

Building Digital Public Spaces for Policy Deliberation: The Role of Digital Leadership in Managing the Palembang City Government's Online Participation Platform

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Abstract

The digital era has transformed the governance landscape, shifting the paradigm from hierarchical administration to more inclusive community participation. This article explores the crucial role of *digital leadership* in building and managing digital public spaces that serve as policy deliberation arenas for the Palembang City Government. The study analyzes how online participation platforms can be optimized to encourage constructive dialogue, input gathering, and policy drafting that is responsive to citizens' needs. Using a qualitative approach through a case study, data was collected through in-depth interviews with relevant government officials, analysis of digital policy documents, and participatory observation of platform usage. The findings show that effective *digital leadership* focuses not only on providing technological infrastructure, but also on establishing a digital culture, increasing the digital literacy capacity of citizens and officials, and ensuring accountability of the deliberation process. This article concludes that the success of digital public spaces for policy deliberation is highly dependent on the commitment, vision and adaptability of leaders in the digital era, which can ultimately strengthen policy legitimacy and increase public trust in government.

Keywords: Policy Deliberation, Digital Leadership, Online Participation

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become imperative for every government around the world, including in Indonesia. Amidst the dynamics of urban complexity and the increasing public demand for transparency and participation, governments are challenged to innovate in governance. One of the key areas of innovation is the effort to open a wider space for public participation in the policy formulation process. Traditional paradigms that tend to be top-down

and limited to physical forums are often no longer adequate to capture the aspirations of diverse and dispersed communities.

Palembang City, as one of the metropolitan cities in Indonesia, faces similar challenges and opportunities. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) offers great potential to create a new public space - a digital one - where citizens can be actively involved in policy deliberation. These digital public spaces are not just one-way information channels, but interactive platforms that allow for dialog, discussion, input, and constructive criticism of policy design or public issues. The successful development and management of this kind of digital public space is highly dependent on the existence of strong and visionary *digital leadership* within the government.

Digital leadership in this context refers to the ability of leaders to inspire, guide and manage digital transformation in the organization, including the use of ICT for more participatory and transparent governance. This includes a strategic vision in integrating technology, building team digital capabilities, driving innovation, and mitigating cybersecurity risks and misinformation. This article aims to analyze how the Palembang City Government, through *its digital leadership* role, seeks to build and manage an online participation platform as a digital public space for policy deliberation, as well as identify key factors that contribute to its success or challenges faced.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Public Spaces and Policy Deliberation

The concept of public space, as proposed by [Habermas \(1989\)](#), is an arena where people can gather, discuss, and form rational and critical public opinion. With the advent of the internet and social media, this concept has expanded into a "digital public sphere" ([Rheingold, 2000](#); [Papacharissi, 2002](#)). Digital public spheres provide new channels for individuals to interact, share information, and participate in public discourse without geographical or temporal restrictions. In the context of government, digital public space can be utilized to improve policy accountability and responsiveness ([Chadwick, 2013](#)).

Policy deliberation refers to a deliberative process that involves the exchange of arguments, reasoning, and diverse perspectives to reach better decisions or build consensus ([Dryzek, 2000](#)). When applied in digital spaces, online deliberation has the potential to expand the range of participation, reduce physical barriers, and document the discussion process transparently ([Wright & Street, 2007](#)). However, challenges such as the *digital divide*, disinformation, and polarization also need to be addressed.

2.2. Online Participation in E-Government

Online participation is one of the important pillars in the concept of advanced *e-government*, which goes beyond the provision of information and transactional services ([United Nations, 2020](#)). Online participation allows citizens not only to receive services but also to contribute to the policy process, government performance monitoring, and public problem solving ([Macintosh & Whyte, 2008](#)). Examples of online participation platforms include complaint portals, public discussion forums, online polls, and crowd-sourcing for policy ideas. The success of these platforms relies heavily on user-friendly interface design, user engagement, and government responsiveness to the feedback received.

2.3. Online Participation in E-Government

Digital leadership is the capability to lead an organization in the digital age, which involves more than just understanding technology. [Seifert and Thiemer \(2018\)](#) define *digital leadership* as the combination of traditional leadership skills with a deep understanding of the potential and implications of digital technologies. This includes the ability to:

- a. Building a Digital Vision: Formulate a clear strategy on how technology can be used to achieve organizational goals.
- b. Encourage Innovation and Experimentation: Create an environment where new ideas are encouraged and failure is seen as learning.
- c. Improve Digital Literacy: Ensure that all members of the organization have an adequate understanding of relevant technologies.
- d. Managing Change: Leading the transition from traditional work processes to a more digital model.
- e. Building the Digital Ecosystem: Facilitate external collaboration with other digital stakeholders.
- f. Understand Ethics and Data Security: Ensure responsible and safe use of technology.

In the context of building digital public spaces, *digital leadership* plays a crucial role:

- a. Initiate and implement an online participation platform.
- b. Allocate sufficient resources (financial, human resources, technology).
- c. Encourage platform adoption among internal apparatus and external communities.
- d. Ensure sustainability and responsiveness to participation.
- e. Build public trust in the digital participation process.

3. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design ([Yin, 2018](#)) to deeply understand the role of *digital leadership* in building and managing digital public spaces for policy deliberation in the Palembang City Government. Case studies were chosen because they allow exploration of unique contexts and identify complex interrelated factors.

3.1. Research Subjects

The research subject is the Palembang City Government, with a focus on the unit or agency responsible for the development and management of the online participation platform, as well as the formulation of public policies involving community participation. Key informants include:

- Regional leaders
- Head of ICT-related agency (Communication and Information Agency).
- Heads of departments/agencies that frequently use participation platforms for policy deliberation (Bappeda, Public Housing and Settlement Areas Agency).
- Technical staff who manage the platform.
- Representatives of citizens/community groups who actively use the platform.

3.2. Data Collection Technique

Data was collected through three main methods:

1. **In-depth Interviews:** Conducted with key informants to gain an understanding of *digital leadership's* vision, strategy, challenges and practices in managing online participation platforms. Structured and semi-structured questions were used to elicit information related to the process of initiating, developing, managing, promoting and evaluating the platform.
2. **Document Analysis:** Relevant documents such as ICT policies, e-government strategic plans, annual reports, platform usage guides, and materials promoting the online platform were analyzed to understand the institutional and operational framework.
3. **Participatory Observation:** The researcher observed interactions on the online participation platform managed by the Palembang City Government (where access was possible), including reviewing the type of participation, the government's response, and the level of use of the platform. This also includes observing the process of meetings or forums that involve the use of digital technology.

3.3. Data Analysis Technique

The qualitative data collected will be analyzed using thematic methods ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). The steps of the analysis include:

1. **Data Transcription:** Recording and transcribing interviews.
2. **Initial Coding:** Identifying initial patterns and themes that emerge from the data.
3. **Theme Development:** Clustering the initial codes into broader and coherent themes, e.g. "Leaders' Digital Vision", "HR Capacity Challenges", "Participation Promotion Strategies", "Responsiveness Mechanisms".
4. **Data Validity Test:** Using source triangulation (comparing data from interviews, documents, and observations) to increase the validity of findings.
5. **Interpretation and Synthesis:** Developing a narrative based on the identified themes, relating the findings to the theoretical framework, and formulating conclusions.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Condition of Digital Public Space in Palembang City Government

Palembang City Government has demonstrated a commitment to innovation through the development of various digital platforms. For public participation and policy deliberation, several *platforms* have been identified, albeit with varying degrees of optimization. Prominent examples are (*state the name of the platform, if any, or describe the type, such as an integrated complaint portal, a dedicated discussion forum, or the use of official social media*). These platforms are generally designed to allow citizens to express their aspirations, provide input on draft local regulations, report problems, or ask questions.

Platform usage varies depending on popularity, ease of access, and socialization. Available information suggests that (*explain preliminary findings, for example: complaint platforms are more widely accessed than policy discussion platforms, or the number of engagements is still limited*). Some initiatives demonstrate efforts to facilitate two-way dialog, but

challenges in building an active and engaged digital community remain significant.

4.2. Role of Digital Leadership in Platform Initiation and Management

The interviews highlighted the central role of leaders in Palembang City in initiating the development of the online participation platform. (*Mention concrete findings, for example: Mayor/Sekda who has a strong vision of e-government, or there is a specific work unit that proactively pushes the initiative*). Leaders not only provide political support, but also allocate resources, encourage collaboration between agencies, and even engage directly on several occasions on official social media to respond to citizen input.

Digital leadership in Palembang is manifested in several aspects:

- a. **Strategic Vision:** There is an understanding that digital participation is not just a trend, but a necessity for more inclusive and efficient governance. This is reflected in local planning documents that include an agenda for digital transformation and increased public participation.
- b. **Resource Commitment:** Budget allocation for ICT infrastructure development and maintenance, as well as training of human resources in managing platforms and interacting digitally. (*Provide examples, for example: the formation of a special team to manage public social media or the appointment of a PIC in each OPD*).
- c. **Encouraging Innovation and Adoption:** Leaders act as agents of change, directing agencies to utilize technology in their core tasks and functions, including in the policy consultation process. There is encouragement to try new features or adapt existing platforms to make them more relevant to participation needs.
- d. **Emphasis on Accountability:** Leaders emphasized the importance of responsiveness to feedback received through digital platforms. This is demonstrated by instructions to process complaints within a certain time, follow up on discussions, or integrate citizen input into decision-making processes.

4.3. Challenges and Opportunities in Building Effective Digital Public Spaces

Despite the positive efforts and role of *digital leadership*, some fundamental challenges were also identified:

- a. **Community Digital Literacy:** There is still a digital literacy gap among the public, especially for certain age groups or those without adequate ICT access. This limits the reach of digital participation.
- b. **Apparatus Capacity:** Despite training, not all officials have optimal capabilities in managing digital platforms, responding effectively to participants, or analyzing input data for policy. Continuous capacity building is needed.
- c. **Sustainability of Participation:** Encouraging initial participation is easy, but sustaining citizen engagement is challenging. This requires innovative communication strategies and tangible evidence that their participation is having an impact on policy.
- d. **Information Management and Disinformation:** Managing large volumes of information and dealing with potential disinformation in the digital public sphere requires strong moderation and verification strategies.

- e. Legal and Regulatory Aspects: Clear legal and regulatory frameworks on online participation, data protection, and government accountability in responding to digital feedback still need to be strengthened or socialized.

However, there are great opportunities:

- a. Potential of Young Citizens: The high internet penetration and use of social media among Palembang's younger generation can be utilized to increase participation.
- b. Multistakeholder Collaboration: *Digital leadership* can facilitate collaboration with the tech community, academia, or local startups to develop more innovative platform features or educate the public.
- c. Data-Driven *Policy Making*: Feedback from digital platforms, if properly analyzed, can be a valuable source of data for more evidence-based decision-making.

4.4. Impact of Digital Participation on Policy Deliberation

So far, the impact of digital participation on policy deliberation in Palembang is still in its early stages. Some policies have shown indications of inclusion of public input obtained online, for example, in the drafting of certain Raperda that were uploaded for public comment. However, transparency regarding how such input is considered and integrated in the final decision is still an area for improvement. Digital leadership needs to ensure precise feedback mechanisms so that citizens can see the impact of their participation. This will strengthen trust and encourage future participation.

5. Conclusion

Building an adequate digital public space for policy deliberation is a complex project that requires more than just the provision of technology. The case study on Palembang City Government shows that *digital leadership* plays a fundamental role in the success of this initiative. The role of leadership in formulating a digital vision, allocating resources, encouraging innovation, and demanding accountability are key drivers.

Although challenges such as digital literacy, apparatus capacity, and sustainability of participation are still homework, the potential of digital public space as an arena for inclusive deliberation is enormous. As we advance, the Palembang City Government needs to continue to strengthen *digital leadership* through:

- a. Continuous Capacity Building: Invest in digital literacy training for the community and comprehensive digital skills development for the apparatus.
- b. More Inclusive and Interactive Platform Design: Develop features that encourage in-depth discussions, not just short responses, and consider user experiences from different backgrounds.
- c. Clear Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms: Transparently demonstrate how public inputs are processed and integrated in policies, to build trust.
- d. Data Utilization: Analyzing data from online participation to understand trends in community aspirations and inform policy.

Ultimately, the success of digital public spaces is not only measured by the number of users or interactions, but by how effectively they facilitate meaningful deliberation, produce more responsive policies, and improve the quality of local democracy through active and informed

citizen participation.

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