

Technological Mediation, Democratic Participation, and Trust: Implications for Governance and the Case of Albania

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Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted implications of technological mediation for democratic participation and public trust in governance institutions. Drawing on political theory, science and technology studies (STS), and empirical evidence from post-communist transition states, the article argues that digital technologies simultaneously expand participatory opportunity and introduce new risks of exclusion, manipulation, and legitimacy erosion. It develops a tripartite analytical framework—access, agency, and accountability—to evaluate the democratic quality of technology-mediated governance. Albania is deployed as a primary illustrative case, offering a vivid portrait of the tensions between rapid e-government expansion and persisting deficits of civic trust, institutional capacity, and digital equity. Written as a conceptual and illustrative case study analysing secondary data, the article draws on data from INSTAT, the European Commission, and Freedom House, among others, and concludes with policy recommendations oriented toward inclusive digital democracy. Its purpose is to generate theoretical and policy insights rather than establish causal relationships.

Keywords: e-governance, digital democracy, institutional trust, Albania, civic technology, participatory governance

Introduction

The relationship between technology and democracy has long been a subject of scholarly debate. From the printing press to radio broadcasting, each era of communications technology has been greeted with competing prophecies: some herald a new dawn of informed citizenry and deliberative governance; others warn of manipulation, surveillance, and the erosion of public reason. The contemporary moment is no different. Digital technologies—encompassing the internet, social media platforms, e-government portals, algorithmic decision-making systems, and artificial intelligence—are reshaping the architecture of democratic life at a pace and scale that is genuinely novel.

Technological mediation refers to the ways in which technologies intervene in, and thereby transform, the relationships between citizens, information, and political institutions (Jasanoff, 2016; Winner, 1980). It is not merely instrumental: technologies do not simply carry democratic content from one place to another unchanged. Rather, as Feenberg (2019) argues, they embody particular values, assumptions, and power relations that structure what kinds of participation are possible, who can participate, and on what terms. To ask about the implications of technological mediation for democracy is therefore to ask a deeply political question about the distribution of power, voice, and accountability in contemporary societies.

This question has particular salience in countries navigating the simultaneously challenging terrain of democratic consolidation and digital transformation. Albania offers a compelling case study: a small Southeastern European country that has undertaken ambitious e-government and digital transformation reforms as part of its accession process toward European Union (EU) membership, while continuing to grapple with significant challenges of institutional trust, civic disengagement, and the legacies of communist-era authoritarianism. The Albanian case illuminates in concentrated form the tensions that technological mediation introduces across a wide range of democratic settings.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the methodology and theoretical framework, drawing on political theory, STS, and democratic theory to develop a tripartite model of technological mediation's effects on democratic participation and trust. Section 3 examines the mechanisms by which technology can enhance democratic participation, with particular attention to e-government and digital civic engagement. Section 4 turns to the risks and pathologies that technology can introduce—including digital exclusion, platform-mediated misinformation, and surveillance—and their consequences for trust. Section 5 presents Albania as a detailed illustrative case. Section 6 offers a synthetic discussion and policy recommendations. Section 7 concludes.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework: Mediation, Participation, and Trust

Methodological considerations

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach combined with conceptual policy analysis to explore how technological mediation influences democratic participation and public trust in governance institutions. Albania serves as the illustrative case because it is simultaneously undergoing democratic consolidation, public administration reform, and rapid digital transformation, making it a relevant context for examining the opportunities and challenges of technology-mediated governance.

The analysis is structured around a three-dimensional analytical framework consisting of access, agency, and accountability. Access refers to citizens' ability to use digital governance platforms and obtain information; agency concerns their capacity to participate meaningfully in democratic and governance processes through digital technologies; and accountability examines how technological systems affect transparency, responsiveness, and democratic oversight.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data and documentary analysis, drawing on official statistics from INSTAT, European Commission reports, assessments by international organizations (including the World Bank, OECD, SIGMA, ITU, Transparency International, Freedom House, and OSCE), academic literature, and comparative international case studies. The use of diverse sources enables triangulation and strengthens the reliability of findings.

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted, with evidence coded according to the three analytical dimensions. The analysis focused on identifying mechanisms through which digital technologies facilitate participation, risks related to exclusion, misinformation, surveillance, and algorithmic governance, factors shaping institutional trust, and the specific opportunities and challenges associated with Albania's digital transformation agenda.

The study has some limitations. It is based solely on secondary sources and does not include original survey or interview data. Its purpose is to generate theoretical and policy insights rather than establish causal relationships. Furthermore, because Albania is used as an illustrative case, findings should not be generalized automatically to other contexts. Nevertheless, the case offers valuable insights into the broader challenges faced by countries undergoing simultaneous digital and democratic transitions. From an ethical perspective, the research relies entirely on publicly available documents, official statistics, and published studies. No human participants were involved, and no personal data were collected.

Technological Mediation and Democratic Theory

Democratic theory has traditionally foregrounded ideals of popular sovereignty, equal political voice, deliberation, and accountability (Dahl, 1971; Habermas, 1996). These ideals presuppose citizens who are adequately informed, capable of forming and expressing political preferences, and embedded in institutions that are responsive and transparent. Technological mediation affects each of these preconditions in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The concept of technologymediated trust highlights that digital intermediaries themselves become new, hardtoassess objects of trust (Bodó, 2020).

Winner's (1980) foundational argument that "artifacts have politics" remains highly relevant in contemporary digital governance debates. However, recent scholarship has extended this insight by examining how algorithmic systems, digital platforms, and data infrastructures actively mediate relationships between citizens and public institutions. For example, Kudina and Verbeek (2018) argue that digital technologies should be understood not merely as tools but as co-constitutive elements of democratic practice, shaping how citizens perceive public authority and exercise political agency. Similarly, Hofmann (2019) conceptualises democracy and digital media as mutually evolving systems, suggesting that technological change does not simply affect democratic institutions from the outside but becomes embedded within democratic processes themselves. These contemporary contributions move beyond earlier debates concerning whether technologies are politically neutral and instead focus on how digital infrastructures reconfigure participation, legitimacy, and trust. They therefore provide an important bridge between classical STS perspectives and current discussions of digital governance.

A Tripartite Framework: Access, Agency, and Accountability

Building on these theoretical resources, this article proposes a tripartite analytical framework for evaluating technological mediation's implications for democratic participation and trust.

The first dimension is access. Democratic participation requires that citizens can reach the political information, services, and channels through which they exercise voice. Technological mediation transforms access conditions, potentially expanding reach through digital channels while simultaneously excluding those without reliable internet connectivity, digital literacy, or suitable devices (van Dijk, 2020). The digital divide is not merely a technical problem of infrastructure; it is a political problem of unequal voice. When digital platforms become the primary or exclusive channel for political participation—voting, consultation, service access, complaint resolution—those on the wrong side of the divide are

structurally disenfranchised. Digital platforms do not just transmit information; they reconfigure how trust is produced between citizens, institutions, and intermediaries (Ramos, 2025; Bodó, 2020).

The second dimension is agency. Access is a necessary but insufficient condition for meaningful participation. Agency refers to citizens' capacity to act deliberately and effectively as political subjects: to understand their rights, interpret information, form preferences, and engage in consequential ways with governance processes. Technological mediation may enhance agency by providing information, reducing transaction costs, and creating new participatory venues. But it can also undermine agency: algorithmic curation of political information creates filter bubbles that distort citizens' understanding of the political world (Pariser, 2011); complex digital interfaces may be technically accessible but practically unintelligible; surveillance technologies may chill political expression and association. Recent studies of mediated democracy suggest that the relationship between technology and democratic agency is more reciprocal than earlier technological determinist accounts implied. Hofmann (2019) argues that democratic norms and communication technologies evolve together, while Kudina and Verbeek (2018) demonstrate how digital systems influence citizens' practical experience of autonomy and participation. Empirical research from Albania by Xhafka et al. (2024) similarly shows that digital government reforms can increase administrative accessibility without necessarily increasing citizens' perceived influence over decision-making. Together, these studies reinforce the distinction between access and agency developed in this article: expanding access to digital services does not automatically create meaningful democratic participation.

The third dimension is accountability. Democratic governance requires that those who exercise power can be held to account by those over whom power is exercised. Technology can strengthen accountability by making governmental data and decision-making more transparent (open data, freedom of information portals), enabling more effective monitoring by civil society and media, and reducing opportunities for corrupt discretionary behaviour through automated processing. Conversely, opaque algorithmic decision-making can remove accountability from human actors while vesting consequential power in technical systems whose logic is inaccessible to citizens and officials alike (Danaher, 2016). Surveillance technologies may also flip the accountability relationship, enabling governments to monitor citizens rather than citizens to monitor governments.

Trust in Governance: Conceptual Clarifications

Trust is both a cause and a consequence of effective democratic participation. Levi and Stoker (2000) distinguish between trust in specific politicians and institutions (particularised trust) and diffuse trust in the political system as a whole (generalised trust). Both forms matter for democratic health, but they are

driven by different factors: the former by evaluations of specific performance and integrity; the latter by perceptions of systemic fairness, procedural justice, and the alignment of institutional practice with democratic norms.

Technological mediation affects trust through several pathways. First, service quality: when e-government platforms deliver services reliably, quickly, and transparently, they can build performance-based trust in public institutions. Second, perceived integrity: when digital systems are seen as reducing corruption and discretionary behaviour, they can enhance integrity-based trust. Third, procedural fairness: when digital participation channels are genuinely responsive and inclusive, they can foster trust grounded in perceptions of fair process. Fourth, epistemic conditions: when digital media ecosystems are saturated with misinformation and disinformation, they corrode the shared epistemic foundation on which democratic trust depends.

Opportunities: Technology as an Enabler of Democratic Participation

E-Government and Administrative Efficiency

The most extensively documented contribution of digital technology to governance is in the domain of public services. E-government—the use of digital technologies to deliver public services and enable administrative processes—has demonstrably improved service access, reduced processing times, lowered costs, and increased transparency in a range of country contexts (World Bank, 2016; OECD, 2020). These efficiency gains can build trust by improving citizens’ direct experience of the state as a competent and responsive service provider.

Beyond efficiency, e-government platforms can reduce opportunities for corruption by limiting the discretionary human interactions in which informal payments are solicited and extracting rent-seeking from bureaucratic processes (Bussell, 2012). In contexts where corruption has been a principal driver of institutional distrust—as in many post-communist states—this is a potentially significant contribution to democratic consolidation. The digitization of business registration, tax administration, customs, and public procurement has been associated with improved perceptions of government integrity in a range of reform contexts (Transparency International, 2022).

Digital Participation and Civic Engagement

Beyond service delivery, digital technologies have been deployed to support more active forms of democratic participation. Participatory budgeting platforms—pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and subsequently adopted in cities across

Europe and beyond—use digital tools to enable citizens to propose and vote on local budget allocations (Sintomer et al., 2016). Open consultation portals allow citizens to comment on proposed legislation and regulations. Citizen petition platforms aggregate citizen voices to initiate legislative debate. These tools represent genuine extensions of the democratic participatory repertoire, enabling forms of engagement that were previously logistically impractical at scale.

Social media platforms have also demonstrated capacity to mobilize collective political action, most dramatically in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2012, but also in more routine democratic contexts. More recent research suggests a need to temper earlier optimism regarding the democratic potential of digital platforms. While studies such as Howard and Hussain (2013) highlighted the mobilisation capacity of social media, contemporary analyses emphasise that participation facilitated by digital platforms is often fragmented, unequal, and vulnerable to commercial and algorithmic incentives. Ramos (2025), for example, demonstrates that digital platforms can strengthen trust and coordination within communities while simultaneously weakening trust in external institutions. This finding suggests that digital participation may generate social capital without necessarily strengthening democratic legitimacy, an important distinction for evaluating governance outcomes.

Open Data and Transparency

Open data initiatives—the systematic publication of government data in machine-readable, freely accessible formats—represent another important channel through which technology can strengthen democratic accountability. By enabling journalists, researchers, civil society organisations, and ordinary citizens to access and analyse public data on spending, procurement, performance, and policy outcomes, open data initiatives can strengthen the informational foundations of democratic scrutiny (Davies et al., 2019). Statistical offices play a crucial role in this ecosystem: high-quality, accessible official statistics are a precondition for informed public debate and evidence-based accountability.

The potential of open data for accountability has been demonstrated in a range of contexts. Investigative journalists have used government spending data to expose procurement irregularities; researchers have used administrative data to evaluate policy effectiveness; civil society organisations have used open contracting data to monitor infrastructure projects. These applications represent the democratic rationalization of data infrastructure—the redeployment of governmental data resources toward citizen-oriented accountability purposes.

Risks and Pathologies: Technology as a Threat to Democratic Participation and Trust

The Digital Divide and Structural Exclusion

The optimistic account of technology as a democratising force must be tempered by attention to the digital divide: the persistent inequalities in access to, and effective use of, digital technologies that map closely onto existing dimensions of social inequality (van Dijk, 2020). Rural populations, older adults, lower-income households, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities are consistently less likely to have reliable internet access, appropriate digital devices, and the skills to use digital platforms effectively. When governance processes migrate to digital channels, these populations face structural exclusion from participation.

The digital divide operates at multiple levels: material access (infrastructure, devices, affordability), skills and literacy, and the social norms and networks that shape digital engagement. Bridging the divide requires attention to all three levels, not merely the provision of infrastructure. Universal broadband is a necessary but insufficient condition for digital inclusion; it must be accompanied by sustained investment in digital skills development, accessible design of public platforms, and maintenance of non-digital participation channels for those who cannot or choose not to use digital technologies.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Epistemic Degradation

One of the most widely documented pathologies of digital media ecosystems is the proliferation of misinformation—false or misleading information circulated without malicious intent—and disinformation—false information deliberately created and disseminated to deceive (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Both phenomena are amplified by the structural features of social media platforms: algorithmic amplification of emotionally engaging content (which tends to be sensational and polarising rather than accurate); low barriers to publication; limited gatekeeping; and the velocity of information circulation that outpaces fact-checking.

The democratic consequences of epistemic degradation are severe. Democratic deliberation requires that citizens share a sufficient factual common ground to reason together about collective choices. When the information environment is saturated with false claims about electoral processes, public health, economic conditions, or the performance of public institutions, this common ground disintegrates. Citizens are unable to hold their governments accountable for

policies and outcomes they cannot accurately perceive. Trust in institutions—including the media organisations whose role is to provide reliable information—is corroded. Political polarisation intensifies as different communities inhabit radically different informational worlds.

Surveillance, Chilling Effects, and Authoritarian Capture

Digital technologies also create unprecedented capabilities for surveillance—both governmental surveillance of citizens and corporate surveillance of users. Mass surveillance capabilities, when deployed by governments with weak rule-of-law protections and strong incumbency advantages, create chilling effects on political expression, association, and opposition activity (Lyon, 2015). Even in democratic contexts, the awareness of being monitored alters behaviour: citizens may self-censor political speech, avoid association with controversial groups, and refrain from legitimate political activity that might attract governmental scrutiny.

The risk of authoritarian capture of digital governance infrastructure is particularly acute in fragile democracies and hybrid regimes. When e-government platforms are used to extend administrative control rather than empower citizens; when open data initiatives are deployed selectively to present a flattering governmental image rather than enable genuine accountability; when digital participation channels are managed to simulate consultation while excluding meaningful input—the democratic promise of digital technology is inverted. Technology becomes an instrument of regime legitimisation rather than popular empowerment.

Algorithmic Governance and the Accountability Gap

As governmental decision-making is increasingly automated—from benefits assessment to risk scoring in criminal justice to resource allocation in public services—a new form of accountability gap emerges (Danaher, 2016; Pasquale, 2015). Algorithmic systems make consequential decisions affecting citizens' lives according to logic that is typically opaque to the citizens affected, the officials nominally responsible, and often to external scrutiners. Traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability—parliamentary oversight, judicial review, freedom of information—are poorly adapted to scrutinise algorithmic decision-making, whose complexity and dynamism exceed the capabilities of conventional oversight processes.

This accountability gap is not merely technical; it is political. As Pasquale (2015) argues, the 'black box society' is one in which power is exercised through opacity, and citizens are systematically denied the informational resources they would need to contest decisions that affect them. For trust, this opacity is corrosive: citizens

cannot trust what they cannot understand or scrutinise. The democratic response to algorithmic governance requires not only technical solutions (explainability, auditing requirements) but institutional innovations that can translate technical complexity into accessible public accountability.

The Albanian Case: Digital Transformation, Participation, and Trust

Historical and Political Context

Albania presents a particularly instructive case for examining the relationship between technological mediation and democratic governance. Following the collapse of communism in 1991, Albania underwent a turbulent transition characterised by institutional fragility, widespread corruption, recurring political crises, significant emigration, and persisting legacies of the Hoxha regime's extreme isolationism and surveillance apparatus. The pyramid scheme collapse of 1997, which triggered a brief civil unrest, exemplified the fragility of institutional trust in the early transition period. Two decades of democratic consolidation have achieved significant progress—Albania became a NATO member in 2009 and received EU candidate status in 2014—but challenges of corruption, judicial independence, and civic disengagement remain significant (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Albania's commitment to digital transformation is striking. The government has made e-government a central pillar of public administration reform, partly driven by EU accession conditionality and partly by a genuine recognition that digital reform offers a path to break with legacy patterns of corruption and inefficiency. The e-Albania portal, launched in 2013 and progressively expanded, provides access to hundreds of government services online. Albania's eAlbania portal has digitized a large share of services, improving efficiency, accessibility, transparency, and reported citizen satisfaction, and is framed as a basis for stronger trust and more participatory governance. Albania has adopted open data policies, developed e-procurement systems, and piloted digital identity solutions. These initiatives have attracted international recognition, including a United Nations Public Service Award in 2019.

Recent Albanian scholarship provides a more nuanced assessment of these achievements. Xhafka et al. (2024) find that digitalisation has improved citizens' access to public services and increased administrative efficiency, particularly through the expansion of e-Albania. However, their analysis also suggests that gains in service accessibility have not been matched by equivalent advances in participatory governance. Similarly, Syziu and Botusha (2025) identify persistent digital literacy gaps that limit the inclusiveness of digital public services, while

Sinoimeri et al. (2025) highlight continuing territorial disparities between urban and rural areas. Together, these studies support the argument advanced here that technological mediation may improve access while leaving deeper challenges of agency and accountability unresolved.

Statistical Governance: INSTAT and the Role of Official Statistics

TABLE 1: Albania’s Digital Transformation at a Glance

• E-Albania portal: 1,600+ services digitized as of 2024 • Internet penetration: ~79% of population (ITU, 2023) • Mobile broadband subscriptions: ~115 per 100 inhabitants (ITU, 2023) • Fixed broadband penetration: ~30% (significantly lower in rural areas) • EU e-Government Benchmark: Albania outperforms several EU Member States on service digitization • Digital skills deficit: ~42% of adults lack basic digital skills (Eurostat comparable measure, INSTAT 2023) • Trust in government: 35% express trust in national government (Eurobarometer Regional 2023)

The Institute of Statistics of Albania (INSTAT) occupies a critical position in the informational ecosystem of Albanian democracy. As the national authority responsible for producing, maintaining, and disseminating official statistics, INSTAT’s outputs provide the empirical foundation for public policy debate, legislative accountability, and civil society monitoring. The quality, accessibility, and use of official statistics are therefore not merely technical matters but deeply political ones: accurate, timely, and accessible statistics are a precondition for the kind of evidence-based democratic accountability that technological mediation can either enable or undermine.

In recent years, INSTAT has undertaken significant modernisation efforts, developing a comprehensive statistical portal, expanding open data availability, and improving the accessibility of key datasets on demographics, economic conditions, living standards, and social indicators. These reforms reflect a broader commitment to statistical transparency that aligns with EU accession requirements and international best practice under the European Statistics Code of Practice. However, the democratic value of these improvements depends critically on whether citizens, media, civil society, and policymakers are able to access, understand, and use the data INSTAT produces.

Here a significant gap emerges between the technical quality of statistical outputs and their awareness and uptake among intended users. Surveys and assessments consistently suggest that public awareness of official statistical products remains limited; media coverage of statistical releases is sparse and often technically unsophisticated; civil society capacity to engage with quantitative data is constrained by limited analytical resources. This gap—between technical quality and democratic uptake—exemplifies a broader challenge in technology-

mediated governance: the supply of information does not automatically generate the demand, capability, or institutional channels needed to translate it into democratic accountability.

Digital Participation: Promise and Limitation

Albania's e-government expansion has produced measurable improvements in service delivery. Processing times for administrative services have fallen; corruption in routine service interactions—historically a significant public grievance—appears to have declined in some sectors; citizen satisfaction with digitized services is generally higher than with non-digitized equivalents (SIGMA, 2022). These improvements are not negligible: they represent real gains in the quality of citizens' everyday interactions with the state.

However, the transition from e-service delivery to e-participation—from using digital channels to receive services to using them to exercise democratic voice—has been considerably more limited. Public consultation portals exist but are rarely used; when consultations occur, responses are often formulaic and the links between citizen input and policy outcomes opaque. Participatory budgeting and other deliberative innovations remain experimental and small-scale. The institutional culture of many Albanian public bodies continues to privilege top-down communication over genuine dialogue with citizens. Digital platforms have expanded the channels through which governmental information is disseminated, but have not yet substantially altered the underlying power dynamics of citizen-state relations. The findings of recent Albanian studies reinforce this interpretation. While Xhafka et al. (2024) document measurable improvements in digital service provision, they also note that citizen engagement remains largely transactional rather than deliberative. Syziu and Botusha (2025) similarly argue that digital transformation has progressed more rapidly in administrative functions than in mechanisms designed to facilitate citizen participation. These findings mirror broader international research suggesting that governments often succeed in digitising services before developing institutions capable of supporting meaningful digital democracy.

The Albanian media and social media environment also presents challenges for democratic digital participation. Social media use is high—Albania has one of the highest rates of social media penetration in the Western Balkans—but is characterised by significant political polarisation, disinformation, and the near-complete alignment of major media outlets with political or business interests (OSCE, 2023). The social media environment is not primarily a space for deliberative democratic engagement but a contested battlefield for political narratives, where misinformation circulates freely and the institutional credibility of authoritative sources—including official statistics—is routinely challenged.

Broader media and datagovernance debates in Albania link alignment with EU standards to the quality of the democratic information environment (Budini, 2025).

Digital Inequality and Exclusion in Albania

Albania's digital transformation has proceeded against a backdrop of significant and persistent digital inequality. Internet penetration is substantially lower in rural areas than in urban centres: INSTAT's Household ICT Survey consistently shows gaps of 20-30 percentage points between Tirana and rural regions such as the northeast and southeast of the country. Older adults, people with lower levels of education, and women in rural areas are significantly less likely to have internet access or digital skills. Given that rural and less-educated populations are often those most dependent on public services and most affected by governmental decisions on agriculture, infrastructure, and social welfare, their exclusion from digital participation channels is a serious democratic deficit.

This digital divide maps onto broader socioeconomic inequalities. Albania has experienced rapid urbanisation and significant internal migration from rural to urban areas, driven partly by the collapse of agricultural employment and uneven regional development. Those who remain in peripheral rural areas are disproportionately older, less educated, and less digitally connected. The risk is that digital transformation of governance reinforces rather than corrects these inequalities: those already best-positioned to navigate institutional processes gain additional advantages through digital channels, while those with greatest need are structurally excluded from the efficiency and transparency gains that digitisation promises.

Trust, Legitimacy, and the Digital State in Albania

Public trust in Albanian state institutions has historically been low and remains a significant challenge. According to the 2023 Eurobarometer Regional Survey, only 35% of Albanian respondents expressed trust in the national government—a figure that, while somewhat higher than the Western Balkans average, remains well below the EU average of 41% and significantly below the trust levels seen in consolidated democracies in Northern Europe. Trust in the judiciary is even lower, at approximately 25%. Corruption perceptions remain high: Albania scores 37 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023), placing it in the lower half of global rankings and significantly below EU average.

In this context, digital transformation carries both promise and risk for trust. On the promising side: the reduction in discretionary human interactions enabled

by digitization—particularly in services where informal payments have historically been expected—has the potential to improve perceptions of government integrity. The increased transparency of public procurement through e-procurement platforms provides at least a channel through which civil society and media can monitor public spending. The improved accessibility of official statistics through INSTAT’s digital portal creates the informational conditions for more evidence-based public accountability.

On the risk side: if digital transformation is perceived as serving incumbent political interests—streamlining services in visible ways while leaving deeper problems of corruption, judicial capture, and political interference intact—it may reinforce cynicism rather than build trust. The EU accession process, which has been the primary driver of Albanian governance reforms including digital transformation, generates a distinctive form of legitimacy risk: when reforms are driven by external conditionality rather than domestic political demand, they may lack the popular ownership needed to generate sustainable trust. Citizens who have not participated in defining the digital governance agenda are unlikely to trust its products.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the trust-building potential of digital governance depends on whether digital channels become genuinely two-way: not just vehicles for governmental communication and service delivery, but responsive, accountable spaces in which citizen voices are heard and consequential. The evidence from Albania, as from many other digital transformation contexts, is that this transition from e-government to digital democracy remains unfinished. The architecture of digital participation has been laid; the political will and institutional capacity to populate it with genuine democratic life is still developing.

TABLE 2: Key Tensions in Albania’s Digital Democracy

• Service efficiency gains vs. limited progress in participatory governance • High social media use vs. low deliberative quality of online political discourse • Growing INSTAT data quality and availability vs. limited public uptake and media capacity • Urban digital advancement vs. rural digital exclusion • External reform drivers (EU accession) vs. domestic ownership and civic demand • Formal consultation mechanisms vs. meaningful citizen influence on policy • Anti-corruption potential of digitization vs. risks of surveillance and administrative control
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Discussion: Policy Implications and Recommendations

Rethinking the Access-Agency-Accountability Framework

The Albanian case—and the broader theoretical framework developed in this article—suggests that the democratic implications of technological mediation cannot be reduced to questions of infrastructure and service delivery. The tripartite framework of access, agency, and accountability provides a more comprehensive basis for evaluation and policy design. Governments and development partners investing in digital governance must attend to all three dimensions simultaneously: ensuring that digital channels are accessible to all, that citizens have the agency to use them meaningfully, and that they enable rather than obstruct democratic accountability.

Policy in this domain too often privileges the access dimension—internet infrastructure, platform development, device provision—while neglecting agency and accountability. Digital skills investment, accessible design, maintenance of non-digital alternatives, and the creation of genuinely responsive participation channels deserve at least equal attention. The evidence from Albania and comparable contexts suggests that service digitisation without a corresponding investment in civic capacity and institutional responsiveness produces efficiency gains that do not translate into democratic deepening.

Strengthening democratic use of statistics and data

One of the most significant and underappreciated implications of technology-mediated governance for democratic participation concerns the role of official statistics and quantitative information in public deliberation. If statistical offices like INSTAT are to fulfil their democratic function—providing the informational infrastructure for evidence-based accountability—their outputs must not only be technically excellent but genuinely accessible and actively used by media, civil society, policymakers, and citizens.

The Albanian case demonstrates that improvements in statistical production and open-data availability do not automatically translate into stronger democratic accountability. While INSTAT has expanded access to official statistics and digital dissemination tools, public awareness and effective use of these resources remain limited. This suggests that the principal challenge is no longer data availability but data utilisation. Policy interventions should therefore focus on strengthening the intermediary actors that translate statistical information into public knowledge. Priority should be given to expanding data journalism training,

establishing partnerships between INSTAT and universities, supporting civil society organisations working with public data, and developing user-friendly data visualisation tools tailored to non-specialist audiences.

Rather than evaluating success solely through the number of datasets published, Albanian institutions should monitor indicators such as media citations of official statistics, public engagement with statistical portals, and the use of statistical evidence in policy consultations and parliamentary debates.

Addressing Digital exclusion as a Democratic Priority

The evidence from Albania indicates that digital inequality remains concentrated among rural residents, older adults, and individuals with lower levels of education. As public services increasingly migrate to the e-Albania platform, these groups face a heightened risk of exclusion from both service delivery and democratic participation. Policy responses should therefore move beyond national-level connectivity targets and focus on territorially targeted interventions. Priority should be given to municipalities in the northeast and southeast regions where digital access and skills deficits remain most pronounced. Mobile digital support units, community-based digital learning centres, and municipal digital mediators could provide practical assistance to citizens who struggle to navigate online systems.

Importantly, the complete replacement of face-to-face administrative channels should be avoided until digital inclusion gaps have substantially narrowed. Maintaining alternative access channels is not merely a service delivery issue but a democratic safeguard against exclusion.

Improving the quality of Digital Public Sphere

A central finding of the Albanian case is the contrast between extensive digital connectivity and relatively weak democratic deliberation. High levels of social media engagement have not translated into stronger civic dialogue, while misinformation and politically aligned media continue to undermine trust in public institutions. Policy efforts should focus on strengthening the quality of the digital information ecosystem rather than simply expanding access to digital platforms. This includes supporting independent journalism, integrating media and information literacy into secondary education curricula, expanding fact-checking initiatives, and enhancing the communication capacity of trusted public institutions such as INSTAT. Because public trust depends partly on the credibility of information sources, strengthening institutional transparency and communication should be treated as a core component of democratic resilience rather than as a public relations function.

From Service Digitalisation toward Participative Digital Governance

Perhaps the most significant finding of the Albanian case is that digital transformation has primarily improved administrative efficiency rather than democratic participation. The expansion of e-Albania has strengthened service delivery, but digital channels have not yet become meaningful mechanisms through which citizens can influence public decision-making. Future reforms should therefore prioritise the development of participatory digital governance tools. Public consultation platforms should incorporate clear feedback mechanisms showing how citizen contributions influence final decisions. Municipal governments should be encouraged to pilot digital participatory budgeting initiatives and online deliberative forums linked directly to local policy processes.

Furthermore, indicators used to evaluate digital governance reforms should extend beyond measures such as numbers of services digitised or platform users. They should include measures of citizen engagement, responsiveness to public input, and perceived influence over decision-making processes. Without such a shift, Albania risks achieving digital government without achieving digital democracy.

Conclusion

Technological mediation is not destiny. Digital technologies neither inevitably advance nor inevitably threaten democratic participation and trust. Their democratic implications depend on how they are designed, deployed, governed, and contested. The tripartite framework developed in this article—access, agency, and accountability—provides a conceptual basis for moving beyond both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism toward a more nuanced and politically grounded analysis of technology's democratic potential.

Albania illustrates the stakes of this analysis with particular clarity. A country that has made digital transformation central to its governance reform agenda, while continuing to grapple with significant deficits of civic trust, digital inequality, and institutional capacity, demonstrates both the promise and the limitations of technological mediation for democratic deepening. The promise is real: e-government has improved services, reduced some opportunities for corruption, and expanded the informational resources available for accountability. The limitations are equally real: digital participation remains thin, digital inequality persists, epistemic conditions are challenging, and the gap between technical improvement and democratic uptake is significant.

Closing this gap requires sustained investment in the full range of conditions for democratic digital governance: infrastructure and inclusion, skills and agency, responsiveness and accountability. It requires particular attention to institutions—like INSTAT—whose role is to provide the informational infrastructure of democratic life, and whose democratic value depends not only on technical excellence but on the capacity to communicate, engage, and be understood. And it requires the political courage to treat digital transformation not as an administrative modernisation project but as a democratic project—one in which citizens are not merely users of improved services, but active participants in shaping the digital society in which they live.

Recent empirical research further supports this conclusion. Studies conducted in Albania and comparable contexts increasingly suggest that the principal challenge is no longer whether governments can digitise services but whether digital transformation can be translated into meaningful democratic engagement and institutional trust. Contemporary scholarship therefore complements rather than replaces foundational democratic theory: the questions identified by Dahl, Habermas, and Winner regarding voice, legitimacy, and accountability remain central, but they now unfold within technologically mediated environments that introduce new opportunities and constraints.

The implications of technological mediation for democratic participation and trust are ultimately inseparable from the broader question of what kind of democracy we want to build and for whom. Technology can serve that democracy—if we choose to design and govern it accordingly.

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