

Mediatized Governance Practice: Research on the Construction of the “Ask the Government of Shandong” Online Democratic Platform (Post-print)

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Abstract

[Objective] To explore the functional mechanism of mediatized governance in state governance and democratic platform construction, and to elucidate the theoretical logic and practical pathways for constructing democratic platforms within the context of mediatized governance. [Methods] Employing case study analysis, this study deconstructs the operational mechanism of the ‘Ask the Government of Shandong’ program, systematically examines the tripartite embedding model among government, media, and audience, and conducts an in-depth analysis of the operational mechanism of mediatized governance. [Results] Findings indicate that mediatized governance achieves transformation of governance effectiveness through ‘politics-media-society’ interaction, yet faces three structural tensions: first, institutional friction between bureaucratic systems and media logic; second, the balancing dilemma between public discourse space and public opinion risk management; and third, participation inequality caused by the digital divide. [Conclusion] It is recommended to optimize democratic platforms through pathways such as constructing a stratified and categorized public participation system, enhancing media credibility, and deepening precise alignment of policy issues.

Full Text

Mediatized Governance in Practice: A Study on the Construction of the “Ask Shandong” Online Democratic Platform

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Abstract

[Purpose] This study explores the functional mechanisms of mediatized governance within national governance and democratic platform construction, revealing the theoretical logic and practical pathways for building democratic platforms in the context of mediatized governance. **[Method]** Through case analysis and deconstruction of the operational mechanisms of the “Ask Shandong” program, this research systematically examines the tripartite embedding model among government, media, and audiences to conduct an in-depth analysis of mediatized governance’s operational logic. **[Results]** The findings indicate that mediatized governance achieves governance efficacy transformation through “politics-media-society” interactions, yet faces three structural tensions: first, institutional friction between bureaucratic systems and media logic; second, the challenge of balancing public discourse space with public opinion risk management; and third, participation inequality caused by the digital divide. **[Conclusion]** The study proposes optimizing democratic platforms by constructing a stratified and categorized public participation system, enhancing media credibility, and deepening precise alignment between policy issues and public concerns.

Keywords: mediatized governance; democratic platform; national modernization; tripartite embedding; institutional mechanisms

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As General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out, “We must strengthen internet thinking and leverage the advantages of the internet—its flattening structure, interactive nature, and rapid responsiveness—to advance scientific government decision-making, precise social governance, and efficient public services”[1]. This statement outlines the contours of embedding media thinking into national governance, facilitating the modernization of national governance systems and capabilities, and providing an action plan for building a cyber power and digital China.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Mediatized Governance

1.1 Mediatized Governance: The Integration of Mediatization and Governance Theory

Mediatized governance originates from the integration of mediatization and governance theories. Mediatization refers to the comprehensive penetration of media influence into all aspects of society, driven by the widespread application of media and information technologies. Since the 1990s, Western academia has distinguished “governance” from the previously interchangeable term “govern-

ment,” defining governance as “the sum of the many ways in which individuals and institutions, both public and private, manage their common affairs” [2]. In this context, “the state becomes a collection of inter-organizational networks composed of governmental and social actors” [3], constructing a new vision of social governance characterized by multi-actor consultation, co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits. Due to the penetration and shaping of media logic, media has become what McNair termed “political actors” [4], serving as active and independent agents within the social governance community that participate in national governance and political activities through the provision of information services, thereby comprehensively influencing social life [5].

Mediatized governance differs from media governance in that the latter takes media as its object, whereas the former treats “mediatization” as a governance resource that facilitates the penetration of media logic into all social dimensions [6]. In the practice of whole-process people’s democracy, the combination of media logic and political logic creates a participation pathway that is full-time, full-chain, all-dimensional, and all-encompassing [7]. Mediatized governance should not be simplistically understood as technological governance, which tends to follow a unidirectional logic emanating from technology itself, obscuring the value rationality of mediatized governance. Its essence remains “technology + governance,” and only when it forms organic linkage with external governance in a mediatized society does it become genuine mediatized governance [8]. In essence, mediatized governance unfolds as governance that adapts to the requirements of media technology, organization, and institutions, profoundly influencing society.

1.2 Mediatized Governance: An Important Component of National Governance Modernization

National governance modernization constitutes the contextual background and value objective of mediatized governance, while mediatized governance serves as a crucial means and pathway for advancing national governance modernization [9]. In terms of governance structure, media participates in national governance as a neutral, instrumental intermediary, enabling the public to convey individual or collective interests and values through media channels while allowing the state and government to release policies and decision-making explanations, thereby forming government-citizen interaction. In terms of governance tools, mediatized governance represents an important supplement to political and legal systems, with media acting as a third-party communication platform that conducts public opinion guidance on one hand and integrates fragmented public opinion to resolve conflicts on the other [10]. Regarding governance capacity enhancement, media plays the role of a communication bridge for multi-party interests and a resource allocator, closely integrating professional authoritative resources with information technology to sensitively identify risks and improve social management effectiveness. Mediatized governance is not merely a fusion of technology and information but an indispensable link in the process of national governance modernization, providing powerful support for building a

more open, efficient, and harmonious social governance system by promoting transparent information flow, enhancing public participation, optimizing policy formulation and implementation, and improving decision-making 科学性.

1.3 Democratic Platform: A Foundation for National Governance Modernization

Yan Wenjie argues that the foundational elements of modern national governance are public communication based on public deliberation as the practical carrier, publicness as the practical characteristic, and public good as the practical objective, as well as decision-making built upon this foundation [11]. Therefore, in the governance process, beyond the implementation of public power, more important are the various forms of consultation between power holders and public groups. In this “mediatization of everything” era, media has become “power holders” [12], with social processes occurring on media platforms that migrate parts of democratic processes to cyberspace as online democratic platforms, enhancing governance efficiency and efficacy through information technology. Moreover, democratic platforms strengthen state-society cooperation, achieving common governance objectives through collaborative governance.

1.4 Mediatized Governance: Building More Open, Inclusive, and Efficient Democracy

Under digital transformation, mediatized governance demonstrates three core advantages. First, **greater openness**: by constructing open information platforms, mediatized governance significantly enhances transparency in public participation and decision-making processes. The widespread application of social media and online platforms breaks traditional information dissemination barriers, making policy formulation and public discussion more open, diverse, and inclusive, thereby strengthening public trust and engagement in policy-making. Second, **greater inclusivity**: mediatized governance advocates broad participation from multiple actors, encompassing government, public, social organizations, and enterprises. Through effective media connectivity, all parties achieve collaborative governance on the basis of equality and mutual respect, jointly promoting social governance innovation and development. Third, **greater efficiency**: mediatized governance fully utilizes digital technology and data analysis tools, improving government capacity to respond to emergencies and crises through real-time monitoring and early warning mechanisms, ensuring social stability and security while significantly enhancing governance efficiency and responsiveness. In summary, democratic platform construction constitutes an important pathway for safeguarding democracy. Mediatized governance establishes equal relationships between government and society through rule-making and public empowerment, supporting public participation in social governance through platforms such as television governance inquiries and online governance forums. This process not only relies on media technology and platforms but also partially follows media logic embedded in institutions, precisely embodying the

essence of mediatized governance.

2. “Ask Shandong” : A “One-Stop” Integrated Media Governance Program

Television governance inquiry programs represent innovative practices of mediatized governance embedded in local governance, essentially manifested as deep coupling between media logic and political systems. Under the guidance of the Shandong Provincial Party Committee and Provincial Government, “Ask Shandong” has constructed a closed-loop mechanism of “integrated media governance inquiry—authoritative feedback—social evaluation.” Through innovative formats such as sharp questioning by hosts, direct confrontation between provincial officials and the public, and real-time multi-platform interaction, the program strengthens supervision effectiveness. Relying on the “Lightning News” APP, it achieves full-process digital closure of governance issue collection, live interaction, and processing tracking, forming a governance chain of “problem exposure—government response—rectification evaluation” that effectively promotes government transparency and resolution of livelihood issues. This mediatized governance model reconstructs the government-media-public interactive relationship through institutional embedding, becoming an important pathway for enhancing governance efficacy.

3. Mechanisms for Realizing Mediatized Governance in “Ask Shandong”

3.1 Government Embedding: Guiding Mediatized Governance Pathways

Governance inquiry programs become “representatives” of the people under government guidance, reflecting public voices to relevant departments while promoting government agencies’ active participation in mediatized governance processes. Taking “Ask Shandong” as an example, the government reconstructs governance processes through a dual embedding mechanism. At the organizational structure level, it establishes a Provincial Innovative Government Affairs Openness Mechanism Office as a specialized coordination body, coordinating multi-level personnel (province-city-county three-level official participation system), topic access filing and review (provincial party committee and government topic pre-examination system), and execution effectiveness supervision (rectification commitment time-limited supervision system). At the action logic level, it constructs a governance closed loop of “problem exposure—administrative commitment—rectification evaluation,” transforming media supervision into a government performance management tool through normalized accountability mechanisms. This embedded governance incorporates media agendas into the administrative system through institutional pathways, achieving both the procedural reconstruction of democratic supervision and the mediatized expression of pressure-based governance, demonstrating local governments’ practical wisdom

in enhancing governance efficacy through technological governance innovation. Under government guidance, the organic integration of social governance and governance inquiry programs reveals the concrete historical coupling of China's political logic and media logic [13], making "Ask Shandong" a "lever" for local governments to carry out social governance work and a "handle" for democratic platform construction.

3.2 Media Linkage: Efficiently Connecting Government and Citizens

The internet era's trans-spatiotemporal linkage gradually expands people's horizons from geography to the globe, making locality increasingly less important [14]. However, "Ask Shandong" attracts residents' attention to local society and further participation in social governance by combining strong geographical characteristics with online communication technology. Media linkage is manifested first in reflecting people's voices and positively guiding public supervision of government work. In one "Ask Shandong" episode, a villager reported delays in "village-to-village" road construction. The program invited villager Chai Fujian to the inquiry site for dialogue with the mayor of Liaocheng City, who promptly promised to coordinate relevant departments to resolve the issue. This face-to-face governance inquiry model enhances governance efficacy, strengthens government credibility, promotes resolution of social conflicts and livelihood issues, and effectively advances social fairness and justice. Second, it is reflected in the program's "media-government linkage, follow-up review" mechanism. After the "village-to-village" road issue was addressed, journalists conducted on-site investigations revealing that the road section had been constructed into a 5-meter-wide concrete road, solving vegetable transportation difficulties and increasing farmers' income. "Ask Shandong" establishes an institutionalized government-citizen interaction platform that precisely resolves grassroots governance challenges while driving iterative upgrades in government governance efficacy. This mediatized governance innovation promotes regional governance modernization, fosters social consensus, and enhances people's well-being.

3.3 Audience Participation: Practicing the Mass Line in the New Era

The social media era offers diverse channels for audience participation in governance, integrating mass power into governance inquiry platforms to achieve bidirectional enhancement of governance efficacy. "Ask Shandong" has established dedicated governance inquiry sections on the Lightning News client, Qilu Net, and other media platforms, enabling "one-click governance inquiry" with direct connections to relevant departments or journalists. Enterprises, market entities, and citizens can continuously score and evaluate the actual work of various departments through a rating system. Additionally, citizens can leave messages for governance inquiry through the "Shandong Radio and Television Station" and "Qilu Net" WeChat official accounts, with media platforms accepting netizen messages around the clock. "Ask Shandong" serves not only as a platform for discovering and solving problems but also as a democratic

supervision and deliberation platform. Each episode invites provincial people's congress deputies, provincial political consultative conference members, and citizen representatives to form a governance inquiry delegation, voting "satisfied" or "unsatisfied" on proposals. By the end of November 2022, over 550 provincial people's congress deputies and political consultative conference members had participated in governance inquiries, with more than 3,000 representatives from grassroots enterprises and the general public, proposing over 500 solutions and development suggestions on-site [15]. These diverse mechanisms promote public participation, demonstrating the institutionalized practice sample of whole-process people's democracy in the mediatized governance field and achieving systematic transformation from democratic values to governance efficacy.

4. Challenges in Building Online Democratic Platforms under Mediatized Governance

4.1 Mechanism Constraints: Conflicts Between Government Decision-Making and Program Logic

Mediatized governance emphasizes multiple governance actors, including government, media, social organizations, and citizens. However, differences in interest appeals and action logic among these actors make it difficult to form effective coordination mechanisms in democratic platform construction, with information asymmetry and communication barriers further exacerbating coordination difficulties. Taking "Ask Shandong" as an example, the program coordinates numerous government personnel, citizen delegations, and journalist-host teams during preparation and implementation, requiring multi-party cooperation and government support that presents practical challenges.

As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, mediatized governance faces contradictions between procedural justice and technological rationality. The "accelerator" characteristic of governance inquiry programs compresses the statutory procedures for policy deliberation, causing some projects to fall into a state of "mediatized suspension" due to procedural compliance risks and lack of policy feasibility assessment. This highlights the paradigm conflict between technological empowerment and institutional constraints in the process of governance modernization, explaining why governance inquiry programs have not proliferated nationwide.

4.2 Social Risks: Negative Public Opinion Damaging Government Image

The governance inquiry program site features leaders subject to inquiry and sharp-questioning hosts. First, when facing incisive questions from "Ask Shandong" hosts, responsible officials typically exhibit three reactions: actively admitting mistakes and proposing solutions with assigned responsibilities; temporarily deferring responses with statements like "we will handle this after the program"; or becoming incoherent and visibly nervous. Citizens expect sincere attitudes toward public service and specific solutions, so evasive and delayed responses

during live broadcasts easily lead to declining public trust and crisis of confidence in government. Second, governance inquiry program clues primarily rely on citizen and journalist reports, and whistleblower information should be protected. However, in one “Ask Shandong” episode, an investigating journalist’s personal information was maliciously leaked, resulting in personal threats. Although the perpetrators were later apprehended by police, damage to government image is difficult to repair. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a media emergency response chain of “public opinion early warning—crisis intervention—trust repair” while improving a hierarchical protection system for citizen privacy information to build a solid information security barrier. This requires both safeguarding procedural justice in governance and reshaping public value through technology, ultimately achieving coupling between the value rationality and technological rationality of mediatized governance.

4.3 Public Reception: Technological Inequality Weakening Democratic Efficacy

Severe disparities in technology usage significantly undermine the democratic efficacy of online democratic platforms. First, the urban-rural digital divide causes social disembedding. According to the 53rd “Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development” by CNNIC, as of December 2023, urban internet users numbered 766 million (70.2% of total users), while rural internet users numbered 326 million (29.8%) [16]. Although China’s total internet user base is substantial, the urban-rural ratio remains significantly imbalanced. This “digital divide” creates factual inequality in citizens’ participation in democratic consultation and supervision, undermining the sharing and equal access principles of online democratic platforms and creating new “vulnerable groups.” Second, educational disparities create technological segmentation. Higher-educated individuals typically understand new technologies and their application scenarios more quickly and apply them more effectively to practical problems, while less knowledgeable individuals face greater challenges in understanding new technologies, affecting usage effectiveness. Third, communication rights disparities lead to participation imbalance. Some ordinary citizens have deficiencies in digital literacy and value judgment, making them more likely to be “voiceless” in democratic practice and unable to compete with professional groups occupying communication rights. As Sartori observed, “There is a growing imbalance between the powerless knowledgeable (the various small groups of experts) and the all-powerful ignorant (the non-expert majority)” [17]. The digital technology “funnel” filters out ordinary citizens while retaining elite groups, weakening democratic efficacy [18].

5. Insights for Building Online Democratic Platforms under Mediatized Governance

5.1 Expanding the Scope of Governance Representatives to Increase Political Participation Opportunities

First, enhance the representativeness of grassroots citizen representatives. Grassroots citizens form the foundation of society, so establishing a composite representative selection system of “open selection–community recommendation–interest group quota” can ensure systematic expression of grassroots demands through institutional embedding, achieving precise mapping between policy formulation and livelihood needs. Second, introduce expert consultation systems. Establishing specialized technical committees at all stages of policy formulation can construct a technical governance chain of “scholarly demonstration–industry evaluation–implementation” to strengthen decision-making capacity and policy feasibility assurance. Finally, encourage youth participation. Establishing youth policy laboratories and digital consultation platforms can activate youth socialization processes through intergenerational dialogue mechanisms, achieving dynamic adaptation between policy innovation and sustainable development needs.

5.2 Utilizing Proprietary Media Resources to Enhance Program Credibility

On February 19, 2016, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the News Work Symposium the need to “effectively improve the communication power, guidance power, influence, and credibility of Party news and public opinion.” Credibility is the key capability for media to gain audience trust. Therefore, program teams should strengthen preliminary research by forming interdisciplinary research teams to conduct empirical data collection (field surveys + in-depth interviews) and establish dynamic mapping models of “public opinion pain points–policy blockage points.” They should also improve intelligent monitoring mechanisms by deploying algorithm-driven social sentiment perception systems to construct topic selection demonstration mechanisms for “hotspot identification–trend prediction–issue classification.” Finally, programs can adopt transparent production mechanisms and use covert evidence collection and asymmetric information disclosure strategies to form multimodal content production systems, strengthening institutional embedding of communication effectiveness through procedural justice.

5.3 From Accountability to Consultation: Deepening Governance Content

Governance inquiry programs must adhere to problem orientation, daring to face problems and adept at discovering them. Grasping principal contradictions identifies breakthrough points for work advancement, and how to identify and expose these contradictions reflects the questioning capability required of

program hosts. In governance inquiry programs, questions must be “accurate” –neither missing the forest for the trees nor skimming the surface, but focusing on the essence and patterns of problems to avoid unprofessional or misguided questioning. The inquiry process should skillfully employ rhetorical questions, counter-questions, and follow-up questions, such as asking “Is it that you dare not solve it or cannot solve it?” “Please face the problem directly,” or “How do you manage this, and are you satisfied with the responsible person’ s answer, Director?” Therefore, governance inquiry should not only ask why governance problems occur but also how to solve them, when to solve them, and whether long-term management mechanisms exist. Programs must consider the people empathetically, adhere to the mass line, express public voices, ask what the people ask, and address what the people urgently need.

This study examines a provincial integrated media governance platform, deconstructing the dynamic coupling mechanism of “media-governance” based on mediatized governance theory. The research reveals that “Ask Shandong” achieves governance efficacy enhancement through triple embedding: government institutional embedding through organizational restructuring, media technical embedding through establishing full-media interactive systems, and public subjectivity embedding through digital participation channels, thereby forming a co-evolutionary path of “political logic–media logic–social logic.” The study identifies three contradictions in mediatized governance promotion: the friction between media immediacy and administrative proceduralism, the imbalance between negative public opinion dissemination and control capacity, and the participation gap caused by digital literacy disparities that weaken governance efficacy. Accordingly, the paper proposes three-dimensional solutions: constructing stratified and categorized public participation systems, enhancing media credibility, and establishing precise policy issue alignment mechanisms. This case provides a new “institution-technology-value” synergy model for governance modernization in the new era: through institutional embedding of mediatized governance, it achieves both deliberative democracy in the public sphere and technological governance transformation within government, ultimately forming a benign interactive mechanism with Chinese characteristics of “governance visibility–procedural legitimacy–value publicity,” offering an operational pathway for the mediatized practice of whole-process people’ s democracy.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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