Clicktivism and Control: The Governance Illusion in the Social Media Era.

Suhail Iqball[1]

Abstract

In the classical administrative era of the early 2000s, governance systems depended heavily on structured feedback loops, documentary, hierarchical, and mediated through multiple bureaucratic layers to assess the impact of policies and programmes on target groups. Yet, such inputs were often filtered, adjusted, or diluted to suit institutional comfort zones, leaving critical shortcomings unaddressed. With the rise of social media, e-governance tools, and networked governance paradigms, a new form of public feedback has emerged. This paper argues that social media enables immediate, visible, and largely unmediated channels of citizen input, compelling traditional bureaucracies to acknowledge that digital narratives can no longer be ignored or suppressed. In this sense, social media appears to bridge key governance gaps by allowing primary stakeholders to signal failures in policy design or implementation and by pressuring policymakers to respond for reasons of legitimacy and public optics.

However, this shift is double-edged. While scholarship shows that social media can enhance transparency, facilitate citizen–state interaction, and strengthen accountability, research on "clicktivism" reveals that low-effort digital engagement may create an illusion of participation without substantive impact. Studies from Sri Lanka and Nigeria indicate that although social media mobilizes awareness, its capacity to generate sustained civic engagement or policy change is modest.

Thus, this paper examines whether social media-driven feedback mechanisms genuinely reform governance processes or merely construct a governance illusion. It concludes that the central challenge for democratic governance is converting online voice into offline accountability.

Keywords

Digital Governance; Citizen Engagement; Feedback Mechanisms; Clicktivism; Accountability

[1]Pursuing Master of Arts in Public Administration from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, the everyday practice of public administration revolved around files, registers and formal correspondence. Citizens who wished to complain about a failed service, an abusive official or a faulty policy did so through written petitions, personal visits to offices and various layers of paper documentation. These complaints entered a bureaucratic chain: they were received at a counter, entered into a register, forwarded to a section, examined by a dealing hand, commented on by superiors and eventually placed before a competent authority. Only after this chain of documentation had run its full course could administrators begin to see the patterns of policy failure or institutional malfunction that those complaints signalled. The state's knowledge of itself and its own shortcomings emerged slowly and selectively from this archive of paper.

This classical model of administration possessed an internal rationality – it ensured records, hierarchical responsibility and procedural regularity – but it was also structurally slow and often opaque. The citizen's grievance disappeared into the file system. Months or years later, parts of it might reappear in the form of internal reviews, committee reports or policy amendments, but the connection between the original complaint and the eventual reform was rarely clear, even to those inside the system. The feedback loop between citizen and state was thus delayed, mediated and tightly controlled by bureaucratic procedures.

The diffusion of information and communication technologies into public administration has disrupted this pattern. E-governance programmes around the world have digitized records, automated workflows and opened online interfaces for citizen complaints. In India, for example, the Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) operates as a single online portal through which citizens may submit grievances related to central and many state government services, track their status and evaluate the timeliness of responses. Gujarat's SWAGAT initiative, launched in 2003, similarly integrates digital and communication technologies to enable citizens to submit complaints that are reviewed directly at different levels including by the Chief Minister, backed by a largely paperless workflow and real-time monitoring.

These systems exemplify a more general reconfiguration of feedback in governance. Instead of waiting for complaints to accumulate in files, administrators encounter them as constantly refreshing data on dashboards. Instead of seeing policy problems only after years of implementation, they can observe them emerging almost in real time. Decisions become, in your apt phrase, "switchable": easier to modify, withdraw or recalibrate because their consequences appear quickly in digital form rather than as archival sediment years later.

Social media platforms add yet another layer to this transformation. When a resident films a flooded road, tags a municipal corporation on X, and the video is shared thousands of times within a few hours, the grievance bypasses not only the older paper-based system but also the formal digital portal. It enters a hybrid realm in which citizens, journalists, opposition politicians and administrators are all part of the same public audience. Government agencies themselves increasingly maintain official accounts, respond publicly to complaints, and use these spaces to project an image of responsiveness.

The core question of this paper is how this environment of social media and e-governance generates an illusion of control. Citizens may feel that by clicking, tagging and sharing they are directly shaping public policy; administrators may feel that by responding to a selection of visible complaints and curating success stories they are demonstrating accountability. But beneath these mutual perceptions, the deeper structures of power, capacity and inequality may remain remarkably unchanged.

Digital Governance and the Transformation of Feedback

The first step in understanding the governance illusion is to examine how digital technologies have altered the basic mechanics of administrative feedback. Classical administration, as noted, relied on documentation and the physical movement of files. The feedback loop was reactive and episodic: only when complaints reached a certain volume, or when a particularly egregious case attracted elite attention, did the system mobilize to reconsider its rules or policies. Much of the time, routine implementation proceeded with limited awareness of citizen experience.

E-governance reforms promised to change this by embedding feedback in the very architecture of service delivery. Portals like CPGRAMS are available 24×7 and are formally open to any citizen with internet access. Complaints can be lodged without needing to know which specific office is responsible; the system itself routes them to the appropriate authority. Ministries and departments gain access to consolidated data: how many complaints they have received, on what subjects, from which regions, and how quickly they have responded. SWAGAT's multi-level design, combining village, district and state hearings supported by ICT, similarly aims to create a time-bound, transparent chain of responsibility.

This datafication of grievances has at least three important effects. First, it compresses time. Administrators no longer have to wait for periodic reviews to discover recurring issues; dashboards display them continuously. Second, it makes feedback more legible to the system. Complaints are categorized, geocoded and aggregated in ways that make patterns visible at a glance. Third, it increases the formal accountability of officials: response timelines and pendency figures can be monitored by

higher authorities, and in principle linked to performance assessment.

Your insight that this makes administration "switchable" is significant. When feedback becomes fast and legible, it becomes rational for decision-makers to treat policy not as a fixed product but as something to be tested, adjusted and iterated. E-governance thus nudges bureaucracy toward what might be called a reflexive style of rule: one that repeatedly asks why a particular decision is generating complaints, how implementation on the ground diverges from intention, and what alterations might improve acceptance and feasibility.

Yet even as e-governance compresses time and increases visibility, it remains largely within the formal institutional sphere. The state controls the portal, defines acceptable complaint formats and retains discretion over how data will be interpreted and acted upon. Social media breaks open this enclosed circuit. Platforms like X, Facebook or Instagram are not designed as grievance systems, yet they have become de facto channels of complaint and publicity. Users post photographs of potholes, failing hospitals or arbitrary policing; they tag official accounts and journalists; they mobilize mockery and outrage through memes and hashtags.

One of the most striking developments in many democracies has been the emergence of accounts that specialize in highlighting such grievances and publicly pressuring authorities. In your own research you note an account whose slogan roughly translates as "show us by doing it," where citizens submit issues like bad roads or waste mismanagement and the account tags relevant departments, often eliciting rapid responses. Whether or not such cases are statistically representative, they symbolize a crucial shift: recognition is no longer entirely at the discretion of the bureaucracy. Visibility can be imposed on the administration through public posts, forcing it to acknowledge problems that might otherwise have remained buried in files.

What social media contributes, then, is not just speed but spectacle. Grievances become performances addressed simultaneously to the state and to a watching public. Administrators do not simply receive complaints; they are seen to receive them. Solutions are not merely implemented; they are displayed and circulated as evidence of responsiveness. It is at this point that the boundary between genuine accountability and its simulation begins to blur.

Clicktivism, Slacktivism and the Ambivalence of Digital Participation

The term "clicktivism," popularized by Micah White, captures one dimension of this blur. Writing from within activist circles, White criticizes the trend of reducing political engagement to online

actions that can be easily quantified – signatures, clicks, shares – and optimized using the logic of advertising. In his view, campaigns built around such metrics offer "the illusion that surfing the web can change the world" and risk producing political passivity by substituting marketing tactics for deeper organizing.

Evgeny Morozov's critique of "cyber-utopianism" in *The Net Delusion* extends this line of argument to the geopolitical arena. Morozov shows how regimes can manipulate online spaces, infiltrate digital movements and use the internet for surveillance and propaganda, thereby turning supposed tools of liberation into instruments of control. From this perspective, simply increasing digital connectivity or online expression does not guarantee more democratic outcomes; it may equally enable more sophisticated forms of domination.

Empirical research on so-called "slacktivism" complicates, but does not entirely overturn, these critiques. Henrik Serup Christensen's widely cited study "Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?" finds that online activism is often positively correlated with offline participation, suggesting that for many individuals, digital acts complement rather than replace other forms of engagement. Other work points to the role of social media in facilitating large-scale protests, from the Arab uprisings to various recent movements, by lowering coordination costs and enabling rapid diffusion of information. Zeynep Tufekci, in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, emphasizes both the power and the fragility of such networked protests: they can mobilize quickly and at scale, yet often struggle to translate visibility into durable organizational capacity or institutional change.

Taken together, this scholarship suggests that digital participation is ambivalent rather than simply empty. Clicks and shares can be gateways to deeper involvement, but they can also be endpoints that satisfy the desire to "do something" without demanding sustained commitment. From a governance point of view, the key question is not simply whether clicktivism is "real" activism, but how administrations interpret and respond to the signals it generates. If governments treat trending hashtags as indicators of public mood, they may reorient attention to whatever becomes most visible, regardless of its structural importance. If they learn to manage such visibility strategically, they may convert social media into a stage on which responsiveness is performed rather than fully enacted.

The Governance Illusion: Selective Responsiveness and Algorithmic Bias

Your observation that social media can create bias in governance goes to the heart of this problem.

Visibility on platforms is not neutral. Algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement; political actors invest resources in shaping narratives; and governments may pressure platforms directly or indirectly. In such an environment, the grievances that rise to prominence are not necessarily those that reflect the most severe injustices or failures. They may instead be those that are most easily dramatized, most aligned with dominant narratives or most compatible with the interests of powerful actors.

This selectivity opens the possibility of what might be called curated accountability. Administrations can respond quickly and visibly to certain complaints – typically those that are concrete, solvable at low cost and photogenic – while ignoring or deflecting more complex structural issues. A broken road can be repaired for the camera; a deeply unequal land regime or a discriminatory policing pattern cannot be remedied overnight. Yet the images of repair circulate, producing an impression of energetic, citizen-oriented governance.

At the same time, state agencies and ruling parties deploy their own communication strategies on social media. They highlight policy successes, amplify testimonials from beneficiaries and promote carefully crafted narratives of efficiency and benevolence. During election periods, these efforts intensify into sophisticated digital campaigns involving targeted advertisements, influencers and coordinated content. Studies of such campaigns suggest that while they may not always flip partisan loyalties, they can strongly shape perceptions of leadership competence and agenda.

When the curated narratives promoted by governments intersect with algorithmic systems that reward engagement, the result can be a public sphere in which citizens predominantly encounter images of a responsive state, interspersed with highly publicized interventions in selected grievances. Critical or uncomfortable voices may still exist, but they are relatively harder to find, more easily dismissed as "negative" or "anti-national", or drowned out by orchestrated counter-messaging. The comparison you draw with tightly controlled media environments in authoritarian states such as North Korea is provocative, yet it underscores an important warning: even in formally democratic contexts, media systems can be structured in ways that limit what is easily visible and thinkable. The difference is that control is exerted less through overt censorship than through the more subtle mechanisms of algorithmic curation, platform governance and political communication.

The illusion here is twofold. Citizens may come to believe that because they see many stories of grievances being resolved and officials responding online, governance as a whole must be functioning effectively. Administrators, in turn, may persuade themselves that by addressing visible issues and

maintaining an active social media presence, they are genuinely accountable, even if the deeper institutional obstacles to justice – inadequate resources, entrenched power hierarchies, inequality in access to complaint channels – remain largely intact. The digital layer becomes a mirror that reflects an edited version of governance back to both rulers and ruled.

Performance, Capacity and the Dark Edge of Digital Governance

The distinction between real and performed accountability becomes sharper when we consider the underlying capacity of the administrative system. ICT-enabled grievance mechanisms like CPGRAMS and SWAGAT demonstrate that digital tools can significantly improve the handling of complaints when they are embedded in serious institutional reforms: clear timelines, defined responsibilities, regular monitoring and escalation, and political backing from the top leadership. Such systems, if implemented sincerely, reduce opportunities for grievances to be ignored, create data for systemic improvements, and make it harder for officials to treat complaints as discretionary favors.

However, not all digital initiatives are grounded in equivalent capacity or commitment. Instances of prolonged delays in grievance resolution, even when the complaints are lodged through online systems, reveal that technology by itself does not dissolve bureaucratic inertia. Recent scrutiny of a six-year delay by an urban development authority in resolving a payment issue despite the use of digital records, for example, led a state right-to-service commission to criticize the agency for undermining citizens' rights, underscoring that digitization without administrative responsiveness simply produces a more visible record of failure.

In the realm of social media, the tension between performance and capacity is even more pronounced. Government departments may form social media cells, train officials in crafting posts, and collaborate with platform companies on best practices for digital engagement, as seen in workshops where Meta's India team trains state-level information departments on content strategy and analytics. These efforts undoubtedly improve the quality and reach of government communication. Yet they also risk prioritizing the appearance of connectivity and listening over the hard work of restructuring institutions, reallocating budgets and confronting entrenched interests. It is easier, after all, to reply to a tweet than to reform a corrupt supply chain or address deep regional disparities.

Your concluding warning that administrations which persist in avoiding people's real problems while hiding behind rigid processes and digital façades risk dragging their societies into a darker age of governance is therefore not hyperbole. The darkness you evoke is not the absence of information, but its distortion. Citizens may be better informed about certain things – they might know which

complaints have been "resolved" this week or which schemes have been launched – yet less able to see the structural continuities that reproduce injustice. Administrators may be immersed in streams of online feedback yet shielded from voices that lack digital access or algorithmic visibility.

If this trajectory continues unchecked, the result could be a form of post-democratic governance in which electoral competition and online participation coexist with a hollowing out of meaningful accountability. Participation is reduced to clicktivism; responsiveness is reduced to social media replies; legitimacy is reduced to favorable engagement metrics. Beneath the surface, the "system failures" you emphasize – chronic underfunding of public goods, capture of state institutions by narrow interests, violence against marginalized communities – continue largely unaltered.

Conclusion

The rise of social media and e-governance has undeniably transformed the landscape of governance. Classical public administration, with its slow, paper-based feedback loops, has been overlain by a dense web of digital portals, email channels and online dashboards. Administrators today confront complaints not as distant echoes in archival files but as immediate notifications and real-time data. Decisions have become more "switchable", at least at the margins, because their consequences are visible much sooner.

At the same time, social media has opened an unruly public arena in which citizens can broadcast grievances, demand action and publicly evaluate responses. Your example of the "show us by doing" style of account on X captures the spirit of this shift: the insistence that the state must not only promise but visibly perform. In many cases, this pressure has led to real improvements: roads repaired, garbage cleared, delinquent officials disciplined. Digital tools have thus enlarged the repertoire through which citizens can press claims and administrators can demonstrate responsiveness.

Yet the very features that make digital governance powerful also make it prone to illusion. Clicktivism enables individuals to feel politically engaged through minimal gestures whose connection to structural change is often tenuous. Critiques by White and Morozov remind us that online activism can degenerate into marketing metrics and that regimes can appropriate the internet for surveillance and propaganda. Empirical work on slacktivism and networked protest shows a more ambivalent picture, in which online participation sometimes complements offline action but frequently struggles to translate visibility into durable institutional reform.

From a governance perspective, the risk is that administrations learn to govern appearances rather than

realities. They may respond energetically to those complaints that surface prominently on social media while allowing less visible injustices to persist. They may invest heavily in cultivating an image of efficiency and empathy online, even as underlying organizational cultures and incentive structures remain resistant to change. Platform algorithms and communication strategies may converge to present citizens with a curated view of governance in which success stories and symbolic interventions dominate over critical scrutiny.

Avoiding this fate requires more than skepticism about clicktivism. It demands a deliberate effort to integrate digital feedback into robust, transparent and inclusive institutional frameworks of accountability. Grievances voiced on social media need systematic pathways into formal redressal systems; data from e-governance portals must be used not only for public relations but for policy redesign and resource allocation. Regulation of platforms, as seen in initiatives like India's IT Rules and the Grievance Appellate Committee, must strike a careful balance between ensuring a "safe, trusted and accountable" online environment and preserving space for dissent and critical journalism. Above all, governments must recognise that the legitimacy of governance ultimately depends less on how responsive they appear in timelines than on whether citizens experience justice, dignity and effective services in their everyday lives.

The social media era, in this sense, is not predetermined. It can become a time in which administrations truly learn from citizens in real time, rethinking policies in the light of lived experience and reshaping institutions to be more democratic. Or it can become an age in which the glow of screens masks the hardening of systems, and the promise of digital participation dissolves into the governance illusion you have rightly identified. The direction taken will depend on whether public administration treats digital tools as an opportunity for deeper transformation or merely as a new technology of control wrapped in the language of engagement.

References

1. Banday, M. T., and M. M. Mattoo. 2013. "Social Media in E-Governance: A Study with Special Reference to India." Social Networking 2 (2): 47–56. https://doi.org/10.4236/sn.2013.22006.

2. Birkinshaw, Matt, and Parth Taraporevala. 2023. "Social Media as E-Governance: Digital Lives of Indian Municipal Bodies and Smart Cities." South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal 30. https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.8855.

3. Christensen, Henrik Serup. 2011. "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?" First Monday 16 (2). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i2.3336.

4. Greijdanus, H., C. A. de Matos Fernandes, F. Turner-Zwinkels, A. Honari, C. A. Roos, H. Rosenbusch, and T. Postmes. 2020. "The Psychology of Online Activism and Social Movements: Relations between Online and Offline Collective Action." Current Opinion in Psychology 35: 49–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.003.

5. Leonel, Rosanna, Kate Rehbein, Melissa K. Westermann-Behaylo, and Emily Perrault. 2024. "Firms' Response to Slacktivism: When and Why Are E-Petitions Effective?" Journal of Management Studies 61 (7): 3148–3183. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13010.

6. Ly, B., and R. Ly. 2023. "Emerging Trends in Social Media for E-Governance and Citizen Engagement: A Case Study of Telegram in Cambodia." Computers in Human Behavior Reports 12: 100347. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2023.100347.

7. Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. New York: PublicAffairs.

8. Nsama, L., C. K. Webster, B. B. Dash, N. Walubita, U. C. De, S. K. Behera, S. Singh, and S. S. Patra. 2024. "The Role of Citizen Engagement in Democratic Governance Enhancement through E-Governance: A Case Study of Lusaka City Council, Zambia." Journal of Theoretical and Applied Information Technology 102 (22): 8135–8151.

9. Rana, Nripendra P., Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Michael D. Williams, and Vishanth Weerakkody. 2016. "Adoption of Online Public Grievance Redressal System in India: Toward Developing a Unified View." Computers in Human Behavior 64: 734–747. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.019.

10. Sun, Chunxiao, Guiquan Jiang, and Jian Zhang. 2024. "An Analysis of Hotspots, Subject Structure, and Emerging Trends in Digital Governance Research." SAGE Open 14 (3). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241268756.

11. Tufekci, Zeynep. 2017. Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest. New Haven: Yale University Press.

12. United Nations APCICT. 2019. Social Media, Development and Governance. Asian and Pacific Training Centre for ICT for Development (APCICT/ESCAP).

13. V. Srinivas. 2022. Effective Redressal of Public Grievances. Occasional Paper. Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Government of India.

14. Yadav, Rakesh Kumar. 2024. "Strengthening Grievance Redressal Systems as a Critical Component of Good Governance: The Case Study of CPGRAMS." Kırklareli University Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences 13 (2): 1–20.