, and facilitate participatory communication in their communities.