

# Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service

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## Abstract

Social media have become essential channels for government communication with the public, creating opportunities for engagement with citizens, greater complexities in messaging and interactions, and distinct challenges in addressing government-citizen relations. This thematic issue brings together several articles that explore how governments, officials, and citizens interact on social media platforms. Collectively, the contributions illuminate how social media reshape communicative roles, redefine the boundaries between journalism, propaganda, and public service, and challenge democratic accountability. The studies employ a wide range of theoretical frameworks (from mediatization and affordance theory to principal-agent models and boundary work theory), distinct contexts (such as crisis communication, health communication, and military intervention), and several methodological approaches including text mining, machine learning, and mixed-methods approaches, among others.

## Keywords

communication policy; digital government; information policy; government communication; public sector communication; political communication; social media

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, social media sites and platforms have become indispensable to government communication across all levels of administration, from municipalities to ministries and federal departments and to supranational institutions. What was once an optional supplement to press releases and official statements has evolved into an essential channel for informing, engaging, and managing relations with citizens. Yet, as

governmental bodies increasingly adopt social media to promote transparency, participation, and their own policies and political prerogatives, these means of communication have also introduced new risks—of polarization, emotional contagion, misinformation, and loss of control over public narratives.

This thematic issue brings together a diverse collection of studies that explore how governments, officials, and citizens interact in the digitally mediated communication environments of social media platforms. This is an important and timely area of research given the growing centrality of social media in society, the fragile state of modern democracies, and the potential use of these digital tools to impact government-citizen relations. The articles include a narrative review of the field, qualitative interviews with government officials, quantitative analyses of message characteristics and engagement metrics, and discussions across national contexts, levels of government, and distinct periods. In general, the articles point to the multi-disciplinary nature of this research, conflicts between political and bureaucratic norms, and pressures from social media logics. The research also points to novel trends in policy promotion via social media influencers, important factors in crisis and health communication, and the impact of agency and communicator qualities on how citizens respond to government social media messages.

Collectively, the contributions illuminate how social media reshape communicative roles, redefine the boundaries between journalism, propaganda, and public service, and challenge democratic accountability. The studies employ a wide range of theoretical frameworks, diverse contexts, and several methodological approaches, discussed in greater detail below.

## 2. Articles in This Thematic Issue

We open the issue with Hansson and DePaula (2025) whose review essay provides a conceptual map of the field. They identify two central axes of research: one distinguishing the literature across senders, messages, media, audiences, and effects; and another differentiating the domains of government policy and public administration. This framework anchors the thematic issue, situating the empirical studies that follow within a broader scholarly landscape and outlining directions for future inquiry into government social media communication.

The next set of articles examines the transformation of governmental structures and routines under digitalization. Johansson and Johansson (2025) analyze how social media are integrated into the executive branch, using Sweden as a case study. Their work conceptualizes social media as both a communicative resource and a catalyst for institutional adaptation, revealing how ministries have normalized social media through “strategic complementarity” with traditional media. Similarly, Karlsen et al. (2025) explore the communicative balancing act of Norwegian cabinet ministers who use Facebook simultaneously as heads of ministries and as party politicians. Their findings indicate that social media accentuates self-personalization and political branding of executive communication, potentially reshaping cabinet unity and decision-making.

The following group of articles turns to local and institutional practices of engagement. Haman et al. (2025) show that municipal adoption of Facebook in the Czech Republic is strongly shaped by organizational capacity and resource constraints, resulting in a digital divide between large and small municipalities. Mabillard and Zumofen (2025) extend this inquiry to the Nordic context, exploring how communication managers conceptualize and measure engagement. They find that despite widespread reliance on

quantitative metrics, there is a growing recognition of the need for qualitative, dialogic approaches to evaluating citizen interaction with governments.

Moving from structure to content and emotion, Yadlin et al. (2025) examine emotional responses to Israeli politicians' Facebook messages during civic and military crises. Their analysis of 25,000 posts reveals that emotional reactions on social media not only differ across types of periods, but social media may amplify negative reactions and may be shaped by the limited expressive affordances of platforms themselves. This insight underscores the importance of emotional design in governmental crisis communication, the limits and control of platform affordances, and the implications for public trust and democratic resilience.

Trust emerges as a central theme across several contributions. Schwaderer (2025) highlights that in crises, who communicates may matter more than what is communicated. By analyzing 744,000 Twitter posts from six European countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, he finds that experts tend to elicit more positive sentiment than politicians and that women communicators may enjoy a "trust advantage" rooted in relational communication traits. Complementing this perspective on trust, Huang and Wang (2025) investigate how journalists in China operate as outsourced government social media managers, navigating tensions between journalistic and bureaucratic logics of the one-party state. Their findings reveal how hybrid professional identities shape communication legitimacy under authoritarian constraints.

At the supranational level, Moreno-Cabanillas et al. (2025) explore how the European Commission can foster political trust among young citizens through social media. Their comparative study across five EU countries finds that dialogue-based and participatory communication strategies hold the greatest potential to build trust, particularly when tailored to different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Several contributions interrogate the interplay between culture, influence, and new platforms. Reveilhac (2025) provides a comparative typology of government-influencer collaborations in France, the US, and Canada, revealing how states increasingly harness digital personalities to align public perception with policy goals amid evolving regulatory regimes. Cuşnir (2025) turns to TikTok to analyze Romania's Ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs, showing how the logic of "govtainment"—the spectacularization of government communication—shapes institutional visibility even as it fails to guarantee higher engagement. Smoliarova (2025) similarly explores the role of influencers by focusing on Russian-speaking female bloggers who became de facto government communicators during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, bridging information gaps for migrant audiences and illustrating the democratization—and moral dilemmas—of this type of public health and crisis communication.

The issue concludes with Morselli et al. (2025), whose study of vaccine discourse in South Africa demonstrates the dangers of governmental retreat from online spaces. Using agent-based modeling of over 480,000 tweets, the authors show that the increased prevalence of antivaccine narratives could be explained by the decrease in the communication of official and mainstream media actors, thus also potentially contributing to declining vaccination rates. Their work powerfully illustrates the stakes of digital inaction for public health and policy legitimacy.

Together, these contributions demonstrate that government social media communication is no longer a peripheral activity but a central component of governance itself—with far-reaching implications for trust in

government, emotional interactions, resource management, legitimacy, and accountability. They reveal the promises and perils of the increased mediatization of government and society and the several dimensions of interactions between citizens and state actors. As digital infrastructures evolve, so too must our understanding of these platforms and how government actors are using them to constrain and to sustain democracy and public service.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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