

ABSTRACT

New Challenges Facing the Modern State and Public Institutions from the Perspective of Social Media and Public Policy

The accelerated transformations driven by digitalization, the expansion of social media platforms, and the emergence of hybrid threats have profoundly reshaped the relationships between the state, public institutions, and citizens. Over the past two decades, the digital environment has evolved beyond its traditional role as a communication channel into a complex ecosystem for the production, dissemination, and strategic influence of information, capable of shaping social behaviour, political attitudes, and decision-making processes. Within this context, political communication, public policy formulation, and public administration are increasingly exposed to unprecedented pressures generated both by the rapid pace of technological innovation and by the proliferation of disinformation, information manipulation, and strategic influence operations.

This dissertation is situated within the field of Political Science and adopts an interdisciplinary perspective at the intersection of political communication, public policy studies, digital governance, and public administration. The central premise of the research is that social media should no longer be regarded merely as a communication tool but rather as an influential actor that actively shapes the contemporary political environment, redefines the relationship between public institutions and citizens, and generates new vulnerabilities specific to the digital information ecosystem.

The motivation for undertaking this research stems both from the scientific relevance of the topic and from the author's extensive professional experience within the Romanian central public administration and the field of public policy. This practical experience has demonstrated that public institutions are increasingly required to address simultaneously traditional governance challenges and emerging risks generated by the digital ecosystem. Consequently, there is a growing need to develop new institutional mechanisms founded upon innovation, adaptability, and organizational resilience.

The relevance of this research has been further reinforced by the profound transformations witnessed at the international level in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the intensification of information competition among states, the expansion of

information warfare, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence, and the widespread use of algorithmic recommendation systems have accelerated the migration of social, economic, and political interactions into the digital environment. As a result, social media platforms have become essential arenas for public information, civic mobilization, electoral campaigning, public diplomacy, and governmental communication. Simultaneously, they have evolved into privileged channels for the dissemination of disinformation, manipulation, and strategic influence operations.

Within this rapidly evolving environment, hybrid threats constitute one of the most significant challenges confronting the modern state. These threats combine conventional and unconventional instruments, military and non-military capabilities, digital technologies, and information operations with the objective of undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions and weakening the state's capacity to respond effectively to crises. Unlike traditional forms of confrontation, hybrid threats strategically exploit information as a critical resource, while digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of manipulative content, intensify social polarization, and influence political behaviour on an unprecedented scale.

Against this backdrop, the present research argues that institutional responses cannot be limited exclusively to reactive mechanisms aimed at countering disinformation. Instead, they must encompass a broader process of organizational transformation and administrative innovation. One of the central hypotheses of this dissertation is that innovation in public administration constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for strengthening institutional capacity to adapt to the challenges generated by digital transformation and for developing public policies capable of addressing the complexity of the contemporary information environment.

Building upon these premises, the primary objective of the research is to provide an integrated analysis of the relationship between the influence of social media on political behaviour and the need for innovation within public administration in the context of hybrid threats and digital transformation. In doing so, the dissertation seeks to move beyond the fragmented approaches commonly found in the existing literature by proposing an analytical framework that connects processes of digital political communication with institutional adaptation mechanisms and public policy formulation.

To achieve this objective, several specific research goals have been established. The first objective consists of developing the conceptual framework underpinning digital political

communication, political marketing, social media, disinformation, hybrid threats, and innovation in the public sector. The second objective focuses on identifying the mechanisms through which digital platforms influence political behaviour and democratic processes. The third objective examines the impact of hybrid threats on public institutions and on the administrative capacity of the state. Furthermore, the research investigates public officials' perceptions of administrative innovation while identifying the principal barriers and opportunities associated with institutional modernization. Finally, the dissertation formulates evidence-based public policy recommendations and proposes a strategic framework aimed at strengthening institutional resilience and fostering the development of a public administration capable of responding effectively to the challenges of the digital era.

The originality of this research lies in integrating, within a unified analytical framework, three dimensions that have generally been examined separately in the existing literature: the influence of social media on political behaviour, the impact of hybrid threats on state governance, and the role of administrative innovation as a strategic mechanism for institutional adaptation. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the dissertation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary transformations in governance while providing an empirical foundation for the design of public policies better suited to the realities of the digital age.

Research Methodology and Dissertation Structure

Given the multidimensional nature of the research topic, the study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches complemented by documentary analysis and content analysis. The selection of this methodological framework was intended to provide an integrated perspective on the relationship between the transformation of political communication in the digital environment, the manifestation of hybrid threats, and the growing need for innovation within public administration. The triangulation of research methods enabled both an in-depth exploration of the mechanisms through which social media exerts political influence and an empirical validation of institutional perceptions regarding organizational adaptability and innovation.

The theoretical component of the dissertation is grounded in a critical review of the literature in Political Science, political communication, political marketing, public policy, public administration, and digital governance. The analysis encompasses seminal contributions

addressing the evolution of political communication in the digital era, theories of influence and persuasion, mechanisms of disinformation dissemination, and the extensive body of literature dedicated to public sector innovation. Furthermore, the research incorporates an examination of strategic documents issued by European and international institutions, alongside national strategies concerning the digital transformation of public administration and innovation in the public sector.

To investigate the ways in which digital platforms influence political behaviour and democratic processes, the qualitative component of the research employed **semi-structured interviews** as its primary methodological instrument. Interviews were conducted with experts in political communication, political marketing, public administration, academia, and government, as well as with practitioners directly involved in the formulation and implementation of public policies. The selection of these categories of respondents was intended to capture a multidisciplinary perspective on the transformations generated by social media within the public sphere and to explore the mechanisms through which digital platforms shape electoral behaviour, institutional communication, and the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The interviews were designed around a thematic interview guide encompassing several analytical dimensions, including the role of social media in shaping the public agenda, mechanisms of political influence and persuasion, the impact of disinformation and information manipulation, changes in citizens' political behaviour, and the challenges associated with the rapid development of emerging digital technologies. The analysis of the interview data revealed recurrent patterns concerning institutional vulnerabilities and highlighted the need to strengthen strategic communication as a key instrument for enhancing state resilience against hybrid threats.

The qualitative investigation was further complemented by a **content analysis** of the institutional communication strategies adopted by Romanian public institutions across major social media platforms. The analysis examined the ways in which digital communication channels are utilized, the communication strategies employed, the level of interaction with citizens, and the institutional capacity to respond effectively to disinformation and information manipulation. The findings revealed substantial differences among public institutions

regarding the degree of professionalization of digital communication and the integration of modern communication tools into administrative practice.

To investigate the administrative dimension of the research, a quantitative study was conducted based on a structured questionnaire administered to employees from both central and local public administration, as well as to respondents representing related sectors, including education, justice, diplomacy, culture, and national security. The research instrument was organized into several thematic sections designed to assess perceptions of innovation culture, organizational barriers, digital competencies, openness to organizational change, inter-institutional collaboration, and opportunities for administrative modernization within the framework of the **National Strategy for Innovation in the Public Sector (2025–2029)**.

The empirical findings provide a comprehensive assessment of the current state of innovation within the Romanian public administration. They reveal not only a significant willingness among public officials to embrace modern organizational practices but also the persistence of structural constraints, including excessive bureaucracy, procedural rigidity, institutional fragmentation, and insufficient digital competencies. At the same time, the results demonstrate that administrative innovation is widely perceived by respondents as an essential prerequisite for improving institutional effectiveness, enhancing the quality of public service delivery, and strengthening the capacity of public administration to respond to the challenges associated with digital transformation.

The structure of the dissertation reflects this integrated research approach. The first section establishes the conceptual and methodological foundations of the study. The second develops the theoretical framework concerning political communication, social media, hybrid threats, and innovation in public administration. The third examines the impact of digital transformation on the modern state and on public policy-making processes, with particular emphasis on the role of strategic communication and institutional resilience. The fourth section is devoted to an in-depth analysis of the social media phenomenon through a series of representative international and national case studies, highlighting the mechanisms through which digital platforms influence political behaviour and the broader implications for democratic governance. The final section brings together the empirical investigations undertaken throughout the dissertation, synthesizes the principal findings, and formulates evidence-based public policy recommendations aimed at fostering an innovative, resilient, and digitally adaptive public administration.

By integrating multiple methodological approaches and systematically linking theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, this research moves beyond a purely descriptive analysis of the phenomena under investigation. Instead, it provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the complex relationship between digital political communication, hybrid threats, and processes of administrative innovation. In doing so, the dissertation contributes both to the advancement of scholarly knowledge in Political Science and to the development of practical solutions capable of informing the formulation and implementation of evidence-based public policies.

Research Findings, Original Contributions, and Public Policy Implications

The findings of this research confirm that the transformations driven by digitalization and the expansion of social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped traditional mechanisms of political communication, democratic participation, and public sector governance. The integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative evidence demonstrates a direct relationship between the growing influence of the digital information environment and the increasing need for public institutions that are more resilient, innovative, and capable of adapting to the challenges of contemporary society.

The qualitative findings demonstrate that social media should no longer be viewed solely as a technological communication tool but rather as a strategic environment in which political opinions are formed, political identities are constructed, and influence is exerted over electoral behaviour and public agenda-setting. The interviews conducted with experts in political communication, political marketing, public administration, and academia indicate that digital platforms have fundamentally altered the relationships among political actors, traditional media organizations, and citizens by reducing the role of conventional intermediaries while facilitating the emergence of new mechanisms of influence based on algorithmic curation, message personalization, and the rapid dissemination of digital content.

The analysis further reveals that disinformation should not be understood merely as a communication-related challenge but as a systemic vulnerability affecting the functioning of democratic institutions. According to the respondents, the proliferation of information manipulation and fake news contributes to declining levels of public trust in governmental institutions, intensifies social polarization, and shapes political behaviour in ways that are difficult to anticipate through conventional models of institutional communication.

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns the pivotal role of **strategic communication** in strengthening institutional resilience. The empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of public institutions no longer depends exclusively on administrative capacity or the quality of decision-making processes, but also on their ability to communicate in a transparent, coherent, and context-sensitive manner within the digital information ecosystem. Consequently, the research highlights the necessity of developing public policies aimed at professionalizing institutional communication, strengthening digital literacy, and establishing effective mechanisms for responding to disinformation campaigns and strategic influence operations.

The analysis of the selected case studies confirms the global nature of these transformations. The cases of the Brexit referendum, the 2016 United States presidential election, the Euromaidan protests, and the movements associated with the Arab Spring illustrate that digital platforms may simultaneously function as instruments of democratic mobilization and as vectors of strategic information influence. Across all the cases examined, social media contributed to accelerating collective mobilization, reshaping public agendas, and redefining the relationship between citizens and state institutions.

The quantitative component complements these findings by examining public officials' perceptions of administrative innovation. The survey results reveal a broad consensus regarding the necessity of modernizing public institutions and adapting them to the requirements of digital transformation. Respondents consistently identified digitalization, administrative simplification, professional capacity-building, and enhanced inter-institutional collaboration as the principal drivers of institutional modernization and improved public sector performance.

At the same time, the research identifies a series of persistent structural barriers that constrain the capacity of public administration to implement innovation processes effectively. These include excessive bureaucratization, organizational resistance to change, fragmented administrative processes, insufficient digital competencies, and the limited institutionalization of organizational learning mechanisms. These findings are consistent with the conclusions advanced in the international literature on public sector innovation while simultaneously providing an empirical perspective that is specific to the Romanian public administration.

One of the dissertation's fundamental conclusions is that administrative innovation cannot be reduced solely to the digitalization of public services or the introduction of new information technologies. Rather, the findings demonstrate that innovation requires profound institutional transformation involving changes in organizational culture, the development of public leadership, the strengthening of inter-institutional collaboration, and the promotion of a public administration oriented towards continuous learning, adaptability, and anticipatory governance.

The principal original scientific contribution of this dissertation lies in the development of an integrated analytical framework explaining the relationship between the influence of social media on political behaviour, the manifestation of hybrid threats, and the need for innovation in public administration. The research demonstrates that these three dimensions should not be understood as independent phenomena but rather as interconnected components of the broader transformation of contemporary governance, whereby technological developments simultaneously generate new opportunities and new vulnerabilities affecting the functioning of the modern state.

A second element of originality derives from the integrated methodological approach adopted throughout the research, combining qualitative inquiry, quantitative analysis, and systematic content analysis. This methodological triangulation strengthens the robustness of the findings by validating the results from complementary analytical perspectives while providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital transformation simultaneously affects political behaviour and institutional adaptive capacity.

A further significant contribution of the dissertation consists in providing an empirical foundation for the formulation of evidence-based public policies. Building upon the research findings, the study advocates strengthening strategic communication capacities within public institutions, enhancing the digital competencies of public sector employees, promoting organizational innovation, and institutionalizing permanent mechanisms for monitoring and countering disinformation and strategic information influence operations.

Furthermore, the research argues that administrative innovation should be incorporated as a strategic objective of public sector reform, in line with the policy orientations promoted by the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**, the **European Commission**, and the **National Strategy for Innovation in the Public Sector (2025–2029)**.

The empirical evidence generated by this study provides robust support for the development of public policies aimed at strengthening institutional resilience, modernizing public administration, and reinforcing citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, the dissertation contributes to the advancement of the literature on digital political communication by integrating the concepts of institutional resilience, digital governance, and administrative innovation into a unified explanatory framework. From a practical perspective, the conclusions of the research may support the design of national strategies concerning digital transformation, public communication, and public administration reform by providing policymakers with empirically grounded recommendations tailored to the challenges arising from the evolution of the digital society.

The Proposed Conceptual Model and the Dissertation's Theoretical Contribution

Building upon both the existing body of scholarly literature and the empirical findings generated by the present research, this dissertation proposes an integrated conceptual model designed to explain the relationship between digital transformation, the influence of social media on political behaviour, and the need for innovation in public administration within the context of hybrid threats.

The proposed model is founded on the premise that digitalization should not be understood merely as a technological development but rather as a systemic transformation that fundamentally reshapes the mechanisms of communication, governance, and the exercise of political power. The evolution of digital platforms has profoundly altered the production, dissemination, and consumption of information by reducing traditional barriers to information access while dramatically accelerating the circulation of messages within the public sphere.

Within this new information ecosystem, social media platforms emerge as influential political actors that shape public opinion, civic participation, public agenda-setting, and electoral behaviour. Simultaneously, distinctive features of the digital environment—including algorithmic content curation, information personalization, the rapid diffusion of digital content, and the diminishing role of traditional information intermediaries—facilitate the emergence and amplification of phenomena such as disinformation, information manipulation, and influence operations characteristic of hybrid threats.

The empirical findings demonstrate that these dynamics exert direct consequences on the functioning of democratic institutions. Declining public trust, increasing societal polarization, changes in political behaviour, and the growing vulnerability of the information environment generate new demands upon the state's capacity to respond effectively to contemporary challenges.

Within this analytical framework, the dissertation argues that institutional responses should not be confined to reactive measures designed solely to counter disinformation. Instead, they should be grounded in the development of an innovative public administration capable of anticipating societal and technological change while continuously integrating organizational learning, digital transformation, and inter-institutional collaboration into its governance processes.

The proposed conceptual model identifies a causal sequence whereby digital transformation generates structural changes in political communication; these transformations facilitate the emergence of hybrid threats and influence political behaviour; the resulting vulnerabilities exert increasing pressure on public institutions, thereby creating the need for administrative innovation and the continuous adaptation of public policies. Accordingly, innovation is conceptualized not merely as a managerial instrument for improving administrative efficiency but as a fundamental pillar of democratic resilience and good governance.

The model also possesses a significant practical dimension. It may serve as an analytical framework for assessing the capacity of public institutions to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the digital information environment while supporting the formulation of public policies aimed at strengthening institutional resilience, enhancing strategic communication, developing digital competencies, and fostering organizational innovation.

From a scientific perspective, the proposed framework expands the existing conceptual literature by integrating research domains that have generally been examined independently, namely digital political communication, hybrid threats, administrative innovation, and public policy. This interdisciplinary perspective offers a systemic understanding of the ongoing transformation of contemporary governance while creating the foundations for future comparative research on institutional resilience within digitally mediated societies.

Accordingly, the dissertation's principal theoretical contribution consists in demonstrating that the relationship between social media, hybrid threats, and innovation in public administration should be understood as an integrated process of governance transformation, in which the effectiveness of public institutions increasingly depends upon their capacity to anticipate technological change, manage information-related risks, and continuously adapt public policies to the evolving dynamics of the digital society.

Ultimately, the capacity of the modern state to respond effectively to hybrid threats originating in the digital environment is determined not only by the effectiveness of its strategic communication but also by the degree of administrative innovation and by the institutional capacity for continuous adaptation.