

MEETING DEMOCRACY'S CHALLENGE

Constructing scenarios – stories about the future – has an impressive legacy in South Africa's recent political history. The idea is that by positing two or three or four plausible alternative futures, carefully worked out and well researched, citizens and planners can see more vividly what *could* happen, and can thus plan to achieve the best possible outcome.

Indeed, having also seen, at least in the collective mind's eye, how bad it could be, governments can also plan more actively to avoid the worst plausible outcomes. Large-scale scenario-making exercises were undertaken by the South African Presidency in 2003 and 2008 and by various private-sector groupings over the years, including the recent Dinokeng Scenarios released earlier this year (www.dinokengscenarios.co.za).

Despite their different methodologies and core participants, all these recent scenarios have come to some strikingly similar conclusions in one area in particular: there is an urgent and compelling need for ordinary people to get more involved in decision-making processes in South Africa. Starkly put, if South Africans leave the running of the country only to professional politicians, the futures posited are bleak.

South Africa 2025 – The Future We Chose?, published by the Presidency in 2008, examined the basis on which future social partnerships could be formed. There was a focus on what it would take to create more social solidarity. In one of the scenarios, people in a future South Africa get together in various ways – “from convention halls, retreats, summits and on the airways of talk radio and TV”. They agreed that short-term sacrifice was needed from *all* parties; it could not just be the “workers and poor that were always required to compromise” and that social partnerships could not be “speculated about and wished for: they needed to be forged in action”.

Taking this theme even further, the private sector-led scenario exercise Dinokeng built all its scenarios around the

IN A CONTEXT OF DECLINING
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, CAN
MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY
AND 'NEW MEDIA' BE USED
TO INVOLVE MORE PEOPLE
IN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING,
ASKS HARRY DUGMORE
IN THIS EXPLORATION OF
THE IMPLICATIONS OF
MOBILE COMMUNICATION
ON JOURNALISM IN THE
DEVELOPING WORLD

quantity and quality of future public participation in the inner-workings of governance.

The preface to the Dinokeng scenarios uses strong language to convey concern: “The heart of our challenges is that we have failed to appreciate or understand the imperatives of running a modern democratic state. Leadership across all sectors lacks clarity of purpose and is increasingly self-interested, unethical and unaccountable. We have a weak state with declining capacity to address our critical challenges.

“In addition, our citizenry has been largely disengaged or co-opted into government or party structures since 1994, and has demonstrated a growing dependence on the state to provide everything.”

Further dramatising their theme, the three Dinokeng scenarios are called “Walk Apart”, “Walk Behind” and “Walk Together”, all of which describe different kinds of state/citizen relationships.

Are these scenarios correct in their common concern about the paucity of citizen involvement in South Africa? Why should greater involvement by ordinary people make such a big difference to the future of South Africa? Surely ordinary people don't have the skills or the time to get more involved in complex matters such as municipal budgets, or planning train routes – or else they would? Or, perhaps, they just don't think they can make much difference?

Disengaged, disinterested or both?

Recent research by the Presidency does support the contention that South Africans, 15 years after the heroic levels of participation that led to the overthrow of apartheid, are becoming less engaged: membership of religious groups, trade unions, political parties, and even of sporting associations are all decreasing, sometimes sharply, in the 21st century.

Pundits scratch their heads too. What has caused this South African equivalent of “bowling alone”? In Robert D Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, the author rails against the how social capital in the US, which he describes as “the very fabric of our connections with each other”, has plummeted in just one generation.

Putnam came to his conclusions about declining levels of social capital from studies of membership of organisations of all kinds, interest in politics (even the signing of petitions has fallen, his study found) and, surprisingly, the amount of time spent with family and friends. Putnam's bogeymen in terms of this mass disengagement of the social are urban sprawl, television, and the rise of the internet.

Is it the same in South Africa? Is our stock of social capital declining? Is fear of crime, for example, contributing to the individualisation of South African life and the atomisation of the public sphere? And what about the internet – all that MXit and Facebooking going on? Is that increasing social isolation, or building social capital like nothing before?

Where has civil society gone?

In post-apartheid South Africa, various elements of scenario-making and forecasting seem to suggest that we are facing critical shortages of the “bridging” kind of social capital. Distinct from the “bonding” sort of social capital that keeps groups together, such as families, this is the cross-boundary type of capital that reaches out to other groups, i.e. creates bridges between people.

Politically, there is of course a critical link between the creation of social capital and the role of what is often called civil society, the coming together of people in some kind of organised way to debate and discuss issues of common interest.

Of course, what is the common interest, and common to whom, are the huge issues in post-apartheid South Africa.

And that seems to be precisely the problem – both social capital and civil society are held to be in decline, with people participating and connecting less and less, to the great determinant of social life. South Africans are not even connecting to decide what is common.

For many, this has dire consequences. As the Dinokeng Scenarios ominously put it: “If citizens do not organise to engage government constructively, we will experience rapid disintegration and decline.”

All this serves to inform the Iindaba Ziyafika (isiXhosa for “the news is coming”) project, run out of the School for Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. The core proposition of Iindaba Ziyafika is that information and communication technology can enlarge the public sphere by providing the tools that encourage participation and facilitate that participation.

Embedded in the Iindaba Ziyafika project is the idea that cellphone-based technologies can be used to create both social capital and help civic society get together and engage better with government.



Paul Greenway

Cellphones and civic life

The basis of *lindaba Ziyafika* is to facilitate citizen reporting and opinion-sharing through cellphones, which are now ubiquitous in South Africa. The big idea is that if ordinary people can better receive information about the issues and then also have a say, this would be a great boon for local democracy.

To achieve this, step one has to be to build a content management system, known as Nika, which allows people to send in news and information about what is happening in their communities through SMS. This information is published on the website and in the newspaper of *Grocott's Mail*, South Africa's oldest independent newspaper (see sidebar).

Nika's ability to receive messages from citizens directly into a newspaper's news feed gives ordinary people a voice they might not have had. For example, when teachers at a Grahamstown school went on strike and threatened the life of the school principal, a learner at that school sent *Grocott's* a message, alerting them to this crisis. *Grocott's* was able to send a reporter to investigate more deeply, bringing a dire situation to public notice.

Now that we know, what do we do?

Having got the technology in place, the next step is to link the issues to a sense of what can be done and citizen involvement.

This is much more difficult – and precisely the challenge identified by recent scenario studies. While there is no lack of issues in South Africa and many channels available to people to participate, or at least make a noise, levels of participation are low and falling.

For *lindaba Ziyafika*, this raises a raft of questions about the limits of conventional journalism, the nature of developmental journalism (or journalism for development) and, indeed, about the very paradigms in which journalism is practised. What is becoming clear is that there is a strong case to be made that South African media have to find ways to go beyond just raising the issues, towards framing issues and challenging people to make choices.

Part of the answer to increased participation may lie in more vigorous journalism that is committed to exposing and explaining issues in ways that make more sense to ordinary people and which invite reaction and participation. Too much reporting, at every level of our media, is about what government did (or did not do), not about what government is thinking about doing in future and how that might impact on us, and what our choices might be.

It is arguable that there is nothing wrong with national levels of participation when people have a choice – voting rates, for example, are still high. But voting is easy – you choose people and parties who work hard to explain your

WHAT IS NIKA?

Nika (isiXhosa for “to give”) is a breakthrough. Built as an extension of Drupal open-source content management system, it allows any community newspaper to receive SMS messages directly into the newspaper's workflow. By translating SMSs through a special modem and some clever coding, the messages appear as text in the editor's inbox. This means story tips or even fuller news stories can be sent by people who do not have access to email or the internet.

Nika can also incorporate contributions sent via Facebook, MXit or email, enabling small papers to have many more eyes and ears on the ground. Many previously ignored issues and concerns are starting to see the light of day through Nika's SMS channels.

The system has been tested at *Grocott's Mail* for a year, and is currently being tested at three other community newspapers. It will be available to any community newspaper that wants to try it out by September 2009. Contact Harry Dugmore on h.dugmore@ru.ac.za for more details.

WHEN MEDIA AND MOBILE COLLIDE

lindaba Ziyafika (isiXhosa for “the news is coming”) is a US\$620 000, three-year initiative, funded by the US-based Knight Foundation and run out of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.

Headed by Harry Dugmore, MTN chair of media and mobile communication, the *lindaba Ziyafika* set of projects explores the interface between mobile phones and media, and citizen journalism in particular.

The insights gleaned through *lindaba Ziyafika* will initiate a series of research projects, some of which will be developed with MTN.

choice and convince you. Getting involved in local government issues, joining a community police forum, standing for the school board, and indeed working at any level of government is much more complex than voting. But it is still about choices – only they can be more difficult.

This is where media can play a much more active role, and where *lindaba Ziyafika* is going to succeed or fail.

The media as motivator

What are the main issues in local government? What decisions have to be made and when? Where can people participate and what choices are there? Can we enlarge the set of options we need to choose from? And how can people stay in the loop and see that decisions are implemented well?

If local media are not going help answer these questions, who will do it? Political parties and organs of participation – such as ratepayers associations and community crime forums – don't generally do a good job of this, for various reasons. Indeed, they very often rely on the media to help them make sense of these very issues.

A good example of this was a report in *Grocott's Mail* that the municipality had decided to spend R800 000 on new traffic lights at a critical road junction. This sparked debate in the newspaper's letters page, with some contributions coming through the Nika SMS line, about alternative plans the council may not have considered, including the creation of a pedestrian-only area in the centre of town. *Grocott's Mail* provided a venue and facilitated a live discussion among

citizens that examined various proposals. It ran stories about a previous (disastrous) attempt to do erect traffic lights in the same place, years ago, something the council did not seem aware of.

Underlying much of this is a clash between generally poor pedestrians and their needs and wealthier car drivers. This seemingly simple debate raised issues around creating a common interest as well as a solution that would be to the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

But despite its new level of involvement, the newspaper's coverage highlighted what is generally lacking in civic news in South Africa: the news was about a decision already made. In addition to being about a *fait accompli*, the news itself was presented neutrally: it was left entirely up to citizens to write in with the new idea of the pedestrian mall.

The paper and the website could have possibly been more proactive and run, for example, a poll on people's views, or framed alternative choices. In an area where unemployment is above the 50% mark, surely the R800 000 could be put to better use creating jobs: having real people direct traffic is a venerable African tradition.

At a local level, there is a strong case that the job of newspapers and their websites should be to alert people in advance about choices to be made, to help frame issues and explain what is at stake. Or is that an abrogation of conventional journalism's neutral “we'll just report on it, and call it the way we see it, and nothing more” approach?

This is a valid and urgent debate. But the strong case for newspapers and other media to play a much more activist role in society is not, many feel, being made coherently and publicly enough.

Without the media making initial sense of what is at issue, of where and when interventions could be made and what the possible choices are, the feared decline in popular participation in decision-making is more likely to come true.

To make a difference, *Grocott's*, particularly in its most recent online incarnation at www.grocotts.co.za, is going to work much more actively to identify upcoming issues of importance to citizens and create forums, through cellphones, that alert people not just to issues, but to their options.

This will require a great effort by journalists and citizen journalists to interpret and explain issues. And there will be a related greater effort to reflect on opinions and even gather those opinions using cellphone-based technology. *Grocott's* will run more online polls and SMS voting lines, and, as importantly, will work on ways to ensure that decision makers know what the results are.

It will also be important to work more closely with other media channels, such as community radio, and it may even be necessary to create spaces for meetings, call those meetings and see what happens.

By doing all of this, *Grocott's* and *lindaba Ziyafika* want to demonstrate that new technology and a fresh approach to framing issues and motivating public response and participation, can demonstrate better ways for the public to get involved in local democracy.

If successful, this civic journalism plus inexpensive but powerful mobile phone and internet technology model might be replicated all over South Africa and further afield. It may, over time, be able to make a contribution to better governance in South Africa and Africa. Then the rosier scenarios, based on increased public participation envisaged for this country may just have a chance of coming true.

