

UTILIZATION OF DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACE BY THE MEDAN CITY GENERAL ELECTION COMMISSION IN ORDER TO INCREASE VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE 2024 MEDAN CITY REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how Regional Head Election organizers utilize the digital public sphere and the obstacles faced by the General Elections Commission (KPU) in leveraging this space to increase voter participation. Employing a qualitative approach, the research was conducted in Medan City, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The results indicate that the Medan City KPU has effectively utilized the digital public sphere via various social media platforms throughout the election stages—from the preparatory phase to the post-election period. A primary objective of this social media optimization is to disseminate election-related information and encourage the public to actively exercise their voting rights. However, obstacles within the digital public sphere are inevitable; for example, algorithms can limit the reach of content, preventing it from connecting with a wider audience. The study underscores that the successful optimization of the digital public sphere is heavily influenced by the capacity and commitment of the election organizers .

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has made social media a new public space with a significant influence on various aspects of life, including politics. Social media is no longer simply a means of communication but has also evolved into an instrument of political participation, enabling people to express their views, obtain information, and engage more broadly in the democratic process. In fact, technological advances toward *Artificial Intelligence* are further enhancing the effectiveness of political information dissemination and interactions between election organizers and the public (Agustini et al., 2025). This condition demonstrates that digital transformation has shifted political communication patterns from conventional models to a more open and participatory digital public space (Astaman & Manihuruk, 2025).

The use of digital public spaces is strategic in political communication because it serves as a medium for disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and educating the public about politics. In the context of regional head elections, the General Elections Commission (KPU) utilizes digital public spaces to disseminate election information, improve political literacy, and raise public awareness about the importance of exercising their right to vote. Optimizing

these public spaces is expected to expand access to election information and increase voter participation (Asmaranti et al., 2024).

The development of digital politics also demonstrates changing patterns of public participation. Citizens are no longer merely recipients of political information, but are also involved in producing, disseminating, and influencing public opinion through various social media platforms. This phenomenon was evident in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, including in Medan, where digital communities played an active role in the dynamics of electoral politics (Andryan, 2026). These changes confirm that the digital public sphere has become a crucial arena for modern democratic practices, enabling broader and more rapid political interaction.

The concept of public space is rooted in Habermas's thinking in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), which views public space as a free arena where society can discuss rationally and form public opinion. With the development of communication technology, public space is no longer limited to physical space, but has expanded to include mass media and digital platforms that can reach a wider audience. Digital media has become a strategic tool for disseminating election information, political education, and fostering public awareness of democracy (Juditha & Darmawan, 2024).

In the implementation of regional elections, the existence of digital public spaces is becoming increasingly important because it is directly related to increasing public political participation. The General Elections Commission (KPU), as a national, permanent, and independent state institution, has the responsibility to organize democratic elections based on the principles of direct, general, free, secret, honest, and fair as stipulated in Law Number 7 of 2017. The independence of the KPU is an important prerequisite for the realization of the legitimacy of electoral democracy (Arifin et al., 2025). Therefore, the use of digital public spaces is one of the main strategies in carrying out the functions of socialization and voter education.

The legal basis for the use of public spaces in elections is further strengthened through various regulations. General Elections Commission (KPU) Regulation Number 15 of 2023 regulates campaign implementation and clearly differentiates between the socialization period and the official campaign period. Furthermore, KPU Regulation Number 9 of 2022 concerning Public Participation and KPU Decree Number 620 of 2024 concerning Technical Guidelines for Socialization and Voter Education provide operational guidelines for the KPU in implementing socialization through various media, including digital public spaces. These regulations emphasize that public spaces are a strategic instrument in increasing electoral literacy and public political awareness (Syahdanul & Muhammad, 2025).

In practice, the Medan City Election Commission (KPU) has utilized various digital platforms to convey information regarding election stages, voting transfer procedures, procedures for determining valid and invalid votes, and organizing activities aimed at increasing voter participation. This use of digital media demonstrates a transformation in political communication strategies from conventional approaches to information technology-based communication that is more interactive, fast, and easily accessible to the public.

Despite this, voter participation in Medan City continues to fluctuate. Data from the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) shows that voter participation in the 2015 regional elections was only 25.35%, increasing to 46.8% in the 2020 elections, and then declining again to around 34% in the 2024 elections. This low participation rate indicates that increased access to information has not fully encouraged the public to exercise their right to vote. This situation presents a challenge for election organizers in optimizing their outreach strategies through digital public spaces.

Low voter turnout isn't always caused by apathy, but is also influenced by the public's limited understanding of political procedures and rights. First-time voters, for example, often don't understand that they qualify as voters, potentially leading to non-voters. Furthermore, the formation of a public's political orientation is influenced by family, peer groups, mass media, and social media, which shape political preferences and a person's level of democratic awareness (Astaman & Manihuruk, 2025; Daulay & Harahap, 2025).

Based on these conditions, research on the use of digital public spaces by the Medan City General Election Commission (KPU) is crucial. This study aims to analyze how digital public spaces are utilized as a medium for voter outreach and education, identify obstacles encountered in their implementation, and evaluate their contribution to increasing voter participation in the 2024 Medan City Pilkada. The research findings are expected to provide recommendations for the KPU and stakeholders in formulating more effective political communication strategies to improve the quality of public participation in the implementation of democracy.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the use of digital public spaces by the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) in increasing voter participation in the 2024 Regional Elections. This approach was chosen because it is able to describe in depth the role of the KPU in implementing voter socialization and education through various digital media based on the perspectives of informants. The study refers to the qualitative research concept according to Creswell which emphasizes natural data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation studies, then analyzed interpretively to obtain a comprehensive understanding. The research stages include problem identification, literature review, informant determination, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and preparation of the research report (Adil et al., 2023; Lim, 2025).

The research was conducted at the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) Secretariat considering that Medan City has interesting voter participation dynamics, including having recorded the lowest participation rate in the 2015 Regional Elections. The focus of the research was directed at the KPU's use of digital public spaces in providing political education to voters, the forms of media used, and the supporting and inhibiting factors in its implementation. Data were obtained through primary sources in the form of in-depth interviews, observations, and *focus group discussions* (FGDs), as well as secondary sources derived from books, scientific journals, official documents, and laws and regulations. Informants were selected purposively, *consisting* of the leaders and staff of the Medan City KPU, the Medan City Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), and representatives of community groups who actively utilize digital media.

Data analysis was conducted through a process of reduction, coding (*open coding* , *axial coding* , and *selective coding*), data presentation, and drawing conclusions, referring to the stages of analysis by Creswell and Strauss. Interpretation was carried out in stages to identify themes, patterns, and relationships between categories, thus generating an understanding of the effectiveness of utilizing digital public spaces in increasing voter participation. Data validity was guaranteed through a credibility test using triangulation techniques of sources, methods, and documentation, so that the research findings have a level of validity and reliability that can be scientifically accounted for.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Transformation of Digital Public Space in Political Communication for Regional Head Elections

The utilization of digital public space by the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) in the 2024 Regional Head Elections demonstrates a transformation in political communication from conventional media to digital media. Social media no longer functions solely as a means of disseminating information, but has evolved into a strategic instrument in political education, shaping public opinion, and increasing public participation. This change aligns with Noam Chomsky's view of *manufactured consent* , namely the process of forming public agreement through the management of information flows. In the Indonesian context, Zainal Arifin Mochtar (2026) emphasized that contemporary political power is determined not only by mastery of formal institutions but also by the ability to manage narratives in the digital public space. (Simanullang & Prayetno, 2025).

This transformation has become increasingly apparent since the development of social media as the primary arena for political communication after the era of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono until the 2024 election. Democracy, which previously relied on mainstream media, is now undergoing digitalization, enabling the dissemination of information to be faster, broader, and more interactive. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (*Twitter*), Instagram, and TikTok have developed into strategic spaces for building political image, influencing public perception, and strengthening political consolidation digitally. This condition confirms that the digital public sphere has become a crucial part of the dynamics of electoral democracy in Indonesia (Sidik et al., 2026).

Table 1. Social Media Profiles of Interest in Indonesia

Social media	Year of Establishment	Founding Countries	Founder's Name
Facebook	2004	United States of America	Mark Zuckerberg
YouTube	2005	United States of America	Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, J. Karim
X/ Twitter	2006	United States of America	Jack Dorsey, Noah, Stone, Evan

Instagram	2010	United States of America	Kevin Systrom, Mike Krieger
TikTok	2016	China	ByteDance Company

In the implementation of regional elections, these developments present both opportunities and challenges for election organizers. On the one hand, social media expands public access to election information and encourages more active political engagement. However, on the other hand, the digital space is also characterized by the spread of hoaxes, polarization of opinion, the dominance of unofficial narratives, and the decline in the quality of political discourse. Therefore, the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) are not satisfied with merely performing administrative functions; they must also act as providers of credible information, facilitators of political education, and managers of a healthy, open, and educational digital public space (Suling, 2024).

This situation is becoming increasingly relevant in Medan, a metropolitan city with high levels of social media usage. The public obtains political information from various sources, both official institutions and non-institutional actors active in the digital space. This situation creates increasingly complex competing narratives, making the effectiveness of public communication by election organizers a crucial factor in building public trust, increasing political literacy, and encouraging voter participation in the 2024 regional elections (Bolo, 2023).

Based on these findings, this study considers optimizing digital public space to be a key strategy in the implementation of electoral democracy. The analysis focuses on the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU)'s use of digital media to convey information and educate voters, while also identifying various institutional, technical, and socio-political barriers faced in managing digital public space. The results of this analysis are expected to provide an overview of the effectiveness of election organizers' digital communication strategies and serve as a basis for developing recommendations to increase public political participation in the next election.

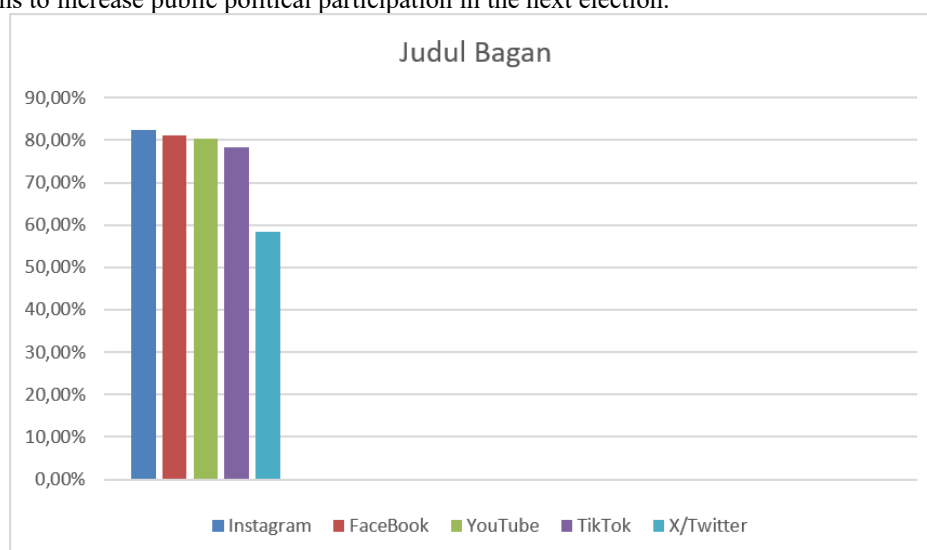


Figure 1. Most popular social media graphs

How Election Organizers Utilize Digital Public Spaces to Convey Information and Build Political Discourse in the 2024 Medan City Election

This study found that the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) utilized digital public space as the primary instrument of institutional communication in the 2024 regional elections. The shift from conventional to digital communication patterns prompted the KPU to utilize various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X, to convey election information. This use of digital media demonstrates institutional adaptation to developments in information technology as well as changes in public behavior in accessing political information.

The use of various social media platforms demonstrates that the Medan City Election Commission (KPU) implements a communication strategy tailored to the characteristics of each user group. Each platform is treated as a communication space with a distinct audience segmentation, allowing information delivery to be tailored to the public's

media consumption patterns. From a political communication perspective, this strategy reflects *political communication adaptation*, the institution's ability to tailor messages to the characteristics of the media and its intended audience (Meliasari et al., 2025).

The use of digital public space is evident in the dissemination of technical information regarding the stages of the regional elections, such as candidate registration schedules, campaign periods, voting procedures, polling station locations, and voting procedures. This information is presented in the form of digital posters, infographics, educational videos, and live broadcasts, making it easier for the public to understand. Furthermore, social media is also used as a means of political education, aimed at raising public awareness, particularly among first-time voters, about the importance of participating in elections (Kusumadinata, 2024).

Table 2. General Election Commission Social Media

Social Media Name	Number of Followers	Years of use	Number of Posts
Instagram	9,421 Followers	2017	3,852 Posts
Facebook	2,800 Followers	2017	3,400 Posts
YouTube	411 Subscribers	2023	83 Video
TikTok	278 Followers	2023	59 Video

Interview results indicate that social media is used not only to convey administrative information but also as a means of clarifying issues and information developing in society. This function demonstrates that the digital public sphere is utilized as an arena for building public trust while maintaining the quality of election information. From the perspective of political communication theory, this practice reflects the functions of *agenda setting* and *political image maintenance*, namely, the efforts of institutions to direct public attention and maintain legitimacy through the delivery of accurate and regulation-based information.

However, this study found that the Medan City Election Commission (KPU)'s use of digital public spaces was still dominated by informative and educational functions rather than deliberative ones. The majority of published content consisted of information on election stages, calls to vote, issue clarifications, and reposts from the Indonesian General Elections Commission (KPU) and the North Sumatra Provincial General Elections Commission (KPU). This situation indicates that social media is used more as a channel for distributing official information than as a discussion space that encourages active public participation.

These findings align with research Badariah & Saleh (2025) showing that social media effectively increases access to political information through educational content, humor, testimonials from first-time voters, and digital *challenges*, as long as the information remains accurate and free from hoaxes. Farabi's research also reveals that social media can create a space for political expression, expand access to information, and encourage a shift in political participation from mere information consumption to active interaction through comments, discussions, and the dissemination of political information. Thus, social media has great potential as a democratic public space if managed in a participatory manner.

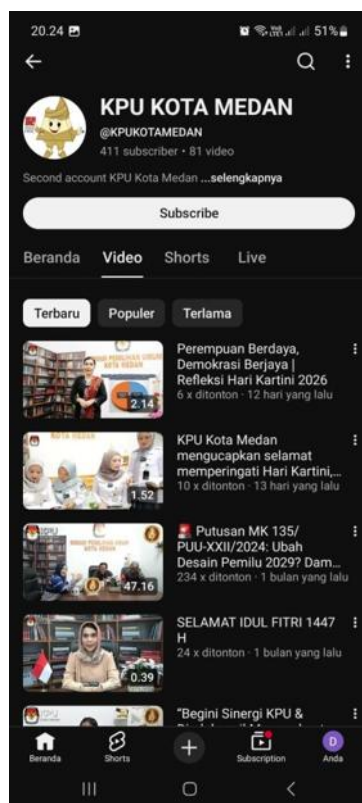


Figure 2. KPU social media display

This study also found that the Medan City Election Commission's digital communication patterns remain structural and bureaucratic. Most content is redistributed by the North Sumatra Provincial Election Commission (KPU), resulting in relatively limited production of local narratives. Although the KPU has attempted to adapt its communication style to the characteristics of Medan's citizens and opened up space for interaction through comments and clarification of hoaxes, the communication remains more responsive than deliberative. (JeriYansyah et al., 2026).

Overall, the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU)'s use of digital public space in the 2024 regional elections demonstrated a dominant role in information, education, and clarification. Social media has become a primary instrument of institutional political communication, conveying information, providing voter education, and countering hoaxes. However, the digital public space that has emerged has not fully developed into a participatory deliberation space due to its dominance of one-way communication, institutional standardization, and limited production of local content relevant to the dynamics of Medan's society.

Obstacles faced by the General Elections Commission in optimizing public space in the 2024 Medan mayoral election

One of the main obstacles faced by the Medan City General Elections Commission (KPU) in optimizing the digital public space is the limited reach of information due to social media algorithms. Although the KPU has utilized various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and X, not all election content can reach the public equally (Rahma & Pinem, 2025). Social media algorithms tend to display content based on user preferences, interaction history, and engagement levels, so educational information about elections often loses out to entertainment content or more sensational issues. From the perspective of Habermas's public sphere theory, this condition indicates that access to public information in the digital space is no longer completely equal because it is influenced by the mechanisms of digital platforms that determine information distribution (Prasetyo et al., 2022).

The findings also demonstrate the emergence of *filter bubbles* and *echo chambers*, a phenomenon where users receive more information that aligns with their existing preferences and views. As a result, political education messages

produced by the General Elections Commission (KPU) have the potential to miss out on reaching the very groups that need election information. This barrier demonstrates that the effectiveness of digital political communication is determined not only by the quality of the content, but also by the technological structure of social media, which limits the inclusive dissemination of information (Bondar & Siregar, 2025).

Another obstacle is generational fragmentation in digital media utilization. Generation Z, as the most active group using social media, has a high level of digital access, but not all of them use social media as a source of political information, using it more for entertainment and social interaction. Conversely, older age groups generally have greater political experience but face limited digital literacy, making them less likely to follow election information delivered through social media. These differences in characteristics between generations mean that the General Elections Commission (KPU) has not been able to effectively disseminate political information to all voter groups (Tsaabitah & Marzuki, 2026).

In addition to technological factors and the characteristics of digital media users, this study also found that political apathy among Medan residents is the most fundamental obstacle to optimizing digital public space. Some residents believe that the change of regional head has no real impact on their lives, thus reducing their interest in following political information or exercising their right to vote. From the perspective of *political efficacy theory*, low public confidence that political participation can produce change leads to decreased attention to election information provided by election organizers (Widyanti et al., 2024).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the obstacles to optimizing digital public space by the Medan City Election Commission (KPU) stem from a combination of technological, social, and psychological factors. Social media algorithms, generational fragmentation of media use, and low public trust and interest in politics are interrelated challenges in improving the effectiveness of election communication. (Tarigan et al., 2024) Therefore, optimizing digital public spaces is not simply about increasing technological capacity and content production; it also requires more adaptive and inclusive communication strategies, as well as ongoing efforts to rebuild public trust in local democratic processes.

CONCLUSION

The Medan City General Elections Commission's (KPU) utilization of digital public spaces in the 2024 regional elections demonstrates a transformation in political communication from conventional models to digital communication, which is more open, fast, and adaptive to developments in information technology. Various digital platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, X, WhatsApp, and official websites, are being utilized as media for conveying information on election stages, providing political education, clarifying issues, and combating hoaxes and disinformation. These findings demonstrate that election organizers are no longer merely performing administrative functions but are also acting as democratic actors, building public political awareness through informative, educational, and clarifying digital communication.

However, optimizing the digital public sphere still faces several obstacles, particularly limited information reach due to social media algorithms, low public attention to political content, and the potential for manipulation and distortion of information in the digital space. Therefore, the use of the digital public sphere as an instrument of local democracy needs to be strengthened through political communication strategies that are more contextual, participatory, and tailored to community characteristics. Furthermore, increasing public digital literacy and strengthening the institutional capacity of election organizers are crucial steps to ensure the digital public sphere functions more effectively as a healthy, inclusive, and educational arena for democracy.

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