

# Is Online Sentiment a Reflection of Public Opinion? Research on Innovative Mechanisms for Public Policy Formulation in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** The formulation and implementation of public policies face increasing public scrutiny and protest. This phenomenon stems partly from the widespread adoption of internet technology, which amplifies citizens' opportunities to voice opinions, and partly from heightened civic awareness, driving strong public engagement in policies affecting personal interests. Consequently, traditional public policy mechanisms struggle to meet digital-age demands, making innovation imperative. This paper contends that online sentiment represents a certain measure of public opinion and should be incorporated into the scope of consideration for public policy formulation. However, attention must also be paid to the irrationality and potential distortion inherent in online sentiment expression. In light of this, this paper proposes a "Recognition-Transformation" framework to convert online sentiment into credible public opinion information (D-information). This D-information should then be integrated with leadership/bureaucratic hierarchical information (A-information), expert consultation information (B-information), and commissioned social survey information (C-information) to form a "Four-Source Information Synergy" model, serving as the information base for public policy formulation. Concurrently, by establishing an open, interactive system for public policy formulation and implementation, alongside a "monitoring-consultation-adjustment" policy-making procedure, an innovative mechanism for public policy formulation suited to the digital age is constructed.

**Keywords:** Public Policy; Digital Era; Innovative Mechanism; Public Interest; Online Sentiment

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## 1.Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

In recent years, with the proliferation of internet technology and heightened public awareness of social governance participation, tensions between public policy and public demands have become increasingly apparent. Public policy formulation and implementation frequently provoke strong public sentiment. For instance, in November 2025, the newly revised Public Security Administration Punishment Law<sup>[a]</sup>, stipulating that "records of violations of public security

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[a] China's newly revised Public Security Administration Punishment Law shall formally take effect on 1 January 2026. Article 136 stipulates: Records of violations against public security administration shall be sealed and shall not be provided or disclosed to any

management penalties, including drug use, shall be sealed,” provoked intense public sentiment, even evolving into broader public questioning of privilege and fairness. Similarly, in the same month, the Sichuan Provincial Department of Education’s policy to comprehensively implement the “Spring and Autumn Holiday System for Primary and Secondary Schools<sup>[b]</sup>” across the province similarly triggered parental emotions, sparking a wave of online public opinion. This demonstrates that conflicts between public policy and public demands have become a significant and unavoidable issue in digital-age social governance. The reasons for this are twofold: on the one hand, digital platforms have become crucial spaces for citizens to express their interests and disseminate their views (Zhang Yan, 2022). On the other hand, traditional public policy formulation mechanisms face structural challenges in absorbing and integrating public opinions, leading to diminished credibility and increased implementation resistance (Zhang Xiangdong, 2007). Against this backdrop, this paper poses the core questions: Can online sentiment serve as an effective representation of public opinion? How can governments incorporate online sentiment into public policy formulation through institutional innovation to enhance the scientific rigour, rationality, and effectiveness of policy-making?

## 1.2 Research Significance

Theoretically, this study seeks to introduce “online sentiment” as a novel influencing variable within public policy-making mechanisms. This aims to broaden perspectives on public policy information input mechanisms and innovate the logic and procedural mechanisms of public policy formulation. Practically, by constructing public policy-making mechanisms adapted to the digital network era, it provides theoretical foundations for government departments to mitigate public policy conflicts and enhance social governance efficacy.

## 1.3 Research Methodology and Structural Arrangement

This study employs a combined approach of theoretical analysis and mechanism design. It first traces the theoretical lineage of public policy and public interest, then critiques the inherent limitations of traditional public policy formulation mechanisms, before proposing a modern public policy formulation mechanism and framework that integrates online sentiment. The paper is structured into four sections as follows: Section One presents the research question; Section Two elaborates on the theoretical foundations of public policy, public interest, and public policy formulation; Section Three proposes a modern public policy formulation mechanism adapted to the digital network era; Section Four summarises research findings and offers recommendations.

# 2. Public Policy, Public Interest, and the Mechanisms of Public Policy Formulation

## 2.1 The Nature of Public Policy and the Multidimensionality of Public Interest

Traditional perspectives view public policy as collective action undertaken by government to achieve the singular, objective goal of public interest. Contemporary theory, however, tends to regard the essence of public policy as the authoritative allocation of societal values by government (Easton, 1965). Here, “values” encompass all matters cherished by society’s members, including power, wealth, services, and opportunities. Consequently, the process of formulating and implementing public policy is inherently political, with outcomes reflecting the competition and compromise between diverse interests and values.

The closely associated concept of ‘public interest’ likewise transcends classical, totalitarian understandings (such as

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organisation or individual. Exceptions apply where relevant state organs require access for case handling purposes, or where organisations conduct inquiries in accordance with national regulations. Entities conducting lawful inquiries shall maintain confidentiality regarding sealed records.

[b] On 5 November 2025, the Sichuan Provincial Department of Education and 10 other departments jointly issued a notice implementing a spring and autumn break system for primary and secondary schools across the province. The policy stipulates that spring and autumn breaks shall generally be scheduled around the mid-term periods of the spring and autumn semesters (i.e., April–May and October–November), with each break typically lasting three days. Spring and autumn breaks shall be coordinated by municipal (prefectural) authorities, with flexible arrangements tailored to regional circumstances. These breaks may be combined with statutory holidays, weekends, and seasonal excursions. Rural areas may align them with local farming seasons, while ethnic regions may coordinate them with local holidays.

Rousseau's 'general will'), exhibiting multidimensional, dynamic and constructed characteristics.<sup>1</sup> The interplay of consequentialism and proceduralism. One perspective holds that public interest manifests in specific outcomes that maximise overall social welfare (utilitarianism). Another emphasises that public interest resides within fair, open, and inclusive decision-making procedures; provided the process is legitimate, its outcome acquires public interest legitimacy (Rawls, 1971; Habermas, 1996). 2. The perspectives of pluralism and corporatism. Pluralism views the public interest as the equilibrium achieved through free competition among countless interest groups in the political marketplace (Dahl, 1961). Corporatism, however, emphasises that the public interest is a consensus formed through state-led integration of major functional interest groups (such as trade unions and chambers of commerce) into institutional frameworks for deliberation (Schmitter, 1974). 3. Reconstruction of the Network Society. The rise of the internet has profoundly altered the form of the public sphere. The "decentralisation" and "fragmentation" of interest expression channels have enabled diffuse individual interests and sentiments—previously filtered or obscured by organised channels—to manifest on a massive scale and in real time (Castells, 2008). This has resulted in the composition of public interest no longer being confined to traditional dimensions such as class or industry. Instead, it revolves around the aggregation of specific events and communities of shared sentiment, becoming exceptionally complex, fluid, and contentious (Fang Dejiu, 2025). Public interest is no longer a static entity to be discovered, but rather a dynamic process continuously constructed and defined through the interaction of diverse discourses, particularly online discourse.

## 2.2 Information Input Mechanisms in Public Policy Formulation and Their Systematic Biases

The scientific rigour, rationality, and effectiveness of public policy formulation fundamentally depend on the quality of its information inputs. Traditional closed or semi-closed mechanisms for public policy formulation and implementation typically rely on three primary information channels, each inherently embedded with specific systemic biases.

*Table1: Information Input Mechanisms and Systemic Biases in Traditional Public Policy Formulation*

Information Input Channel	Operational Logic and Theoretical Assumptions	Inherent Flaws and Systemic Biases
A. Internal Research by Leadership/Bureaucratic Hierarchy	Based on Weberian rational bureaucratic models, it presupposes that information can be accurately transmitted bottom-up through the bureaucratic hierarchy, with decision-makers grasping the overall situation through reports and inspections.	Information distortion and filtering: Hierarchical reporting tends to simplify information, present selective narratives, and foster collusion of interests (reporting successes while concealing failures), creating "visual isolation" (Wilson, 1989). Surveys often devolve into "staged inspections" with small sample sizes, struggling to uncover genuine, acute frontline conflicts.
B. Expert Consultation and Technical Rationality	Rooted in technocracy or expert governance, this approach presupposes that societal problems can be optimally resolved through specialised knowledge and instrumental rationality.	Technical Rationality and Value Blind Spots: Expert knowledge is often confined to specific domains, hindering cross-system value balancing (e.g., economic efficiency versus social equity, development versus environmental protection). Experts may develop "intellectual arrogance" through alliances with particular interests or detachment from public daily life, causing their rational recommendations to clash with public emotional perceptions and fundamental values (Fisher, 1990).
C. Commissioned Social Surveys	Based on positivist social science, this approach employs standardised sampling and questionnaire surveys to scientifically capture public opinion distribution in quantitative form.	Static and superficial: Surveys entail high costs, lengthy cycles, and lagging results, rendering them incapable of responding to sudden public issues. Standardised questionnaire designs may fail to capture the complex, nuanced genuine sentiments of the populace or their latent, unexpressed demands. Their pursuit lies in statistical representativeness rather than profound understanding at the emotional and value levels.

Consequently, while traditional information input mechanisms may prove effective in relatively stable social environments, their closed nature, lagging responsiveness, and filtering tendencies inevitably prove inadequate when confronted with the diverse, immediate, and emotionally charged expressions of public sentiment in the digital network era. Should government departments rely solely on these channels, they will inevitably become trapped within an information silo. Consequently, the

public policies formulated therein may align with bureaucratic or technical rationality, yet they will lack social sensitivity and responsiveness due to their failure to adequately incorporate and recognise public sentiment. This constitutes the structural root cause of the implementation resistance encountered by many current public policies.

### **2.3 Online Sentiment as a Manifestation of Public Opinion: Theoretical Controversy, Dual Attributes, and Identification Frameworks**

The emergence of online sentiment poses a fundamental challenge to traditional conceptions of public opinion and the information foundations of public policy formulation. Online sentiment refers to the emotional inclinations, attitudes, and collective moods expressed en masse by netizens through text, images, symbols, and other mediums during the formulation and implementation of public policies. Regarding whether online sentiment should be incorporated into the scope of public policy formulation, two distinct viewpoints exist.

Supporters contend that online sentiment represents a revolutionary manifestation of public opinion in the digital age. 1. Scale and directness. Online sentiment provides unprecedented volumes of raw, behavioural public opinion data, transcending the sample limitations of traditional surveys. It captures the voices of silent and emerging groups, constituting a “direct pulse of democracy” (Katz et al., 2013). 2. Immediacy and early warning capability. Sentiment shifts function as societal sensors, mapping public reactions to policy in real time and furnishing governments with valuable early warning signals and feedback windows for adjustment (González-Bailón & Paltoglou, 2015). 3. Shaping the Public Agenda. Powerful online sentiment can bypass traditional media and bureaucratic agenda-setting mechanisms, propelling marginal issues directly into the public eye and reshaping policy discussion priorities, thereby genuinely embodying the agency of public opinion (Wang Yichun, 2010).

Critics, however, sharply contend that online sentiment carries significant risks of distortion as a representation of public opinion. 1. Participation bias and non-representativeness. Active online users do not constitute a cross-section of the entire population, exhibiting structural biases in age, geography, educational background, and other dimensions. Those expressing sentiment are often stakeholders or individuals with extreme views, potentially leading to the neglect of the “silent majority”. 2. Polarisation and distortion. Homogeneous social media circles and algorithmic recommendation systems readily foster the “echo chamber effect” and group polarisation, drowning rational discourse in extreme sentiment (Sunstein, 2017). Commercial interests and online troll armies may also manipulate public sentiment, fabricating false waves of public opinion. 3. Fragmentation and Irrationality. Online sentiment frequently manifests in fragmented, hashtag-driven, and satirical forms, lacking systematic expression and rational argumentation. This may divert attention from substantive issues, complicating public policy analysis.

Naturally, simplistically endorsing or rejecting online sentiment is unwise. The crux lies in how institutional design can transform online sentiment from noise into meaningful signals. This involves a “recognition-transformation” framework for online sentiment. At the identification level (what it is), leveraging technologies such as big data sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and social network analysis enables not only the detection of the intensity of netizens’ emotions (attention levels) but also the discernment of their depth (core demands), purity (authentic public sentiment versus manipulated outcomes), and group structure (emotional distribution across different interest groups) (Wang Xiwei, Zhuang Huixing et al., 2024). For instance, one must distinguish between cathartic anger and grievances rooted in specific injustices; discern whether complaints stem from localised group dissatisfaction or reflect broader societal anxieties. At the implementation level (actionable steps), the identified valid public sentiment information should be systematically integrated into the policy-making process. This includes establishing a system for analysing and reporting online public opinion to serve as supplementary material for public policy drafts; introducing selected representatives from diverse online communities holding differing emotional stances during public policy consultation phases; and incorporating online sentiment monitoring as a key indicator for post-implementation evaluation and dynamic adjustment of public policies.

In summary, as the digital network era advances, it is imperative to incorporate online sentiment into the scope of consideration for public policy formulation and implementation. Concurrently, attention must be paid to the dual characteristics of online sentiment, which simultaneously serves as an expression of public opinion while carrying risks of distortion. While it cannot wholly replace traditional public opinion, it undoubtedly constitutes an indispensable and dynamic

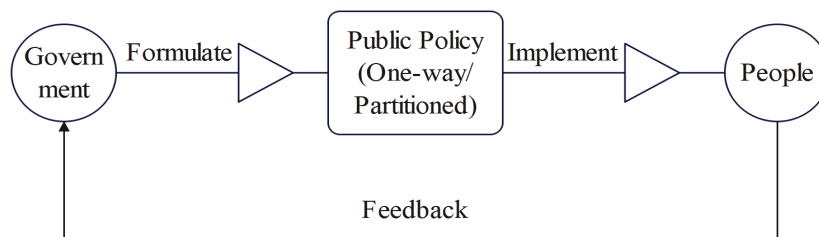
component of contemporary public sentiment. The modernisation of public policy formulation mechanisms does not hinge on whether online sentiment is considered, but rather on the ability to establish a refined, prudent, and institutionalised process for critically assimilating and rationally transforming such sentiment. This enables the formulation of policies that better serve the public interest amidst the cacophony of the digital age.

### 3.Modern Public Policy-Making Mechanisms in the Digital Network Era

Having systematically analysed the inherent flaws of traditional public policy-making mechanisms and their profound tension with public sentiment, this chapter proposes a constructive alternative. It argues that an effective mechanism for public policy-making in the digital network era requires not piecemeal, patchwork revisions to traditional processes, but a profound logical restructuring—a transformation of the public policy-making system itself. This entails evolving from a mechanistic execution system based on unidirectional information flow and limited feedback into an ecosystem grounded in pluralistic information and bidirectional coupling. The core logic of this innovative mechanism lies in institutionally designing the systematic and critical integration of vast, dynamic, and unstructured data—including network sentiment—into the entire process of public policy formulation and implementation. This establishes a new dynamic equilibrium between value rationality and instrumental rationality, as well as democratic participation and decision-making efficiency.

#### 3.1 Paradigm Shift: From “Closed-Linear” to “Open-Cyclical”.

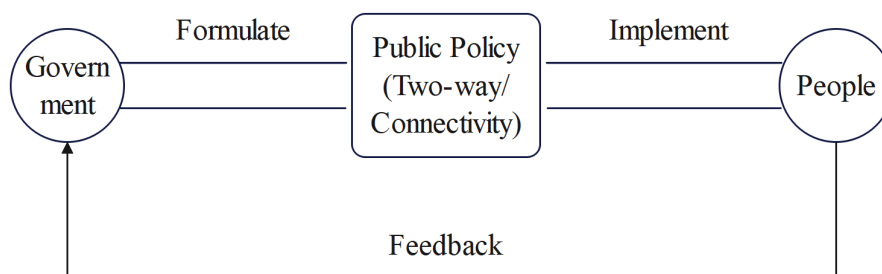
*Figure 1: Traditional Public Policy Formulation and Implementation Model*



Traditional public policy formulation and implementation followed an engineering paradigm approximating a “closed-linear” model (as illustrated in Figure 1). Within this paradigm, the government occupies a central position as the sole engineer, with public policy proposals regarded as optimal solutions derived under finite constraints. Citizens are presupposed as passive recipients and subjects of these proposals, possessing narrow, delayed, and easily filtered feedback channels. The system thus exhibits pronounced “unidirectional/disconnected” characteristics. This paradigm often functions effectively in contexts characterised by information scarcity, high social homogeneity, and weak public social awareness. However, its inherent closed nature renders it incapable of addressing the challenges posed by the information explosion and the highly heterogeneous nature of interest demands in the digital network era.

To adapt to the digital age, public policy-making bodies must transition towards an ‘open-loop’ ecological paradigm (as illustrated in Figure 2). Within this paradigm, public policy formulation is conceptualised as a continuously interactive ecosystem comprising multiple stakeholders including government, citizens, social organisations, market institutions, and media.

*Figure 2 Modern Public Policy Formulation and Implementation Model*



Public policy ceases to be a pre-designed blueprint, instead emerging as a collective choice forged through multi-stakeholder interaction, capable of continuous optimisation in response to environmental feedback. Consequently, the government’s role



evolves from a singular decision-making centre to that of an ecosystem platform builder, an enforcer of interaction rules, a facilitator of public dialogue, and an ultimate accountability bearer. Its core function lies in ensuring low-cost, high-fidelity, institutionalised “two-way/connected” and cyclical flow of information (including public opinion) within the system, thereby enhancing the adaptability and resilience of the entire public policy ecosystem.

### **3.2 Core Architecture: The “Four-Source Information Synergy” Model for Institutionally Integrating Online Public Sentiment**

The implementation of this new paradigm relies upon an institutionalised framework capable of synthesising diverse information streams, particularly one that rationally processes online sentiment. This paper proposes a “four-source information synergy” model for information integration. Building upon the optimisation of traditional three information sources (A. Leadership/bureaucratic hierarchical information, B. Expert knowledge information, C. Commissioned social survey information), it elevates a fourth source—D. Online sentiment and public opinion information—to an institutionally equal status. It further establishes complementary, verification, and synergistic mechanisms among these four sources.

Specifically, the institutional integration of online sentiment and public opinion information constitutes the key innovation of this model, operating through three progressive tiers. 1. Systematic Perception and Collection. Government departments must establish a cross-platform, full-cycle system for perceiving online social sentiment. This transcends simple public opinion monitoring, requiring the systematic collection of textual, visual, and interactive data from social media, forums, government message boards, and even comment sections on short-video platforms. The aim is to capture diverse, raw public sentiment and opinion patterns, avoiding information distortion caused by platform selection bias. 2. In-depth Analysis and Rational Identification. Confronted with vast volumes of unstructured sentiment data, multi-tiered analytical techniques must be employed to achieve the transformation from “data to information to knowledge”. This encompasses: firstly, identifying intensity and momentum – analysing the public discourse’s fervour and emotional intensity surrounding specific issues; secondly, distinguishing focal points from broader trends – utilising natural language processing and topic modelling to cluster specific public policy demands from the flood of sentiment, while analysing the distribution structure of these demands across different social groups; Thirdly, uncovering underlying structures by integrating socio-economic data to explore structural and institutional causes behind emotional outbursts (such as perceived lack of fairness or unstable expectations). This process aims to filter noise, identify rational elements, and transform emotional expressions into factual and value-based propositions suitable for public policy debate. 3. Institutionalised Input and Procedural Response. Analytical findings must be embedded within the public policy formulation process as statutory procedures, presented in standardised formats such as public opinion reports. Concurrently, these reports should be submitted alongside expert assessments and investigative reports for deliberation by decision-making bodies at critical junctures: public policy agenda setting, proposal drafting, risk assessment, and post-implementation evaluation. More crucially, establishing procedural response mechanisms requires that when public policy drafts are released, they must include annexes or dedicated sections providing public responses, explanations, or clarifications to the mainstream concerns and reasonable queries distilled from online public opinion. This action transforms the incorporation of public opinion from an optional, flexible gesture into a rigid, visible procedural responsibility.

Simultaneously, synergistic mechanisms among the four information sources prove crucial. Firstly, Source A and Source D should cross-validate bureaucratic hierarchical information. Secondly, Source B must be cross-referenced with the public value preferences revealed by Source D to bridge the gap between technical rationality and everyday rationality. Thirdly, the precision of Source C provides a calibration benchmark for representational biases in Source D. Thus, through mutual collision and checks and balances, the four information sources achieve full expression of all stakeholders’ interests, ensuring public policies maximally reflect the public good.

### **3.3 Process Reengineering: Establishing a Dynamic Closed-Loop System of “Monitoring-Consultation-Adaptation”**

Based on the model of synergistic four-source information, modern public policy formulation and implementation should be restructured into a dynamic closed-loop process of “monitoring-consultation-adaptation,” forming a cyclical system for public

policy iteration.

First, at the front end of the process: issue identification and risk early warning. Leveraging the real-time nature of D-source information, an early warning system for social risks and public concerns should be established. During the problem definition stage of public policy, the aggregation of online public sentiment itself can serve as a crucial source for agenda setting, ensuring that the public policy agenda remains in sync with the pulse of society.

Secondly, the mid-stage of the process: open consultation and co-construction of legitimacy. A tiered consultation mechanism is introduced during the formulation of public policy proposals. For public issues requiring strong expertise and presenting minimal controversy, public opinion may be gathered through means such as publishing policy infographics and soliciting online feedback. Conversely, for major livelihood concerns or highly contentious public issues, a formal consultation mechanism should be activated. This could involve leveraging digital technology to conduct large-scale online deliberations, simulated voting, and publicly streamed hearings, thereby transforming the consultation process itself into a public forum for building consensus and establishing communicative legitimacy.

Thirdly, the back-end process: implementation feedback and agile adaptation. Following public policy implementation, focus shifts to continuous monitoring of D-source information, enabling real-time assessment of societal acceptance and sentiment feedback. For widespread discomfort or unintended consequences arising during execution, establish agile policy adaptation procedures permitting rapid, minor adjustments to implementation methods, supporting regulations, or technical standards—provided core objectives remain unchanged. Public policy evaluation must also synthesise information from all four sources, particularly analysing the trajectory of online sentiment evolution. This transforms experience into institutional knowledge, completing the learning loop from one-off decision-making to continuous governance.

### 3.4 Potential Challenges and Boundary Constraints

Any institutional innovation must prudently consider its boundaries and risks. The public policy formulation mechanism proposed herein may face three major challenges. Firstly, the representativeness dilemma under the digital divide, wherein the absence of marginalised groups in online discourse may lead to new public policy injustices. The countermeasure lies in combining digital empowerment with traditional channels as a safety net, proactively providing alternative participation pathways for non-internet users. Secondly, the risks of sentiment polarisation and populism. The new mechanism does not equate to populist rule but rather values public input to enhance the scientific rigour of policy formulation, reduce implementation resistance, and improve outcomes. Consequently, the government must act as a rational gatekeeper and value balancer, employing expert analysis and public dialogue to mitigate extreme sentiments while guarding against the “echo chamber effect” and group polarisation (Sunstein, 2017). Thirdly, balancing decision-making costs and efficiency. Governments should establish differentiated participation rules based on policy types, applying high-intensity public engagement for fundamental and distributive policies while adopting streamlined procedures for routine and specialised policies to ensure governance effectiveness (Thomas, 2010).

The essence of modern public policy formulation and implementation mechanisms adapted to the digital network era lies in achieving a logical shift through systematic institutional design: from “government-led, public passive acceptance” to “government-facilitated platforms, multi-stakeholder collaborative governance”. The public policy formulation mechanism in the digital era requires a four-source collaborative model as its information foundation and a dynamic closed-loop process as its operational framework. This transforms the diffuse, noisy sentiments permeating cyberspace into rational proposals that drive public policy formulation. In essence, this represents not merely an upgrade of technological tools, but a profound transformation in the logic of social governance. It constitutes a new form of governance characterised by greater inclusivity, responsiveness, and iterative capacity. This mechanism provides a sustainable pathway for public policies to forge consensus within complex societies and maximise the public interest.

## 4. Conclusion

The advancement of internet technology and heightened public awareness of civic participation have rendered traditional public policy-making paradigms ill-suited to contemporary environments. This is evident in the persistent challenges to public policies and resistance encountered during implementation. Consequently, this paper proposes an innovative mechanism for

modern public policy formulation. Firstly, while incorporating online sentiment as an information source, it acknowledges its irrationality and potential distortions. Thus, it introduces an “identification-transformation” framework to convert online sentiment into effective public opinion. Secondly, it integrates online sentiment with three traditional information sources—internal research from leadership/bureaucratic hierarchies, expert consultations, and data from commissioned social research institutions—to form a four-source collaborative model. This provides diverse and comprehensive input for public policy formulation. Thirdly, by establishing an open public policy formulation system and rigorous procedural mechanisms, it enables the development of scientific, rational, and effective public policies. Undoubtedly, the contemporary mechanisms for formulating and implementing public policy in the digital age fundamentally reflect a transformative shift in governance paradigms, wherein governments must integrate public sentiment and opinions into the fabric of social governance.

For public policy-making bodies, it is imperative to set aside preconceptions about online sentiment and refrain from outright dismissing citizens’ emotional expressions. Whilst public policy cannot possibly satisfy every individual, widespread online questioning of such policies indicates inherent flaws in the formulation process. Indeed, harnessing online sentiment to promptly identify public interests and demands can significantly enhance the scientific rigour, rationality, and effectiveness of public policy formulation, ultimately improving the efficacy of policy implementation.

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