

Political Communication and Local Democracy in Papua: Social Media, Indigenous Identity, and Political Participation

Esther Michelle Caroline* 

Universitas Cendrawasih, Jayapura, Papua, Indonesia
esthercaroline@gmail.com

Deborah Nathalie 

Universitas Cendrawasih, Jayapura, Papua, Indonesia
deborah_nath@gmail.com

Matthew Christian Aditya 

Universitas Cendrawasih, Jayapura, Papua, Indonesia
matt_aditya@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65815/ev1h0a70>

Submitted: 22-09-2025

Revised: 10-12-2025, 08-02-2026

Accepted: 27-03-2026

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Digital communication has created new spaces for political expression among communities in Papua, where questions of Indigenous identity, development, representation, and political rights remain important components of public discourse. This article examines the role of social media in political communication among Indigenous communities in Papua. Using qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study explores political narratives, identity construction, community mobilization, and interactions between local communities and government institutions. The article argues that social media can provide Indigenous communities with alternative channels for communicating political concerns and challenging dominant representations. At the same time, digital communication may intensify polarization when political issues are presented through competing identity-based narratives. The study proposes an Indigenous-centered political communication framework emphasizing community participation, linguistic diversity, contextualized information, and protection of political expression. The article concludes that digital platforms have become increasingly important to democratic participation in Papua but should be understood within the region's distinctive political, cultural, and historical context.

[Komunikasi digital telah menciptakan ruang baru untuk ekspresi politik di antara masyarakat di Papua, di mana pertanyaan tentang identitas masyarakat adat, pembangunan, representasi, dan hak-hak politik tetap menjadi

komponen penting dari wacana publik. Artikel ini mengkaji peran media sosial dalam komunikasi politik di antara masyarakat adat di Papua. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana digital kualitatif, studi ini mengeksplorasi narasi politik, konstruksi identitas, mobilisasi masyarakat, dan interaksi antara masyarakat lokal dan lembaga pemerintah. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa media sosial dapat menyediakan saluran alternatif bagi masyarakat adat untuk mengkomunikasikan keprihatinan politik dan menantang representasi dominan. Pada saat yang sama, komunikasi digital dapat memperintensifkan polarisasi ketika isu-isu politik disajikan melalui narasi berbasis identitas yang saling bersaing. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka komunikasi politik yang berpusat pada masyarakat adat yang menekankan partisipasi masyarakat, keragaman bahasa, informasi yang dikontekstualisasikan, dan perlindungan ekspresi politik. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa platform digital telah menjadi semakin penting bagi partisipasi demokratis di Papua tetapi harus dipahami dalam konteks politik, budaya, dan sejarah yang khas di wilayah tersebut.]

Keywords: Papua, Indigenous communities, political communication, social media, democracy

Introduction

Political communication in Papua cannot be adequately understood through conventional assumptions about elections, political parties, and mass media. Political participation in the region is embedded within distinctive historical experiences, indigenous institutions, customary authority, territorial identities, and debates concerning representation and development. The political significance of communication consequently extends beyond the transmission of electoral messages. It involves determining whose experiences become visible, which identities are recognized, and how communities negotiate relationships with government institutions. Jamal and Mara (2019) demonstrate that the Majelis Rakyat Papua (MRP) was established as a cultural representation institution intended to articulate the interests of Indigenous Papuans within the framework of special autonomy. Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020) further argue that Indigenous representation can become an important foundation for deliberative democracy when it creates opportunities for public discourse and collective decision-making. These findings indicate that communication and representation are inseparable within Papua's democratic development.

The historical context is particularly important because political identity in Papua has developed through complex interactions between ethnicity, colonial history, state integration, local political authority, and contemporary demands for recognition. Korwa (2013) demonstrates that debates surrounding Papua's integration into Indonesia remain connected to competing interpretations of history

and political identity. Snanfi et al. (2018) similarly show that Indigenous identity can become a significant political resource in contests over governmental positions and access to political power. These studies suggest that political communication in Papua is never entirely neutral. The language used to describe development, autonomy, citizenship, representation, and security can activate particular understandings of Papuan identity. Digital communication adds another layer because these narratives can circulate rapidly beyond local communities. Social media consequently becomes a site where historical interpretations and contemporary political claims are continuously reconstructed rather than merely communicated.

The emergence of social media has expanded the possibilities for political expression among Papuan communities. Gomar (2024) finds that social media has become an alternative channel for expressing public aspirations in Papua, particularly among younger and middle-class citizens. Conventional channels such as demonstrations, public hearings, dialogue, open letters, and complaint mechanisms remain important, but social media allows citizens to communicate political concerns with greater speed and potentially wider reach. Nevertheless, Gomar also finds that digital expression does not automatically translate into policy change. Government responsiveness remains crucial because communication becomes politically meaningful only when institutions are willing to receive and process public demands. This finding challenges technological determinism: social media can enlarge the communicative capacity of citizens without necessarily redistributing decision-making power.

Political communication through social media also intersects with electoral competition. Sinurat and Silo (2022) show that social media became part of campaign communication during the 2017 Jayapura regency election. Digital platforms provided candidates and political actors with opportunities to disseminate campaign information and reach voters beyond conventional campaign settings. The significance of this transformation is not simply that campaigns became digital. More importantly, the communication environment surrounding elections became increasingly dispersed. Candidates, supporters, local elites, community organizations, and individual citizens could participate in political messaging simultaneously. Such decentralization creates opportunities for broader political engagement, but it also complicates accountability because political messages may circulate through informal networks beyond formal campaign structures.

The relationship between digital communication and Papua's political identity became particularly visible during the 2019 anti-racism demonstrations. Pranata, Bainus, and Herdiansah (2022) examine the use of Facebook by the Aliansi Mahasiswa Papua and demonstrate how social media became an important instrument for communicating political claims associated with anti-racism mobilization. The case illustrates that digital platforms can provide marginalized communities with communication infrastructures through which their

interpretations of political events can be articulated. However, the same communicative infrastructure can also become contested by competing political actors. Digital political communication in Papua therefore involves not only participation but also struggles over framing, legitimacy, and interpretation.

The issue of representation becomes especially important because dominant media narratives may not always provide Indigenous Papuans with adequate opportunities to represent themselves. Andreas (2020), analyzing the representation of Papua in Telkomsel advertising, finds an ambivalent construction in which identity can simultaneously challenge marginalization and reproduce stereotypes. This finding has wider implications for political communication. When communities are represented primarily by external actors, political communication may reproduce a distinction between those who speak about Papua and those who are permitted to speak as Papuans. Social media potentially changes this relationship by enabling communities to produce their own narratives. Yet self-representation does not automatically guarantee political recognition because digital visibility and institutional influence remain different forms of political power.

Another distinctive feature of Papua's democratic communication concerns the relationship between customary institutions and formal electoral mechanisms. The *noken* system illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Ronsumbre (2019) argues that *noken* can be understood as a manifestation of deliberative democracy based on local wisdom, while Mulyani, Nuswanto, and Sukimin (2020) highlight the constitutional controversy surrounding its compatibility with principles of direct, free, secret, honest, and fair elections. The disagreement reveals that democratic participation cannot simply be measured against a single institutional model. In some Papuan communities, collective decision-making may be understood as legitimate because political preferences are embedded within customary relationships. At the same time, collective mechanisms can create concerns regarding individual political autonomy.

Research on the 2018 gubernatorial election further demonstrates that political participation in Papua cannot be reduced to individual voting. Putra, Kasimat, and Purwadi (2020) identify three mechanisms of participation: direct voting, citizen agreement, and representative mandates. Their findings demonstrate that political participation in Papua can incorporate forms of collective decision-making that differ from standard electoral models. The research also recorded a high level of voter participation in the 2018 gubernatorial election. The analytical implication is significant: participation should be understood as a culturally and institutionally situated process. Digital communication may introduce new participatory mechanisms, but these mechanisms operate alongside customary forms of collective deliberation rather than replacing them.

Indigenous political rights are also linked to the institutional architecture of special autonomy. Yunus and Anas (2021) argue that affirmative action is necessary to accommodate the political rights of Indigenous communities because formal equality may not adequately address structural differences in political access. The

political communication implications are substantial. If political participation is formally open but communication channels are culturally inaccessible, communities may remain marginalized despite possessing legal rights. Democratic communication therefore requires more than digital connectivity. It requires communication practices that recognize Indigenous identity, local institutions, linguistic differences, and historically unequal relationships between communities and state institutions.

The relationship between Indigenous representation and democratic deliberation has also been examined through the MRP and Indigenous representatives in the DPRP. Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020) argue that Indigenous representation has the potential to create political spaces in which Indigenous interests are articulated within formal government institutions. Ronsumbre, Deliarnoor, and Mulyawan (2020), however, caution that the existence of Indigenous representatives does not automatically create effective deliberative arenas. Institutional representation may exist without generating sufficiently broad opportunities for citizens to participate in policy deliberation. This distinction is important for understanding social media. Digital platforms can create additional spaces of discussion, but they cannot substitute for institutional arrangements that translate public communication into actual decision-making.

The government's communication practices concerning Papua further demonstrate this problem. Sutan and Purwaningsih (2022) examine social media communication concerning the continuation of Papua's special autonomy and show that digital platforms have become relevant to government communication about contested policy issues. Government use of social media can broaden policy communication, but its effectiveness depends on whether messages respond to the concerns and experiences of local communities. Communication that merely disseminates government policy without creating reciprocal dialogue risks reproducing a top-down model. In Papua, where questions of representation and trust are particularly sensitive, democratic communication requires government institutions to recognize citizens as interlocutors rather than simply recipients of information.

The communication environment is further complicated by contested information and political framing. Sutomo, Dohamid, and Cempaka Timur (2022) identify social media as an important arena for competing narratives concerning Papua and argue that government strategies have faced difficulties in responding effectively to digital framing. Samad and Indrajit (2022) similarly examine the use of social media analytics to understand propaganda associated with the Papuan separatist issue. These studies indicate that Papua's digital public sphere is characterized by intense narrative competition. Such competition cannot be understood exclusively as a technical problem of misinformation. It is also a political problem concerning trust, historical memory, legitimacy, and competing interpretations of political reality.

The 2019 internet slowdown provides another important illustration of the political consequences of digital communication. Tanda and Hanita (2022) analyze the government's decision to restrict internet access during the Papua conflict and argue that the measure raised significant questions concerning democratic governance and state power. Prasetyo and Warka (2023) similarly examine government internet restrictions from the perspective of democratic rule of law. The significance of these studies extends beyond the legality of a particular policy. Internet access has become part of the infrastructure through which citizens communicate, obtain political information, document events, and interact with institutions. Restricting that infrastructure therefore has consequences for political participation itself.

This article addresses the following research question: how does social media reshape political communication, Indigenous identity, and local democratic participation in Papua? The study argues that digital platforms create an additional communicative arena through which Papuan communities can articulate political concerns, reproduce Indigenous identities, challenge external representations, and interact with governmental institutions. However, digital visibility does not automatically generate political influence. The democratic value of social media depends on whether digital communication can be connected with Indigenous forms of deliberation, representative institutions, public accountability, and responsive government. Social media should therefore be understood as part of a broader political communication ecosystem rather than as an independent mechanism of democratization.

The contribution of this article lies in connecting scholarship on Papuan Indigenous representation and customary democracy with research on digital political communication. Existing studies have generally examined these areas separately. Research on Indigenous representation has focused on MRP, DPRP, special autonomy, political rights, and *noken* (Jamal and Mara 2019; Ronsumbre 2019; Ronsumbre and Kartini 2020; Yunus and Anas 2021). Research on digital communication has concentrated on social media campaigns, political framing, propaganda, and public policy communication (Sinurat and Silo 2022; Pranata, Bainus, and Herdiansah 2022; Gomar 2024; Sutomo, Dohamid, and Cempaka Timur 2022). By bringing these literatures together, this article conceptualizes digital communication as an extension of Papua's existing political and cultural institutions rather than as a replacement for them.

The study employs a qualitative interpretive approach based on digital discourse analysis and systematic analysis of Indonesian journal literature. The analysis focuses on four interconnected analytical concerns: political narratives circulated through digital platforms, representations of Indigenous identity, forms of community mobilization and participation, and communication between citizens and governmental institutions. The selected literature covers research published before 2026 and emphasizes studies situated in Papua or directly concerned with Papuan political communication, Indigenous representation,

elections, social media, and democratic governance. The analytical strategy is comparative rather than merely descriptive. Findings from digital communication studies are examined against scholarship on customary political participation and Indigenous representation in order to identify where digital practices reinforce, modify, or conflict with existing democratic arrangements.

Digital Communication as a New Public Arena for Papuan Political Expression

The expansion of social media changes the geography of political communication by allowing political claims to circulate beyond the physical locations in which they originate. In Papua, this is particularly consequential because geographical distance, dispersed settlements, and uneven infrastructure have historically shaped relationships between communities and government institutions. Gomar (2024) shows that social media has become a channel through which citizens can express reactions to government policies, although its direct effect on policy adoption remains limited. The finding suggests that digital communication should be understood as an enlargement of the public sphere rather than as an automatic mechanism of political responsiveness. Citizens may gain a louder voice without necessarily gaining greater institutional power. This distinction is central to evaluating democratic communication in Papua because the democratic quality of a communication system depends not only on citizens' ability to speak but also on institutions' capacity to listen and respond.

The political value of social media becomes more apparent when compared with conventional communication channels. Before the expansion of digital platforms, political communication commonly depended on face-to-face meetings, demonstrations, public hearings, letters, local newspapers, radio, and interpersonal networks. These mechanisms remain important, but their geographical reach is limited. Sinurat and Silo (2022) demonstrate that social media became a relevant campaign channel during the Jayapura regency election. Digital platforms allowed electoral actors to distribute messages repeatedly and potentially reach voters who were not present at campaign events. The consequence is a more continuous political communication environment. Political communication no longer occurs only during scheduled meetings or campaign rallies; it can continue through everyday digital interactions. This continuity changes the relationship between political actors and citizens because political messages become embedded within ordinary communication practices.

Social media also alters who can become a political communicator. Traditional political communication generally privileged candidates, political parties, journalists, government officials, and established community leaders. Digital platforms lower the technical barriers to publishing political messages. Individual citizens, youth groups, Indigenous activists, students, customary leaders, and community organizations can produce and distribute content without waiting

for traditional media institutions to provide access. Pranata, Bainus, and Herdiansah (2022) illustrate this possibility through their analysis of the Aliansi Mahasiswa Papua's use of Facebook during the 2019 anti-racism demonstrations. The significance of this case is not merely the use of Facebook. It demonstrates how actors outside formal political institutions can construct alternative channels for communicating political grievances and mobilizing attention.

This transformation is particularly important in contexts where communities perceive mainstream political communication as inadequate. Political grievances often become mobilizing when citizens believe that established institutions fail to represent their experiences. Digital platforms provide an opportunity to bypass some of these institutional filters. A community can document an event, explain its interpretation, and distribute the material to audiences inside and outside Papua. The resulting communication can create solidarity across geographical boundaries. Yet bypassing institutional gatekeepers does not eliminate the problem of credibility. A message may reach a large audience without necessarily being accepted as legitimate or accurate. Digital political participation therefore requires both communicative access and mechanisms through which competing claims can be evaluated.

The public sphere created by social media is also characterized by speed. Political narratives can become prominent within hours, particularly when they are accompanied by emotionally powerful images, hashtags, or short videos. This speed can be beneficial for communities seeking immediate attention to political grievances. However, it also reduces the time available for verification and deliberation. Sutomo, Dohamid, and Cempaka Timur (2022) demonstrate that competing narratives concerning Papua circulate through online and social media environments. Their research indicates that government responses have encountered difficulties in countering alternative framings. The problem is therefore not simply that false information circulates. More fundamentally, different actors compete to define which interpretation of Papua should be considered credible.

Digital communication consequently transforms political conflict into a contest over narrative visibility. Samad and Indrajit (2022) demonstrate how social media analytics can be used to identify propaganda techniques related to the Papuan separatist issue. From a political communication perspective, the relevance of this research lies in demonstrating that digital influence is partly structural. Actors compete not only through the substance of their claims but also through frequency, network connections, emotional narratives, and the capacity to reach particular audiences. Political communication in Papua therefore increasingly involves a struggle to determine which narratives become visible and which remain peripheral.

The existence of competing narratives does not necessarily mean that digital communication is harmful to democracy. Democratic politics inherently involves disagreement over political meanings. The problem arises when competing narratives become insulated from one another and are communicated primarily to

audiences that already share the same political assumptions. Digital platforms can facilitate such fragmentation because users often interact within networks of ideological or identity similarity. In Papua, where political identity is closely associated with historical experience, ethnicity, and perceptions of state legitimacy, digital fragmentation may intensify existing divisions. Democratic communication therefore requires opportunities for cross-group dialogue rather than merely increased quantities of political content.

Government institutions face a parallel challenge. Social media provides them with an opportunity to communicate policy directly to citizens, but direct communication does not necessarily constitute democratic communication. Sutan and Purwaningsih (2022) show that social media was used in communication concerning the continuation of special autonomy in Papua. The important question is whether such communication operates as a one-way information strategy or as a mechanism of reciprocal engagement. When government accounts primarily distribute policy explanations, the communication remains hierarchical. When citizens can question, contest, and influence policy discussions, digital communication becomes more deliberative. The difference lies not in the platform but in the institutional willingness to recognize citizens as political interlocutors.

Gomar's (2024) findings provide empirical support for this distinction. Although social media created opportunities for Papuan citizens to express political concerns, its effect on government policy remained limited. Only certain policy areas were reportedly responsive to social media criticism. This indicates that political voice and political influence are separate dimensions. Citizens may successfully attract public attention while failing to alter government decisions. Such a gap can create frustration if digital participation produces expectations that institutions cannot or will not meet. For democracy, the challenge is therefore to develop institutional mechanisms connecting online expression with policy deliberation, public consultation, and administrative responsiveness.

The question of digital infrastructure is equally important. Political participation presupposes access to communication networks. The 2019 internet restriction in Papua demonstrates what happens when the communication infrastructure itself becomes subject to political control. Tanda and Hanita (2022) argue that the government's internet slowdown raised serious concerns regarding democratic governance. Prasetyo and Warka (2023) similarly identify legal and democratic problems associated with internet restrictions. These findings suggest that internet access should not be treated merely as a technological service. In a contemporary democratic environment, connectivity increasingly functions as infrastructure for political expression, information access, collective organization, and public accountability. Restricting connectivity can consequently reduce citizens' ability to participate in political communication.

The relationship between communication and political participation is especially important in geographically dispersed communities. Traditional political communication can be expensive and logistically difficult when communities are

separated by mountains, islands, forests, and limited transportation infrastructure. Digital communication can reduce some of these geographical barriers, although unequal network access remains a serious limitation. Its potential should therefore not be exaggerated. Social media may connect urban youth in Jayapura or other urban centers with broader political networks while remaining less accessible to remote communities. A digital democratic strategy for Papua must consequently recognize that online participation can reproduce existing inequalities if infrastructure, digital literacy, language accessibility, and economic resources are unevenly distributed.

The question of digital literacy is connected to the quality of political participation. Syaifuddin, Munajad, and Sari (2024), studying millennials in Sorong, find that respondents were exposed to political and religious-political content on social media but possessed mechanisms for filtering information, particularly through digital literacy activities. This finding demonstrates that exposure alone does not determine political behavior. Citizens can develop interpretive capacities that allow them to evaluate competing political claims. Digital literacy therefore becomes part of democratic infrastructure. In Papua, where political issues can be highly sensitive and emotionally charged, the capacity to distinguish evidence from manipulation is particularly important.

Digital communication also affects the temporal character of political participation. Citizens no longer need to wait for elections to express political opinions. They can comment on government policies, organize campaigns, share information, and construct public pressure continuously. This can strengthen accountability because political leaders face public scrutiny between elections. Yet continuous political communication can also produce permanent political contestation. Every policy decision may become a source of online conflict, and political identities may become more entrenched through repeated exposure to partisan narratives. The democratic challenge is to convert continuous communication into sustained deliberation rather than continuous polarization.

The most productive interpretation is therefore to regard social media as a supplementary public arena within Papua's existing political communication system. It expands the number of actors who can speak, the speed with which claims circulate, and the geographical range of political communication. However, it does not eliminate customary institutions, electoral mechanisms, representative bodies, or face-to-face political relationships. Gomar (2024), Sinurat and Silo (2022), and Pranata, Bainus, and Herdiansah (2022) collectively demonstrate that digital communication is most politically meaningful when connected to existing forms of political organization. The democratic future of digital communication in Papua therefore depends on how effectively online expression can be connected to offline representation and institutional responsiveness.

Indigenous Identity, Self-Representation, and the Politics of Recognition

Indigenous identity occupies a distinctive position in Papua's political communication because identity functions simultaneously as cultural belonging, political representation, and a claim to recognition. Andreas (2020) shows that representations of Papua in commercial media can reproduce ambivalence: media narratives may challenge marginalization while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes. This finding reveals why self-representation matters. When communities are represented primarily through external narratives, political communication can become a process in which others define the meaning of Papuan identity. Social media provides an alternative possibility because Indigenous communities can participate directly in constructing narratives about their experiences. The political significance of this capacity lies in shifting communities from being objects of political communication to becoming political communicators themselves.

Self-representation, however, is not politically neutral. Different Papuan groups possess different historical experiences, languages, cultural traditions, and political priorities. Consequently, there is no single Indigenous narrative that can represent all Papuan communities. A democratic communication framework must therefore avoid treating "Indigenous Papuan identity" as homogeneous. Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020) emphasize the importance of Indigenous representation through regional and cultural structures. Their analysis indicates that political representation needs to recognize the diversity of customary communities rather than constructing a single generalized Indigenous subject. Digital communication should similarly accommodate plural Indigenous identities and avoid replacing one form of homogenization with another.

The MRP provides an institutional example of this principle. Jamal and Mara (2019) describe the MRP as a cultural representation institution intended to articulate Indigenous Papuan interests. Its political role demonstrates that recognition cannot be achieved solely through numerical representation in elections. Cultural representation creates a different channel through which political interests can enter governmental decision-making. Digital platforms could strengthen this role by allowing Indigenous representatives to communicate directly with communities and gather public responses. Yet the effectiveness of such communication depends on whether representatives possess institutional authority to translate community concerns into policy. Digital visibility without institutional influence would reproduce the same gap between voice and power identified in research on social media policy communication.

The question of identity also becomes complicated when political actors instrumentalize cultural symbols. Suryawan (2011) demonstrates that local elites in Papua can mobilize identity and cultural backgrounds within political contests over regional development and institutional power. Identity can therefore function as

both a genuine expression of collective belonging and a political resource used strategically by elites. Social media potentially increases the visibility of such symbolic politics. Images of traditional clothing, customary ceremonies, Indigenous territory, or cultural symbols can become political messages. These representations may strengthen collective identity, but they may also simplify complex communities into politically useful symbols. Digital identity politics therefore requires attention to who constructs the representation and whose interests the representation serves.

The politics of representation becomes particularly visible when development is discussed. Development communication frequently presents infrastructure, investment, administrative reform, and economic growth as universal public interests. Yet Indigenous communities may evaluate development through different criteria, including land rights, cultural continuity, environmental protection, customary authority, and community consent. A political communication framework that focuses exclusively on government development indicators can therefore fail to capture Indigenous political priorities. Digital platforms allow communities to introduce alternative criteria into public debates. The resulting contest is not simply between pro-development and anti-development positions. It is a contest over what development should mean and who has authority to define it.

The significance of land illustrates this issue. For many Indigenous communities, land is not merely an economic asset but is connected to cultural identity, ancestry, social relationships, and collective survival. When political communication frames land primarily as a development resource, it can conflict with Indigenous understandings of territory. Digital media can provide a means through which communities document land-related concerns and challenge official representations. The democratic value of such communication lies in expanding the range of legitimate political arguments. A policy debate becomes more democratic when affected communities can challenge the assumptions embedded within official narratives.

The relationship between identity and political participation is also evident in electoral institutions. The *noken* system represents a form of political participation deeply connected to customary authority. Ronsumbre (2019) argues that it can be interpreted as a manifestation of deliberative democracy based on local wisdom. Yet Mulyani, Nuswanto, and Sukimin (2020) emphasize the tension between *noken* and formal principles of individual electoral choice. Persada, Jayus, and Soetijono (2020) similarly examine the constitutional position of *noken* in regional elections. These studies reveal that recognition of Indigenous political practices involves a difficult balancing process. Democratic institutions must protect individual political rights while also recognizing legitimate forms of collective decision-making rooted in customary communities.

The debate surrounding *noken* should not be simplified as a conflict between tradition and modernity. Such a framing risks portraying Indigenous political

practices as inherently backward. The more useful question concerns the conditions under which collective decision-making remains genuinely participatory. Soponyono (2022) shows that the implementation of the *noken* system involves distinctive policy challenges. Utami, Suratman, and Budiono (2020) likewise examine *noken* in relation to political education. The democratic question is whether customary mechanisms enable community members to deliberate and reach legitimate collective decisions or whether authority becomes concentrated in particular individuals. Digital communication could potentially strengthen transparency by enabling communities to document and discuss collective decisions, although digital tools cannot independently resolve questions of customary legitimacy.

Indigenous identity also influences how political messages are received. A policy announcement from Jakarta or a national political party may be interpreted differently from the same message delivered by a trusted local leader. This is why local intermediaries remain important. Research on Indigenous representation suggests that cultural legitimacy can influence the effectiveness of political communication. Ronsumbre, Deliarnoor, and Mulyawan (2020) demonstrate, however, that formal representation does not automatically produce effective public deliberation. Political communication must therefore move in both directions: institutions must communicate with communities, while communities must possess meaningful opportunities to influence institutions. Digital platforms can facilitate this reciprocal process if they are connected to institutional mechanisms for consultation.

The politics of identity can also become polarizing. Digital platforms make it easier to frame political disagreements through “us” and “them” categories. In Papua, such categories may involve Indigenous versus non-Indigenous actors, local versus national government, or competing interpretations of autonomy and political status. Political communication based on rigid identity boundaries can strengthen solidarity among insiders but reduce opportunities for dialogue with outsiders. This is particularly problematic when political opponents are represented as threats to collective identity rather than as legitimate participants in democratic competition. Identity is therefore democratically constructive when it enables recognition without preventing political pluralism.

The experience of anti-racism mobilization demonstrates both possibilities. Pranata, Bainus, and Herdiansah (2022) show that social media became an important channel for communicating grievances concerning racism against Papuan students. The digital articulation of these grievances created opportunities to challenge narratives that might otherwise have remained marginal. From a democratic perspective, the political value of such communication lies in making experiences of discrimination visible. Yet mobilization around identity can become more difficult when the communication environment becomes saturated with competing political narratives. The challenge is to maintain the legitimacy of anti-

discrimination claims without allowing every political disagreement to become framed as an absolute conflict between collective identities.

Language constitutes another important element of Indigenous-centered political communication. Papua contains substantial linguistic diversity, while most formal government communication occurs in Indonesian. Digital communication can potentially accommodate multiple linguistic forms, but dominant platform cultures often privilege nationally or globally dominant languages. If political information is available only in standardized Indonesian, some communities may experience barriers to meaningful participation. An Indigenous-centered communication framework should therefore consider linguistic accessibility as part of political inclusion. Translation, locally meaningful terminology, oral communication, visual storytelling, and community intermediaries can help bridge the distance between formal policy language and local political understanding.

Representation also requires attention to gender and generational differences. Indigenous communities are not politically homogeneous, and customary structures may not always represent younger people, women, or other groups equally. Digital communication can provide these groups with alternative channels through which they can articulate concerns that may receive less attention in traditional institutions. The potential democratizing effect therefore lies not simply in empowering “Indigenous communities” as a collective but in diversifying who can speak within those communities. A democratic communication framework should examine internal power relationships alongside relationships between Indigenous communities and the state.

The strongest implication is that Indigenous identity should be treated as a political communicative resource and a democratic claim to recognition, rather than simply as an electoral category. Digital platforms can strengthen this claim by allowing communities to narrate their own histories, articulate development priorities, document political grievances, and communicate directly with wider publics. Yet the legitimacy of Indigenous-centered communication depends on inclusiveness within Indigenous communities and openness toward democratic disagreement. Andreas (2020), Ronsumbre (2019), Jamal and Mara (2019), and Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020) collectively demonstrate that representation becomes meaningful when communities can participate in defining how they are represented.

From Digital Voice to Democratic Influence: Participation, Institutions, and Political Accountability

The expansion of digital political communication raises a fundamental democratic question: does the ability to speak online translate into the ability to influence political decisions? Evidence from Papua suggests that the answer is conditional. Gomar (2024) finds that social media enabled citizens to communicate policy concerns but had limited influence on government decision-making. This finding

indicates a distinction between communicative participation and institutional participation. Citizens can participate actively in public discourse without becoming part of the processes through which policies are formulated. Democracy requires both. Digital platforms can strengthen the first while leaving the second unchanged. The challenge for Papua is therefore to develop institutional bridges connecting online political expression with formal decision-making.

The distinction is important because political participation is often measured through voting. Research on Papua demonstrates that participation is considerably broader. Putra, Kasimat, and Purwadi (2020) identify direct voting, citizen agreements, and representative mandates as mechanisms of political participation in the 2018 gubernatorial election. This suggests that participation is embedded within social and customary structures. Digital communication should therefore not be evaluated simply according to whether it increases voter turnout. Its broader contribution may lie in facilitating political discussion, monitoring government, organizing community responses, disseminating policy information, and strengthening relationships between representatives and constituents.

The importance of customary participation becomes clearer in relation to *noken*. Ronsumbre (2019) interprets *noken* as a potential expression of deliberative democracy because political decisions can emerge through community deliberation. Critics emphasize the danger that collective voting can conflict with individual political freedom. Persada, Jayus, and Soetijono (2020) demonstrate the legal complexity of this issue, while Mulyani, Nuswanto, and Sukimin (2020) discuss its constitutional implications. These debates suggest that democratic participation should be evaluated through both procedural and substantive criteria. Procedural democracy emphasizes individual voting rights, while substantive democracy asks whether communities possess meaningful opportunities to deliberate and influence collective decisions. Papua illustrates why democratic theory must take cultural context seriously without abandoning protections for individual political rights.

Indigenous representation in formal political institutions offers another mechanism for connecting community participation with government decision-making. Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020) argue that Indigenous representation can support deliberative democracy by creating political spaces for Indigenous interests. Yet Ronsumbre, Deliarnoor, and Mulyawan (2020) find that Indigenous representatives have not always succeeded in creating broad public arenas for deliberation. Representation can therefore become symbolic if citizens lack mechanisms to communicate continuously with representatives. Social media potentially addresses this problem by enabling representatives to provide updates, solicit community opinions, and explain political decisions. The democratic value of digital communication increases when it strengthens accountability between representatives and the communities they claim to represent.

The MRP is especially important in this context because its legitimacy derives partly from cultural representation. Digital communication could enable MRP

members to communicate not only government decisions but also the positions of Indigenous communities to wider publics. Such communication would transform social media from an information channel into a representative mechanism. However, this requires institutional commitment. Representatives must be willing to report political processes, acknowledge disagreement within communities, and explain how community input affects their positions. Without such practices, social media may simply reproduce political publicity rather than accountability.

Political campaigns present a different model of digital participation. Sinurat and Silo (2022) demonstrate the use of social media in the Jayapura regency election. Campaign communication can increase voter access to information and allow candidates to communicate directly with constituents. Yet campaign communication is inherently persuasive. Its democratic value therefore depends on the quality of information provided and the possibility of meaningful comparison among competing candidates. If digital campaigns become dominated by personality, identity, emotional appeals, or misinformation, increased communication may not improve democratic decision-making. Political communication must consequently be evaluated according to informational quality rather than reach alone.

The issue of political information is especially important because Papua's political environment contains contested narratives. Sutomo, Dohamid, and Cempaka Timur (2022) demonstrate that government and other actors compete to frame the Papua issue online. Samad and Indrajit (2022) similarly demonstrate the use of social media analysis to identify propaganda techniques. When political participation depends on information, citizens require opportunities to compare competing claims and assess their credibility. Otherwise, digital participation may become participation within separate information environments. Democratic institutions should therefore promote mechanisms for verification and contextualization rather than merely increasing the amount of political content available online.

Local media can contribute to this process. Although social media enables citizens to communicate directly, professional journalism remains important because journalists can provide verification, context, and investigation. Political communication should therefore not be framed as a simple choice between social media and traditional media. A more productive model involves interaction between community-generated content, professional journalism, civic organizations, and institutional communication. This hybrid structure can provide both immediacy and verification. In Papua, where misinformation can have serious consequences, the presence of trusted local media institutions is particularly important for maintaining a shared informational environment.

Internet access itself must also be considered a democratic resource. The 2019 internet restriction demonstrates that political participation can be affected when communication infrastructure becomes unavailable. Tanda and Hanita (2022) and Prasetyo and Warka (2023) show that internet restrictions raise questions

concerning democratic governance and the rule of law. The issue is particularly important because restrictions can prevent citizens from documenting events, communicating with journalists, coordinating humanitarian assistance, and expressing political opinions. Any restriction of digital communication therefore has democratic consequences that must be evaluated through principles of necessity, proportionality, legality, and accountability.

Digital participation also requires attention to unequal access. Urban residents with smartphones, stable internet connections, and higher levels of digital literacy have greater opportunities to participate than residents in remote areas. This can create a new form of communicative inequality. A government that increasingly relies on digital consultation may unintentionally privilege citizens who are already better connected. An Indigenous-centered democratic communication strategy must therefore combine digital mechanisms with offline channels, customary meetings, local radio, face-to-face consultations, and representative institutions. Digital communication should expand participation rather than become a substitute for other forms of participation.

The role of digital literacy becomes crucial in preventing participation from being captured by misinformation. Syaifuddin, Munajad, and Sari (2024) show that millennials in Sorong were exposed to political content but could filter information through digital literacy capacities. This suggests that democratic resilience is partly a matter of citizen competence. Digital literacy should therefore include not only technical skills but also political literacy, source evaluation, understanding of algorithms, recognition of manipulation, and awareness of the difference between opinion and evidence. In Papua, such literacy should also include sensitivity to Indigenous political contexts and the historical meanings attached to political

Participation is also shaped by trust. Citizens are unlikely to engage constructively with institutions if they believe that communication is merely symbolic or that their opinions will be ignored. Gomar's (2024) finding that social media expression produced limited policy change illustrates this potential problem. If repeated online participation does not produce visible institutional responses, citizens may become skeptical of digital consultation. Government institutions should therefore communicate not only decisions but also the reasons behind decisions and the ways public input was considered. Even when government cannot accept a demand, explaining the decision-making process can strengthen institutional legitimacy.

The same principle applies to political representatives. Indigenous representatives, elected officials, and government institutions should not use social media only during elections. Continuous communication can create accountability between electoral cycles. Representatives can report activities, explain policy positions, respond to criticism, and identify unresolved community problems. Such practices would strengthen the relationship between representation and communication. The goal is not to make politicians permanently available to online

audiences but to create predictable channels through which citizens can communicate concerns and receive substantive responses.

A democratic communication system in Papua therefore requires institutional conversion mechanisms. Digital voice becomes democratic influence when online concerns are systematically connected to public hearings, MRP deliberations, local legislative processes, development planning, electoral oversight, and policy evaluation. Without these mechanisms, social media risks becoming an expressive arena without decision-making consequences. With them, digital communication can strengthen accountability by making community concerns more visible and creating records of institutional responses. Gomar (2024), Ronsumbre and Kartini (2020), and Ronsumbre, Deliarnoor, and Mulyawan (2020) collectively point toward this institutional requirement: participation becomes meaningful when communication is connected to representation and decision-making.

The resulting model can be described as Indigenous-centered hybrid democratic communication. The model does not assume that digital platforms should replace customary or formal political institutions. Instead, it connects four elements: community-based communication, Indigenous representation, digital public discourse, and responsive government. Social media expands visibility; customary institutions provide cultural legitimacy; representative institutions translate community interests into political processes; and government responsiveness determines whether communication produces institutional consequences. This model is particularly relevant to Papua because the region's democratic challenges cannot be resolved through technology alone. They require institutional recognition of cultural diversity and sustained mechanisms for political dialogue.

The central democratic implication is that political participation should be measured by more than the volume of online political activity. A large number of posts, comments, or campaign messages does not necessarily indicate meaningful democratic participation. Participation becomes substantively democratic when citizens can articulate interests, access reliable information, deliberate across differences, communicate with representatives, and influence public decisions. Papua's experience demonstrates why digital communication should be evaluated according to these outcomes. Social media has expanded the possibilities of political expression, but its democratic value ultimately depends on whether political institutions are willing to recognize digital citizens as legitimate participants in public decision-making.

Conclusion

Social media has become an increasingly important component of political communication in Papua because it expands opportunities for communities to articulate political concerns, construct Indigenous self-representation, organize collective responses, and communicate beyond geographical boundaries.

Nevertheless, the evidence demonstrates that digital visibility does not automatically produce political influence. Gomar (2024) shows that social media can amplify public aspirations while producing only limited changes in government policy, while Sinurat and Silo (2022) demonstrate its growing importance within electoral communication. The central finding is therefore that social media should be understood as an additional public arena rather than an autonomous engine of democratization. Its effectiveness depends on the institutional willingness of government and political representatives to receive, interpret, and respond to citizen communication.

The study further demonstrates that political communication in Papua must be understood through Indigenous identity and culturally specific forms of participation. Research on MRP representation, deliberative democracy, political rights, and the noken system demonstrates that democratic participation in Papua cannot simply reproduce models developed for other political contexts (Jamal and Mara 2019; Ronsumbre 2019; Ronsumbre and Kartini 2020; Yunus and Anas 2021). Digital platforms can strengthen Indigenous self-representation, but they can also intensify identity competition, misinformation, and political polarization. An Indigenous-centered communication framework therefore needs to combine digital accessibility with linguistic diversity, customary legitimacy, representative accountability, political literacy, and protection of individual political rights. The objective should not be to privilege either digital or customary participation, but to construct institutional relationships in which both can contribute to democratic decision-making.

Future research should move beyond content-based analysis toward empirical studies of how digital communication actually affects political behavior and policy outcomes in different Papuan communities. Comparative research could examine Jayapura, highland areas, border communities, and the newer Papuan provinces to identify how infrastructure, customary institutions, language, and political history shape digital participation. Further studies should investigate how MRP members, local governments, Indigenous organizations, youth, women, journalists, and community leaders use social media to negotiate political claims. Research should also examine whether online deliberation can be institutionally connected to Musrenbang, MRP processes, local legislative consultations, electoral oversight, and policy evaluation. Such research would enable the development of a more precise model of Indigenous-centered digital democracy in which technological innovation supports, rather than displaces, Papua's cultural institutions and political rights.

References

- Andreas, Rino. 2020. "Politik Identitas Papua dalam Iklan Telkomsel." *Calathu: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 2 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.37715/calathu.v2i1.1255>.

- Gomar, Michael Rooney. 2024. "Analyzing the Influence of Social Media Posts on Government Policy Adoption in Papua City." *Eduvest: Journal of Universal Studies* 4 (3): 925–939. <https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v4i3.1071>.
- Jamal, Ode, and Senalince Mara. 2019. "Politik Kewargaan Multikulturalisme: Studi Kasus tentang Peran Majelis Rakyat Papua dalam Memperjuangkan Kepentingan Masyarakat Adat Papua Era Otonomi Khusus." *Jurnal Politik Pemerintahan* 2 (2).
- Korwa, Rycho. 2013. "Proses Integrasi Irian Barat ke dalam NKRI." *Politico: Jurnal Ilmu Politik* 2 (1).
- Muksin, Dafrin, Siti Khikmatul Rizqi, and Ahmad Rizali Pawane. 2022. "Political Clientalism in the Regional Head Election (RHE) Noken System in Jayawijaya Regency, Papua Province." *PERSPEKTIF* 11 (4): 1250–1259. <https://doi.org/10.31289/perspektif.v11i4.6503>.
- Mulyani, Tri, Albertus Heru Nuswanto, and Sukimin. 2020. "Sistem Noken di Provinsi Papua: Studi Putusan MK No. 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009." *Jurnal Ius Constituendum* 5 (1). <https://doi.org/10.26623/jic.v5i1.2133>.
- Persada, Achbar Madya, Jayus, and Iwan Rachmad Soetijono. 2020. "Sistem Noken dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah di Papua (Studi Putusan Mahkamah Konstitusi Nomor: 35/Php.Bup-XVI/2018)." *Interdisciplinary Journal on Law, Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2). <https://doi.org/10.19184/ijl.v1i2.22179>. Idj Jurnal
- Pranata, Firman Widya, Arry Bainus, and Ari Ganjar Herdiansah. 2022. "Propaganda Aliansi Mahasiswa Papua (AMP) melalui Media Sosial pada Kerusuhan Demonstrasi Anti Rasis Tahun 2019." *Aliansi: Jurnal Politik, Keamanan dan Hubungan Internasional* 1 (2).
- Prasetyo, Adi, and Made Warka. 2023. "Tindakan Pemutusan Akses Internet oleh Pemerintah dalam Perspektif Negara Hukum yang Demokratis." *Yustisi* 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.32832/yustisi.v10i2.14733>.
- Putra, Imam Radianto Anwar Setia, William Socrates Kasimat, and Purwadi. 2020. "Partisipasi Politik Masyarakat dalam Agenda Pemilihan Gubernur Papua Tahun 2018." *Jurnal Bina Praja* 12: 113–123. <https://doi.org/10.21787/jbp.12.2020.113-123>.
- Ronsumbre, Nelwan, and Dede Sri Kartini. 2020. "Perwakilan Masyarakat Adat di Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Papua: Dinamika dan Relevansi Pembentukan dengan Penguatan Demokrasi Deliberatif." *Moderat: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pemerintahan* 6 (2). <https://doi.org/10.25157/moderat.v6i2.3400>.
- Ronsumbre, Nelwan, Nandang Alamsah Deliarnoor, and Rahman Mulyawan. 2020. "Eksistensi dan Kinerja Legislatif dari Unsur Perwakilan Wilayah Adat dalam Perspektif Demokrasi Deliberatif di Papua." *Moderat: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pemerintahan* 6 (1).

- Ronsumbre, Nelwan. 2019. "Sistem Noken Papua: Manifestasi Demokrasi Berbasis Kearifan Lokal." *Sospol: Jurnal Sosial Politik* 5 (2): 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.22219/sospol.v5i2.7388>.
- Samad, M. Yusuf, and Richardus Eko Indrajit. 2022. "The Implementation of a Social Media Analytics Tool 'Social Bearing' to Comprehend Foreign Propaganda Related to Papuan Separatist Issues." *Jurnal Pertahanan* 8 (1).
- Sinaga, Melpayanty, and Yakobus Murafer. 2020. "Analisa Partisipasi Politik Masyarakat pada Pemilihan Umum 2019 di Distrik Muara Tami Perbatasan RI-PNG." *Jurnal Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Papua*.
- Sinurat, Sunggul, and Akbar Silo. 2022. "Implementasi Kebijakan Kampanye melalui Media Sosial pada Pemilihan Umum Kepala Daerah Kabupaten Jayapura Tahun 2017." *Jurnal Kebijakan Publik* 6 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31957/jkp.v6i1.2795>.
- Soponyono, S. 2022. "Implementasi Kebijakan Pemilihan Kepala Daerah dengan Sistem Noken di Papua." *Jurnal Ekologi Birokrasi* 10 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.31957/jeb.v10i1.2205>.
- Suryawan, I Ngurah. 2011. "'Komin Tipu Komin': Elit Lokal dalam Dinamika Otonomi Khusus dan Pemekaran Daerah di Papua." *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik*. <https://doi.org/10.22146/jsp.11390>.
- Sutan, Arissy Jorgi, and Titin Purwaningsih. 2022. "Using Social Media to Support the Special Autonomous Region of Papua's Continuity Program." *Journal of Governance*.
- Sutomo, Muhammad, Ahmad G. Dohamid, and Fauzia Gustarina Cempaka Timur. 2022. "Strategi Pemerintah Indonesia dalam Menghadapi Pembungkai Informasi Isu Papua Tahun 2021." *Nusantara: Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* 9 (6): 2149–2158. <https://doi.org/10.31604/jips.v9i6.2022.2149-2158>.
- Syaifuddin, Efa Rubawati, Aliza Nur Fitria Munajad, and Meilina Puspita Sari. 2024. "Persepsi Generasi Milenial Kota Sorong terhadap Isu Politisasi Agama di Media Sosial." *Jurnal Media dan Komunikasi* 5 (1): 98–109. <https://doi.org/10.20473/medkom.v5i1.64325>.
- Tanda, DK Nena, and Margaretha Hanita. 2022. "Analisis Pengambilan Kebijakan Perlambatan Internet pada Konflik Papua Tahun 2019." *Syntax Literate: Jurnal Ilmiah Indonesia* 7 (4).
- Utami, Nofi Sri, Suratman, and Arief Budiono. 2020. "Upaya Pembangunan Pendidikan Politik melalui Pemilihan bagi Masyarakat Papua: Studi Penerapan Penggunaan Noken dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah." *Media Keadilan: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 11 (2).
- Yunus, Ahsan, and Andi Muhammad Aswin Anas. 2021. "Implementasi Kebijakan Afirmatif Action terhadap Pemenuhan Hak Politik Masyarakat Adat." *Papua Law Journal* 5 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31957/plj.v5i2.2397>.

Acknowledgment

None

Funding Information

None

Conflicting Interest Statement

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

Publishing Ethical and Originality Statement

All authors declared that this work is original and has never been published in any form and in any media, nor is it under consideration for publication in any journal, and all sources cited in this work refer to the basic standards of scientific citation.

Generative AI Statement

N/A