PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS IN PUBLIC POLICY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The effectiveness of public policy increasingly depends on how early and clearly governments inform the public about their decisions. This study aims to classify proactive communication tools according to the stages of the public policy cycle, identify the key challenges and opportunities associated with their application, and examine how this same logic manifests in digital diplomacy as the external dimension of proactive communication. The research is grounded in a structured narrative review: academic publications in public policy, public sector communication, and open governance (including literature from 2020–2025), alongside policy documents from international organizations, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five distinct groups of proactive communication tools were identified: informing, consultation, engagement, risk-prevention, and monitoring tools. Furthermore, four primary challenges emerged: institutional fragmentation, resource and competency deficits, low public trust, and disinformation. While digital platforms, data-driven audience segmentation, and participatory practices present significant opportunities to overcome these hurdles, the empirical evidence base supporting these opportunities remains unevenly distributed. A brief document-based illustration from the Georgian context demonstrates that a normative obligation for proactive disclosure does not automatically translate into two-way communication integrated into the policy cycle. The theoretical significance of this paper lies in proposing an integrated analytical framework for proactive communication, while its practical value rests on actionable recommendations for public institutions. Ultimately, the analysis indicates that proactive communication is an essential prerequisite for policy legitimacy and effective implementation, requiring formal institutional status within strategic planning.

Keywords: *proactive communication, public policy, strategic communication, public relations, digital diplomacy.*

Introduction

Nature of the Problem

Public relations conducted by state entities has traditionally relied on a one-way information standard, echoing Grunig and Hunt's (1984) "public information" model: information was disseminated to the public only after decisions had been finalized, often solely in reaction to public criticism or crisis. Such an approach degrades policy effectiveness, generating an information vacuum that is readily filled by rumors and disinformation, thereby hindering reform implementation. Proactive communication, by contrast, entails the pre-planned, early dissemination of information grounded in two-way dialogue across all stages of the policy cycle—from agenda-setting to evaluation.

The conceptual framework of the public policy cycle—which divides policy into agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation stages—is widely utilized as an

analytical model (Howlett et al., 2009). According to Kingdon's (1984) model, public perception of a problem is decisive in determining which issues reach the policy agenda, while Entman's (1993) framing theory demonstrates that the presentation of an issue governs its public interpretation. Hood (1983) identified information as one of the fundamental tools of the state, and Hood and Margetts (2007) observed that the capabilities of this tool have expanded significantly in the digital era.

In communication theory, Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model posits mutual influence between an organization and its stakeholders. Within a governmental context, Liu and Horsley's (2007) "Government Communication Decision Wheel" synthesizes the parameters dictating communication strategy choices, while Canel and Sanders' (2012) edited volume consolidated government communication as a distinct academic domain. Mergel (2013) categorized social media practices into "push," "pull," and "networking" strategies. Regarding civic participation, Arnstein (1969) articulated the "ladder of citizen participation," whereas Fung (2006) analyzed participatory mechanisms based on participant composition, communication mode, and policy impact. Bryson et al. (2013) emphasized that public engagement must be deliberately structured. Fairbanks et al. (2007) framed transparency as a core principle of government communication, and Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) conceptualization of "information disorder" demonstrates how information voids heightened disinformation risks. Finally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) positions public communication as a core strategic function that must be decoupled from political communication and transitioned from a reactive stance to a proactive operational posture.

Recent scholarship enriches this framework across several axes. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the imperative of government communication: Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) analyzed crisis communication strategies, emphasizing transparency and trust preservation. Empirical literature on disinformation has grown substantially: Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) synthesized research on psychological "inoculation" and prebunking, while experimental studies by Roozenbeek et al. (2022) demonstrated that short preventive videos on social media enhance public detection of manipulative techniques. Walter et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis on fact-checking efficacy, noting that outcomes vary across audiences and contexts. Regarding public trust, OECD survey data (OECD, 2024) indicates that trust is on average higher in nations where citizens favorably evaluate state communication regarding reforms—a correlation rather than a causal claim. Lastly, the deployment of artificial intelligence in public administration offers novel opportunities alongside emerging governance risks, necessitating robust institutional oversight (Wirtz et al., 2020).

Research Gaps and Challenges

Extant literature predominantly treats communication as an auxiliary function or focuses narrowly on isolated tools (e.g., social media platforms). Contemporary studies frequently address singular issues—such as pandemic communication, disinformation, or institutional trust—rather than analyzing the policy cycle holistically. Few studies systematically connect proactive communication tools across all policy cycle stages while simultaneously examining their challenges and structural opportunities. Within Georgian-language academic literature, this domain remains insufficiently researched.

Aim, Research Questions, and Propositions

This study aims to systematize proactive communication tools across the public policy cycle, identify operational challenges and opportunities, and explore how this logic manifests in digital diplomacy as the external dimension of proactive communication. The research questions are:

1. Which specific tools enable proactive communication at different stages of the policy cycle?
2. What structural challenges constrain their effective deployment?
3. What opportunities exist to mitigate these challenges?

4. How do proactive communication tools, challenges, and opportunities manifest within digital diplomacy?

As a qualitative review, this study does not statistically test hypotheses; instead, three analytical propositions guide the synthesis. Empirical validation remains a direction for future research. Research question 4 is addressed in a dedicated subsection (3.4) and does not rely on a standalone proposition.

Proposition 1: Proactive communication tools vary across each stage of the policy cycle and can be classified according to their primary function.
Proposition 2: The primary constraints on proactive communication are institutional and trust-related rather than purely technological.
Proposition 3: Digital communication tools achieve efficacy only when anchored in two-way communication and participatory decision-making principles.

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research advances the intersection of government communication and public policy studies. Practically, it provides public institutions with a decision-making framework for selecting communication tools and navigating implementation barriers.

In this paper, proactive communication is defined as communication initiated by a public authority, tailored to a specific stage of the policy cycle, and defined by three simultaneous criteria:

Timeliness: Initiated prior to public crisis or criticism;
Two-way engagement: Encompassing both message dissemination and systematic audience listening/feedback integration (cf. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Macnamara, 2016);
Institutional integration: Planned in alignment with policy design to fulfill policy objectives, explicitly excluding partisan or electoral mobilization (OECD, 2021).

By this definition, proactive communication is distinguished from: (a) reactive communication responding post-crisis; (b) proactive disclosure, which represents a legal obligation limited to informational transparency; (c) crisis communication triggered by singular events; and (d) propaganda, wherein reciprocity and verifiability are ignored. These three criteria form the analytical dimensions of this study, evaluating tools based on timeliness, two-way engagement, and policy integration.

Methods

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative, structured narrative review design. It does not claim full adherence to systematic review standards (e.g., PRISMA). This methodology was selected to synthesize field knowledge and construct an integrated analytical framework rather than measure organizational metrics.

Source Identification: Literature was retrieved from international academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and official publications of international organizations (OECD, UN, Council of Europe). Search queries included: proactive communication, government communication, public policy communication, citizen engagement, open government, policy cycle, disinformation, prebunking, digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, and combinations thereof. Special emphasis was placed on literature published between 2020 and 2025.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Included resources comprised: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs examining public sector communication in policy processes; (b) analytical reports and policy frameworks from international organizations; (c) literature detailing communication instruments, outcomes, or systemic constraints; and (d) digital and public diplomacy studies addressing external audience engagement. Studies focusing exclusively on electoral campaigns,

commercial marketing, or political party communications were excluded. For the Georgian contextual illustration, publicly available legal acts and Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) reports from the Open Government Partnership (OGP) were utilized.

Analytical Approach: Selected literature was examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across six phases: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Coding proceeded along two axes: (1) policy cycle stage served by communication, and (2) communication function (informing, consultation, engagement, risk prevention, monitoring). Operational challenges and opportunities were grouped into distinct thematic categories.

Rigor and Reliability: Analytical trustworthiness was maintained by grounding synthesis in peer-reviewed literature and international standards, utilizing explicit coding guidelines, and comparing findings across diverse national and international operational contexts.

Limitations: The review relies predominantly on English-language sources, which may underrepresent localized institutional nuances. Formal quality appraisal was not conducted, and source selection did not follow the strict protocol of a systematic review; selection bias cannot be completely ruled out. Consequently, findings reflect analytical generalizations rather than direct empirical testing in specific agencies. The Georgian context serves as a brief document-based illustration rather than a deep case study or interview-based inquiry.

Results

Results are organized according to the research questions and propositions, synthesizing the thematic review of selected literature.

Tools Across the Policy Cycle

The analysis indicates that proactive communication tools vary by objective and degree of two-way interaction: early stages favor one-way information dissemination, whereas decision-making and evaluation stages rely heavily on interactive, two-way formats. Table 1 classifies these instruments into five functional categories.

Table 1. Proactive Communication Tools Across Policy Cycle Stages

Policy Cycle Stage	Tool Category	Primary Instruments	Core Function
Agenda Setting	Informing	Proactive disclosure, open data, plain-language summaries, infographics	Problem visibility
Policy Formulation	Consultation	Public consultations, online feedback portals, focus groups	Gathering public perspectives
Decision Making	Engagement	Multi-stakeholder working groups, co-design, citizen panels, participatory budgeting	Enhancing legitimacy
Implementation	Risk Prevention	Early warning alerts, explanatory campaigns, prebunking	Compliance and policy protection
Evaluation	Monitoring	Feedback channels, public reporting, perception surveys, media monitoring	Organizational learning and adjustment

As illustrated in Table 1, a single channel (e.g., social media) serves different functions depending on the policy stage: it acts as a broadcast channel during agenda-setting and a feedback mechanism during evaluation. Efficacy is thus governed by the tool's functional alignment with the policy cycle rather than the media channel itself.

Primary Challenges

Thematic analysis revealed four recurring structural challenges:

Institutional Fragmentation: Communication is frequently relegated to an isolated press function detached from policy planning, resulting in contradictory or uncoordinated messaging across agencies—particularly in cross-cutting policy areas (Canel & Sanders, 2012; OECD, 2021).

Resource and Competency Deficits: Proactive communication requires expertise in audience analytics, data management, and public dialogue. In practice, public communication teams are often restricted to traditional media relations. Social media usage frequently defaults to one-way "push" broadcasts rather than networked interaction (Mergel, 2013). Modern public sector communication research highlights its role in reducing distance between citizens and public institutions (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), which demands strategically oriented teams.

Low Public Trust: Proactive communication does not automatically foster institutional trust; skeptical publics often view additional information with suspicion. While transparency is necessary, it is insufficient on its own—consistency, clear communication, and tangible integration of public feedback are required (Fairbanks et al., 2007). Experimental research indicates that transparency's effect on trust is conditional upon context and message content (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). In an OECD survey, only 41% of respondents on average believed they could influence a local public decision (OECD, 2024), highlighting a perceived lack of meaningful two-way channels.

Disinformation: Information voids create fertile ground for deceptive narratives (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Because reactive debunking is often slow to neutralize false claims, proactive communication leverages early explanations and anticipates narrative vulnerabilities. Prebunking and psychological inoculation improve public recognition of manipulation techniques (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2022). While fact-checking remains effective, its impact varies by context and audience profile (Walter et al., 2020).

Opportunities

Table 2 maps operational opportunities against identified challenges, outlining required preconditions and underlying literature.

Table 2. Proactive Communication Challenges and Mitigation Opportunities

Challenge	Practical Manifestation	Mitigation Opportunity	Required Precondition	Supporting Literature
Institutional Fragmentation	Contradictory messaging	Unified communication strategy integrated into policy document	Institutionalization of communication in policy planning	Canel & Sanders, 2012; OECD, 2021 (Conceptual)

Challenge	Practical Manifestation	Mitigation Opportunity	Required Precondition	Supporting Literature
Resource Deficits	Reactive, one-way messaging	Digital platforms, data-driven audience segmentation	Professional capacity building for staff	Mergel, 2013; Hood & Margetts, 2007; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Wirtz et al., 2020 (Conceptual/Descriptive)
Low Public Trust	Public skepticism, low engagement	Co-design, participatory frameworks, open data initiatives	Genuine incorporation of public feedback	Fairbanks et al., 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; OECD, 2022, 2024 (Experimental/Survey)
Disinformation	Rumors, viral falsehoods	Prebunking, factual pre-exposure, fact-checking partnerships	Rapid, coordinated institutional response	Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2022; Walter et al., 2020 (Experimental/Meta-analytic)

The "Opportunity" column in Table 2 is normative, derived from synthesized literature rather than single-study findings. The supporting evidence base varies: experimental and meta-analytic data back the disinformation and trust domains, whereas institutional fragmentation and competency issues rely primarily on conceptual literature.

Digital platforms reduce information distribution costs and enable targeted messaging across diverse demographics (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Mergel, 2013). AI technologies (e.g., automated response systems, tailored content generation) further lower cost barriers, though they introduce risks regarding bias, transparency, and accountability (Wirtz et al., 2020). Technology alone, however, does not guarantee positive outcomes: its success depends on maintaining two-way dialogue and offering citizens genuine influence over policy choices (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006; Bryson et al., 2013; OECD, 2022). The reviewed literature aligns with the three research propositions, though empirical validation within specific institutional settings remains necessary.

Table 2.1. Key Performance Indicators for Proactive Communication Efficacy

Dimension	Example Indicator	Data Source / Method
Timeliness	Share of policy proposals backed by a communication strategy prior to decision-making	Internal administrative audit, documentary review
Two-Way Engagement	Proportion of public consultation inputs integrated into final policies; publication of "What We Heard" reports	Public consultation synthesis reports
Policy Integration	Participation rate of communication officers in core policy planning working groups	Organizational mapping, key informant interviews

Dimension	Example Indicator	Data Source / Method
Disinformation Response	Time elapsed between the emergence of a false narrative and institutional prebunking/clarification	Media monitoring analytics, digital tracking
Public Perception & Trust	Target group comprehension metrics; institutional trust indexes	Public perception surveys (e.g., OECD Trust Survey)

Digital Diplomacy as an External Dimension

Addressing research question 4, digital diplomacy represents the application of digital communication tools by foreign policy institutions to engage international publics, media, foreign experts, and diaspora networks (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019). Digital channels also influence the operational autonomy and legitimacy of international organizations (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2021). Because foreign policy is a component of public policy, it shares the core logic of the policy cycle—differentiating one-way information broadcasting from relational dialogue. Cull's (2008) taxonomy identifies "listening" as a primary pillar of public diplomacy, aligning with two-way communication principles. Bjola et al. (2019) observe that digital environments have shifted foreign ministry operations toward audience-centric, data-driven engagement. Table 3 illustrates how Table 1's tool categories translate to digital diplomacy.

Table 3. Proactive Communication Tools in Digital Diplomacy

Tool Category	Digital Diplomacy Application	Primary Function
Informing	Official social accounts, diplomatic portals, multi-language digital content, infographics	External policy positioning and visibility
Consultation	Social listening, digital roundtables with foreign policy experts	Understanding foreign audience perception
Engagement	Virtual summits, digital diaspora networks, co-hosted international online events	Deepening bilateral/multilateral ties
Risk Prevention	Real-time crisis consular notifications, proactive rebuttal of foreign disinformation	Citizen protection and reputation management
Monitoring	Engagement metrics, foreign media sentiment analysis	Strategic evaluation and messaging adjustment

Digital diplomacy faces structural challenges similar to those in domestic contexts: audience fragmentation across cultural filters, acute foreign disinformation operations (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), the requirement for alignment between domestic and foreign messaging, and resource constraints requiring specialized analytical and linguistic expertise.

Opportunities include reaching remote audiences efficiently and gathering real-time feedback. Scholars note that digital diplomacy can amplify the network reach of small states (Manor, 2016). However, because these observations are largely derived from network centrality studies (e.g., USC Center on Public Diplomacy reports) rather than direct policy outcome measurements, empirical verification remains required. Ultimately, digital diplomacy succeeds only when moving beyond one-way broadcasting to incorporate systemic listening.

Discussion

The primary conclusion of this study is that proactive communication should be recognized not as an auxiliary informational function, but as an integral component of public policy planning, implementation, and evaluation. Extending Hood's (1983) formulation of information as a core state tool, this analysis demonstrates that its efficacy relies on timeliness and two-way reciprocity. The examination of digital diplomacy confirms that these principles apply equally to external audiences, positioning digital diplomacy as the international dimension of an integrated strategic framework rather than a separate phenomenon.

Critical Perspectives and Counterarguments

The academic literature reflects several critical perspectives. First, participatory exercises may become tokenistic, exerting little influence on final policy outcomes (Arnstein, 1969). This criticism underscores Proposition 3: two-way reciprocity is a vital condition for efficacy rather than a decorative feature. Second, proactive communication risks being co-opted for partisan self-promotion. To mitigate this risk, the OECD (2021) emphasizes maintaining a strict institutional boundary between public communication and political campaigning. Institutional safeguards—such as professional standards and oversight—are necessary to preserve legitimacy. Third, excessive proactive outreach can cause information overload; effective practice requires targeted segmentation and clear formatting rather than sheer volume.

Structural Insights

Table 2 indicates that primary operational barriers are organizational rather than technological. Investing in digital tools yields limited results unless communication is structurally integrated into policy units. Furthermore, public trust operates as a long-term outcome of consistent practice rather than a static prerequisite or a short-term campaign result.

The Georgian Context

Under Article 28 of the General Administrative Code of Georgia, Executive Decree No. 219 (2013) mandates standards for proactive public disclosure (sakartvelos parlament'i, 1999; sakartvelos mtavroba, 2013 / საქართველოს პარლამენტი, 1999; საქართველოს მთავრობა, 2013). Statutory provisions in Georgia focus primarily on the "Informing" dimension (Table 1). Whether formal disclosure evolves into two-way communication integrated across the policy cycle remains an open question.

Georgia's participation in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) since 2011 offers a relevant illustration. Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) assessments noted expanded consultation during early action plan cycles; for instance, the 2014–2015 IRM report documented consultations across 15 settlements and nine regions (Gogidze, n.d.). This case illustrates that legal requirements for proactive disclosure do not automatically create an institutional environment for sustained two-way dialogue, supporting Propositions 2 and 3. Comprehensive empirical analysis—via documentary audits of public consultations and interviews with departmental communication leads—represents a logical next step for future research.

Ethical Considerations and Bounds of Legitimacy

While data-driven audience segmentation and AI tools enhance communication precision, they introduce two distinct risks:

Processing personal data can blur the line between public information and behavioral manipulation, eroding public trust (Wirtz et al., 2020).
Purely digital channels risk marginalizing vulnerable demographics (e.g., elderly populations, rural communities, ethnic minorities, digitally excluded groups).

The legitimacy of proactive communication relies on transparent segmentation rules, data protection guarantees, and multi-channel accessibility. In digital diplomacy, these concerns are magnified, as identical digital tools can support constructive dialogue or escalate state confrontation. Verifiability, transparent source attribution, and reciprocal dialogue serve as the defining markers of legitimate proactive digital diplomacy.

Conclusion

This structured review demonstrates that proactive communication is not a mere technical support function, but a fundamental determinant of public policy legitimacy, transparency, and operational effectiveness. Integrating communication tools into every phase of the policy cycle—from agenda-setting to evaluation—allows public institutions to reduce information vacuums, build public trust, mitigate disinformation risks, and optimize implementation outcomes. Furthermore, the principles of proactive communication apply directly to digital diplomacy, demonstrating that foreign public engagement functions as the external dimension of an integrated public policy strategy.

At the same time, the research highlights that technological tools alone cannot compensate for institutional weaknesses. The main constraints on effective proactive communication stem from institutional fragmentation, resource and skill gaps, and low initial levels of public trust. Overcoming these barriers requires public authorities to transition from reactive PR tactics toward strategic, data-driven, two-way engagement that actively incorporates citizen feedback into policy decisions.

Practical Recommendations for Public Institutions

5. **Institutionalize Communication in Policy Design:** Mandatory inclusion of communication specialists in policy development teams from the agenda-setting phase onward, accompanied by a dedicated communication strategy for every major policy initiative.
6. **Establish Clear Boundaries:** Separate public interest communication from political or electoral messaging through formal professional guidelines and ethical codes.
7. **Adopt Prebunking and Rapid Clarification:** Shift from delayed reactive fact-checking toward proactive narrative forecasting, media literacy initiatives, and prebunking protocols.
8. **Build Capacity in Audience Analytics:** Invest in staff training focused on digital analytics, social listening, message testing, plain-language drafting, and two-way public engagement.
9. **Ensure Multi-Channel and Inclusive Outreach:** Combine digital platforms with traditional media and offline community formats to prevent the exclusion of digitally vulnerable populations.
10. **Implement Closed-Loop Feedback Mechanisms:** Publish structured "What We Heard and What We Changed" reports following public consultations to demonstrate tangible civic impact and foster institutional trust.

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