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UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS TO ENHANCE DIGITAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ADDRESSING THE FREE NUTRITIOUS FOOD (MBG) HOAX ISSUE

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ABSTRACT
Social media has transformed public interaction between governments and citizens, making it a vital tool for digital participation in policymaking. However, it has also enabled the spread of misinformation, especially regarding government initiatives like Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program, which faced false claims about food safety and cancellations. This study explores how government institutions use social media to enhance public engagement in combating such misinformation. Through a qualitative approach, the research examines existing literature on government social media use and digital participation strategies, focusing on the MBG hoax case. The findings show that while government social media is effective for information dissemination, it lacks deeper public interaction. The study emphasizes the need for more transparent communication, timely responses, and participatory content creation. It concludes with recommendations to improve institutional coordination, citizen engagement, and media literacy efforts to better counter misinformation.

INTRODUCTIONS

The rapid development of social media as a public communication channel has transformed the interaction patterns between governments and citizens in the digital sphere (Yuan et al., 2023). Social media is no longer merely a one-way communication tool but has become a public dialogue arena that enables citizen participation in policymaking and public oversight (Cahyadi, 2025). The speed at which information spreads on these platforms allows for instant responses to public issues, but it also increases the risk of misinformation and hoaxes that are difficult to control (Alam et al., 2021; Muhammed T & Mathew, 2022). This condition becomes more complex when government

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institutions are expected not only to disseminate information but also to serve as facilitators of digital public participation (Khan, 2017; Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024).

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is an Indonesian government initiative launched in 2025 with the primary aim of addressing stunting and malnutrition among school-aged children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. The program provides nutritious meals free of charge in schools and through local Nutrition Service Units established at the village and sub-district levels, supervised by nutrition experts to ensure compliance with national dietary standards. In addition to its public health focus, MBG is also designed to stimulate local economies by sourcing food ingredients from local producers (Saputra, 2025; Sulaiman, 2025).

However, since its implementation, MBG has faced significant challenges that have drawn public and media attention. One major issue is the occurrence of mass food poisoning cases in several regions; according to reports up to late September 2025, more than 6,000 students were affected by foodborne illnesses linked to MBG meals (Nasution, 2025; Pramudita, 2024). Additionally, misinformation and hoaxes have circulated widely on social media—such as claims that the MBG program was canceled or that medical treatment for poisoning victims was not covered by the government. These claims have been officially debunked by fact-checking institutions and the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) (Taufan, 2025).

The spread of hoaxes has become a serious challenge in modern digital democracies. False or misleading information can damage public trust in institutions and weaken the legitimacy of public policies (Post, 2023; West et al., 2020). In a democratic context, hoaxes may even serve as tools to distort public perception of political actors and government programs (Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Reglitz, 2022). In Indonesia, the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo) has documented hundreds to thousands of hoax contents, particularly during election periods or in response to national issues (Kominfo, 2019). This situation illustrates that misinformation is not a minor problem but a structural one that requires serious intervention and cooperation between the state and the public.

Government institutions, as the official representatives of the state, have a strategic responsibility to maintain the flow of accurate public information. They can utilize social media not only as a channel for communication but also as a tool to encourage citizen engagement in public discourse (Yuan et al., 2023). However, the capacity of many governmental bodies to utilize social media effectively remains limited, especially in designing two-way interactions, ensuring accessibility, and moderating online discussions. Organizational barriers, lack of public trust, human resource constraints, and inadequate digital infrastructure continue to hinder optimal communication.

In the context of hoaxes, the use of social media by government institutions becomes increasingly crucial. Governments can employ social media platforms to provide clarifications, promote media literacy, and facilitate citizen reporting or feedback on suspicious content (Kominfo, 2025; "The Role of Social Media in Combating Hoaxes," 2023). Counter-messaging campaigns designed by government agencies can significantly reduce the spread of misinformation (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). However, the effectiveness of such strategies depends on the level of digital public participation — whether citizens are willing to engage, report, and respond to online misinformation — including issues surrounding the MBG hoax. Therefore, it is essential to conduct empirical studies that examine how government institutions leverage social media to foster digital public participation in responding to MBG-related hoaxes in Indonesia.

The urgency of this research lies in the strategic need to strengthen public information resilience and digital democracy in Indonesia by optimizing government use of social media. Given the growing prevalence of hoaxes and their potential impacts on social stability, public trust, and political participation (Muhammed T & Mathew, 2022), this study provides both practical and theoretical insights into how government institutions can enhance digital public participation in the MBG hoax context. The findings are expected to offer policy recommendations for digital communication strategies and public literacy development.

Several previous studies have investigated the relationship between government social media use, digital public participation, and hoax mitigation. For instance, a study on Virtual Public Participation in Hoax Prevention in

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West Java revealed that although citizen reporting mechanisms exist, participation levels remain low, and most interactions are one-way rather than deliberative (Maula & Fardiah, 2025). Another study found that Indonesian government social media accounts have not yet adopted mature open government models, limiting collaborative citizen engagement (Asyiah, 2018). However, no study to date has specifically focused on how government institutions respond to the MBG hoax issue through digital public participation strategies.

Based on the background and research urgency, this study aims to analyze how government institutions utilize social media to increase digital public participation regarding the MBG hoax issue. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) describe the forms of communication and digital interaction used by government institutions in addressing MBG-related hoaxes; (2) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting the level of digital public participation; and (3) propose strategic recommendations for effective government social media engagement in combating hoaxes through participatory digital governance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with the type of literature study (library research) aimed at analyzing conceptual frameworks and empirical findings related to the utilization of social media by government institutions in enhancing digital public participation on the MBG hoax issue. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of meanings, contexts, and interactional patterns within non-numerical data (Creswell, 2021). A literature study is appropriate since this research seeks to identify, review, and synthesize previous studies, policy reports, and other secondary data relevant to public digital communication and hoax counter-management strategies in governmental contexts (Snyder, 2019).

Data Sources

The research relies on secondary data sources obtained from a wide range of academic and institutional publications, both national and international. The data include scholarly journal articles, scientific books, government reports (particularly from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of Indonesia/Kominfo), and publications by international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD. In addition, data from reputable media outlets and civil society organizations addressing issues of digital participation and misinformation management were also included. Public policy documents, government digital communication guidelines, and prior research published between 2019 and 2024 were selected to ensure the study's relevance and currency (Booth et al., 2021).

Data Collection Technique

The data collection process was conducted through a systematic literature review, which involves identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant studies and reports. The procedure followed four key stages:

1. Identification – locating relevant publications through academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink;
2. Selection – screening articles based on their relevance to the keywords *"government social media use," "digital public participation,"* and *"hoax management";*
3. Evaluation – assessing the credibility, methodological rigor, and contextual relevance of each selected source; and
4. Extraction – collecting key findings, concepts, and theoretical frameworks for qualitative interpretation (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

This structured process ensures that only credible and conceptually valid data are included in the analysis, thereby strengthening the reliability of the study's findings.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which is descriptive and interpretive in nature (Schreier, 2012). The analysis was conducted by categorizing data into thematic areas related to: (1) government social media utilization; (2) forms of digital public participation; and (3) governmental strategies in

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combating the MBG hoax. Each theme was then interpreted to explore conceptual linkages, communication patterns, and the effectiveness of institutional strategies.

To deepen understanding, a comparative analysis was also applied by examining relevant case studies and *best practices* from government institutions in other countries (Bowen, 2009). This analytical framework not only identifies recurring patterns but also highlights innovative practices that can inform future digital engagement strategies. Thus, the analysis is expected to produce comprehensive theoretical and practical insights into how social media can be leveraged by government bodies to foster digital public participation and counter misinformation effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Digital Communication and Interaction by Government Institutions

Government institutions have diversified their modes of communication on social media, moving beyond mere one-way announcements toward a range of interactive practices that attempt to combine information provision, real-time response, and public involvement; nevertheless, these practices vary widely in design, intensity, and effectiveness across agencies and contexts (Yuan et al., 2023). At the foundational level, government accounts typically perform an authoritative broadcasting function: official channels post factual clarifications, press releases, infographics, and short explanatory videos intended to correct circulating falsehoods and provide an "official version" of events (Guo et al., 2021). These informational posts are often optimized for platform affordances — for example, short captioned videos for TikTok, carousels and infographics for Instagram, and threaded posts for X/Twitter — because format strongly influences user attention and shareability (Metzler & Garcia, 2024). In many documented instances, such content is effective at reaching passive audiences who consume but do not actively engage; the evidence from content engagement metrics indicates that while reach can be substantial for well-produced posts, the depth of public deliberation triggered by such posts tends to be limited.

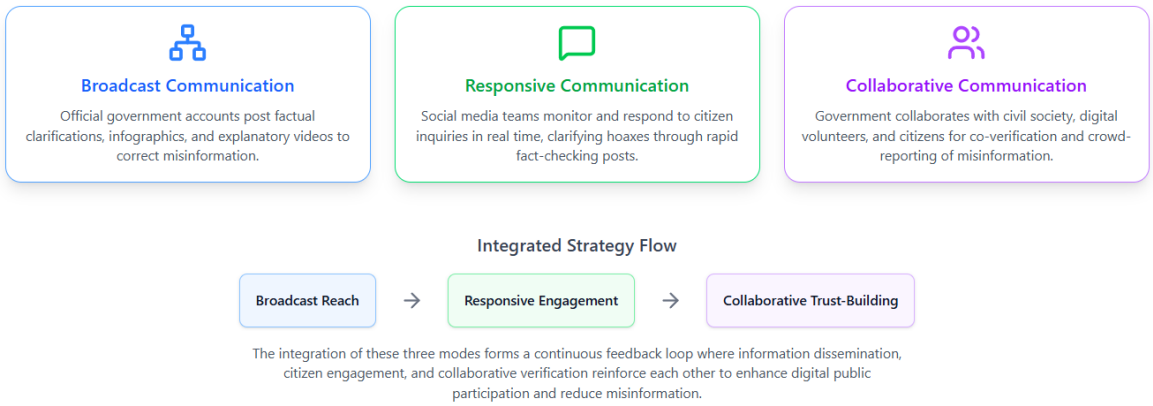

Figure 1. Government Social Media Communication Framework in Addressing the MBG Hoax

Beyond broadcast, responsive communication constitutes a second, distinct mode in which government social media teams monitor incoming messages, reply to citizen questions, and issue rapid clarifications or "fact checks." This real-time responsiveness has been institutionalized in some contexts — for example, through dedicated monitoring units that track trending topics and produce rapid rebuttals to misinformation — and research shows that timely responses increase perceived credibility and reduce rumor persistence when they are accurate and transparently sourced (Neyazi et al., 2022; Rahmawan et al., 2023). However, responsiveness faces practical constraints: staffing

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limits, jurisdictional ambiguity between different ministries, and platform algorithmic delays often mean that corrections arrive after hoaxes have already circulated widely, thereby limiting corrective impact (Effendi, 2023). Moreover, rapid reactive posts that simply deny a claim without offering an explanatory narrative or sources can fail to change beliefs among audiences predisposed to accept the hoax.

A third and more aspirational mode of interaction is collaborative or participatory communication, where government actors actively invite citizens to co-produce content, report suspicious posts, participate in Q&A sessions, or join crowdsourced verification initiatives. Empirical studies indicate that participatory formats — including community reporting buttons, crowdsourced fact-checking partnerships with civil society, and digital volunteer networks — can increase civic ownership of the misinformation-response process and improve detection and amplification of correct information (Kusumarani & Zo, 2018). In Indonesia, civil society fact-checking organizations such as MAFINDO have worked in partnership with government and media to promote citizen reporting and verification, demonstrating how collaborative ecosystems can complement official channels. Despite these promising models, genuine two-way collaboration remains fragile: participatory initiatives often rely on short-term campaigns, volunteer labor, or non-institutional funding, which hinders sustainability and scale.

The MBG hoax saga illustrates how these three modes operate (and at times collide) in practice. Beginning with viral posts that falsely claimed the Free Nutritious Food (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) program contained prohibited ingredients or that the program had been cancelled by executive order, the hoax spread rapidly across WhatsApp groups and public feeds, leveraging emotive frames and local rumor networks (Komdigi; local government clarifications). Government responses encompassed all three modes described above. Official agencies posted corrective statements and infographics that aimed to debunk specific claims and provide procedural details about the MBG program, and Kominfo-affiliated platforms aggregated debunking notices (broadcast/informative mode). At the same time, local government social media operators and provincial disaster-communication units engaged in responsive interactions on comment threads and through replies to citizens, attempting to answer practical questions about distribution points and food safety testing (responsive mode). In several localities, civil society groups and volunteer fact-checkers were invited to co-monitor MBG-related content, submit verified corrections, and assist in relaying official clarifications to hard-to-reach communities (collaborative mode), which improved reach in areas where trust in central government channels was lower.

Nonetheless, the MBG case also exposed limitations inherent in current government social media practice. First, jurisdictional fragmentation meant that different agencies sometimes issued slightly divergent messages about MBG logistics and safety checks, creating confusion among audiences and giving adversarial actors room to mischaracterize official corrections as inconsistent (Effendi, 2023). Second, platform dynamics favored emotionally salient rumor posts: algorithmic amplification of sensational claims outpaced the slower production and dissemination of careful rebuttals, diminishing the corrective reach of official posts (Metzler & Garcia, 2024). Third, while collaborative practices improved local uptake where they existed, many regions lacked organized community partners or digital volunteer networks, leaving pockets of the population reliant on peer-to-peer WhatsApp circulation of the hoax (Kusumarani & Zo, 2018; Rahmawan et al., 2023). These dynamics show that government social media must be simultaneously strategic in content design, well-resourced for timely monitoring and response, and networked with civil society and local communicators to convert reach into meaningful, corrective participation.

In sum, the forms of digital communication and interaction deployed by government institutions in the MBG episode reveal a mixed picture: social media provides powerful broadcast reach and creates opportunities for rapid corrective responses, while participatory approaches offer pathways to amplify legitimacy and local trust; however, constraints related to resources, inter-agency coordination, platform algorithms, and uneven local partnerships limit the effectiveness of governmental efforts unless they are embedded within an integrated, multi-stakeholder misinformation response strategy (Neyazi et al., 2022). Future practice and research should therefore prioritize longitudinal evaluations of integrated broadcast–response–collaboration models, paying special attention to how

Sosioedukasi
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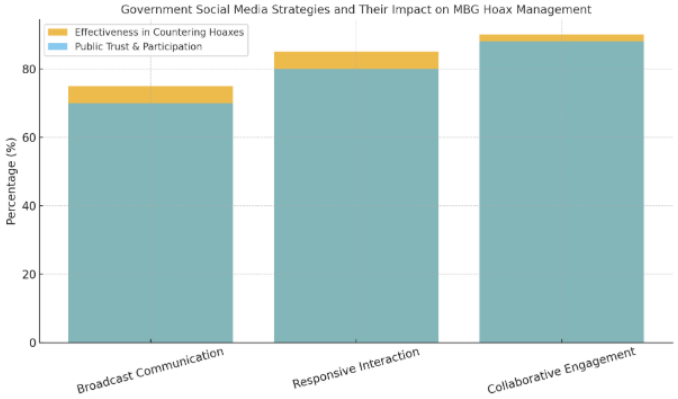
explanatory narratives, timing, and local partnership ecosystems jointly determine whether social media interventions succeed in converting official communications into sustained public participation against hoaxes.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Digital Public Participation

The capacity of publics to act as active participants in digital efforts to identify, report, and correct misinformation is shaped by an interwoven set of enabling and constraining conditions that operate at individual, institutional, and technological levels. At the individual level, improvements in basic digital skills and media literacy raise citizens' ability to recognize suspicious content and to use platform tools for reporting; initiatives such as Indonesia's #Siberkreasi movement and related digital literacy campaigns have been associated with a measurable increase in awareness about online hoaxes and the mechanisms for verifying claims, even while scholars caution that many programs remain uneven in reach and depth across regions (Pamungkas, 2021). This expansion of skills helps explain why, in many documented episodes, users who have been exposed to digital literacy interventions are more likely to pause before sharing and to seek verification from fact-checking organizations or official channels (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).



Institutional factors are equally decisive: transparency, timeliness, and perceived credibility of government accounts strongly influence whether citizens will engage with official corrections or take part in crowdsourced verification. Where government social media maintain clear provenance (verified handles, well-sourced posts) and respond promptly with explanatory narratives rather than terse denials, public trust—and therefore the likelihood of active participation—rises (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Conversely, fragmentation across agencies, inconsistent messaging, and slow coordination produce confusion that reduces citizens' willingness to act; Indonesian case studies show that when municipal, provincial, and national accounts issue slightly different procedural details about the same program, audiences perceive inconsistency and retreat from engagement. Institutional partnerships with civil society fact-checking groups (for example, MAFINDO) and local media amplify corrective reach because such collaborations combine official authority with grassroots credibility, creating channels through which citizens both receive and feed back verified information.

Technological and platform dynamics create a third set of constraints and affordances that shape participation. Social algorithms privilege content that is novel or emotionally arousing, which often advantages sensationalized hoaxes over sober corrections; therefore, even well-crafted government messages struggle for visibility unless amplified through influencers, community partners, or paid promotion (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2010; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Platform affordances also matter: ephemeral formats and closed messaging apps (e.g.,

Sosioedukasi
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WhatsApp) enable rapid peer-to-peer rumor diffusion while limiting public moderation and the visibility of official rebuttals; this makes it harder for centralized government interventions to reach clusters of users who are most susceptible (Handayani et al., 2023). Moreover, human resource constraints inside public agencies—limited staff dedicated to social listening, low capacities for rapid multimedia production, and insufficient training in community management—reduce the frequency and quality of interactive engagement, turning potentially dialogic channels back into one-way broadcasts.

The MBG (Free Nutritious Food) hoax illustrates how these enabling and constraining forces interact in practice. In several local outbreaks of the MBG rumor, initial circulation occurred within private WhatsApp groups and then spilled into public social feeds with evocative claims about food safety and alleged cancellations of the program; these posts benefited from emotional framing and local rumor networks, accelerating spread before official channels had prepared responses. Government actors eventually activated multiple instruments—Kominfo's public debunk pages, municipal social media clarifications, and targeted community outreach—but the corrective process revealed recurring bottlenecks. In places where Kominfo and local authorities coordinated quickly with local health offices and community leaders, official clarifications combined with on-the-ground verification (photo-documented testing, distribution schedules) restored confidence and prompted citizens to share corrective posts, report suspicious content, and ask follow-up questions—a clear instance where institutional transparency and local partnerships translated into active digital participation (Rahmawan et al., 2023). In contrast, in districts where messaging was inconsistent or delayed, the rumor persisted and even mutated; platform algorithms kept amplifying repackaged sensational variants while official rebuttals remained less visible, demonstrating how timing, message framing, and platform dynamics jointly shaped the net outcome.

Taken together, these observations imply that strengthening digital public participation against hoaxes requires an integrated approach that simultaneously invests in citizen competencies (deep, context-sensitive media literacy), institutional capabilities (rapid coordinated response, transparent sourcing, partnerships with fact-checkers and local actors), and platform strategies (format optimization, influencer partnerships, and targeted dissemination to counter algorithmic bias). The literature and the MBG case both show that isolated interventions—an awareness campaign without community networks, or a rapid rebuttal without credible local partners—are unlikely to convert reach into sustained participation; only when individual, institutional, and technological levers are aligned does digital public participation become a durable mechanism for resisting misinformation (Lazer et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Digital Public Participation

Based on the findings, three strategic directions are proposed for government institutions to improve the effectiveness of social media utilization in addressing hoaxes like MBG.

1. First, institutions should implement an integrated digital communication framework that synchronizes inter-agency efforts in misinformation management. A unified platform—such as a national Digital Response Center—could coordinate fact-checking, crisis communication, and citizen feedback across ministries (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). This would enhance message consistency and response speed.
2. Second, the government needs to promote participatory content creation and dialogic engagement. This may involve inviting citizen co-creators, influencers, and community-based organizations to produce counter-hoax narratives in culturally relevant and emotionally resonant formats (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024). Two-way communication mechanisms, such as online town halls, Q&A sessions, and digital volunteer programs, can foster a sense of ownership among citizens in combating misinformation.
3. Third, digital participation must be supported by sustainable media literacy programs. Integrating media literacy into school curricula and local community initiatives will enhance long-term resilience against misinformation (Alam et al., 2021). This aligns with the participatory governance principle, where citizens are not only recipients of government communication but also co-producers of public truth.

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In summary, the government's utilization of social media in addressing the MBG hoax demonstrates significant progress toward open and participatory digital governance. However, maximizing its impact requires a shift from reactive information dissemination to proactive collaboration. By institutionalizing participatory communication models and strengthening trust-based digital ecosystems, government institutions can more effectively mobilize citizens to become active partners in safeguarding the integrity of public information.

Discussion

The results of this study underline the pivotal role social media plays in enhancing digital public participation, especially in the context of addressing misinformation like the MBG hoax. Government institutions have increasingly diversified their approaches, employing a combination of broadcast communication, responsive clarifications, and collaborative efforts with civil society groups to combat misinformation. These approaches reflect a shift from one-way communication towards a more interactive model, although challenges remain in terms of effectiveness.

A key finding is that government communication through social media platforms has a substantial reach but limited ipact in fostering meaningful public engagement. While fact-based posts and clarifications reach large audiences, the depth of interaction remains shallow, suggesting a gap in citizen participation. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that government social media efforts often struggle with engagement beyond information dissemination (Guo et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023). The study also highlights that timely responses and transparent messaging are crucial for enhancing credibility and reducing the spread of misinformation. However, the fragmented nature of government agencies and platform algorithms often hampers swift and cohesive action.

Collaborative communication emerged as a promising solution. Engaging citizens in co-creating content or participating in crowdsourced fact-checking not only improves the credibility of the information but also strengthens local trust in government efforts. The case of MBG exemplifies the effectiveness of this participatory approach, where local partnerships amplified the corrective impact of government responses. Despite these successes, the study identifies critical constraints: inadequate coordination among agencies, resource limitations, and the dominance of sensational content on social media platforms.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the necessity for a holistic and integrated approach to digital public participation. Future strategies should focus on improving inter-agency coordination, enhancing media literacy among citizens, and developing sustainable community partnerships to foster deeper and more sustained engagement.

CONCLUSION

The study underlines the crucial role of government social media in mitigating misinformation and fostering digital public participation, especially in addressing issues like the MBG hoax. While government institutions have made significant strides in using social media for communication, their approach remains mostly one-way, and deeper engagement is lacking. The findings indicate that social media platforms' broad reach is often not enough to counter the spread of misinformation effectively, as it requires active citizen participation. This can be achieved through two-way communication and collaboration with civil society groups.

Practical recommendations include the establishment of an integrated digital communication framework that coordinates efforts across government agencies and local partners, ensuring message consistency and responsiveness. Additionally, promoting media literacy and participatory content creation will empower citizens to actively engage in debunking hoaxes and supporting public policies.

Despite these promising approaches, the study identifies several limitations in government capacity, including insufficient resources and coordination across agencies. These factors hinder the effectiveness of communication strategies, particularly in regions where trust in central government is low.

Sosioedukasi
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Volume 14 No. 4. Desember 2025 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to evaluate the impact of integrated digital communication models in hoax mitigation. Additionally, exploring how different platforms and local partnerships influence the success of participatory strategies would provide valuable insights into enhancing government-citizen collaboration in the digital age.

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