

Public Policy Communication in the Digital Era: Building Trust, Transparency, And Citizen Engagement

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ABSTRACT: Public policy communication has become a central component of governance in the digital era. Governments no longer communicate only after decisions have been made; rather, they communicate throughout the policy cycle through official portals, social media, open data platforms, public consultation systems, mobile applications, chatbots, and digital identity infrastructures. This article examines how digital communication can strengthen three governance outcomes: public trust, transparency, and citizen engagement. Drawing on an integrative review of digital government, open government, e-participation, and public-sector artificial intelligence literature, the article develops a framework for understanding public policy communication as a governed communication system rather than a one-way channel of information dissemination. The analysis shows that digital communication contributes to trust when information is credible, accessible, consistent, secure, and connected to visible government responsiveness. Transparency becomes meaningful when disclosure is timely, comprehensible, reusable, and linked to accountability mechanisms. Citizen engagement becomes substantive when digital participation channels include feedback loops, response traceability, and inclusion safeguards. The article also discusses risks associated with misinformation, platform dependency, algorithmic opacity, privacy, digital exclusion, and symbolic participation. It concludes that effective public policy communication requires channel complementarity, plain-language explanation, open-data quality, human oversight of automation, and institutional commitment to listening and response.

KEYWORDS: public policy communication; digital government; public trust; transparency; citizen engagement; open data; e-participation; artificial intelligence

1. INTRODUCTION

Public policy communication has traditionally been understood as the process by which governments explain policy decisions to citizens, stakeholders, and the wider public. In that conventional view, communication is often treated as a downstream activity: policy is formulated, a decision is adopted, and communication follows. In the digital era, however, this sequence is no longer sufficient. Policy communication now occurs before, during, and after policy formulation through online consultations, public-service portals, open-data platforms, dashboards, social media, mobile applications, chatbots, and digital identity systems. Communication has therefore become part of the infrastructure of policy design, implementation, and accountability.

This transformation reflects the broader shift from e-government to digital government. Whereas e-government is commonly associated with digitizing existing administrative procedures, digital government emphasizes data-driven, user-centered, interoperable, and proactive public administration (Mergel et al., 2019; OECD, 2014). In this context, communication is not merely a matter of speed or visibility. It is a governance function that affects whether citizens understand public decisions, trust official information, participate in policy processes, and comply with public programs.

The digital environment creates important opportunities for public policy communication. It enables governments to publish information quickly, reach diverse audiences, deliver services remotely, collect citizen feedback, monitor public sentiment, and disclose data for accountability. Digital platforms can reduce transaction costs and increase the visibility of government responses. Open data can make budgetary, regulatory, and service-performance information more reusable. E-participation tools can provide new channels for consultation and co-production (Medaglia, 2012; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024).

At the same time, digital communication generates new risks. Social media may accelerate misinformation and emotional polarization. Public portals may be authoritative but difficult to navigate. Open-data systems may publish data that are technically available but not practically understandable. Chatbots and AI assistants may reduce search friction but also raise concerns about accuracy, bias, explainability, and institutional responsibility (Andrews et al., 2022; Barati, 2023). Digital identity systems can simplify transactions but may also intensify privacy and surveillance concerns if not governed transparently.

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This article restructures public policy communication as a digital-era governance problem. It asks: How can governments use digital communication to build trust, enhance transparency, and promote meaningful citizen engagement? The article develops a conceptual framework, reviews relevant literature, compares selected digital communication models, and proposes practical implications for governments seeking to communicate policy more credibly and inclusively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Public Policy Communication as Governance Infrastructure

Public policy communication is not limited to public relations or media management. It includes the ways governments explain problems, justify decisions, provide evidence, respond to criticism, invite participation, and demonstrate accountability. In digital governance, these functions are embedded in platforms, data systems, and interaction routines. The design of those systems determines what citizens can know, how easily they can act, and whether their input can be traced to institutional response.

Digital transformation literature suggests that public organizations do not become more responsive simply by adopting new technologies. They must redesign processes, responsibilities, data flows, and public-facing interfaces (Mergel et al., 2019). For communication, this means that a government website, social media account, chatbot, or open-data portal should not be evaluated only by technical availability. It should also be evaluated by clarity, accessibility, reliability, explainability, and responsiveness.

2.2. Trust, Transparency, and Public Legitimacy

Trust is a multidimensional outcome involving confidence in government competence, integrity, fairness, and responsiveness. Digital communication can influence trust, but not automatically. Transparency experiments show that releasing information does not always produce trust; the effect depends on the type of information, the level of citizen knowledge, the perceived motives of government, and the institutional context in which disclosure occurs (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013).

This distinction is crucial for digital-era policy communication. A government may publish large quantities of information while still failing to build trust if citizens cannot understand the information, verify its relevance, or observe consequences for decision-making. Transparency therefore needs to be interpreted as more than publication. It requires explanation, metadata, plain language, contextualization, and visible accountability (Bertot et al., 2010; Janssen et al., 2012).

The Open Data Charter emphasizes principles that are directly relevant to communication: data should be open by default, timely and comprehensive, accessible and usable, comparable and interoperable, supportive of improved governance and citizen engagement, and conducive to inclusive development and innovation (International Open Data Charter, 2015). These principles show that the communicative value of open data lies not simply in disclosure but in usability, interpretation, and public value.

2.3. Citizen Engagement and E-Participation

Citizen engagement refers to the involvement of citizens in public problem definition, agenda setting, consultation, feedback, service improvement, and decision-making. Digital tools have expanded the possibilities for e-participation through online petitions, discussion platforms, participatory budgeting, crowdsourcing, consultation portals, and social media engagement (Medaglia, 2012). However, participation does not become meaningful merely because a platform exists. E-participation can be symbolic if citizens submit comments or petitions without receiving acknowledgment, explanation, or evidence of policy influence. Research on e-participation indicates that trust and subjective norms can shape citizens' willingness to engage through government websites (Alharbi et al., 2016). Linders (2012) similarly argues that digital media can support citizen co-production, but only when governments design channels that allow citizens to contribute to public value rather than merely consume information.

For public policy communication, engagement should therefore be measured not only by the number of clicks, posts, comments, or participants, but also by the quality of deliberation, inclusiveness of participation, traceability of response, and institutional use of citizen input.

2.4. Platform Risks, Misinformation, and AI-Mediated Communication

The digital era has complicated the information environment in which public policy is communicated. Social media allow governments to respond rapidly, humanize institutions, and reach audiences where they already communicate. Yet social media also expose governments to platform dependency, message distortion, harassment, misinformation, and declining confidence in online information. Trust in social media is not a single concept; it involves trust in platforms, content, sources, networks, and institutional actors (Zhang et al., 2023).

The spread of AI-enabled communication adds another layer of complexity. Chatbots and automated assistants can translate complicated procedures into conversational support and help citizens find services. Nevertheless, public-sector AI is especially sensitive because government communication carries legal, administrative, and ethical consequences. If AI systems generate inaccurate guidance, treat groups unevenly, or hide the basis of responses, they can undermine trust rather than strengthen it (Andrews et al., 2022; Wirtz et al., 2019).

Algorithmic transparency and human oversight are therefore essential. Abdu et al. (2024) argue that transparency must consider the handoff between technical systems and institutional decision-making. For communication, this means that citizens should know

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when they are interacting with automated systems, how outputs are generated or verified, and how to reach a human official when the matter is consequential.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This article proposes a systems framework for public policy communication in the digital era. The framework treats digital communication as an interaction among five elements: authoritative information, accessible explanation, responsive interaction, visible accountability, and governed automation. These elements operate across the policy cycle, from agenda setting and policy formulation to implementation, service delivery, monitoring, and evaluation.

The framework links communication design to three governance outcomes. First, trust is strengthened when citizens perceive public information as accurate, consistent, secure, fair, and responsive. Second, transparency is strengthened when information is timely, understandable, reusable, and connected to decision rationales. Third, citizen engagement is strengthened when digital channels enable citizens to provide input, receive acknowledgment, observe institutional responses, and understand how participation influenced policy.

Table 1. Digital-Era Public Policy Communication Framework

Element	Communication function	Governance mechanism	Risk if weak	Design requirement
Authoritative information	Provides official, citable, and stable policy content.	Reduces ambiguity and misinformation by establishing a reliable source of record.	Fragmented messages, rumor circulation, and source confusion.	Maintain a canonical portal for policy information and link social media messages back to it.
Accessible explanation	Translates technical rules, data, and procedures into understandable formats.	Makes transparency usable rather than merely formal.	Information overload, exclusion of low-literacy users, and poor comprehension.	Use plain language, multilingual materials, visual summaries, and accessibility standards.
Responsive interaction	Allows questions, feedback, consultation, petitions, and service tracking.	Shows citizens that communication is two-way and institutionally meaningful.	Symbolic participation and citizen cynicism.	Provide response timelines, status tracking, and clear ownership of replies.
Visible accountability	Connects disclosure and participation to reasons, outcomes, and follow-up actions.	Builds trust by demonstrating that government explains and learns.	Perception that consultation is performative or that data are decorative.	Publish decision rationales, consultation summaries, and implementation updates.
Governed automation	Uses AI, chatbots, and data systems under human supervision.	Improves access while protecting fairness, privacy, and responsibility.	Algorithmic opacity, bias, hallucination, and loss of accountability.	Disclose AI use, log interactions, test systems, and provide human escalation routes.

Note. The framework synthesizes concepts from digital government, open data, e-participation, transparency, and public-sector AI literature.

4. METHODOLOGY

This article uses an integrative literature review combined with illustrative comparative case analysis. An integrative review is appropriate because the topic cuts across public administration, communication studies, digital government, open government, e-participation, and AI governance. The aim is not to estimate a single causal effect, but to synthesize concepts and identify policy-relevant mechanisms through which digital communication may affect trust, transparency, and citizen engagement.

The review prioritizes peer-reviewed articles, international policy documents, and official government sources related to digital government, open data, public trust, e-participation, social media, and public-sector AI. The comparative cases are used illustratively

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to show different communication models rather than to rank countries. The article therefore distinguishes between service-oriented communication, deliberative communication, open-data communication, and AI-mediated communication.

This design has limitations. The article does not use original survey data and does not claim that digital communication causes higher trust in all contexts. Trust is culturally and institutionally contingent. Moreover, evidence is uneven across countries and platform types. The analysis therefore focuses on design principles and governance mechanisms that can guide professional policy communication.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Digital Communication Is a Policy-Cycle Function, Not a Final Announcement

The first finding is that digital public policy communication should be embedded across the entire policy cycle. Governments communicate when they define problems, present evidence, consult stakeholders, announce decisions, deliver services, monitor outcomes, and report results. In digital environments, these moments are no longer separated. Citizens may encounter a policy through a social media post, verify it through an official portal, apply for a service through a mobile application, ask questions through a chatbot, and evaluate results through an open-data dashboard.

This integration creates both opportunities and risks. On one hand, policy communication can become more continuous, interactive, and evidence-based. On the other hand, inconsistent messages across platforms can damage credibility. A citizen who receives different information from a chatbot, a social media post, and a government portal may lose confidence in all three. Professional policy communication therefore requires channel governance: each platform should have a clear role, and all platforms should connect back to a reliable source of record.

5.2. Trust Is Built Through Reliability, Responsiveness, and Service Integrity

Digital tools do not automatically create public trust. They influence trust when they improve the citizen's experience of government competence, honesty, fairness, and responsiveness. For example, an online portal can strengthen trust when it provides accurate information, clear procedures, predictable processing, and visible status updates. Conversely, it can weaken trust when it is difficult to use, produces errors, or gives citizens no way to resolve problems.

The literature on transparency and trust shows that information disclosure must be interpreted carefully. Transparency can strengthen trust when it reduces uncertainty and demonstrates accountability, but it can also have weak or negative effects if citizens interpret disclosed information as evidence of incompetence, conflict, or manipulation (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Therefore, the goal is not maximum disclosure without design, but meaningful disclosure supported by explanation and response.

Trust also depends on security and privacy. Digital communication often requires citizens to share personal information, authenticate identity, and interact with data-intensive services. If public systems are vulnerable or opaque, citizens may interpret digital government as risky. Research on online public services emphasizes that security posture is central to the trustworthiness of government platforms (Silva et al., 2023).

5.3. Transparency Requires Usable and Contextualized Information

The second major finding is that digital transparency requires more than publishing documents or datasets. Information must be discoverable, accessible, machine-readable where appropriate, understandable to non-experts, and connected to decision processes. Open data can support public accountability, but only if datasets include metadata, methodological explanation, update cycles, and clear channels for user feedback (International Open Data Charter, 2015; Janssen et al., 2012).

A common weakness in public communication is "transparency by volume," where governments release many files but do not explain what the information means, how it should be interpreted, or how it relates to policy decisions. A more professional approach is "transparency by explanation." This means pairing disclosure with plain-language summaries, visualizations, version histories, decision rationales, and links to implementation follow-up. Such practices make transparency useful for citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, researchers, and businesses.

5.4. Citizen Engagement Requires Response Traceability

The third major finding concerns citizen engagement. Digital participation tools are often evaluated by participation volume, but quantity alone is not enough. A consultation platform that receives thousands of comments may still fail if citizens cannot see whether their input was considered. Similarly, an online petition system may generate high attention but also raise expectations that government cannot meet.

Meaningful engagement requires response traceability. Citizens should be able to see when input was received, which institution is responsible, what response was given, what decision followed, and why. This does not mean that government must accept every citizen proposal. It means that participation should be institutionally acknowledged and publicly explained. Without this link, digital participation risks becoming performative.

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E-participation research supports this point. Medaglia (2012) shows that e-participation research has shifted toward understanding not only tools but also institutional arrangements and outcomes. Alharbi et al. (2016) further show that trust is related to citizens' intention to engage through e-government channels. Therefore, governments seeking participation must design for credibility, responsiveness, and inclusion.

5.5. AI-Mediated Communication Must Be Governed Before It Is Scaled

AI-mediated communication is likely to become more common in public administration. Chatbots and AI assistants can help citizens search complex information, translate administrative language, and navigate eligibility rules. However, the use of AI in public communication must be tightly governed because government advice is not ordinary consumer information. It can affect rights, benefits, obligations, and compliance.

Professional public policy communication should therefore require disclosure when AI is used, testing for accuracy and bias, logging of interactions, protection of personal data, and human escalation for consequential matters. Andrews et al. (2022) argue that public-sector AI must be evaluated through a trust framework because government has responsibilities that go beyond efficiency. Wirtz et al. (2019) similarly emphasize that AI in the public sector creates challenges of accountability, legality, and legitimacy.

The core principle is that AI can support communication but should not obscure institutional responsibility. Citizens should be able to determine whether they are reading an official rule, an AI-generated summary, or the discretionary judgment of a public official.

5.6. Digital Communication Channels and Their Governance Requirements

The digital communication ecosystem is multi-channel. Each channel has a distinctive function, and each carries specific risks. A professional government communication strategy should not rely on a single platform. Instead, it should define the purpose, authority, and governance requirements of each channel.

Table 2. Digital Communication Channels in Public Policy Communication

Channel	Main communication value	Major risk	Professional governance requirement
Social media	Rapid alerts, campaign amplification, rumor response, listening to public concerns.	Misinformation, emotional amplification, harassment, platform dependency, weak archiving.	Use social media as a gateway to official sources; establish moderation, verification, and crisis protocols.
Official portals and mobile applications	Authoritative policy information, service access, procedure explanation, application tracking.	Poor usability, fragmented information, technical exclusion, unclear ownership of content.	Maintain plain language, accessibility standards, search quality, service-status tracking, and content governance.
Open-data portals and dashboards	Disclosure, monitoring, external analysis, evidence-based accountability.	Low usability, weak metadata, privacy leakage, data without context.	Provide metadata, data dictionaries, update cycles, privacy review, APIs, and explanatory notes.
Consultation and petition platforms	Citizen input, agenda signaling, policy feedback, deliberation, co-production.	Symbolic participation, elite capture, low deliberative quality, unmet expectations.	Publish response rules, timelines, consultation summaries, and policy follow-up reports.
Chatbots and AI assistants	Natural-language navigation, FAQ support, document search, service triage.	Hallucination, bias, opacity, unclear liability, weak accountability.	Disclose AI use, test outputs, log errors, protect data, and provide human escalation.

6. Illustrative Comparative Cases

Comparative cases help clarify that digital-era public policy communication does not follow a single model. Some systems emphasize deliberation and public input; others emphasize service delivery and authoritative information; others focus on open data and transparency. The following cases are presented as illustrative models rather than as a ranking of performance.

Table 3. Illustrative International Models of Digital Public Policy Communication

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Case	Communication model	Governance contribution	Key lesson
Taiwan	Deliberative and participatory communication through digital democracy initiatives, including consultation and consensus-building tools.	Shows how digital platforms can structure public dialogue and connect citizen input to policy discussion.	Participation becomes credible when government commits to visible response pathways.
Estonia	Infrastructure-centered digital government built around interoperability, secure data exchange, and legally recognized digital services.	Demonstrates that trust in digital communication depends on stable institutional and technical infrastructure.	Authoritative digital systems can normalize trust when security, legality, and usability are aligned.
United Kingdom	Centralized portal communication through GOV.UK, open-data systems, and emerging AI-enabled service support.	Illustrates the value of a single source of official information and the need for algorithmic transparency.	Centralization improves discoverability, but AI-enabled communication requires safeguards.
India	Large-scale citizen-facing platforms for engagement and public-service communication.	Shows how digital communication can operate at population scale when connected to program delivery.	Scale requires integration among communication, identity, service workflows, and feedback.
Brazil	Unified digital-service portal model through gov.br.	Highlights the role of portal consolidation in simplifying citizen-state interaction.	A unified interface can reduce search costs and symbolically simplify government.
Vietnam	Identity-centered public-service communication connected to digital identity and integrated public-service access.	Shows how communication can be embedded in authentication, transactions, and service confirmation.	Digital identity can strengthen transactional communication but must be balanced with privacy, inclusion, and deliberative engagement.

Note. The cases are illustrative. Before final journal submission, country-specific statistics should be updated from official government sources.

The comparative cases suggest three broad models. The first is the participatory model, illustrated by digital consultation and petition systems. Its strength lies in agenda signaling and public input, but its weakness is the risk of symbolic participation if response pathways are unclear. The second is the service-communication model, illustrated by centralized portals and digital identity systems. Its strength lies in convenience and procedural clarity, but its weakness is the possibility of narrowing communication to transactions rather than dialogue. The third is the open-data and accountability model, which supports external scrutiny but depends heavily on data quality, metadata, and public capacity to interpret information.

A mature digital communication strategy should combine these models rather than choosing only one. Governments need authoritative portals for official content, open-data systems for accountability, social media for reach and rapid response, consultation platforms for participation, and AI assistants for navigation under human supervision. The key challenge is institutional integration: citizens should experience these channels as parts of one coherent public communication system.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

First, governments should establish a clearly designated source of official policy truth. Social media, chatbots, newsletters, and dashboards should link back to an official portal where citizens can verify current rules, procedures, and decision rationales. This reduces source confusion and helps prevent misinformation.

Second, governments should move from publishing information to explaining policy. Professional communication requires plain-language summaries, frequently asked questions, visual explanations, timelines, and examples. Complex policies should be translated into citizen-centered guidance without oversimplifying legal obligations.

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Third, governments should build response traceability into engagement platforms. Citizens should know where their comments go, who reviews them, how responses are generated, and what decisions follow. Consultation reports should summarize the main themes of public input and explain how government accepted, modified, or rejected proposals.

Fourth, open-data systems should be treated as communication systems. Data should be accompanied by metadata, limitations, update frequency, responsible units, and contact points. Dashboards should not only display figures but also explain definitions, data sources, and policy relevance.

Fifth, AI communication must be governed by transparency and human accountability. Governments should disclose AI use, prevent AI from giving unverified legal or administrative advice, test systems before deployment, and maintain human escalation channels for consequential cases.

Sixth, inclusion must be treated as a design requirement. Digital communication should account for rural users, elderly citizens, disabled persons, linguistic minorities, and citizens with low digital literacy. Mobile-first design, assisted service points, offline alternatives, and accessibility standards are essential for equitable communication.

Table 4. Practical Checklist for Digital-Era Public Policy Communication

Dimension	Diagnostic question
Authority	Is there one official source of record for each policy or service?
Clarity	Are rules and procedures explained in plain language with examples?
Traceability	Can citizens see what happened after feedback, petition, or consultation input?
Usability	Can citizens find information quickly through search, navigation, and mobile access?
Data quality	Are datasets documented, updated, and accompanied by metadata?
AI governance	Are automated tools disclosed, tested, logged, and supervised by humans?
Inclusion	Are there accessible, multilingual, assisted, and offline alternatives?
Evaluation	Is success measured by comprehension, trust, responsiveness, and satisfaction, not only traffic?

8. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Future research should distinguish between different forms of trust. Service trust refers to confidence that a portal or application can process a transaction correctly. Informational trust refers to confidence that official content is accurate and reliable. Democratic trust refers to confidence that government listens, explains, and acts fairly. These forms of trust may move in different directions. A country may improve digital service delivery while still facing skepticism about consultation or policy fairness.

Future studies should also measure communication outcomes more directly. Common indicators such as website visits, likes, shares, or downloads are insufficient. Researchers should measure comprehension, perceived clarity, perceived responsiveness, trust in official sources, satisfaction with services, inclusion of marginalized groups, and the extent to which citizen input is reflected in policy decisions.

The article has several limitations. It is an integrative review and conceptual analysis rather than an empirical survey or experiment. The comparative cases are illustrative, and country-specific claims should be updated with the latest official statistics before submission to a journal. The article also focuses on public-facing communication and does not fully examine internal government communication capacity, political communication, or crisis-specific communication in depth.

9. CONCLUSION

Public policy communication in the digital era is best understood as a governance system rather than a media function. Governments build trust not only by speaking more frequently, but by communicating accurately, consistently, accessibly, securely, and responsively. They build transparency not only by releasing information, but by making information understandable, reusable, contextualized, and connected to accountability. They build citizen engagement not only by opening digital channels, but by ensuring that participation is acknowledged, processed, and linked to visible response.

The central lesson is that technology does not substitute for institutional responsibility. Social media, portals, open data, consultation platforms, and AI assistants can all improve public policy communication, but only when they are embedded in clear rules, professional communication standards, human oversight, and inclusive design. Digital communication should therefore be treated as a strategic public capability: one that connects policy design, service delivery, accountability, and citizen trust. In the digital era, the credibility of public policy depends not only on what governments decide, but on how openly, clearly, and responsively they communicate those decisions to society.

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