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# DIGITAL PUBLIC COMPLAINTS IN THE ISLANDS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF THE AMBON CITY GOVERNMENT IN UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract**

Citizens of Ambon City increasingly voice complaints about public services through social media rather than through formal channels, while the municipal government works in an archipelagic province where connectivity, geography, and administrative capacity are uneven. This study describes how the Ambon City Government uses social media to manage digital public complaints, identifies the challenges it faces, and formulates strategies suitable for an island setting. A qualitative descriptive design was applied through document analysis of regulations, Ombudsman assessment releases, official statements, and news coverage published between 2018 and 2026, analyzed with the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña and interpreted through Mergel's push–pull–networking framework. The findings show that Ambon has built a multi-channel complaint ecosystem and holds the highest public service compliance score in Maluku, yet complaints raised on social media are still handled reactively, triggered by virality and dependent on individual leaders. Five challenges were identified: unequal digital access, fragmented channels, the absence of a response standard for social media, limited administrator capacity, and the tension between criticism and misinformation. The study proposes a hybrid strategy that links social media listening to the formal ticketing system and to community-based intermediaries.

**Keywords:** Ambon City; archipelagic region; digital public complaints; local government; social media

## INTRODUCTION

Complaints are one of the most direct forms of citizen participation in the provision of public services. Law Number 25 of 2009 concerning Public Services requires every service provider to provide a complaint facility and assign competent implementers to manage it, while Presidential Regulation Number 76 of 2013 regulates the procedures for its management. These obligations were then integrated nationally through the National Public Service Complaint Management System – People's Online Aspiration and Complaint Service (SP4N-LAPOR!), the guidelines for which are stipulated in Ministerial Regulation of PANRB Number 62 of 2018. Normatively, citizens in any region now have an official digital channel to submit complaints to their government.

In practice, citizen behavior moves faster than institutional design. A 2026 survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) recorded national internet penetration at 81.7 percent, with social media as the most dominant access destination, while only 4.5 percent of respondents used the internet for public and government services. This means that citizens are present daily on social media, but rarely on official complaint channels. Complaints about garbage, drainage, clean water, or roads are more likely to appear as posts, videos, and comments on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or WhatsApp groups than as ticket-registered reports. While Regulation of the Minister of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PANRB) Number 83 of 2012 encourages government agencies to utilize social media, the guidelines emphasize the function of disseminating information and do not yet regulate social media as a point of entry for complaints.

This issue is further complicated in archipelagic regions. Law No. 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government recognizes the unique characteristics of archipelagic provinces, and Maluku is one of them. The digital divide between regions remains significant: internet penetration in Maluku and Papua is projected to reach only 69.26 percent in 2025, far below Java's 84.69 percent (APJII, 2025), and will only reach 69.74 percent in 2026, when

Java has already reached 85.95 percent (APJII, 2026). As the provincial capital, Ambon City is uniquely positioned. It serves as a service hub for residents from various islands, yet the region itself is hilly, divided by Ambon Bay, and contains mountainous areas that have only recently been connected to fixed internet networks (iNews, 2021).

The Ambon City Government is no newcomer to digital complaints. Ambon Mayoral Regulation Number 49 of 2018 established guidelines for managing LAPOR! within the city government. The Maluku Representative Office of the Indonesian Ombudsman (2021) even noted that while SP4N-LAPOR! was not yet operational in other regencies/cities in Maluku, only Ambon City was active. The city also consistently achieved the highest public service compliance scores in Maluku (Ombudsman Maluku Representative Office, 2024b, 2026). However, several events throughout 2025–2026 demonstrated that the complaints received the quickest attention were those that went viral on social media, rather than those received through official channels. The Deputy Chairperson of the Indonesian Ombudsman also reminded that in the social media era, public service oversight is also carried out by the public, not just by official institutions (Ombudsman RI, 2026).

This situation raises questions that have not been widely answered by previous research. Studies on digital complaints in Indonesia generally focus on the effectiveness of official applications in large cities in Java, while studies in Ambon City have only touched on the innovation of the Ambon Access application (Saimima & Zahrati, 2024) and the implementation of a digital complaint system at the national level (Kotarumalos et al., 2026). The use of social media as a complaint channel in an island city has not been specifically discussed. Based on this, this study aims to (1) describe the use of social media by the Ambon City Government in managing digital public complaints, (2) identify challenges faced in the island context, and (3) formulate strengthening strategies appropriate to that context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Public Complaints as the Voice of Citizens

Hirschman (1970) distinguished two citizen responses to declining organizational quality: exit and voice . In monopolistic local government services, exit options are virtually non-existent, making complaints the primary mechanism for citizens to correct providers. From this perspective, complaints are not a disruption to the bureaucracy, but rather a cheap source of information about service weaknesses. Indonesia's regulatory framework aligns with this view. Law Number 25 of 2009 places complaint management as a component of service standards, and the Indonesian Ombudsman has made it a dimension in assessing compliance with public service delivery.

Digitalization is changing the cost of speaking out. Bertot et al. (2010) show that information technology and social media can shape a culture of openness because citizens can monitor and report on government performance at low cost. Linders (2012) calls this shift the shift from e-government to we-government , where citizens participate in producing services, including by reporting problems in their communities. However, the ease of speaking out does not automatically result in a response. The value of a complaint is only realized when the report is verified, forwarded to the authorized unit, followed up, and the results are reported back to the reporter.

### Social Media in Local Government

Mergel (2013) offers a widely used framework for interpreting government interactions on social media. This framework distinguishes three tactics: push , which is the one-way dissemination of information; pull , which is the effort to solicit citizen input and reports; and networking , which is the reciprocal interaction that leads to collaboration. Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) add that social media adoption in government agencies occurs in three stages: from informal experimentation by individuals or specific units, to the structuring stage when the need for rules arises, and to the institutionalization stage when procedures, roles, and resources are formally established.

Empirical findings across countries tend to be consistent. Local governments are quick to adopt social media, but their use is dominated by push tactics . Bonsón et al. (2012) found that European city governments primarily use social media for transparency, while dialogue with citizens remains limited. Mossberger et al. (2013) found a similar pattern in large US cities. Criado et al. (2013) and Medaglia and Zheng (2017) emphasized that the literature focuses more on the presence of government accounts than on their impact on service management. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) demonstrated that levels of citizen engagement vary across platforms, suggesting that platform choice plays a role in determining the quality of interactions.

### The Digital Divide and the Island Context

Van Dijk (2020) explains that the digital divide extends beyond physical access to devices and networks. It is multi-layered, encompassing motivation, material access, digital skills, and usage patterns. In island regions, these layers are exacerbated by geographic factors: network development costs are higher, signal quality depends on topography and weather, and the distance between citizens and government offices is measured by sea travel. Consequently, digital complaint channels have the potential to be highly beneficial by shortening distances, but they also risk only reaching citizens who are already well-connected.

Research on Ambon City supports this picture. Saimima and Zahrati (2024) found that the implementation of the Ambon Access application was not fully effective, primarily due to weak coordination between stakeholders and the application's quality, which still needs improvement. Kotarumalos et al. (2026) found that a digital complaint system at the district level facilitates reporting and expedites follow-up, but is hampered by limited infrastructure, low digital literacy, and inadequate staff capacity, as well as a weak culture of participation.

### Research Gap

The above description reveals three gaps. First, studies of digital complaints in Indonesia still focus on official applications, even though the majority of citizens' voices flow through social media. Second, studies of government social media primarily assess its information function rather than its complaint function. Third, the island context is rarely used as an analytical variable, even though this context influences who can speak out and how quickly the government can respond. This study addresses these gaps by positioning social media as a complaint channel and Ambon City as a case study of a city in an island province.

## METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a document study design (Bowen, 2009). This design was chosen because the research objective was to map practices, challenges, and strategic directions based on publicly documented policy trails and events. The research locus is the Ambon City Government, with data spanning 2018–2026, namely from the enactment of Ambon Mayor Regulation Number 49 of 2018 until the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Ambon City Government and the Indonesian Ombudsman in July 2026.

The data were sourced from four groups of documents. The first group comprised laws and regulations on public services, complaint management, and the use of social media by government agencies. The second group comprised press releases and publications by the Indonesian Ombudsman on the results of compliance assessments and oversight of public services in Maluku. The third group comprised national and local media reports containing official statements from Ambon City Government officials regarding citizen complaints on social media. The fourth group comprised survey results and relevant scientific publications. Documents were selected purposively based on three criteria: relevance to public complaints in Ambon City, clarity of source and date, and cross-verifiability with other sources.

Data analysis followed Miles et al.'s (2014) interactive model, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. In the condensation stage, document content was coded into three categories according to the research objectives: utilization practices, challenges, and strategies. Utilization practices were then interpreted using the push–pull–networking framework (Mergel, 2013) and the stages of social media adoption (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing regulations, supervisory agency assessments, and news coverage of the same event.

This study has limitations. The data analyzed is entirely secondary, so the findings reflect patterns observed in the public sphere and do not capture the internal processes of complaint management or the experiences of citizens as reporters. The cases presented are illustrative and are not intended to be statistically representative of all complaints. Therefore, the findings of this study need to be further substantiated through interviews with channel managers and residents, as well as content analysis of official city government social media accounts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Ambon City's Digital Public Complaints Ecosystem

Ambon City consists of five sub-districts: Nusaniwe, Sirimau, Teluk Ambon, Teluk Ambon Baguala, and South Leitimur, with 50 villages, villages, and sub-districts and a population of approximately 350,000 (BPS Ambon City, 2025). Between 2018 and 2026, the city government gradually established a complaint channel, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Development of public complaint channels and institutions of the Ambon City Government

| Year | Channels/institutions | Character | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2018 | Guidelines for managing LAPOR! (Mayoral Regulation No. 49 of 2018) | Legal basis for managing online aspirations and complaints connected to SP4N | Ambon Mayor Regulation No. 49 of 2018 |
| 2020 | Ambon Access Application | Integrated smart city services, including text and image-based complaint channels | Kotarumalos et al. (2026) |
| 2022 | Mayor Meets the People (WAJAR) | Weekly face-to-face forum between regional heads and residents | Antara News (2023); Kotarumalos et al. (2026) |
| 2025 | Call Center 112 | 24-hour integrated emergency service, inaugurated on the 450th anniversary of Ambon City | Kompas TV (2025) |
| 2026 | Public Service Complaints Handling Acceleration Team | Cross-regional device team chaired by the City Secretary | Republic (2026) |
| 2026 | Memorandum of understanding with the Indonesian Ombudsman | Accelerating report completion, preventing maladministration, exchanging data, and strengthening competencies | Indonesian Ombudsman (2026) |

Table 1 shows two things. First, Ambon City has a relatively comprehensive complaints ecosystem for a city in eastern Indonesia, ranging from national channels, local apps, emergency services, and even face-to-face forums. Second, social media does not emerge as a standalone channel with its own procedures. It exists as a space for complaints to circulate and officials to respond, but it is not yet explicitly linked to the complaint recording system.

This institutional performance is reflected in the Indonesian Ombudsman's assessment, which includes complaint management as one of the assessment dimensions (Table 2). Since 2024, the use of the website, the SP4N-LAPOR! application, and local government social media has also been assessed (Indonesian Ombudsman Maluku Representative Office, 2024a).

**Table 2.** Results of the Indonesian Ombudsman's assessment of the implementation of public services by the Ambon City Government, 2022–2025

| Assessment year | Mark | Category | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2022 | 72.24 | Yellow zone (moderate compliance), highest in Maluku | Indonesian Ombudsman Representative Office for Maluku (2022) |
| 2023 | 89.03 | Green zone (highest compliance) | Antara News (2024) |
| 2024 | 91.01 | Green zone, the highest in Maluku | Indonesian Ombudsman Representative Office for Maluku (2024b) |
| 2025 | 81.20 | High quality opinion (new assessment method), highest in Maluku | Indonesian Ombudsman Representative Office for Maluku (2026) |

The increase in scores from the yellow zone in 2022 to the green zone in 2023 and 2024 represents a significant improvement. The 2025 scores cannot be directly compared to the previous year due to a change in the assessment method, but Ambon City remains the highest in Maluku. It should be noted that in the 2022 assessment, the Ombudsman cited complaint management as a weak area (Ombudsman RI Maluku Representative Office, 2022). Therefore, compliance with high standards does not necessarily mean that all citizens' voices are addressed. Compliance assessments measure the availability of resources and procedures, while complaints on social media fall outside these channels.

### Social Media Utilization Patterns in Complaints

To examine how social media complaints are handled, this study examines four events in 2025–2026 that were documented in news reports and included official city government responses (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Examples of citizen complaints on social media and the response of the Ambon City Government, 2025–2026

| Time | Complaints on social media | City government response | Pattern | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| October 2025 | Video of piles of rubbish in the waters of Ambon Bay has gone viral on Facebook. | The Mayor re-uploaded the video on his personal Facebook account, appealing to residents and emphasizing sanctions for those who throw away trash. | Personal response of the leader | Titastory (2025) |
| December 2025 | An academic's open letter on Facebook about handling drainage and flooding points | The Head of the Communications and Information and Cryptography Service responded and invited academics and the public to collaborate. | Dialogue and invitation to collaboration | Maluku Light (2025) |
| August 2026 | Video of drainage full of garbage in Lorong Tahu, Rijali Subdistrict | Residents cleaned the drains the day after the video circulated; the mayor inspected the location and assigned the village head and technical services. | Field follow-up | Birahy (2026) |
| August 2026 | Complaints about the equal distribution of road repairs and clean water | The city government spokesperson provided clarification along with program data and job locations. | Data-based clarification | Moluccastimes (2026) |

These four incidents exhibit a consistent pattern. First, the trigger for the response was virality. Complaints gained attention after they circulated widely, not after they were recorded as reports. Second, the response focused on figures, namely the Mayor through his personal account and the Head of the Communications, Informatics, and Cryptography Agency as spokesperson. Third, the response was swift and visible, even extending to field inspections within days. Fourth, there was no public information that the complaint was entered into a complaint recording system that could monitor its resolution status.

Read within Mergel's (2013) framework, this practice has gone beyond push tactics . The city government not only disseminates information but also captures complaints ( pull ) and, in the case of the open letter about drainage, creates a space for collaboration ( networking ). This is crucial, as in many regions, government social media still focuses on publicizing ceremonial activities, a practice also criticized by the Maluku Representative of the Indonesian Ombudsman (2024a). However, in terms of adoption stages (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013), complaint management via social media in Ambon City is still between the experimental and the structuring stages. Responses are underway, but rely on individual initiative and have not yet been institutionalized into procedures.

Reliance on virality carries two risks. The first is attention imbalance. Complaints voiced by citizens skilled at creating content and with extensive networks are more likely to be addressed than those voiced by citizens inactive on social media. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, voices are effective only for those who are able to speak out. The second risk is the loss of institutional learning. Complaints answered in the comments section but not recorded will never become data for mapping recurring problems, such as trash spots and puddles that reappear every rainy season.

### Challenges in the Context of Archipelagic Regions

Document analysis revealed five key challenges. The first is the gap in digital access and literacy. Ambon City generally has much better connectivity than other regencies in Maluku, but its distribution within the city is incomplete. The villages of Naku, Ema, and Kilang in South Leitimur District, for example, were only connected to a fiber optic network in 2021 (iNews, 2021). Regionally, nearly a third of the population of Maluku and Papua is still not connected to the internet (APJII, 2026). Following van Dijk (2020), this issue is not just about signal strength, but also about skills and usage habits. Residents who are accustomed to using social media for entertainment may not know how to submit actionable complaints.

The second challenge is channel fragmentation. Ambon City residents can file complaints through SP4N-LAPOR!, Ambon Access, the 112 Call Center, face-to-face forums, official social media accounts, and officials' personal accounts. The multitude of channels expands reach, but without data integration, each channel maintains its own records. Saimima and Zahrati's (2024) findings on weak coordination between parties in the implementation of Ambon Access indicate that integration issues emerged even before social media was considered.

The third challenge is the lack of response standards for social media. Ambon Mayoral Regulation No. 49 of 2018 regulates the management of LAPOR!, and Ministerial Regulation No. 83 of 2012 regulates the use of social media for government communications. There are no specific provisions governing when citizen posts are treated as complaints, who is authorized to respond, the response time limit, and how complaints are recorded. As a result, response speed is determined by the attention of leaders, not by procedures.

The fourth challenge is management capacity. The Maluku Representative Office of the Indonesian Ombudsman (2024a) emphasized that the use of information technology in public services requires competent human resources and used this as an assessment indicator. Managing complaints on social media requires different skills than conventional public relations, namely monitoring conversations, rapid verification, empathetic communication, and coordination across regional agencies. Kotarumalos et al. (2026) found limited apparatus capacity as a barrier at the national level, which is the frontline recipient of complaints.

The fifth challenge is the tension between criticism and misinformation. Social media contains both valid complaints and misinformation. A city government spokesperson stated that the government is open to criticism as long as it is based on accurate data (Moluccastimes, 2026). This attitude is understandable, but in practice, the line between inaccurate criticism and misleading information is not always clear. Without transparent verification procedures, government clarifications can be perceived as self-defense. Coombs (2007) cautions that an organization's response to public scrutiny needs to be tailored to the level of responsibility the public attaches to it. On issues of basic services like waste and clean water, the public tends to attribute a high degree of responsibility to the government, making a corrective response more effective than a defensive one.

These five challenges are interconnected and reinforced by Ambon City's position as the capital of an island province. As a port, education, healthcare, and trade hub, the city serves not only its own residents but also those from other islands who come and go. For this latter group, social media is often the only practical channel for airing complaints after they leave the city. Therefore, ignoring social media as a complaint channel means losing the voice of city service users.

**Strengthening Strategy**

Based on these patterns and challenges, this study formulated five strategies paired with each challenge (Table 4). These strategies build on the Ambon City Government's existing assets: active official channels, a newly formed acceleration team, a partnership with the Indonesian Ombudsman, and the leadership's habit of responding directly to citizens.

**Table 4.** Matrix of challenges and strategies for managing public complaints via social media in Ambon City

| Challenge | Strategy | Operational steps |
|---|---|---|
| Digital access and literacy gap | Community-based hybrid channels | Making the local government/sub-district, neighborhood associations (RT/RW), and community information groups intermediaries that forward citizen complaints to digital channels; providing a data-efficient WhatsApp channel |
| Channel fragmentation | Integration into one ticket system | Record complaints from social media, Ambon Access, and Call Center 112 into a single database connected to SP4N-LAPOR!; assign one liaison admin in each regional device |
| Lack of standard response | Institutionalization of procedures | Updating Mayoral Regulation No. 49 of 2018 or establishing SOPs that regulate complaint criteria, initial response time limits, disposition flow, and the obligation to provide news on the original channel. |
| Management capacity | Strengthening admin competencies | Train admins in conversation monitoring, verification, and empathetic communication; utilize the scope of competency development in the memorandum of understanding with the Indonesian Ombudsman |
| The tension of criticism and misinformation | Transparency of follow-up | Publish a summary of complaints and their resolution status periodically; respond to criticism with data and corrective actions before clarification. |

The core of these five strategies is linking the speed of social media with the order of the formal system. Figure 1 presents the proposed flow model. In this model, social media is treated equally with other channels as a point of entry for complaints. Admins at the Communication, Informatics, and Cryptography Agency monitor and verify complaints, then record them as tickets. The Public Service Complaints Handling Acceleration Team assigns tickets to technical regional agencies and monitors their resolution. Responses are relayed back to the complainant on the channel where the complaint arose, and all data is collected for policy evaluation.

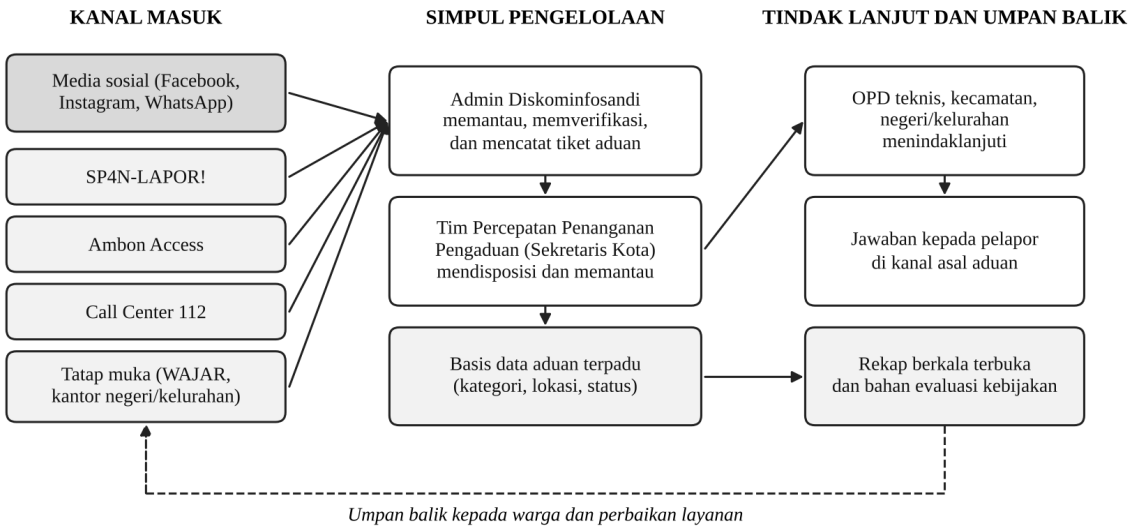


**Figure 1.** Model of integration of public complaints via social media with the formal complaints system (author's proposal)

Community-based hybrid channel strategies deserve special emphasis, as they are most appropriate to the island context. In Maluku, information and complaints are traditionally conveyed through trusted intermediaries, such as marinyo ( community officials), who relay government announcements to residents. This intermediary role could be revived in a new form, with civil servants or village officials receiving verbal complaints and then entering them into digital channels on behalf of residents. This way, residents without devices, signal, or digital skills are still represented in the system, while the city government obtains complaint data that better reflects the entire region, not just the city center.

Institutionalization of procedures should not eliminate existing advantages. A direct response from a regional head on social media sends a strong signal that citizens' complaints are being heard, and this builds trust. Standard procedures are intended to ensure that even non-viral complaints receive equal treatment and that responses persist even when leaders change. In other words, the proposed strategy shifts social media complaint management from the experimental stage to the institutionalization stage, as described by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013).

The findings of this study have two implications. Theoretically, the push–pull–networking framework needs to be complemented with recording and feedback dimensions to assess social media as a complaint channel, not just a communication channel. Practically, oversight bodies can consider indicators that assess whether complaints on local government social media are recorded and resolved, not simply whether the social media account is available and active.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that the Ambon City Government has a relatively comprehensive digital public complaints ecosystem and the highest public service compliance performance in Maluku. Social media has served as a tangible complaint platform, and the city government has responded quickly and openly. However, this response remains reactive, driven by virality, reliant on leadership figures, and not yet connected to a formal complaint recording system.

Five challenges are faced in the context of an archipelagic region: disparities in digital access and literacy, channel fragmentation, the lack of standardized social media response standards, limited manager capacity, and the tension between criticism and misinformation. To address these challenges, this study proposes a hybrid integration strategy that includes community-based channels, integration into a single ticketing system, institutionalization of response procedures, strengthening administrative competency, and transparent follow-up.

Further research is recommended to collect primary data through interviews with channel managers and residents, conduct content analysis of the city government's official social media accounts over a certain period, and compare Ambon City with other cities in island provinces to test the extent to which the proposed model can be applied elsewhere.

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