

# Citizens worldwide are embracing civic technology but the profile of users varies markedly between countries

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Technologies aimed at giving citizens the power to hold their governments to account are becoming increasingly common in both developing and affluent countries a [new report](#) published by mySociety explores who uses civic technologies and why across four countries, and finds that there are significant differences between users in the US and UK compared to those in Kenya and South Africa. **Rebecca Rumbul** writes that these findings are significant because incidental bias of homogenous users may distort specific research findings associated with civic technologies.*



Online and digital technologies that enable citizens to hold governments to account, known as civic technologies, are proliferating at a steady rate around the world (for those unfamiliar with civic technologies in the UK, see [www.TheyWorkForYou.com](http://www.TheyWorkForYou.com), [www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com](http://www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com), [www.WriteToThem.com](http://www.WriteToThem.com) or [www.FixMyStreet.com](http://www.FixMyStreet.com)). The potential for these platforms to invigorate citizen engagement, increase transparency, and broaden public debate has been recognised not only by those in civil society, but by governments, development agencies, and global philanthropists. There is, however, frustratingly little evidence to demonstrate the real-world impact of such platforms. Indeed, there is a paucity of robust research on any aspect of civic technology. A [new report](#) published by international civic technology NGO [mySociety](#) *Who Benefits From Civic Technology? Demographic and public attitudes research into the users of civic technologies* seeks to take a first step towards illuminating the world of civic technology. Whilst a number of studies have used civic technologies to ask intellectual questions about user behaviour, this research sought to begin at the beginning, asking the most basic questions about who actually uses civic technology and why. The research is based on 3,705 survey responses from users of civic technology sites in the UK, USA, Kenya and South Africa, and asks basic demographic and attitudes questions. Only by knowing who is using civic technology can we begin to understand what, where and how significant the impact of civic technology

can possibly be.

The results were surprising.

Far from identifying an agile and youthful user base, in the affluent countries studied (USA & UK) civic technologies have been embraced most energetically by those aged 45 and over, with over 75% of users in both countries aged 45 or over. In the UK, almost two-thirds of users were men, and in both the USA and UK, individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups were under-represented compared to resident populations. Users were generally well-educated to degree level or above, had a keen interest in politics, and the majority were economically active. The geographic distribution of users in the UK and US showed a small urban bias, but the number of rural and suburban users was significantly higher than recorded in Africa. The overall demographic picture in the USA and UK is one in which those individuals already adept at navigating the political and public sphere are using civic technologies to better facilitate their activities. In the UK in particular, it appears that the 'male, pale and stale' so long dominant in the political class, are now dominant in online civic activity too.

The same cannot be said for Kenya and South Africa, where the age and economic situation of civic technology users paints a very different picture. In both countries the majority of individuals using civic technology platforms are typically under the age of 46 (86% in Kenya and 66% in South Africa), and fewer than 45% of users in South Africa hold a first degree or higher. The geography of respondents in Africa was also concentrated in urban areas, with 78% of responders in Kenya from Nairobi and Mombasa. Similarly, responders in South Africa from urban areas such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria and Durban represented 79% of the sample.

These differences are interesting, but pose challenges to the proponents of civic technologies for increasing and broadening citizen participation. The data included in the report demonstrates that, whilst civic technology is being embraced by a wide variety of citizens around the world, groups formed of dominant characteristics exist within the user base in individual countries, and these differ from territory to territory. What is true of the majority of civic technology users in the UK is not true of those in South Africa. These are non-organising groups of individuals that are completely unconnected, however, an incidental bias of homogenous users may distort not only specific research findings associated with civic technologies, but may cause wider ripples in policy and practice where civic technologists themselves draw evidence of impact from biased samples of users.

Just as caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions on public opinion or discourse from social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, extreme caution must be taken in drawing conclusions from studying the use and impact of civic technologies. This research is now being used to hone future research questions into the operation and impact of civic technologies around the world, and will contribute to providing valid answers on how far civic technology is having the democratising effect it was designed to achieve.

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Click [here](#) to access the full report *Who Benefits From Civic Technology? Demographic and public attitudes research into the users of civic technologies*. *Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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