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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### A Systems Approach to the Analysis and Evaluation of Digital Media Policymaking in Iran's Public Governance Framework

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#### EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

##### Introduction

Over the last few decades, the rapid growth of digital media has profoundly reshaped communication systems, governance structures, and public policy-making processes worldwide. Platforms such as social media networks, messaging applications, and content-sharing infrastructures have evolved far beyond their initial function as auxiliary communication tools, now serving as influential socio-technical systems capable of shaping public opinion, political participation, administrative transparency, and cultural dynamics (van Dijck et al., 2018). Their pervasive presence in political, cultural, and social life has created both opportunities and challenges for policymakers and public administrators, necessitating the design of adaptive, resilient, and socially responsible governance frameworks.

Globally, countries have responded differently to these challenges. For instance, in Europe, multi-stakeholder governance models emphasize transparency, platform accountability, and citizen participation, while in East Asia, regulatory frameworks often prioritize control over content and national security considerations. These variations highlight the complex interplay between technological innovation, institutional structures, and socio-cultural factors in shaping digital media policies. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing policies that balance innovation, public interest, and regulatory effectiveness, particularly in contexts where governance systems are rapidly adapting to technological change.

In contemporary public management, digital media policy-making is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional governance issue, rather than a narrowly defined regulatory task. The proliferation of algorithmic content distribution, data-driven technologies, and platform-mediated interactions has intensified challenges related to accountability, data protection, content moderation, and institutional coordination (Napoli, 2023). Conventional policy instruments, originally designed for stable and predictable media environments, often prove insufficient to navigate the dynamic and interconnected landscape of digital ecosystems.

In Iran, these developments occur within a unique institutional, legal, and cultural framework. Widespread adoption of social media and digital communication technologies has transformed information exchange, civic engagement, and public discourse. Concurrently, digital media policy-making is characterized by centralized governance, fragmented regulatory responsibilities, and evolving interactions among government institutions, private actors, and civil society organizations. This complex environment is marked by uncertainty, contested problem definitions, and competing stakeholder interests, which pose significant challenges to traditional linear policy approaches.

Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and advanced data analytics, further exacerbate this complexity by introducing additional governance challenges, including algorithmic decision-making, platform accountability, and the safeguarding of public values (Yuan et al., 2023). Linear, control-oriented frameworks are increasingly inadequate for addressing such multifaceted issues. Analytical approaches capable of accommodating complexity, multiple stakeholder perspectives, and systemic interactions are therefore essential for developing effective and sustainable digital media policies.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital media governance, much of the existing literature

remains fragmented across disciplines. Legal and regulatory studies tend to focus on compliance, censorship, and platform responsibility, whereas technology-focused research emphasizes innovation, infrastructure, and data management (Flew et al., 2019). While these approaches provide valuable insights, they frequently overlook the interdependencies between technological, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions of policy-making, which are critical for understanding the holistic functioning of digital media policies.

In Iran, research on digital media policy-making has largely relied on descriptive analyses or normative critiques, with limited attention to methodological frameworks capable of integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives and policy dimensions. Consequently, there exists a significant gap in understanding how digital media policies operate within a broader governance system, and how interactions among infrastructure, content regulation, and institutional arrangements influence policy effectiveness, coherence, and resilience.

Additionally, many existing policy evaluations implicitly assume that policy problems are clearly defined and stable. In reality, digital media policy-making involves ill-structured problems characterized by ambiguity, competing values, and rapidly evolving technologies. These conditions challenge conventional hard policy analysis methods that rely on predefined variables, linear causality, and static institutional assumptions (Mingers & White, 2010). Addressing this gap requires interpretive, participatory, and adaptive methodologies that can capture multiple worldviews and accommodate the evolving nature of policy contexts.

This study addresses these challenges by adopting a systems-based analytical framework that integrates Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) with Cognitive Mapping, allowing for a holistic evaluation of digital media policy-making in Iran. This approach enables the identification of causal relationships, stakeholder perceptions, and systemic interactions that are often overlooked in traditional analyses, providing a comprehensive understanding of complex policy environments.

The primary aim of this research is to evaluate digital media policy-making in Iran through a systems-based perspective that reflects the complexity, interdependence, and dynamic interactions of policy domains and governance actors. Instead of focusing solely on performance indicators, the study seeks to explore how policy processes emerge from the interactions among technological infrastructure, content governance, and institutional arrangements, as interpreted by multiple stakeholders.

The study is grounded in the conceptualization of digital media policy-making as a complex adaptive system, where changes in one domain such as infrastructure development, content regulation, or institutional coordination produce cascading effects across other domains, influencing institutional behavior, public trust, and governance outcomes. Accordingly, effective policy-making requires adaptive, learning-oriented approaches that emphasize systemic coherence and stakeholder collaboration rather than isolated interventions. This perspective aligns with contemporary public management theories that prioritize systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, and policy learning as essential components of governance in complex and dynamic environments.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design, with Soft Systems Methodology serving as the primary analytical framework. SSM is particularly suitable for contexts characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and multiple stakeholders, as it emphasizes problem structuring, iterative learning, and the exploration of different worldviews rather than optimization based on predefined objectives (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

The research process began with an extensive review of peer-reviewed literature on digital media governance, public policy-making, and systems-based approaches, providing a conceptual foundation for identifying key policy challenges and designing subsequent research stages. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen experts in digital media, public administration, communication studies, and policy analysis in Iran. These interviews systematically captured stakeholder perceptions regarding regulatory challenges, institutional roles, and emerging technological trends. The selection of participants ensured diversity in expertise, professional experience, and perspectives, which was crucial for achieving a holistic understanding of the policy environment.

Data derived from the literature review and interviews were systematically coded to identify recurring themes, key concepts, and causal linkages. These elements were organized within the SSM framework to produce a structured representation of the policy situation. Cognitive Mapping was applied as a complementary method to visualize complex interactions, feedback loops, and the perceived interdependencies among stakeholders (Eden & Ackermann, 2013). The integration of Cognitive Mapping into the SSM process enabled the transition from exploratory problem analysis to structured evaluation, allowing for the identification of critical leverage points, systemic dependencies, and potential interventions for enhancing policy coherence and effectiveness.

### Findings

The study's findings indicate that digital media policy-making in Iran is shaped by the interplay of three interrelated dimensions: technological and infrastructural development, content governance, and legal-institutional frameworks.

Infrastructural development emerged as a foundational prerequisite for effective policy-making, affecting platform accessibility, content production capacity, and public engagement. However, findings suggest that infrastructural expansion without corresponding regulatory adaptation may exacerbate governance gaps and increase policy fragmentation, particularly in rapidly evolving digital environments. For instance, the deployment of new digital platforms without adequate oversight can result in unequal access, information silos, and reduced public participation.

Content governance represents a central area of policy tension. Digital media platforms facilitate cultural expression, civic engagement, and information dissemination, yet concerns regarding misinformation, ethical standards, and cultural sensitivities shape regulatory orientations. Overly restrictive content policies may constrain creativity and limit public participation, whereas balanced approaches that combine support for domestic content production with media literacy initiatives promote sustainable, socially responsible policy outcomes (Napoli, 2023).

The legal-institutional dimension mediates interactions between technological infrastructure and content governance. Fragmented institutional responsibilities and outdated legal frameworks limit policymakers' capacity to address emerging challenges such as data protection, platform accountability, and user rights. Effective governance requires enhanced coordination among governmental bodies, private actors, civil society organizations, and academic institutions (Flew et al., 2019). Cognitive Mapping revealed that stakeholder perceptions of institutional roles significantly affect policy implementation, highlighting the importance of clear role definition and collaborative governance.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The results underscore the analytical value of systems-based approaches in evaluating complex digital media policy domains. Conceptualizing policy-making as an interconnected system provides deeper insights into stakeholder interactions, causal mechanisms, and dynamic policy effects often overlooked in conventional analyses.

From a public management perspective, the study suggests that policymakers in Iran should adopt integrated strategies addressing technological, content, and institutional dimensions simultaneously. Improved coordination among regulatory bodies, alignment of legal frameworks with technological developments, and participatory policy design processes that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives can reduce policy fragmentation, enhance governance effectiveness, and strengthen policy legitimacy. Adaptive, learning-oriented approaches are essential for addressing complexity, uncertainty, and rapid technological evolution in digital media governance.

This study contributes to the literature on digital media governance and public management by demonstrating the operationalization of a systems-based approach for evaluating complex policy domains. By integrating Soft Systems Methodology with Cognitive Mapping, it provides a structured yet interpretive framework capable of capturing multidimensional, contested, and evolving aspects of digital media policy-making in Iran. The research offers both theoretical and practical insights, guiding scholars and policymakers in enhancing policy coherence, adaptability, and effectiveness within rapidly changing governance environments. The study exemplifies how qualitative systems methodologies can be applied to complex policy evaluations, highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement, systemic thinking, and iterative learning for effective governance.

### KEYWORDS

Media, Digital Media, Media Policymaking, Soft Systems Methodology, Cognitive Mapping.

