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Creative Digital Public Communication and Civic Trust: Reimagining Government–Citizen Engagement in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital culture in Southeast Asia has reshaped public communication practices, particularly within governmental institutions. This study explores how creative digital public communication strategies contribute to civic trust and participatory engagement. Using a qualitative multiple-case study of local government social media practices in Indonesia, the research examines content creativity, dialogic interaction, and digital responsiveness as key elements in fostering public trust. Data were collected through digital ethnography, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Findings reveal that creative public communication, characterized by visual storytelling, participatory content, and adaptive crisis messaging, significantly enhances civic trust when supported by transparency and responsiveness. However, structural challenges such as misinformation, algorithmic visibility, and limited institutional capacity constrain effectiveness. The study proposes a Creative Public Communication Model integrating dialogic engagement, digital storytelling, and civic co-creation to envision future-oriented governance in Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

Digital transformation in Southeast Asia has created an increasingly complex and participatory landscape of public communication. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have high social media penetration rates—according to data by Meltwater and We Are Social, by 2025, nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of Southeast Asians will use social media (Staf Technode Global, 2025). This means the public sphere is now largely mediated by digital platforms. The public sphere, as described by Habermas, is inclusive, accessible, open, and democratic—where society is free to express their opinions about economic, social, and political issues (Pembayun, 2017). Habermas's classical concept of the public sphere explains that democracy rests on rational discourse within the public space. However, in the digital context of Southeast Asia, the public sphere has evolved into a creative arena rich with visuals, political memes, short videos, and citizen participation driven by algorithms.

Today's digital public sphere makes it easy for people to openly discuss viral or emerging topics in any situation. The often-quoted phrase "free but polite" reflects a lifestyle concept that seeks to balance freedom of expression in the public space—where every opinion or comment made by netizens on social media remains relaxed, refrains from harsh language, and respects the opinions of others. Article 28E paragraph 3 of the law, which guarantees freedom of opinion and self-expression, serves as a guideline that the state secures this right.

The demand for freedom of expression in the public sphere is aligned with the democratic systems adopted by several Southeast Asian nations. Democracy involves all citizens in nation-building and problem-solving together, but without being dictated by a single authoritarian leader (Bertens, 2001). On one hand, it feels secure when the public sphere respects its boundaries, but the limitless growth of communication and technology brings serious problems. Challenges include the massive spread of hoaxes and disinformation, socio-political polarization, various communication ethics violations (such as cyberbullying and hate speech), and digital divides.

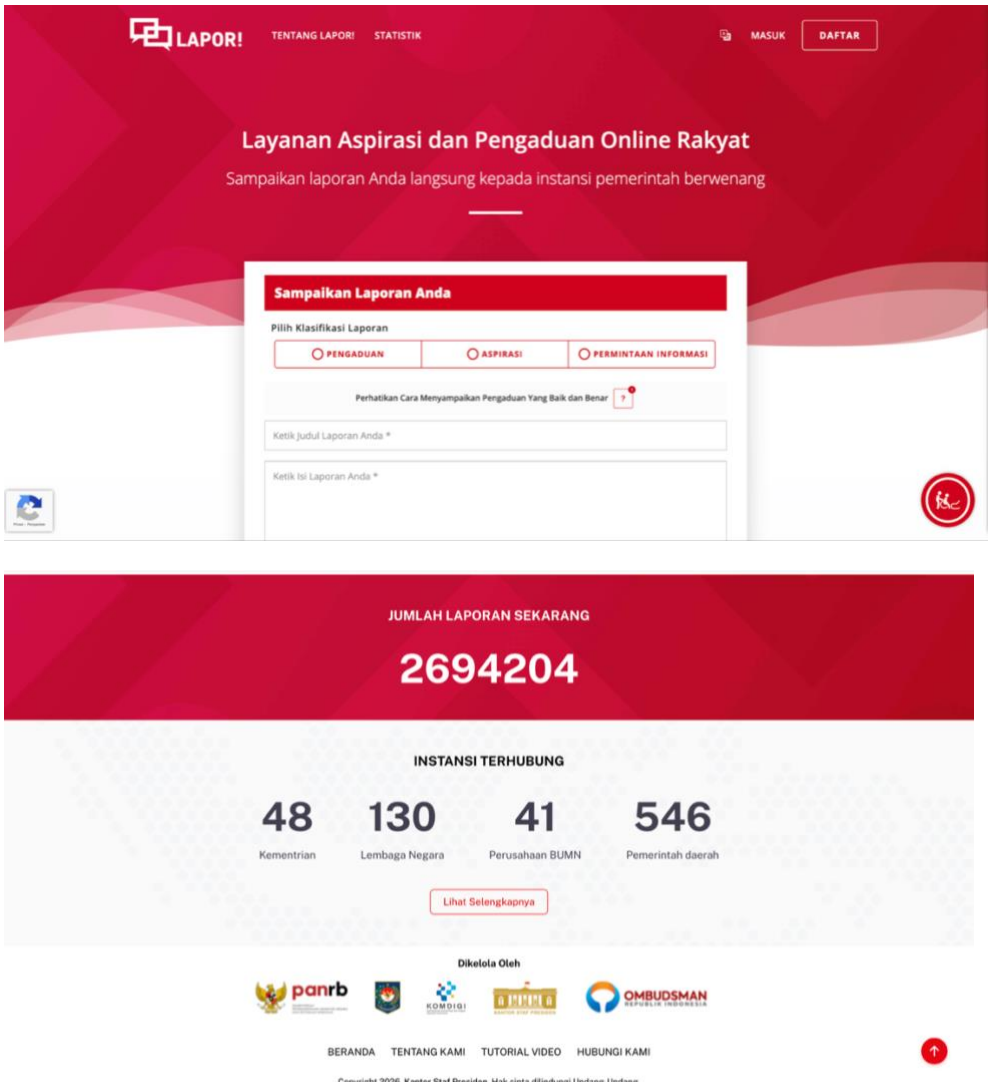
Social media, functioning as a digital public space, has evolved into a crucial primary public sphere for discussion, exchange of views, and rapid formation of public opinion. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp enable direct participation in socio-political discourse, policy oversight (social control), and citizen solidarity. However, this space is also vulnerable to polarization and disinformation due to algorithmic designs (Zordi, Ihsan, Nazarudin, & Patrianti, 2026). The influence of the digital public sphere on viral events is immense. The government is no longer the sole information producer, but one of many actors in a dialogic and dynamic communication ecosystem.

Several major events in Southeast Asia have drastically changed the landscape of public communication, forcing governments and organizations to shift from one-way communication models to transparent two-way dialogues to rebuild public trust. The Covid-19 pandemic forced governments in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, through the Committee for COVID-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery (KPCPEN), to adopt fast, measured, and data-driven public communication. Governments used social media, influencers, and transparent daily press conferences to inform the public about Covid-19, proving effective in changing behavior and rebuilding public trust in government policies.

ASEAN, involving Antara, Bernama, and PNA, created the ASEAN Newsroom as a collective effort to build public trust in ASEAN by providing accurate information amid a flood of dubious content. This is also a way to raise awareness and accommodate broad public participation in various ASEAN agendas (Usman Kansong, 2023). Various digital creativity initiatives combine imagination and technology to produce impactful new content—presented as creative audiovisuals that voice crucial issues such as the environment, climate change, social, and political matters.

Since 2017, Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information has encouraged regional governments to use official government social media accounts for communication with the public (Dunan, 2020). Social media's core characteristic is building networks between users, with information itself becoming a commodity (Hildawati, 2024). For this reason, several government agencies and high-level institutions have established public communication platforms. For example, the Indonesian Ministry of State Secretariat has entered a new phase of being closer to the public as a form of service. Through New Public Management (NPM), the Ministry ensures transparency, accountability, and public participation as part of developing more effective public communication (Humas Kemensetneg, 2024).

The Coordinating Ministry for Political and Security Affairs also has a dedicated "Public Opinion" article section (Pangestu, 2016). One article reveals that the involvement and active role of citizens in running the country alongside the government can greatly contribute to good governance. The LAPOR facility (www.lapor.go.id), established during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's era, serves as a public communication channel where all citizens can provide aspirations and report things that are appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad, supportive or not at all of government policies. The number of citizen reports demonstrates that society strives to play an active role in maintaining Good Governance.



Digital transformation in the public sector has changed communication patterns between governments and citizens, especially through the implementation of e-government and various digital communication platforms. This opens opportunities for more participatory, transparent, and responsive public communication, as reflected in the data above. However, within the Southeast Asian context, this transformation has yet to consistently result in stable and sustainable civil trust.

Research shows that public participation is a vital aspect of data governance strategies in a country (Zhang, Zhang, Zhang, & Kudva, 2024). In the context of social development, the main challenge for Southeast Asian countries is ensuring that all social groups can participate and benefit fairly from development (Larisu, Dilla, Farlin, Ramalan, & Bahar, 2025). Participation here—in the form of public opinion through transparent digital communication—significantly influences the growth of public trust. Social media has also helped create citizen engagement initiatives to build trust between the public and institutions, particularly the government, police, and judicial system (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014). This shows digital technology has been widely adopted, but challenges remain—both structural and cultural—in building effective government-citizen information flows.

On the other hand, the emergence of disinformation and data security issues have weakened public trust in government communication in digital spaces. This is further exacerbated by the digital divide, which restricts equal participation in the digital communication ecosystem, resulting in citizen involvement that tends to be elitist and non-inclusive.

In addition, government public communication approaches in Southeast Asia remain conventional and top-down, not fully adopting creative, dialogic, and participatory digital communication strategies. Yet, recent studies show that innovations such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in public communication can improve the quality of interaction, trust, and citizen satisfaction with government services.

Given these conditions, there is a gap between the potential of digital public communication and its actual implementation in building civil trust. Therefore, this study seeks to reformulate digital public communication approaches that not only focus on information delivery, but also on creating engagement, trust, and collaboration between government and citizens.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at deeply understanding the phenomenon of creative digital public communication in building civic trust and citizen engagement in Southeast Asia. This approach is chosen because it allows for an exploration of meaning, perception, and the dynamics of communication interaction in digital spaces in a contextual and interpretive manner. Recent studies show that government digital communication functions not only as an information medium but also as an interaction space influencing public participation and trust in institutions (Kumalasari & al, 2024). The descriptive approach is used to systematically describe the practices of digital public communication and the responses of society that emerge in digital spaces. This research does not aim to test hypotheses but rather to interpret social phenomena based on dynamically evolving digital data.

The data collection technique in this study uses library research (digital literature review) combined with data exploration from the digital space (digital document analysis). Data are gathered from various relevant and recent secondary sources (2022–2026), including:

- Recent scientific journals (2021–2026) discussing digital public communication, public trust, and citizen participation. Recent studies show that information transparency, service responsiveness, and two-way communication are key factors in building public trust in the digital era (Susniwati, 2025).
- Policy reports and digital government documents, such as the implementation of e-government (SPBE, SP4N-LAPOR), showing that information openness and digital participation contribute to government legitimacy.
- Data from the digital public sphere, which is the main focus of this study, including:
    - Public comments on government social media
    - Public discussions on digital platforms (forums, news portals, and opinion columns)
    - Aspirations and complaints submitted by the public via digital platforms (such as online-based public complaint services)

This approach is relevant to the development of digital communication studies, which position the digital space as the primary arena of interaction between government and citizens (Dinana, Ali, & Taher, 2025). With this approach, researchers can capture the reality of public communication that develops organically in digital space as a form of digital citizenship.

The main data for this research is taken from public reports manifested in the digital space, reflecting direct and spontaneous public participation. In this context, the digital space functions as an open, real-time, and participatory medium for citizen expression. These public reports relate to digital public complaints, reflecting the quality of government services, in the form of citizen comments and opinions, indicating the level of trust or distrust in government policies, and digital public discourse that depicts the dynamics of two-way communication between government and society.

Recent studies show that unresponsive digital communication can create the phenomenon of 'digital silence,' a condition where government platforms fail to build meaningful dialogue, resulting in decreased public trust (Putra & Abdurrahman, 2026). Conversely, interactive, transparent, and participatory digital communication practices have been proven to increase civic engagement and strengthen the legitimacy of government institutions (Artisa, M. Yecyec, & Fadhlurrohman, 2026).

Data analysis is carried out using deductive thematic analysis, following several stages: Data reduction, by selecting digital data relevant to public communication and citizen trust; Categorization, by grouping the data into themes such as transparency, participation, responsiveness, and communication creativity; and Data interpretation, by understanding the relationship between digital communication practices and the formation of civic trust.

To ensure validity and credibility, this research uses data triangulation techniques, including:

- Source triangulation, by comparing data from scientific journals, policy reports, and public responses in digital space
- Method triangulation, through a combination of literature study and digital content analysis
- Digital context triangulation, by comparing various platforms (social media, complaint portals, and online media)

This triangulation ensures that research findings objectively and comprehensively reflect the reality of digital public communication.

3. Result and Discussion

Research findings show that e-government platforms in Southeast Asia have developed into digital public communication spaces that enable direct interaction between governments and citizens. Platforms such as SP4N-LAPOR! (Indonesia), OneService App (Singapore), and eGov PH (Philippines) not only serve as administrative services but also as channels for public participation. In this context, e-government acts as a medium that connects institutional communication with the public expression of citizens. Recent studies show that digital government transformation positively correlates with increased public participation and trust, especially when supported by transparency and responsiveness (Susniwati S., 2025; Artisa R. A., 2026).

Findings from Public Reports on Digital Platforms

Indonesia (SP4N-LAPOR)

- AR (27 years old): “I have reported a damaged road, but there has been no follow-up.”
- HY (36 years old): “The status of the report is unclear in terms of progress.”

These examples indicate a gap between the expectations of the digital system (real-time, transparent) and the reality of bureaucracy, which remains conventional. This suggests that digital transformation is not always accompanied by an organizational cultural transformation within the bureaucracy. Recent research confirms that the failure to integrate technology and institutional capacity is one of the main causes of low e-government effectiveness in developing countries (Susniwati et al., 2025).

The public expects prompt responses; thus, in Indonesia, citizen reports reveal that the government’s response to complaints is still inconsistent, both in terms of speed and response quality. When reports go unanswered, the public experiences a ‘disconfirmation of expectation’—a condition in which expectations for digital services are not met. This triggers “trust erosion,” which is cumulative. Over time, people may experience digital apathy, i.e., reduced participation due to feeling unheard. This phenomenon is related to the digital silence concept, where government communication platforms fail to create meaningful dialogue (Putra, Rahmawati, & Santoso, 2025).

Malaysia (Digital Government Portal)

- N.Z (32 years old): "The portal is comprehensive, but difficult to understand."

This statement indicates that having many features does not always translate to ease of access. Complexity in navigation, technical terms, and non-intuitive information structures can become barriers for the public in utilizing digital services. From a digital public communication perspective, this shows the phenomenon of "over-informational complexity," where a vast amount of information is available, but not presented in a user-friendly, communicative way, making it difficult for people to access services effectively. Current research emphasizes that the success of e-government depends not only on service digitalization but also on user-centered communication design (Yap & Lee, 2022).

- F.A (28 years old): "Response is fast, but the solution is unclear."

The next finding shows that Malaysia excels in response speed but still faces challenges in the quality of problem-solving. This shows the phenomenon of "quick response but low resolution," where the government can respond quickly but does not provide concrete or thorough solutions. From a communications perspective, fast responses without clear solutions create false satisfaction and, in the long term, erode public trust, creating the perception that communication is procedural rather than problem-solving. This finding strengthens the argument that, in digital public communication, response quality is more important than mere speed (Li et al., 2025).

Philippines: eGov PH

Findings from public reports indicate that one of the main problems in implementing e-government in the Philippines is the instability of digital systems. For example:

- J.M (30 years old): "The application often errors."

This shows that the main issue is technological reliability, which is fundamental in building digital public communication. Frequent technical problems hinder public service and communication between government and citizens, leading to decreased trust in digital systems. Furthermore, there is a public demand for real-time information and transparency.

- C.R (26 years old): "Real-time updates are needed."

This is a representative statement from many citizens, reflecting their high expectations for up-to-date systems, instant feedback, and service certainty and transparency. Unlike Malaysia (which experiences conditional trust) and Singapore (which is building trust), the situation in the Philippines shows trust vulnerability, i.e., it is highly susceptible to negative experiences due to overdependence on digital system performance, causing trust to drop rapidly.

1. The Role of Creative Digital Public Communication by Governments in Shaping and Enhancing Civic Trust in Southeast Asia

Based on the results and discussion, the role of creative digital public communication by governments in Southeast Asia cannot be understood merely as information dissemination via digital platforms. Findings show that government digital communication builds civic trust when it fulfills three main requirements: responsiveness, transparency, and citizen orientation. Contemporary digital government literature also emphasizes that citizen-centric digital transformation is a crucial foundation for public trust, as citizens evaluate government not just by the presence of digital platforms, but by the quality of their experiences when using those services (Dechamps, Simonofski, & Burnay, 2025).

Research shows that, in Indonesia, although the government has provided reporting channels, public trust has not fully formed because citizens still find slow follow-up, unclear progress, and a long gap between digital reports and real solutions. Cases such as A.R. and H.Y. demonstrate that

citizens have entered the digital participation space, but trust weakens when digital interactions lack substantive responses. This aligns with studies on digital silence, which show that when government platforms fail to build meaningful dialogue, civic trust erodes (Dedi Kurnia Syah Putra, 2025).

In Malaysia, the pattern is different. On the one hand, findings from N.Z. and F.A. show that the government has created a relatively complete portal and offers good response speed. However, interface complexity and unclear solutions mean that citizens do not fully benefit from digital communication. In this context, the role of creative digital public communication is not yet optimal, because communication creativity is not only about modern digital channels but also about simplifying messages, clarifying service flows, and guiding citizens intuitively. This is consistent with research emphasizing that the success of digital government depends on building relationships with citizens as co-creators, not just passive service users (Trang Thi Uyen Nguyen, 2024).

In the Philippines, research shows that civic trust is highly influenced by the technical reliability of platforms. Reports such as J.M., who noted frequent app errors, and C.R., who demanded real-time updates, indicate that citizens associate trust with system reliability. Here, creative digital public communication has not been effective because communication cannot function optimally if the infrastructure is unstable. Literature on e-government adoption shows that public trust forms when systems are not only present, but also reliable, easy to use, and provide relevant feedback (Nguyen, Nguyen, Huynh, Truong, & Do, 2024).

Unlike the previous three cases, Singapore demonstrates how creative digital public communication can truly enhance civic trust. Reports from L.T. and S.K. show that fast responses, transparent processes, and clear follow-up create a positive digital experience. In this framework, digital government communication is not just informational, but problem-solving. Singapore shows that when citizens feel their reports are processed, monitored, and clearly acted upon, digital communication becomes a real instrument for building trust. This aligns with studies showing that operational transparency, accessible information, and high-quality digital engagement can strengthen participation and public trust (Yuan, 2023).

2. How Creative Digital Communication Strategies Can Reconstruct Government-Citizen Engagement Models to Be More Participatory, Dialogic, and Trust-Based

The study's results and discussion indicate that government–citizen engagement models in Southeast Asia are shifting from old patterns—often one-way, administrative, and procedural—toward new ones that are more dialogic, participatory, and citizen-experience-based. The demand for creative digital communication strategies is now high, not just to actively produce content but also to build response circulation, facilitate public participation, and create the feeling that citizens' opinions are heard. Recent research on government social media affirms that information quality and trust in official accounts directly influence digital citizen engagement (Yuan, 2023).

In Indonesia, the existence of digital complaint channels alone has not created healthy engagement. The public is involved, but this engagement is mostly reactive and corrective, not collaborative. In other words, engagement stops at reporting and does not progress to dialogue. This shows the need for creative communication strategies such as clear status updates, more human responses, report progress visualization, and integration between digital reporting and cross-agency follow-up (Hartanto, Dalle, Akrim, & Anisah, 2021). Literature on citizen-centric digital government also emphasizes stronger engagement when citizens feel their experiences and needs are at the center of service design (Dechamps et al, 2025).

In Malaysia, engagement is starting to build through fast responses but is not yet dialogic because the solutions provided are still unclear. Thus, creative communication strategies needed are not just about faster responses, but also about simplifying bureaucratic language, reducing portal complexity, and providing more communicative service guides. Communication creativity means making systems easier to understand for people of all ages, education levels, and digital literacy. Research on e-government mechanisms also stresses that citizen participation increases when digital

channels are designed to strengthen interaction, not just automate services (Romero, Araujo, Tejada, & Ramírez, 2022).

In the Philippines, participatory and trust-based engagement cannot form without real-time communication and system reliability. If systems often fail, dialogue is cut off before it can develop. Therefore, creative digital communication strategies in the Philippines must start with technical improvements: automatic notifications, real-time progress updates, and system stability that allows citizens to feel continuously connected to the government. The research confirms that communication creativity is inseparable from digital infrastructure quality.

Singapore, unlike the other three countries, provides the strongest example of restructured engagement. The emerging engagement model is not just government as service provider and citizens as passive receivers, but a more collaborative relationship: citizens report, the system provides clarity, the government responds directly, and concrete action follows. This is a dialogic, trust-based engagement. Singapore's approach aligns with the idea that effective digital public communication must create public value and service experiences that encourage ongoing participation.

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that digital transformation in Southeast Asia has created a new landscape of public communication that is participatory, transparent, and highly dynamic. The government's role in creative digital public communication is not only to convey information, but also to build civic trust and reconstruct engagement models that are more dialogic and trust-based. Research findings show that the effectiveness of digital government communication depends on three main factors: responsiveness, transparency, and a citizen-centric orientation.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the implementation of digital platforms for public communication has opened up opportunities for citizen participation, but there are still gaps in organizational culture, platform reliability, and the quality of response that affect the formation of civic trust. Singapore, on the other hand, provides a best practice example where digital public communication has succeeded in building trust and sustainable engagement.

This study proposes a creative digital public communication model (CDPCM) that integrates communication creativity, digital interactivity, institutional responsiveness, and the development of civic trust through ongoing digital engagement experiences. The CDPCM model is expected to be a reference for developing more participatory, dialogic, and trust-based government–citizen engagement strategies throughout Southeast Asia.

The implications of this research are both practical and theoretical. Practically, governments in Southeast Asia must move beyond traditional, top-down communication models and adopt creative digital public communication strategies. This includes designing user-friendly digital platforms, providing clear and timely communication, increasing transparency, and encouraging ongoing citizen participation. Theoretically, the study enriches the discourse on digital public communication, public trust, and citizen engagement, particularly in the Southeast Asian context.

Recommendations

1. Governments should develop digital public communication strategies that are creative, dialogic, and citizen-centered, not just content-driven.
2. Digital systems must be reliable, easy to use, and provide real-time feedback to citizens.
3. Public participation should be encouraged through interactive, transparent, and collaborative digital platforms.
4. Building civic trust requires more than just information delivery—governments must ensure citizen experiences are positive, solutions are clear, and engagement is ongoing.

By implementing these recommendations, it is expected that the digital transformation of public communication in Southeast Asia will not only enhance the quality of government–citizen relations, but also foster more inclusive, participatory, and resilient democratic governance.

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