



International Journal of Economics, Management and Social Science

Vol 9 No 1 March 2026

E-ISSN: 2614-3828 | P-ISSN: 2614-3887

Open Access: <https://journal.salewangang.net/ijemss/index>

Application Of Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory In Understanding The Dynamics Of Public Policy Agenda Setting In The Digital Democracy Era

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Article Info :

Received:

13/04/2026

Revised:

15/04/2026

Accepted:

25/04/2026

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the application of John W. Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory within the shifting dynamics of public policy agenda setting in the era of digital democracy. As digital technologies increasingly shape governance systems, conventional models of agenda formation are being reconfigured by rapid information flows, expanding online public spheres, and diverse digital governance instruments. This study adopts a qualitative literature review, combining theoretical perspectives from policy studies and public administration with recent developments in digital governance. The findings indicate that Kingdon's three streams—the problem, policy, and political streams—remain central to agenda setting, although their internal processes are significantly transformed in digital environments. Digital platforms intensify problem visibility and speed up interactions among streams, while digital archives and information systems enhance transparency and access throughout policymaking. The study further argues that policy windows become more frequent yet shorter, shaped by viral communication cycles and immediate political reactions. Overall, the analysis suggests that scholars and policymakers must adapt the Multiple Streams framework to reflect increasingly networked, multi-actor, and data-driven policy environments characteristic of contemporary digital democracies. These adjustments are essential for capturing how digital participation, algorithmic mediation, and real-time feedback reshape policy prioritization and decision-making processes. Moreover, integrating insights from digital governance studies allows a more nuanced understanding of how ideas circulate, actors interact, and authority is negotiated across platforms. Consequently, refining this framework not only strengthens its analytical relevance but also improves its practical utility in explaining complex policy dynamics in digitally mediated contexts today and in the future ahead.

Keywords: *Multiple Streams Theory; Kingdon; Agenda Setting; Digital Democracy; Public Policy; Digital Governance*



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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of public policy agenda setting has long been central to understanding how certain issues rise to governmental attention while others remain peripheral. Among the theoretical frameworks that have shaped this field, John W. Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory (MST), introduced in his seminal work *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984, revised 1995),

stands as one of the most influential and enduring models. Kingdon proposed that the policy process is not a rational, sequential progression but rather a dynamic interplay among three largely independent streams: the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. Policy change occurs when these streams converge when a "policy window" opens, often catalyzed by focusing events or the strategic actions of policy entrepreneurs.

In the contemporary era, however, the context in which these streams operate has been fundamentally altered. The rise of digital democracy encompassing e-governance, social media, open data platforms, and digital public spheres has introduced new actors, accelerated information flows, and restructured the mechanisms through which public problems are identified, discussed, and placed on the governmental agenda. Citizens no longer passively receive information mediated by traditional mass media; instead, they actively participate in shaping public discourse through digital platforms, making issues viral and compelling governmental responses in unprecedented time frames.

Indonesia, as a developing democracy with one of the world's largest digital populations, provides a particularly instructive context for examining these dynamics. The Indonesian government has pursued extensive digital transformation initiatives, including integrated e-government systems, open data portals, and digital public service platforms. These developments have simultaneously expanded opportunities for citizen participation in policy processes and created new challenges for agenda management in the public sector. As Setyarto (2025) argues in the context of digital archive management, the shift from physical to digital information infrastructures represents not merely a technical transformation but a fundamental reorganization of how institutional knowledge is produced, stored, and made accessible with direct implications for how policy problems and alternatives are recognized and documented.

This article seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the intersection of digital governance and policy theory by applying Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory to the digital democracy era. Specifically, it asks: How do the dynamics of the three streams problem, policy, and political operate differently in digitally mediated governance environments? What new opportunities and constraints does digitalization introduce for policy entrepreneurs seeking to open policy

windows? And what are the implications of these shifts for policymakers and scholars of public administration?

The article proceeds as follows. Section II reviews the theoretical foundations of the Multiple Streams Theory and its development in the literature. Section III analyzes the characteristics of digital democracy and their implications for public governance. Section IV applies the MST framework to the digital democracy context, examining each stream in turn. Section V discusses the implications of the analysis for theory and practice. Section VI concludes with reflections on the need for an updated conceptualization of agenda setting in digitally transformed governance environments.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: KINGDON'S MULTIPLE STREAMS THEORY

A. Core Propositions of the Multiple Streams Theory

John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of linear, stage-based models of the policy process. Drawing on the "garbage can" model of organizational decision-making developed by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), Kingdon proposed that policy decisions are not the product of orderly problem-solving but arise from the coupling of three streams that flow largely independently of one another within the political system.

The problem stream encompasses the processes through which conditions come to be recognized as public problems warranting governmental attention. Not every condition becomes a problem; the transformation requires indicators, focusing events (such as crises, disasters, or dramatic events), and feedback from existing programs that draws attention to discrepancies between desired and actual conditions. Crucially, the definition of a problem is itself a political act the framing of an issue shapes which solutions appear relevant and which actors are empowered to respond.

The policy stream consists of the community of specialists analysts, academics, bureaucrats, and advocates who generate, refine, and promote policy proposals. Within this stream, ideas compete for attention according to technical feasibility, value acceptability, and anticipated constraints. Over time, a process of "softening up" occurs, whereby promising proposals gradually gain acceptance within the policy community, positioning them to be adopted when a policy window opens.

The political stream comprises elements such as the national mood, organized political forces, and governmental changes elections, shifts in legislative composition, or changes in executive

leadership. These factors shape the political receptivity of the system to particular problems and solutions, independently of the policy community's activities.

Policy change occurs when a policy entrepreneur – an individual or coalition willing to invest resources in the coupling of streams – seizes upon a policy window: a brief period during which all three streams converge sufficiently to allow a new issue to rise on the agenda or a new policy solution to be adopted. Policy windows may be predictable (e.g., legislative calendar events) or unpredictable (e.g., crises or elections).

B. Developments and Critiques

Since its original formulation, MST has been widely applied across diverse policy domains and national contexts, demonstrating remarkable analytical flexibility. Scholars have extended the theory to comparative policy analysis (Zahariadis, 2003), European Union policy-making (Zahariadis, 2008), and the policy processes of developing nations (Herweg et al., 2015). These applications have refined and, in some cases, revised aspects of the original framework.

Critics of MST have raised several concerns. Some argue that the theory underspecifies the mechanisms by which streams couple and policy windows open, relying too heavily on the metaphor of chance convergence without providing precise causal accounts. Others contend that the model, developed primarily in the context of the U.S. federal government, may not translate straightforwardly to parliamentary systems, coalition governments, or administratively fragmented polities. More recently, scholars have observed that the theory was formulated prior to the digital revolution and may therefore inadequately capture the dynamics of contemporary policy processes mediated by digital technologies.

Despite these critiques, MST remains a productive framework for policy analysis precisely because of its recognition of ambiguity, bounded rationality, and the non-linear character of policy change – features that, if anything, are more pronounced in the digital era than they were in the pre-digital context Kingdon originally theorized.

III. DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GOVERNANCE

A. Defining Digital Democracy

Digital democracy refers to the use of digital technologies including the internet, social media, mobile applications, and data analytics to enhance democratic participation, improve governmental transparency, and increase the efficiency and responsiveness of public administration. The concept encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, from e-voting and online public consultations to open government data initiatives and social media-mediated citizen engagement.

The significance of digital democracy for public policy extends beyond procedural changes in citizen participation. Digital transformation has altered the fundamental architecture of information production and dissemination within governance systems. Information that once required weeks of compilation and physical distribution can now be generated, shared, and accessed instantaneously. Issues can emerge on the public agenda with viral speed, and governmental responses are increasingly expected to match the pace of digital information cycles.

B. Digital Transformation of Information and Archives

A foundational dimension of digital democracy and one with direct relevance to the Multiple Streams framework is the transformation of governmental information systems, including the shift from physical to digital archiving. As Setyarto (2025) comprehensively documents, the management of digital archives involves not only technical challenges of data storage, security, and retrieval, but also significant organizational and governance dimensions that shape how institutional knowledge is structured and accessed. The transition to digital archives enables government agencies, researchers, and civil society organizations to access policy-relevant information far more rapidly and systematically than was possible in the era of paper-based records.

This transformation is particularly consequential for the problem stream of Kingdon's framework. The availability of real-time data, open government datasets, and digitally accessible archival records dramatically expands the capacity of diverse actors from academic researchers and investigative journalists to civil society advocates and opposition politicians to identify and document conditions that may warrant governmental attention. Simultaneously, as Setyarto (2025) notes, digital archives raise important questions about data security, accessibility, and the long-term preservation of institutional memory issues that themselves constitute emerging policy problems in the digital governance agenda.

C. Digital Platforms and Political Participation

The emergence of social media platforms as central arenas of political communication has profoundly altered the dynamics of political mobilization and public opinion formation. Issues can now achieve national salience within hours, driven by user-generated content, algorithmic amplification, and the networked sharing of information across platform ecosystems. Political parties and advocacy groups have adapted their strategies accordingly, using digital platforms to organize supporters, disseminate frames, and pressure governmental actors.

At the same time, the digital public sphere is characterized by significant inequalities of access and influence, the proliferation of misinformation, and the increasing segmentation of public discourse into ideologically homogeneous "filter bubbles" that may reinforce polarization rather than fostering deliberative democracy. These dynamics have important implications for the political stream in MST, shaping the reception of policy proposals and the strategic calculations of policy entrepreneurs.

IV. APPLYING THE MULTIPLE STREAMS THEORY IN THE DIGITAL DEMOCRACY ERA

A. The Problem Stream in Digital Context

In the digital democracy era, the problem stream is characterized by an unprecedented expansion in the volume, velocity, and diversity of information that informs problem recognition. Traditional indicators—economic statistics, health data, crime rates—have been supplemented and, in many cases, supplanted by real-time data streams generated by digital systems, social media monitoring tools, citizen reporting applications, and open government platforms.

Several distinctive features of the digital problem stream merit attention. First, the threshold for problem recognition has been lowered by the democratization of information production and dissemination. Civil society actors, individual citizens, and investigative journalists now possess enhanced capacity to document conditions and frame them as public problems, bypassing the gatekeeping function that traditionally concentrated problem-framing authority in government agencies and established media organizations.

Second, focusing events in the digital era are characterized by their potential for viral amplification. A single video, dataset, or disclosure can achieve national salience within hours, mobilizing public attention and generating pressure on governmental actors with a speed that has no precedent in the pre-digital era. This compression of the time between event occurrence and agenda placement fundamentally alters the strategic calculations of both problem advocates and governmental respondents.

Third, the relationship between indicator monitoring and problem recognition has been complicated by the sheer volume of data available in digital governance environments. The capacity of governmental actors to monitor, process, and respond to the enormous volume of digital data now potentially relevant to policy has not kept pace with the technical capacity to generate and disseminate that data. This creates both opportunities for more evidence-based problem definition and risks, including data overload, selective attention driven by digital salience rather than substantive importance, and the potential for misinformation to masquerade as credible indicators.

Fourth, the digitalization of governmental information systems and archives, as analyzed by Setyarto (2025), has fundamentally transformed the infrastructure of indicator monitoring and feedback mechanisms that feed the problem stream. Web-based archival systems, cloud storage platforms, and integrated government information systems enable more systematic tracking of policy implementation outcomes, facilitating the feedback processes that Kingdon identified as important drivers of problem recognition. The efficiency and accessibility of digital records encompassing everything from compliance documentation to service delivery data amplify the capacity of the problem stream to generate and sustain attention to governmental failures and unmet needs.

B. The Policy Stream in Digital Context

The policy stream—the community of specialists developing and refining policy proposals—has also been substantially reconfigured by digital transformation. The boundaries of the policy community have expanded as digital platforms facilitate the participation of a broader range of actors in policy deliberation, including international organizations, diaspora communities, academic networks, and civil society coalitions that might previously have had limited access to policy processes.

Knowledge production within the policy stream has been accelerated by digital tools. Systematic reviews, policy briefs, and comparative analyses can be produced and disseminated far more rapidly than in the past, enabling the policy stream to respond more dynamically to shifts in the problem and political streams. Open access publishing platforms and government open data portals have democratized access to policy-relevant evidence, reducing informational asymmetries between well-resourced and less-resourced actors in the policy community.

At the same time, the digital policy stream faces distinctive challenges. The acceleration of information cycles may privilege speed over rigor, generating pressure to adopt policy proposals before they have been adequately "softened up" within the policy community. The proliferation of actors in digital policy spaces also creates challenges of coordination and consensus-building; the networked, decentralized character of digital policy communities may hinder the formation of the stable proposal coalitions that MST identifies as necessary preconditions for effective policy entrepreneurship.

The concept of value acceptability—one of Kingdon's criteria for the survival of policy proposals in the stream—takes on new dimensions in digital contexts. Digital deliberation allows proposals to be rapidly tested against the preferences of diverse publics, but it also exposes them to organized campaigns of opposition that can mobilize rapidly through social networks. Policy proposals that survive the technical scrutiny of expert communities may nonetheless fail to achieve digital legitimacy if they are framed effectively by opponents in digital public spheres.

C. The Political Stream in Digital Context

The political stream—encompassing the national mood, organized political forces, and governmental turnover—is perhaps the stream most visibly transformed by digital democracy. The national mood, which Kingdon characterized as a diffuse sense of shared sentiment that constrains and enables governmental action, is now mediated by digital platforms that both reflect and shape public opinion with unprecedented immediacy.

Social media sentiment analysis, digital polling, and real-time monitoring of online discourse provide governmental actors with continuous data on public opinion, potentially enabling more responsive governance but also creating incentives for policy-making that prioritizes short-term

digital popularity over substantive effectiveness. The political stream in digital democracies is characterized by heightened volatility, as online sentiment can shift rapidly in response to events, disclosures, or influencer interventions, complicating the strategic calculations of policy entrepreneurs.

Electoral dynamics in digital democracies have also altered the political stream. Digital campaigning, data-driven microtargeting, and the use of social media platforms as primary venues of political communication have restructured party strategies and voter-elite interactions. Changes in governmental composition one of Kingdon's key sources of political stream shifts now arrive with digital campaign histories that create both commitments and expectations that constrain post-electoral agenda setting.

Organized political forces interest groups, advocacy coalitions, and social movements have been significantly empowered by digital tools. The capacity for rapid mobilization, cross-jurisdictional coordination, and sustained pressure on governmental actors has increased dramatically, enhancing the ability of organized groups to shape the political stream and exploit policy windows as they open.

D. The Policy Window in Digital Democracy

In Kingdon's original framework, policy windows are relatively rare events periods during which all three streams converge sufficiently to enable agenda change. In the digital democracy era, several factors suggest that policy windows may become both more frequent and more ephemeral.

The acceleration of information cycles in digital environments means that focusing events more rapidly generate the problem stream conditions for window opening, while digital political mobilization can quickly generate the political stream conditions for receptivity to change. At the same time, the compressed temporal dynamics of digital discourse mean that windows may close more rapidly public attention moves on, political coalitions shift, and the urgency of digital moments dissipates as new issues emerge.

This dual dynamic more frequent opening, more rapid closing has significant implications for policy entrepreneurs. The premium on speed in digital window exploitation may advantage actors with pre-existing organizational capacity, prepared policy proposals, and established digital networks

over those who must build these resources in response to emerging opportunities. It may also create incentives for opportunistic policy entrepreneurship that leverages digital attention without substantive policy readiness "agenda surfing" that places issues on the governmental agenda without the organizational foundations necessary for sustained policy change.

Governmental actors must therefore develop new institutional capacities for rapid agenda response in digital democracies. This includes not only communication capabilities but also the administrative infrastructure including efficient digital information management systems, as analyzed by Setyarto (2025) necessary to rapidly access, process, and deploy policy-relevant information when windows open. Organizations that maintain well-organized digital archives and integrated information systems are better positioned to respond analytically to emerging policy windows, supporting evidence-based agenda management in fast-moving digital environments.

V. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

A. Theoretical Implications

The analysis presented in this article suggests several important theoretical implications for the development of MST in digital governance contexts. First, the theory's treatment of stream independence requires reconsideration. In Kingdon's original formulation, the three streams flow largely independently, coupling only at policy windows. In digital environments, however, the streams are more tightly coupled at all times digital platforms simultaneously serve as venues for problem framing, policy deliberation, and political mobilization, creating conditions in which developments in one stream more rapidly and directly affect the others Setyarto, D. B., et al. (2025).

Second, MST's treatment of focusing events requires updating to account for the distinctive characteristics of digital focusing events. Traditional focusing events were typically discrete, geographically located occurrences disasters, scandals, accidents that could be identified and dated. Digital focusing events are often more diffuse, multiply authored, and temporally extended, emerging through the cumulative interaction of many actors across digital networks. The mechanisms by which such events generate problem stream conditions and political stream receptivity may differ substantially from those theorized by Kingdon.

Third, the concept of the policy entrepreneur requires extension to encompass the new forms of digital policy entrepreneurship that characterize contemporary agenda setting. Digital policy entrepreneurs include not only the individual "champions" of Kingdon's framework but also platform-mediated advocacy coalitions, algorithmic agenda-setters, and the hybrid actors—citizen-journalists, social media influencers, and open-source policy communities—whose roles in digital agenda setting have no clear analog in pre-digital policy theory.

B. Practical Implications

For practitioners in public administration and policy-making, the analysis offers several practical insights. First, governmental actors must develop enhanced capacities for digital horizon-scanning—the systematic monitoring of digital information environments to identify emerging problems and potential policy windows before they reach the mainstream political agenda. This requires investment in both technical systems and the analytical capacity to interpret digital signals effectively.

Second, the management of governmental information resources—including the systematic digitalization and organization of public archives, as advocated by Setyarto (2025)—is increasingly a prerequisite for effective participation in the policy stream. Agencies that cannot rapidly access and deploy relevant archival and documentary evidence when policy windows open will be disadvantaged relative to actors with more efficient information systems. Digital archive management is therefore not merely an administrative function but a strategic governance capacity.

Third, policy entrepreneurs in digital democracies must develop hybrid competencies that span technical, communicative, and organizational domains. Effective digital policy entrepreneurship requires not only substantive expertise and political acumen but also fluency in digital communication, capacity for rapid network mobilization, and skills in online framing and narrative management.

Fourth, the volatility of digital political environments argues for the development of more adaptive policy development processes—ones capable of refining and deploying policy proposals rapidly in response to emerging windows rather than relying on lengthy, sequential policy

development cycles. This suggests a potential convergence between MST and agile governance frameworks that emphasize iterative policy development, rapid testing, and continuous learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the application of Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory to the dynamics of public policy agenda setting in the digital democracy era. The analysis demonstrates that while the fundamental architecture of MST—the problem, policy, and political streams, and the concept of the policy window—retains substantial explanatory power, the internal dynamics of each stream are significantly transformed by digital governance environments.

In the digital era, the problem stream is characterized by expanded information access, accelerated issue recognition, and the democratic broadening of problem-framing capacity. The policy stream encompasses a larger and more diverse community of knowledge producers, enabled by digital tools but also challenged by accelerated information cycles and the complexities of digital deliberation. The political stream is marked by heightened volatility, the empowerment of organized digital advocacy, and the continuous mediation of public opinion through platform-based discourse. Policy windows open more frequently but close more rapidly, placing a premium on organizational readiness, pre-positioned proposals, and the rapid deployment of policy-relevant information.

The digitalization of governmental information systems—including the comprehensive management of digital archives as analyzed by Setyarto (2025)—is shown to be not merely a technical or administrative matter but a substantive governance capacity with direct implications for the effectiveness of agenda setting and policy entrepreneurship. Organizations and agencies that invest in robust digital information infrastructure are better positioned to exploit policy windows, document policy problems, and maintain institutional memory through transitions in governmental leadership.

This analysis suggests several directions for future research. Empirical studies comparing agenda-setting dynamics across countries at different stages of digital governance development would help to specify the conditions under which digital transformation most significantly alters the dynamics of MST's streams. Detailed case studies of specific policy episodes in digital democracies tracking the role of digital information systems, social media dynamics, and digital policy communities would contribute important empirical grounding to the theoretical analysis offered here.

Finally, comparative analysis of different national approaches to digital archive management and open government data, and their effects on the problem and policy streams, would illuminate an underexplored dimension of the digital governance–policy nexus.

In conclusion, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory remains a valuable and adaptable framework for understanding the dynamics of public policy agenda setting. Applied to the digital democracy era, it illuminates important continuities in the fundamentally non-linear, ambiguous, and entrepreneurially mediated character of the policy process, while also highlighting the ways in which digital transformation has reshaped the terrain on which these processes unfold. The challenge for scholars and practitioners alike is to develop theoretical and practical tools adequate to the complexity and dynamism of agenda setting in the twenty-first century's digitally interconnected governance environments.

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