

Reflexivity Under Constraint: Police Case Reports and the Limits of Responsive Governance in China

Yanqing Chen¹, Hao Zu²

¹ Corresponding author. PhD student, College of Humanities, China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing, China. Email: chenyanqing2022@163.com.

² Associate Professor and Guangming School of Journalism and Communication, China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing, China.

Fund Project: The article is sponsored by China University of Political Science and Law 2025 Annual Scientific Research Innovation Youth Project "Research on the Mechanism Transformation of the Communication Ecology of Judicial Guiding Cases from the Perspective of Mediatized Governance" (Project No.:25KYQN025).

Abstract: This article examines how police case reports have become part of legitimacy production in the digital age. Drawing on all 770 case-specific reports issued by Shanghai public security organs on Weibo between 2011 and 2025, it argues that law-enforcement legitimacy now depends not only on formal legality but also on procedural visibility, interpretive intelligibility, public responsiveness, and negotiated reception. Police case reports function as institutionalised mechanisms of public explanation, yet this communicative opening remains constrained. Rather than producing stable responsive legality, it entangles legal legitimacy with trust, affect, and communicative acceptance.

Keywords: police case reports; law-enforcement legitimacy; mediatized governance; responsive law; digital governance; China

Introduction

Police bulletins are a crucial site where the mediatized construction of law-enforcement legitimacy can be observed in contemporary China. Public authority increasingly depends not only on decision, but also on public explanation, especially in highly visible and socially contentious incidents. In this sense, public communication is no longer a secondary matter of information release.^[1] It has

^[1] Bergquist, M., Ljungberg, J., Remneland, B., & Rolandsson, B. (2017). From e-Government to e-Governance:

become one of the principal sites at which institutional authority is rendered visible, interpreted, contested, and, where possible, recognised.

This broader transformation is especially visible in the case of police case reports (*Jingqing Tongbao*).^[2] In high-profile incidents, law-enforcement agencies do not secure public acceptance through enforcement alone. They must also explain, display, and justify enforcement through institutionalised communication. Whether law-enforcement action is regarded as legitimate therefore depends not only on legal authorisation, procedural compliance, or substantive outcome, but also on how it is publicly presented and received. Police case reports have become a particularly important site in this process. Although they appear to be routine instruments of disclosure, police case reports also translate state action into publicly observable accounts of legality, order, and justification.

Police case reports emerged within the broader development of police transparency and government information disclosure in China. Existing studies have shown that they are expected to inform the public, dispel rumours, stabilise expectations, and enhance police credibility.^[3] Yet the communicative conditions under which they operate have changed significantly. With the rise of Weibo, WeChat official accounts, and other digital platforms as primary channels of official communication, police case reports are no longer simply post hoc statements issued after an incident. They circulate within an interactive and highly visible media environment in which official accounts, news organisations, and ordinary users continuously observe and respond to one another. As a result, they have become part of an unfolding communicative process rather than a discrete act of disclosure. Initial reports are often followed by supplementary releases, clarifications, or further explanations as public controversy develops. In this setting, the report does not merely announce a law-enforcement decision; it mediates the terms on which that decision is understood.

This shift is not merely technical. Research on mediatized governance has shown that media do not function as neutral channels for transmitting governance practices.^[4] Rather, they reshape the conditions under which governance is perceived, contested, and sustained. Once law-enforcement communication is embedded in a digital media environment, legitimacy can no longer rest exclusively on formal legality or organisational authority. It must also be rendered visible, intelligible, and responsive. In one sense, this development creates new possibilities. It narrows the space for

Social media and public authorities legitimacy work. *Proceedings of the 25th European Conference on Information Systems*, 858–872.

^[2] State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2019). *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on the Open Government Information* (promulgated 17 January 2007, revised 4 April 2019). National People's Congress Standing Committee. (2012). *People's Police Law of the People's Republic of China* (adopted 28 February 1995, amended 29 October 2012). Xi, J. (2022, October 16). *Hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and strive in unity to build a modern socialist country in all respects: Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*.

^[3] Li, Y. (2019). The role of police bulletins under new circumstances. *Journal of Sichuan Police College*, (5), 135–139. Meng, Y. (2021). The value, practical dilemmas and innovative paths of public security incident disclosure in the new media era. *Journal of Anhui Vocational College of Police Officers*, (3), 47. Tang, J., & Huang, W. (2025). An analysis and governance of the 'response risk' of social public opinion in public departments: An empirical study based on typical cases of 'police bulletins'. *E-Government*, (3), 76–88.

^[4] Luo, X. (2022). Mediatized governance: Between media logic and governance logic. *Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University*, (5), 1–11. Guo, X., & Zhao, H. (2023). Mediatized governance: Conceptual differentiation, value reshaping and future prospects. *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences)*, (1), 60. Zu, H. (2022). Political mediatization: Basic meanings, key concepts and theoretical framework. *Journal of University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, (9), 92.

opaque handling and one-way official messaging, while encouraging procedural explanation and public engagement. In another sense, however, it introduces new pressures. Legal legitimacy may become entangled with public trust, emotional reception, and communicative performance.^[5] What is accepted as convincing in public communication may not coincide with what is normatively justified in law.^[6] Police case reports make this tension unusually visible. Police case reports should therefore be understood not merely as informational texts, but as an institutionalised form through which public security authorities communicate and justify law-enforcement action.

Existing scholarship speaks to parts of this problem, but not to the problem as a whole. Research on police bulletins and police transparency has addressed their practical functions, textual conventions and role in risk management. Scholarship on digital governance and official online response has shown how state actors use platform-based communication to shape public perception and maintain authority. Legal and socio-legal studies, meanwhile, have long examined why law should be obeyed, how procedural justice supports institutional acceptance, and how responsive law may accommodate social demands.

This article addresses that question by conceptualising police bulletins as a communicative mechanism through which Chinese law-enforcement agencies mediate legitimacy. It asks three related questions. First, how do police bulletins turn law-enforcement action into a publicly intelligible account of justification? Secondly, through what mechanisms does mediatized communication reshape the production of law-enforcement legitimacy, particularly through symbolic display, procedural explanation and iterative response to public concern? Thirdly, why does this communicative opening fall short of a full transition towards responsive rule of law? The article argues that police bulletins contribute to legitimacy-building through three interrelated processes. They visualise institutional authority through standardised form and official symbolism; they produce intelligibility by narrating facts, procedures and disputed issues; and they draw law-enforcement action into a process of response and negotiation as public controversy unfolds. At the same time, they blur the line between legal legitimacy, trust-based support and communicative acceptance. Mediatized communication may therefore weaken purely unilateral and repressive forms of official messaging, whilst still falling short of a stable form of responsive legality.

The research contributes to two conversations. Empirically, it moves police case reports beyond the usual framework of police disclosure or crisis response and shows their role in the communicative construction of law-enforcement legitimacy. Theoretically, it brings research on mediatized governance into conversation with scholarship on legal legitimacy and responsive law. The broader claim is that digital media are not external aids to legality. They increasingly shape how legal authority is presented, interpreted and contested. From this perspective, the key question is not how to maximise responsiveness, but how to understand the shifting balance among legal autonomy, procedural justification, public visibility and institutional response.

^[5] Bogoch, B., & Peleg, A. (2014). Law in the age of media logic. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization of communication* (pp. 443–464). De Gruyter Mouton.

^[6] Sunshine, J., & Tyler, T. R. (2003). The role of procedural justice and legitimacy in shaping public support for policing. *Law & Society Review*, 37(3), 513–547.

1. Methods

1.1 Research Design

This study examines case-specific police bulletins issued by Shanghai public security organs on Weibo.^[7] This design follows a broader line of social media research that treats platform-based inquiry as a sequential process of data collection, preparation, and analysis, and it is consistent with recent studies that use large-scale Weibo data and topic modelling to analyse official communication by Chinese government agencies and police organisations.^[8]

Methodologically, it adopts a three-stage research design consisting of data collection, data cleaning, and topic modelling. The first stage constructs a corpus of relevant Weibo posts through a combination of official-account scraping and keyword-based retrieval. The second stage cleans and filters the raw dataset in order to retain only those posts that fall within the study's operational definition of case-specific police bulletins. The third stage applies Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling to the cleaned corpus in order to identify recurrent thematic structures within the texts.

The purpose of this design is not to reconstruct all forms of Shanghai police communication on social media, but to build, as systematically as possible, a corpus centred on case-specific bulletins and to use that corpus to identify their principal thematic distribution and textual tendencies. In this sense, the method serves an exploratory and descriptive function. It provides an empirical basis for the subsequent analysis of how police bulletins are used to organise case narratives and make law-enforcement action publicly intelligible.

1.2 Data Collection

Data collection proceeded in two stages.

1.2.1 Full Retrieval of Official Accounts

The first stage targeted officially verified Weibo accounts operated by public security organs in Shanghai. Using a Python-based web-scraping programme, the study retrieved all available Weibo posts published by 68 identified official accounts. The collection period extended from the opening date of each account (the earliest is 2011) to 31 December 2025. For each post, the following fields were collected: post content, date and time of publication, issuing account, number of reposts, number of comments, number of likes, and post URL.

The purpose of this stage was to obtain, as comprehensively as possible, the original body of Weibo content produced by the Shanghai public security system. This reduced the risk of omission that would arise from relying on keyword search alone and provided the base dataset from which case-specific bulletins could later be identified.

1.2.2 Supplementary Keyword Retrieval

^[7]Shanghai was selected because its public security authorities have maintained a stable and relatively comprehensive Weibo matrix since they launched the first official police account in 2011. Their police bulletins are comparatively standardised in format, timeliness and informational completeness, which facilitates comparison across accounts and over time. As a highly visible megacity, Shanghai also provides a useful case for examining how police bulletins respond to intensified pressures of legitimacy construction and public communication.

^[8] Guo, D., et al. (2025). Social media and citizen mobilization: How Chinese government agencies use Weibo to advance the 2030 Agenda goals on sustainability. *Public Relations Review*, 51(2), 102579. Luo, Z., & Li, M. (2022). Collecting and analyzing Weibo data: A roadmap for social research. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Stieglitz, S., et al. (2018). Social media analytics – Challenges in topic discovery, data collection, and data preparation. *International Journal of Information Management*, 39, 156–168.

The second stage complemented account-based retrieval through keyword searches on Weibo’s search interface. Three search strings were used: “Shanghai + police bulletin” (Shanghai + jingqing tongbao), “Shanghai + situation bulletin” (Shanghai + qingkuang tongbao), and “Shanghai + case bulletin” (Shanghai + anqing tongbao). All retrievable Weibo posts returned under these search conditions were collected. The temporal range was kept consistent with that of the first stage.

This supplementary stage was introduced in order to reduce the possibility of missing relevant texts. Some case-related bulletins involving Shanghai may not have been first issued by Shanghai-based public security accounts, but may instead have been reposted, cross-posted, or discussed by other accounts. Keyword retrieval therefore functioned as a supplementary mechanism for identifying relevant posts that might not be captured through account-based collection alone.

Across these two stages, the study collected approximately 360,434 raw Weibo posts.

1.3 Data Cleaning

The raw dataset was subjected to several rounds of cleaning and filtering in order to ensure that the final corpus corresponded to the study’s research object. These procedures included the removal of non-bulletin content, irrelevant non-Shanghai materials, non-case-specific bulletins, and duplicate posts concerning the same case. Table 1 summarises the cleaning procedures.

Throughout this process, the study followed a principle of cautious retention and informational completeness. Borderline cases were not removed lightly. Where multiple records concerned the same case, priority was given to the post with fuller substantive content and, where possible, to the version closest to the original police release.

After cleaning, the final corpus consisted of 770 valid case-specific bulletins, with a total text length of approximately 167,747 Chinese characters.

Table 1
Data Cleaning Procedures

Cleaning task	Operational criterion	Example of excluded content	Retention principle
Removing non-bulletin content	Posts not concerning specific incidents or cases were excluded	Holiday greetings, weather alerts, traffic updates, campaign publicity, internal meeting reports, promotional posts on exemplary officers	Only posts falling within the operational definition of case about specific bulletins were retained
Removing irrelevant non-Shanghai	Only posts issued by Shanghai public security organs, or directly related to	Posts issued by public security organs in other jurisdictions with no direct connection to	Priority was given to posts issued by Shanghai public

content	cases involving Shanghai, were retained	Shanghai	security organs
Removing non-case-specific bulletins	General notices not directed towards a specific case, person, or incident were excluded	General public-security updates, city-wide situation summaries, macro-level notices	Only case-specific bulletins were retained
De-duplication of same-case posts	Posts referring to the same case, same party, and same incident were treated as duplicates	Reposts by different accounts, substantively identical texts with minor wording differences, multiple progress bulletins on the same case	Borderline cases were retained cautiously; where duplicates existed, the fuller and more original version was retained

1.4 Data Analysis

After the completion of data cleaning, the study used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling to conduct an unsupervised analysis of the 770 case-specific bulletin texts. The purpose was to identify recurrent thematic structures in the corpus and thereby provide an empirical basis for the subsequent discussion of police bulletins and law-enforcement legitimacy. The analysis is exploratory and descriptive rather than predictive or causal.

1.4.1 Text Pre-processing

The corpus was pre-processed by removing platform-specific markers, segmenting the text with jieba, and filtering out common stop words and high-frequency institutional terms. The purpose of these procedures was to reduce interference from platform-specific expressions and highly repetitive institutional vocabulary, so that the topic model could better capture meaningful content variation across bulletin texts.

1.4.2 Model Training

On the basis of the processed corpus, the study used CountVectorizer to construct a document-term matrix. The model parameters were set as follows: max_df = 0.9, excluding words that appeared in more than 90 per cent of documents; min_df = 5, excluding words that appeared fewer than five times; and max_features = 1500, retaining the 1,500 most frequent terms. Different values of K were then compared with reference to model perplexity, and the number of topics was ultimately set at six.

1.5 Empirical Overview: Narrative Patterns in Police Bulletins

The LDA analysis provides an initial overview of the thematic structure of the Shanghai police bulletin corpus. Beyond the distribution of topics, however, a closer reading of the texts suggests that police bulletins also exhibit a limited number of recurrent narrative patterns. These patterns are analytically important because they indicate that police bulletins do not merely transmit information about cases in a neutral manner.^[9] Rather, they organise facts, responsibility, procedure, and outcome

^[9] Chermak, S., & Weiss, A. (2005). Maintaining legitimacy using external communication strategies: An analysis of police-media relations. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33(5), 501–512. Mazerolle, L., Antrobus, E., Bennett, S., &

in relatively stable ways, thereby shaping how law-enforcement action is made publicly intelligible.^[10] In this respect, the corpus points not only to thematic clustering, but also to recurring modes of narrative construction.

On the basis of the topic-modelling results and a qualitative reading of representative texts, four broad narrative patterns can be identified: the standard enforcement bulletin, the warning-and-education bulletin, the information notice, and the major-case bulletin. These categories should not be understood as mutually exclusive or rigidly bounded. Rather, they capture the principal narrative tendencies through which police bulletins structure case information and present law-enforcement action to the public. Table 2 summarises these four patterns.

Although these narrative patterns differ in structure and emphasis, they share an important feature: each represents a particular way of linking case facts to public interpretation. Some foreground legal classification and procedural closure; others emphasise warning, visibility, or investigative progress. Taken together, they indicate that police bulletins are structured modes of public explanation, and their narrative form is itself part of the process through which law-enforcement legitimacy is presented and negotiated. This point is especially significant in high-profile incidents, where the question is not merely whether information is disclosed, but how enforcement is narratively framed for public reception.

Table 2
Narrative Patterns in Police Bulletins

Narrative pattern	Typical narrative structure	Main characteristics	Indicative legitimacy function
Standard enforcement bulletin	Time of incident + location + party involved + unlawful act + coercive or administrative measure + procedural statement	Presents a clear causal and procedural chain; legal classification is usually explicit; disposal measures are clearly stated	Reinforces procedural propriety and the appearance of lawful, orderly enforcement
Warning-and-education bulletin	Description of unlawful conduct + seriousness of consequences + police warning or reminder	Combines case handling with preventive or educative messaging; often adopts an admonitory tone	Links enforcement to broader claims of social order, prevention, and public guidance
Information notice	Event summary + injury/loss information + immediate police	Fact-centred and relatively cautious; legal classification may	Provides timely disclosure and maintains visibility,

Tyler, T. R. (2013). Shaping citizen perceptions of police legitimacy: A randomized field trial of procedural justice. *Criminology*, 51(1), 33–63.

^[10] Ellis, J. R. (2021). More than a trivial pursuit: Public order policing narratives and the ‘social media test’. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 17(2), 185–207.

	response + matters still under investigation	remain provisional or under-specified	but often with weaker justificatory force
Major-case bulletin	Case background + investigative progress + coercive measures + recovery of assets/losses + procedural notice	Usually longer and more detailed; information is comparatively complete; frequently used for serious or socially salient cases	Maximises intelligibility and strengthens the public defensibility of police action

2. Police Bulletins as an Intermediary Mechanism in the Construction of Law-Enforcement Legitimacy

Police bulletins in China emerged from the broader institutional framework of police affairs openness. In 1999, pursuant to Article 44 of the People's Police Law, the Ministry of Public Security required public security organs to disclose, on a regular or ad hoc basis, information concerning law enforcement, administrative management, public security conditions, and major criminal cases with social impact. In this setting, police bulletins developed as a distinctive form of government information disclosure issued by public security organs exercising coercive powers in both public-order administration and criminal investigation.

Yet police bulletins are not important merely because they disclose information. Their significance lies more fundamentally in the fact that they mediate the relationship between law-enforcement action and public recognition. In the Chinese context, the rule of law is not conceived simply as a matter of internal legal validity. It is also tied to broader expectations of public understanding, participation, supervision, and acceptance. Since the Eighteenth Party Congress in particular, official discourse on law-based governance has placed increasing emphasis not only on the legality of the exercise of public power, but also on its visibility, supervision, and constraint, under the principle that disclosure should be the norm and non-disclosure the exception.^[11] In this respect, police bulletins have come to serve a dual role. From an administrative perspective, they are a means through which public security organs make law-enforcement action publicly visible. From a judicial perspective, they are a means through which law-enforcement action is framed as intelligible, justifiable, and worthy of acceptance.^[12]

This mediating role becomes especially important in high-profile incidents. Under such conditions, law-enforcement action is judged not only in terms of formal legality or institutional authority, but also in terms of whether it is publicly intelligible and defensible. Police bulletins therefore connect state action to public interpretation by

^[11] Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. (2014). Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on several major issues concerning the comprehensive advancement of governing the country according to law. *China Legal Science*, (6), 11.

^[12] He, W., & Zhang, J. (2024). The judicial openness system: Its course of practice, functional assessment, and paths of improvement: An examination based on the annual work reports of the Supreme People's Court. *China Law-Based Governance*, (12), 88.

presenting selected facts, procedural developments, and official reasoning in a form designed to make enforcement appear publicly justifiable. From this perspective, police bulletins operate as a bridge between enforcement and rational public reception. Openness matters not only because it gives effect to rights to know and supervise, but also because it helps create the conditions under which public authorities may expect compliance and recognition.

At the same time, the relationship between police bulletins and legitimacy has not remained constant. It has changed together with the communicative form of bulletins themselves. In their earlier form, police bulletins were largely retrospective and preventative. They often took the shape of newspaper-based summaries reviewing public-security conditions within a particular jurisdiction over a given period and warning the public of potential risks. In 2003, the Wuhan Municipal Public Security Bureau published what is widely regarded as China's first police bulletin through outlets such as the Wuhan Evening News, covering criminal, public-order, traffic, and fire-related incidents. Thereafter, public security organs across the country began to experiment with similar forms of release.

That earlier model of dissemination, however, was limited in ways that are directly relevant to the present argument. Although newspaper publication satisfied the basic requirement of broad disclosure, it left public security organs with substantial control over the timing, content, and form of release, while the public remained largely in the position of a passive recipient. The editorial interventions of news organisations might indirectly perform a supervisory function, but this was not reflected within the bulletin itself. Moreover, once a bulletin had been issued, public security organs depended upon the news media to relay public feedback. Where public doubts were not effectively answered, tensions could arise not only between the police and the public, but also between the police and the media over responsibility for communication and interpretation. In other words, the earlier communicative structure limited the extent to which police bulletins could function as a direct mechanism for negotiating legitimacy in socially salient cases.

The rise of new media altered this structure significantly. Official accounts operated by public security organs at different levels gradually became the principal sites for the production and release of police bulletins. Their communicative form also changed. Rather than serving mainly as retrospective summaries or warning notices, police bulletins increasingly came to present the facts of individual cases, investigative progress, evidentiary information, disputed issues, and case outcomes in much greater detail. By relying on their own channels of publication, public security organs moved from a two-step mode of mediated dissemination to a one-step mode of direct communication. This shift compressed the hierarchy of information transmission, but it also changed the work that police bulletins were expected to perform. In high-profile incidents especially, bulletins now had to do more than disclose. They had to explain, reassure, respond, and, to some extent, persuade.

It is under these conditions that police bulletins became a particularly important intermediary mechanism in the construction of law-enforcement legitimacy. Through their own channels, public security organs are now able not only to issue initial statements, but also to provide supplementary explanations, respond to controversy in real time, and maintain a continuing communicative presence as events unfold. Public participation, feedback, and the ongoing negotiation of satisfaction thus become much

more directly entangled with the public presentation of law-enforcement action. At the same time, this development also places new demands on the public's role in informed supervision, as participation in digitally mediated scrutiny increasingly shapes the conditions under which police authority is recognised, questioned, or withheld. It is for this reason that police bulletins in high-profile incidents should be understood not merely as instruments of disclosure, but as a central site at which law-enforcement legitimacy is publicly mediated, negotiated, and contested.

The following sections build on this account by examining three interrelated processes through which police bulletins participate in the construction of law-enforcement legitimacy in high-profile incidents: the publicity-oriented construction of enforcement, the continuing negotiation of public satisfaction, and the new demands placed upon informed supervision.

3. The Publicity-Oriented Construction of Law-Enforcement Legitimacy and Its Limits

Conventionally understood, law-enforcement legitimacy derives from clear legal authorisation, procedural compliance, and the fairness or reasonableness of outcomes. In this sense, legitimacy appears as an internal attribute grounded in legal norms. In the age of new media, however, police bulletins have made law-enforcement legitimacy increasingly dependent upon a hybrid configuration in which law and communication are closely intertwined. In high-profile incidents especially, legitimacy is no longer secured solely through legal justification in the narrow sense. It must also be rendered publicly visible, symbolically credible, and discursively intelligible. Police bulletins are central to this development because they do not merely communicate law-enforcement action after the fact; they participate in the public construction of its legitimacy.^[13]

3.1 Symbolic and Textual System

This publicity-oriented construction operates, first, through a symbolic and textual system that amplifies the authority underlying the bulletin. Police bulletins draw upon a recognisable repertoire of institutional symbols and standardised presentation: the police emblem placed prominently at the top, the blue-and-white visual template, the formal register of language, and the official signature and date. Together, these elements produce a distinctive textual materiality through which law-enforcement action is framed as solemn, authoritative, restrained, orderly, and trustworthy. Unlike forms of “law enforcement under the camera” that rely on visual immediacy, emotional resonance, and the dramatic display of policing scenes, police bulletins are distinctive in the way they communicate calmness, restraint, and institutional composure.^[14] Because similar systems of presentation are widely used across official bulletins, their authority-producing function is further reinforced through repetition and recognisability.

[13] O'Connor, C. D., & Zaidi, H. (2021). Communicating with purpose: Image work, social media, and policing. *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, 94(3), 333–352. Chermak, S., & Weiss, A. (2005). Maintaining legitimacy using external communication strategies: An analysis of police-media relations. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33(5), 501–512.

[14] Compared with “law enforcement under the camera”, which relies more heavily on emotional communication and audio-visual impact, police bulletins are distinctive in their use of textual restraint, formal presentation, and procedural narration to construct legitimacy. The growing prominence of the former has been interpreted as reflecting a weakening of deferential attitudes towards the police and a broader erosion of respect for law and authority. See Qiu, Y. (2019). The generative logic of ‘law enforcement under the camera’ and strategies of police response. *Journal of People's Public Security University of China*, (2), 114.

At the discursive level, police bulletins also employ an objective, standardised, and depersonalised mode of narration. This style minimises overt emotional expression and presents law-enforcement action in a tone of caution, impartiality, and procedural seriousness. Particularly significant is the frequent use of the term *qunzhong* (the masses), a form of address with a strong ideological history in the Chinese political lexicon. Its use invokes familiar cognitive schemas linking the Party and the people, the ideal of “the people’s police for the people”, and broader notions of state governance. In doing so, police bulletins do more than identify the public as an audience. They help to construct an affective and political relationship between policing authority and popular recognition, presenting public security organs not simply as coercive institutions but as legitimate guardians acting in the name of collective order.^[15]

3.2 Agenda Setting

Second, police bulletins reinforce legitimacy through selective agenda-setting. Their content is shaped around such elements as the nature of the case, prevailing public concerns, the legal basis of police action, state image, law-based governance, and legal education. In this way, police bulletins create a mechanism through which legitimacy is strengthened by means of factual clarification and procedural visibility. Public security organs may also respond to public and media agendas through proactive communication, follow-up bulletins, and issue-specific replies. In some cases, they go further by appending explanatory references to relevant legal provisions or by incorporating legal reminders addressed to the public. Such practices help audiences to understand the grounds of law-enforcement action and encourage a more rationalised acceptance of official handling. From the standpoint of legality, the publicity-oriented construction of legitimacy provides law enforcement with an important source of support beyond traditional legal reasoning by enabling it to attract, absorb, and respond to public opinion. From a political standpoint, it also resonates with the longer tradition of authoritative communication in China, one that rests upon public trust, deference, and the idea that governing authority is strengthened through “the people’s consent” and “the people’s satisfaction”.^[16]

Police bulletins cluster around a limited number of recurring issue areas, each of which foregrounds particular combinations of facts, procedures, risks, and sanctions. Topic modelling of the 770 case-specific bulletins suggests that their communicative agenda is organised around six major thematic patterns: dangerous driving, financial crime, traffic accidents, online rumours, environmental crime, and pandemic-related violations. These thematic groupings indicate the principal issue areas through which police bulletins repeatedly render law-enforcement action visible, intelligible, and governable in public communication. Table 3 summarises these major thematic patterns.

Yet the significance of these thematic patterns lies not only in their substantive distribution. They also differ in the ways in which legality, procedure, and responsibility are discursively presented. A closer comparison of the six thematic groups reveals systematic variation in at least three respects: the use of formal legal terminology, the completeness of information, and the explicitness of legal

[15] Chen, Y.Q. (2023). Personal deixis and identity construction in police bulletins: An exploration in the context of online public opinion. *CUPL Graduate Law Review*, (2), 280.

[16] Wang, J. (2023). People-centred policy agenda-setting: Theoretical interpretation, generative logic, and implementation mechanisms. *Learning Forum*, (6), 73.

qualification. In some categories, police bulletins rely heavily on standard legal language, quantitative thresholds, and clearly specified coercive measures. In others, the language is more tentative, the procedural chain less complete, and the legal outcome less explicitly stated. These differences are analytically important because they shape how police bulletins frame law-enforcement action for public reception. Table 4 summarises the main discursive features across the six thematic groups that are relevant to legitimacy construction.

Table 3
Major Thematic Patterns in Police Bulletins

Theme	Indicative keywords	Main discursive features
Dangerous driving	drink-driving, drunk driving, blood alcohol, licence, detection, dangerous	Highly technical and data-driven; emphasises measurable indicators and explicit legal consequences
Financial crime	illegal fundraising, deposits, investment, funds, suspect, frozen assets, seizure, platform	Procedurally dense; places particular emphasis on asset recovery and financial scale
Traffic accidents	traffic accident, collision, injury, death, lane, rear-end collision, investigation	Fact-centred and relatively cautious; legal qualification often remains provisional
Online rumours	rumour, false information, online dissemination, fabrication, order, administrative detention	Presents a full chain of conduct and sanction; often adopts an admonitory tone
Environmental crime	illegal fishing, hunting, closed season, wildlife, waters, coercive measures	Similar in structure to financial-crime bulletins, but more specialised in regulatory content
Pandemic-related violations	epidemic control, nucleic acid test, positive result, quarantine, violation, unauthorised movement	Time-specific discourse stressing rule violation and the tension between individual conduct and collective safety

Table 4

3.3 Discursive Features Relevant to Legitimacy Construction across Thematic Groups

Theme	Use of formal legal terminology	Extent of informational completeness	Explicitness of legal qualification	Predominant narrative form	Indicative discursive tendency
Dangerous driving	High	Complete	Explicit	Standard enforcement bulletin	Technically precise and procedurally explicit
Financial crime	High	Complete	Explicit	Major-case bulletin	Procedurally dense and strongly standardised
Online rumours	Medium to high	Relatively complete	Explicit	Warning-and-education bulletin	Admonitory and sanction-oriented
Environmental crime	Medium to high	Complete	Explicit	Standard enforcement bulletin	Regulation-centred and procedurally framed
Pandemic-related violations	Medium	Complete	Relatively explicit	Mixed warning-and-education / standard enforcement bulletin	Preventive and rule-oriented
Traffic accidents	Low	Partially incomplete	Often ambiguous	Information notice	Fact-centred, cautious, and more provisional

Two points are especially noteworthy. First, bulletins concerning dangerous driving and financial crime tend to exhibit the most standardised legal and procedural presentation. They frequently specify legal thresholds, coercive measures, and case-disposal outcomes in ways that make law-enforcement action appear technically precise and procedurally settled. Secondly, traffic-accident bulletins are more likely to retain provisional or open-ended formulations. In this group, legal qualification is often deferred, procedural outcomes remain less explicitly stated, and phrases such as “under further investigation” appear with much greater frequency. In the corpus used here, ambiguous or unspecified qualification is markedly more common in traffic-accident bulletins than in the other thematic groups.

This variation helps to clarify the limits of publicity-oriented legitimacy construction. Police bulletins do not frame law-enforcement action in a uniform manner. Their justificatory presentation depends, in part, on the extent to which they combine legal-linguistic precision, informational completeness, and an explicit account of responsibility. Where these elements are present, bulletins are better able to present law-enforcement action as procedurally ordered and publicly intelligible. Where they are weak or absent, the bulletin may still satisfy a minimal requirement of visibility, but it is less able to stabilise public interpretation. It is in this sense that communicative legitimacy becomes entangled with expectations of clarity, closure, and public satisfaction.

At the same time, these empirical differences also illuminate the broader limit of publicity-oriented construction discussed above. What is strengthened through standardisation and discursive completeness may indeed be a more coherent public presentation of legality, but it may also amount to a broader form of reassurance or adaptive acceptance. Conversely, where legal caution produces open-ended or incomplete communication, public audiences may interpret procedural restraint not as legality, but as evasion or insufficiency.^[17] The point, then, is not that more complete communication necessarily produces legitimacy, but that police bulletins render unusually visible the unstable relationship between legal justification, communicative intelligibility, and public reception. It is precisely this instability that makes police bulletins such a revealing site for observing the broader tension between legitimacy and satisfaction in mediatized law enforcement.

3.4 The Limits of Publicity-Oriented Legitimacy Construction

This publicity-oriented construction has clear limits. Because it ties law enforcement so closely to popular consent and public satisfaction, what it produces may be legal legitimacy in the strict sense, but it may equally amount to a more diffuse form of public acceptance or adaptive tolerance towards a particular mode of law-enforcement action. The latter is better understood not as legitimacy properly so called, but as a form of support grounded in broad social assent. In Eastonian terms, it resembles diffuse support: a generalised sense of trust in and approval of the institution as a guarantor of order and security.^[18] Such support may strengthen long-term trust in public security organs, but it also risks collapsing the distinction between legal legitimacy and broader forms of political or affective acceptance.

This slippage reflects a deeper tension between what may be described, in legal-theoretical terms, as the tension between the normative force of law and the demands of cognitive adjustment.^[19] The normative force of law rests upon a state-led and unified authoritative narrative. It is the product of highly specialised and institutionalised forms of knowledge and is committed to formal equality and general applicability. Cognitive adjustment, by contrast, is rooted in dispersed, situational, and often morally inflected everyday experience. Under such conditions, members of the public may assess law-enforcement action less in terms of procedural legality than in terms of whether the outcome feels acceptable or accords with local moral intuitions. When law-enforcement action appears impeccable in strictly legal terms but sharply conflicts with the shared experiences, emotions, or vernacular understandings of a

^[17] Schaap, D., & Saarikkomäki, E. (2022). Rethinking police procedural justice. *Theoretical Criminology*, 26(3), 416–433.

^[18] Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life* (p. 273). Wiley.

^[19] Ji, W. (2014). *The construction of rule-of-law order* (enlarged ed., p. 7). Commercial Press.

particular audience, law itself may come to appear arbitrary or alien, and the credibility of legal justice as such may be called into question. Conversely, where law bends too far in order to accommodate such expectations, its authority as a stable normative framework may be weakened.

To be sure, the tension between normative force and cognitive dissonance is not unique to police bulletins. It is an enduring feature of modern legality. What mediatized modes of communication do, however, is to magnify and render more visible that tension. The literature on mediatization has described social transformation in four stages of extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation.^[20] Of particular relevance here is amalgamation, where media activities and traditionally non-media activities become increasingly fused, and the boundary between them grows less distinct. Once law enforcement, as an activity belonging in principle to the legal domain, is drawn into a mediatized environment, it cannot remain wholly within a purely legal-discursive framework. Inevitably, part of the work of constructing legitimacy is redistributed to the media's own value logics and networks of meaning-production. Yet the alternative — removing law-enforcement communication from mediatized environments altogether — is no longer realistic. Contemporary legality must engage with society through precisely these communicative structures.

The consequence is that the tension between the normative force of law and the pressures of public cognitive adjustment cannot simply be resolved through better communication. Police bulletins may strengthen the visibility, intelligibility, and symbolic authority of law-enforcement action, but they cannot eliminate the underlying gap between legal justification and public reception. In practice, therefore, police bulletins operate within a communicative structure in which legal legitimacy and broader forms of public acceptance are continually at risk of becoming intertwined. The task is not to dissolve that tension, but to maintain a workable distinction between them. It is precisely in this difficult and unstable space that the governance costs and risks of publicity-oriented legitimacy construction arise.

4. The Negotiation of Public Satisfaction and Its Limits in the Construction of Law-Enforcement Legitimacy

In the new media environment, mediatized empowerment has generated, on the one hand, a bottom-up chain of public management and, on the other, a top-down chain of official response.^[21] As a result, communication between public authorities and the public has increasingly become a process of dynamic adjustment in which public satisfaction is continually negotiated. Under such conditions, the model of the one-off police bulletin has become progressively less adequate. In high-profile incidents, public security organs often issue an initial bulletin at an early stage, simultaneously disclosing investigative progress, responding to public concern, and continuing to verify the facts, before releasing a more definitive conclusion at a later point. Where law-enforcement action is found to be flawed, or where the original bulletin is seen as incomplete or unsatisfactory, the public — including the news media — may generate

^[20] Schulz, W. (2004). Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept. *European Journal of Communication*, 19(1), 88–89.

^[21] Guo, X., & Zhao, H. (2023). Mediatized governance: Conceptual differentiation, value reshaping and future prospects. *Journal of Northwest Normal University*, (1), 60.

immediate pressure through online feedback, thereby prompting public security organs to correct errors, supplement information, or revise their framing of the incident.

This ongoing negotiation of public satisfaction is not merely an incidental feature of digital communication. It places law-enforcement legitimacy within a dialogic interface and, in doing so, narrows the space available for more repressive forms of legal communication while creating conditions under which more responsive forms may emerge. In the typology developed by Nonet and Selznick, law may be conceptualised in terms of three ideal types: repressive law, autonomous law, and responsive law.^[22] Repressive law treats law as an instrument of domination and control. Autonomous law emphasises the relative independence of law, the precision of rules, and the strictness of their application, but risks rendering the legal system rigid, closed, and inattentive to substantive justice or social adaptation. Responsive law, by contrast, seeks to enhance law's capacity to address social problems by maintaining a regulated openness to social needs and public claims. It places greater emphasis on responsibility, problem-solving, and collaboration across multiple actors, and aspires to realise a spirit of legal self-correction through wider forms of participation and engagement.

Seen from this perspective, the communicative structure of negotiated satisfaction in police bulletins may be understood as both a sign and a partial institutional expression of responsive legality. Its logic of supervision and reciprocal response is broadly compatible with the reflexivity and public reason associated with responsive law. Under these conditions, law-enforcement legitimacy can no longer be understood as deriving solely from formal legal authority or from the coercive power of the state, nor can it be fully manufactured through publicity alone. Rather, it increasingly takes shape through a communicative process of explanation and response, one in which legal authority must engage, however unevenly, with social expectations and normative claims. In this sense, legitimacy is no longer simply asserted; it is negotiated.

Such negotiation also has important cognitive effects. It encourages a mode of public reception in which law-enforcement legitimacy is judged not only by reference to formal legality, but also by whether the official response appears to take public concern seriously, address contested issues, and remain open to revision.^[23] Public scrutiny and collective commentary on law-enforcement action provide a discursive arena within which legitimacy is no longer fixed in advance but generated in motion. At least in principle, this may accelerate the interaction between social norms and the legal system and contribute to a more reflexive understanding of law-based governance, in which state power is expected not merely to act, but to explain itself in a manner capable of public justification.

At the same time, the negotiation of satisfaction has encouraged a shift towards anticipatory response, whereby public security organs use technical tools, prior experience, and data analysis to anticipate likely trajectories of public opinion and prepare response strategies in advance. Communication thus moves from reactive

[22] Nonet, P., & Selznick, P. (2017). *Law and society in transition: Toward responsive law* (p. 16). Routledge.

[23] Mazerolle, L., Antrobus, E., Bennett, S., & Tyler, T. R. (2013). Shaping citizen perceptions of police legitimacy: A randomized field trial of procedural justice. *Criminology*, 51(1), 33–63.

damage control towards proactive guidance and broader communicative risk management.

Even so, the significance of negotiated satisfaction should not be overstated. The communicative logic of responsiveness cannot by itself displace repressive or autonomous forms of legality, nor does mediatized communication develop on an empty field. Rather, it adapts to the needs and constraints of the institutional order into which it is introduced.

In the context of police bulletins, this means that negotiated satisfaction may serve two rather different functions. It may facilitate forms of collaborative governance by opening a channel for explanation, feedback, and correction. But it may also be used to reproduce a relationship of management and managed response, in which communication is directed less towards genuine engagement than towards the containment of controversy. This tension becomes especially apparent in sensitive incidents. When public attention intensifies rapidly, public security organs often face a double pressure: they must adhere to legal principles and maintain procedural justice, while also responding to internal administrative pressures associated with social stability and risk control. Under such conditions, the handling of the incident may come to rest upon a mixed foundation in which legal-rational authority remains the formal surface, but charismatic or politically expedient authority increasingly shapes practical response. In these circumstances, the earlier negotiation of satisfaction may degenerate into non-response, incomplete response, or outright collision with public opinion. Mediatized communication then fails to become genuinely embedded within legal practice and instead risks assuming the form of a technically sophisticated but institutionally hollow performance.

A further difficulty lies in the fact that public satisfaction cannot be equated with legal legitimacy. As noted above, law is a relatively autonomous institutional system with its own internal rationality and operating logic, one that cannot simply be reduced to immediate public sentiment.^[24] When sections of the public, failing to recognise this logic, demand that law-enforcement outcomes conform to intuitive expectations of satisfaction or moral desert, they effectively impose an external criterion upon legality itself. Such demands may exceed the capacity of the existing normative order or sit uneasily with its procedural commitments. In that sense, mediatized communication may produce a paradoxical effect. The very communicative mechanisms introduced in order to strengthen the relationship between police bulletins and law-based governance may, under certain conditions, become a reflexive source of risk, destabilising rather than reinforcing that relationship.

For this reason, the negotiation of satisfaction should be understood as a constitutive yet limited dimension of law-enforcement legitimacy in high-profile incidents. It matters because legitimacy can no longer be sustained through one-way assertion alone. Yet it is also limited because communicative responsiveness does not eliminate the tension between legal justification and public reception. At most, it creates a provisional and unstable space in which that tension may be managed, and sometimes intensified. It is precisely this ambivalent condition that makes police bulletins such a revealing site for understanding the mediatized construction of law-enforcement legitimacy in contemporary China.

^[24] Luhmann, N. (2004). *Law as a social system* (K. A. Ziegert, Trans., pp. 76–111). Oxford University Press.

5. public management, Civic Restraint, and the Limits of Obligation in Law-Enforcement Legitimacy

If police bulletins derive part of their legitimating force from openness, response, and negotiated public reception, then the public cannot be treated merely as a passive audience. In digitally mediated environments, the expansion of communicative capacity also expands the practical scope of supervision. The public's ability to comment, circulate, question, and evaluate official explanations gives concrete form to the supervisory dimension of legality. Yet rights of supervision and suggestion do not come without corresponding responsibilities. In the context of police bulletins, the public is not simply entitled to receive information. It is also called upon to exercise judgement in examining official statements and in participating in the wider communicative process through which law-enforcement legitimacy is either sustained or undermined.

At a normative level, this responsibility may be understood in at least four dimensions. The first is a duty of normative understanding: the obligation to assess the exercise of public power on the basis of legal norms rather than moral intuition or affective preference alone. The second is a duty of rational deliberation: the expectation that public discussion should proceed, so far as possible, through legal reasoning and public reason rather than prejudice, emotional escalation, or partisan hostility.^[25] The third is a duty of procedural restraint. Both legal procedure itself and the legal system's response to controversy require time. public management therefore presupposes a willingness to allow public security organs a limited but reasonable temporal space in which to proceed through formal stages of handling, rather than allowing immediate frustration or cognitive limitation to interfere with legally required process. The fourth is the avoidance of trial by public opinion. Public scrutiny must not substitute pressure or visibility for professional judgement, nor should disagreement over a specific case be allowed to escalate into a broader assault on the autonomy of adjudication. If public management is to remain compatible with legality, it must operate within a framework that respects judicial independence, procedural seriousness, and the finality of legal decision-making.

These expectations are not wholly absent from Chinese legal and regulatory developments. In recent years, some have found partial expression in legislation and related governance measures, including the real-name system for online activity, the enactment of the Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China, and judicial interpretations concerning online defamation and public-order offences in digital settings. Even so, law cannot regulate these obligations too extensively without encountering serious difficulties. The first lies in the tension between the generality of legal rules and the highly situational nature of online supervision. Legal norms must retain a degree of abstraction if they are to apply equally across an indeterminate range of persons and cases. Yet what counts in practice as "rational speech" or "responsible reposting" varies enormously according to topic, participants, emotional climate, and temporal context. Any attempt to codify exhaustively the behavioural requirements of online supervision would risk over-expanding and rigidifying the legal system, while also suppressing the vitality and plurality that make digital public communication socially significant in the first place.

^[25] Leane, G. W. G. (2010). Deliberative democracy and the internet: New possibilities for legitimising law through public discourse? *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, 23(2), 373–401.

A second difficulty lies in the tension between the high costs of legal enforcement and the massive, granular, and dispersed character of online activity. To legalise all obligations associated with mediated supervision would require a highly elaborate system of monitoring and adjudicating online speech and conduct. The resulting financial, administrative, and social costs would be immense. More importantly, such a system would risk producing a society organised around pervasive surveillance, with governance costs far exceeding whatever benefits it might yield in terms of communicative order. The third difficulty lies in the mismatch between the externality of legal coercion and the internal character of supervisory responsibility. The most valuable forms of informed public management depend upon public reason as an internal disposition. Law can require behaviour to conform to formal standards, but it cannot easily compel people to adopt habits of careful verification, reflective judgement, and self-limitation before they speak. It may punish a harmful rumour after the fact, but it cannot reliably require prudence in advance. If imposed too heavily, legal coercion may generate tactical evasion rather than genuine responsibility.

For this reason, the expectations associated with informed supervision in mediatized law enforcement are better understood not as fully legal duties, but as moral and civic obligations of self-restraint. Their practical regulation depends less upon formal law than upon non-formal mechanisms such as public norms, internal conviction, and habitual patterns of communicative conduct. In this respect, they are better suited to the fluid and high-volume environment of online interaction. The forms of normative understanding, rational deliberation, procedural restraint, and resistance to trial by public opinion discussed above are therefore difficult to institutionalise as hard legal obligations, even though they remain indispensable to the public conditions of law-enforcement legitimacy. What is required is not simply compliance, but a form of civic self-discipline that allows digitally mediated supervision to contribute to legality rather than destabilise it.

Yet this reliance on self-restraint introduces its own difficulties. The operation of self-regulation presupposes social identities that are sufficiently stable for reputational costs to matter over time. Digital media weaken precisely this condition. The decontextualised and mobile character of online identity loosens the connection between speech and enduring social accountability, thereby diminishing the force of reputational discipline.^[26] At the same time, digital platforms function as highly competitive attention markets. Their technical architecture is oriented towards maximising participation, immediacy, visibility, and user attachment rather than encouraging slow, careful, and systematic reflection. In relation to social controversies, including police incidents, this makes online environments fertile ground for moral self-display, the pursuit of group belonging, and forms of performative justice organised around visibility and instant gratification. Such tendencies stand in direct tension with the patience, caution, and reflective restraint that legal procedure requires.

A further difficulty is generated by the tendency of digital platforms to produce highly homogeneous echo chambers and information cocoons. By filtering and amplifying

^[26] Gil-Lopez, T., Shen, C., Benefield, G. A., Palomares, N. A., Kosinski, M., & Stillwell, D. (2018). One size fits all: Context collapse, self-presentation strategies and language styles on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(3), 127–145.

content on the basis of user preference and prior orientation, they repeatedly reinforce particular viewpoints while excluding or marginalising dissonant information.^[27] This weakens precisely the conditions on which self-regulation depends: self-reflection, openness to disagreement, and the capacity to distinguish legal evaluation from emotional mobilisation. In this sense, the technical characteristics of networked media call for stronger forms of governance, yet those same characteristics also render full legal regulation both impracticable and normatively problematic. The result is that the obligation-bearing dimension of law-enforcement legitimacy can only be held in a provisional balance between limited legal constraint and uneven public self-discipline. It remains contingent, event-bound, and difficult to stabilise as a predictable element of legal order.

This instability has broader implications for the relationship between police bulletins and law-based governance. The increasing frequency and intensity of mediatized communication do not necessarily produce a corresponding structural improvement in legality. In some instances, public participation may exercise a constructive supervisory function and thereby serve as an indicator of legal development. In others, however, it may degenerate into disorder, antagonism, or communicative escalation, revealing the frictions and blockages that continue to constrain law's relationship with public opinion. For this reason, public participation in the communicative life of police bulletins should be understood as both indispensable and inherently unstable. It is indispensable because law-enforcement legitimacy in high-profile incidents now depends, in part, upon informed and disciplined public reception. It is unstable because the civic obligations necessary to sustain such reception can neither be fully imposed by law nor reliably generated by digital media environments themselves.

6. Conclusion

This article examines how, in the digital age, public explanations by authorities have shifted from post-decision transmissions to an integral part of legitimacy production. Using Chinese police bulletins as a case study, it argues that the mediatized environment has redefined law-enforcement legitimacy, which now depends not only on legal logic but increasingly on procedural visibility, interpretive intelligibility, public responsiveness, and ongoing negotiation. Consequently, police bulletins have evolved into institutionalized mechanisms of public justification. However, this growing reliance on public explanation entangles legal legitimacy with institutional trust and communicative acceptance. While responsiveness limits opaque governance, it does not automatically achieve a transition to responsive rule of law or disciplined deliberative responsibility, revealing a broader paradox of digital-age legitimacy.

That paradox is not confined to policing, nor is it confined to China. Across a wide range of contemporary settings, police, courts, regulatory agencies, educational institutions, health authorities, and other public bodies are increasingly required to issue statements, bulletins, updates, and releases in response to highly visible and socially contentious events. In such contexts, public communication is no longer peripheral to institutional authority; it has become one of the principal sites through which authority must be explained, defended, and rendered acceptable.^[28] The

^[27] Nguyen, C. T. (2020). Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2), 141–161.

^[28] Poulsen, B. (2022). When civil servants go frontstage: The mediatization of the role of the civil servant during the COVID-19 crisis. *Administrative Sciences*, 12(3), Article 73. Knox, C. C. (2016). Public administrators' use of social media platforms: Overcoming the legitimacy dilemma? *Administration & Society*, 48(4), 477–496.

significance of the Chinese case lies not in its uniqueness, but in the unusually clear and highly institutionalised way in which it brings this problem into view. Police bulletins in China have developed into a comparatively routinised, standardised, and recurrent form of public explanation. Precisely for that reason, they illuminate with particular clarity a more general predicament: in platformised communication environments, public-sector statements increasingly undertake legitimating work, yet such work cannot be reduced to the simple proposition that institutional authority will be secured if the state merely “explains itself” more fully.

More broadly, the analysis developed here points towards a wider understanding of public-sector response in the digital age. Mechanisms of public explanation are neither merely legal techniques nor neutral communicative instruments. They are institutional practices embedded simultaneously in cultural, political, and economic conditions. Culturally, they rely upon recognisable symbols of authority, shared expectations of order, and established repertoires of official credibility. Politically, they participate in the negotiation of legitimacy between public institutions and the populations to whom they must answer, and thus form part of a wider politics of public justification.^[29] Economically, they are increasingly situated within platform-based attention markets shaped by visibility metrics, emotional amplification, and incentives for engagement.^[30] The problem of public-sector response in the digital age is therefore not simply how to communicate more quickly or more effectively. It is how to sustain a defensible balance between legal reasoning, institutional authority, and communicative environments structured by attention, affect, and continual public contestation.

In this respect, the Chinese experience has significance beyond China. Its value does not lie in offering a readily transferable “Chinese solution”, but in showing with unusual sharpness a difficulty that is more widely shared: public authority increasingly depends upon communication in order to secure recognition, yet once legitimacy enters the communicative domain, it is no longer shaped by legal logic alone. It is also shaped by platform logics, affective dynamics, and unstable structures of public expectation. For this reason, mediatized rule of law, or more broadly the construction of public-sector legitimacy under digital conditions, cannot be achieved simply by increasing the frequency of response, intensifying disclosure, or refining communicative technique. A more realistic path lies in acknowledging the enduring tension between institutional autonomy and communicative openness, and in continually recalibrating the boundaries among procedural justice, substantive justice, public visibility, institutional response, and legal independence in concrete cases.^[31] It is in this sense that police bulletins, as a specific and limited empirical site, provide a Chinese case of wider comparative value for debates on legitimacy, responsive governance, and the changing relationship between law and media in the digital era.

^[29] Özdemir, S. F., Graneng, K., & de Wilde, P. (2025). EU executives on social media: Assessing the potential and trajectories of legitimation via public communication on Twitter. *European Union Politics*, 26(2), 255–280.

^[30] Olsen, R. K., Tenenboim, O., Hess, K., Westlund, O., Lindén, C.-G., & Broersma, M. (2025). Platform paradoxes and public service media legitimacy: A cross-national study. *Information, Communication & Society*, 28(10), 1818–1835.

^[31] Weigl, L., Roth, T., Amard, A., & Zavolokina, L. (2024). When public values and user-centricity in e-government collide: A systematic review. *Government Information Quarterly*, 41(3), 101956.