



# The Role of Facebook in Enhancing Social Accountability in Local Governments: A Case Study of Ramallah and Al-Bireh Municipalities

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## Abstract

*This study examines the role of social media-particularly Facebook-in enhancing social accountability within local governments, using the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh in Palestine as a case study. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative tools to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital accountability practices at the local level. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to municipal council members, public relations staff, and citizens, content analysis of official Facebook pages of the two municipalities, their mayors, and selected council members, as well as semi-structured interviews with media academics and new media specialists.*

*The findings indicate that social media plays a moderate role in the social accountability process and is moderately effective in raising citizens' awareness of accountability-related issues. Facebook has contributed significantly to increasing community participation, particularly through private messaging and direct communication with municipal actors. While municipalities and council members demonstrate a relatively high level of internal responsiveness by transferring complaints through administrative channels, the study reveals a very low level of public response to citizens' negative or critical comments related to accountability on official Facebook pages. Despite this gap, citizens report a moderate level of satisfaction with municipal responses to accountability issues raised on social media.*

*The study highlights a clear discrepancy between the use of Facebook as a communication tool and its limited utilization as a platform for transparent, public accountability. It concludes that strengthening institutional practices and enhancing digital governance strategies are essential to improving the effectiveness of social media as a mechanism for social accountability in local governments.*

**Keywords:** Social Accountability; Local Governments; Social Media; Facebook; Digital Governance; Palestine.

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## Introduction

In recent years, rapid technological development and the widespread use of digital communication tools have significantly transformed the relationship between citizens and public institutions. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have become widely used channels for information dissemination, public communication, and civic engagement. These platforms provide citizens with new opportunities to express their opinions, raise concerns, and interact directly with decision-makers, especially at the local government level where daily public services and community issues are most visible.

Within the context of public administration and governance, social accountability has emerged as a key mechanism for enhancing transparency, participation, and responsiveness. Social media has contributed to expanding the spaces through which citizens can question public officials and monitor institutional performance beyond traditional channels. However, the growing presence of local government bodies on social media platforms does not necessarily guarantee effective accountability practices. In many cases, digital platforms are used primarily for information sharing and public announcements rather than for meaningful engagement with citizens' critical feedback.

In Palestine, municipalities increasingly rely on Facebook as their main digital communication platform. Official municipal pages and personal pages of mayors and council members have become central spaces for publishing announcements, inviting citizens to participate in municipal activities, and communicating administrative information. At the same time, citizens actively use Facebook to express dissatisfaction with service delivery, raise accountability-related issues, and demand responses from local authorities. Despite this interaction, the extent to which social media contributes to genuine social accountability within Palestinian local governments remains insufficiently examined.

This study aims to assess the role of Facebook in enhancing social accountability in local governments through an empirical case study of the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines questionnaires, content analysis, and expert interviews, the study seeks to examine patterns of interaction, levels of responsiveness, and citizens' perceptions of accountability through social media. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from the Palestinian context and by highlighting the gap between digital communication practices and effective public accountability at the local level.

## Theoretical Framework and Review of Previous Studies.

### *Social Accountability and Local Governance*

Social accountability represents a core principle of good governance, as it enables citizens to monitor public institutions, question decision-makers, and demand justification for public actions and resource management. From a governance perspective,

accountability contributes to enhancing transparency, participation, effectiveness, and trust between citizens and public authorities (Sahi & Salami, 2019). Messner (2009) emphasizes that accountability is not limited to formal institutional mechanisms, but also includes social processes through which public actors are questioned and evaluated by society.

In the context of local governments, social accountability is particularly significant due to the proximity of municipalities to citizens and their direct responsibility for service delivery and daily community affairs. Local governments operate within a specific administrative and geographical scope, exercising their responsibilities through collective decision-making rather than individual authority (Nayli & Zayani, 2015). This proximity increases citizens' expectations regarding responsiveness and openness, making accountability mechanisms at the local level especially important.

### ***Digital Governance and Social Media***

With the advancement of digital technologies, accountability practices have increasingly expanded beyond traditional channels to include digital and online platforms. Digital governance refers to the use of information and communication technologies to enhance public administration processes, citizen engagement, and institutional transparency. Social media platforms, as part of the broader digital governance environment, have reshaped the ways in which citizens interact with public institutions and participate in public affairs (Moayad, 2017).

Social media platforms are characterized by interactivity, speed of information dissemination, and low participation costs, allowing citizens to express opinions, mobilize support, and directly communicate with public officials (Al-Hajjar, 2017). Facebook, in particular, has emerged as one of the most influential social media platforms in the Arab world due to its wide reach and diverse interactive features, such as commenting, messaging, tagging, and content sharing (Kheira & Al-Araby, 2017; Ghannam, 2011).

Several scholars argue that social media can function as an alternative or complementary space for public accountability by enabling citizens to voice criticism and demand institutional responses outside formal bureaucratic procedures (Al-Rawi, 2018). However, the effectiveness of these platforms in promoting accountability depends largely on how public institutions engage with citizen feedback and whether digital interaction translates into tangible administrative action.

### ***Previous Studies on Social Media and Accountability***

Previous research has examined the relationship between social media use and accountability from different perspectives. Shaheen (2019) explored the effectiveness of social networking sites in promoting social accountability and found that while these platforms enhance citizen participation, their impact on improving services and exposing corruption remains limited. Similarly, Al-Sawwah (2019) concluded that Facebook

plays an important role in spreading awareness of accountability concepts among university students, but weak institutional responsiveness discourages active participation.

At the municipal level, Qtaishat and Abu Hammour (2018) demonstrated that accountability and transparency significantly contribute to achieving local development, emphasizing the importance of institutional mechanisms in enhancing public trust. In the Palestinian context, Shareem (2021) found that community accountability in local authorities remains at a moderate level, recommending the strengthening of participation and follow-up mechanisms.

International studies also highlight similar patterns. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) showed that while social media platforms increase citizen engagement with local governments, public institutions often prioritize information dissemination over dialogue and accountability. These findings suggest that social media alone does not guarantee accountability unless accompanied by institutional commitment and clear response mechanisms.

### ***Research Gap and Contribution of the Study***

Despite the growing body of literature on social media and accountability, limited empirical research has focused on the role of social media in promoting social accountability within Palestinian local governments. Existing studies often address accountability at a general or national level or focus on awareness rather than institutional responsiveness. This study addresses this gap by examining both citizen interaction and municipal responses through Facebook, combining multiple research tools to assess the effectiveness of digital accountability practices.

By focusing on the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, this study contributes to the literature on digital governance and local accountability by providing empirical evidence from a developing governance context. It highlights the gap between the use of social media as a communication tool and its limited utilization as a platform for transparent and public accountability, offering insights relevant to policymakers, local government practitioners, and researchers.

## **Research Problem, Objectives, and Hypotheses**

### ***Research Problem***

The adoption of social media by local governments has created new channels for communication between public institutions and citizens. In theory, these platforms provide opportunities for enhancing transparency, participation, and social accountability by enabling citizens to raise concerns and question public performance directly (Sahi & Salami, 2019; Messner, 2009). However, the presence of local government bodies on social media does not necessarily translate into effective accountability practices. In many cases, interaction remains limited to information dissemination, while public criticism and accountability-related feedback receive minimal institutional response (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).

In the Palestinian context, municipalities increasingly rely on Facebook as their primary digital communication platform. Citizens actively use Facebook to express dissatisfaction with municipal services, highlight community problems, and demand accountability. Despite this active engagement, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the extent to which Facebook contributes to meaningful social accountability within local governments, particularly in terms of responsiveness to citizens' critical feedback and public scrutiny.

Accordingly, the core research problem of this study lies in examining **the gap between citizens' use of Facebook as an accountability tool and local governments' actual responsiveness to accountability-related interactions** on social media platforms. The study seeks to assess whether Facebook functions merely as a communication tool or as an effective mechanism for enhancing social accountability in local governments.

### ***Research Objectives***

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- 1- To examine the role of Facebook in promoting social accountability within local governments.
- 2- To assess the effectiveness of Facebook in raising citizens' awareness of accountability-related issues.
- 3- To identify the mechanisms and methods used by citizens to hold municipalities accountable through Facebook.
- 4- To analyze the level of responsiveness of municipalities and municipal council members to citizens' accountability-related interactions on Facebook.
- 5- To evaluate citizens' satisfaction with municipal responses to accountability issues raised through Facebook.
- 6- To identify the main challenges and constraints that limit the effectiveness of social accountability through social media.

### ***Research Hypotheses***

Based on the theoretical framework and previous empirical studies on social accountability and digital governance (Messner, 2009; Shaheen, 2019; Shareem, 2021), the study tests the following hypotheses:

- 1- **Facebook plays a moderate role in the social accountability process within local governments.** This hypothesis is grounded in literature suggesting that social media enhances participation but does not fully institutionalize accountability mechanisms.
- 2- **Facebook is effective to a moderate degree in raising citizens' awareness of accountability-related issues.** Prior studies indicate that social media

contributes to awareness-raising, though its impact on behavior and institutional change remains limited (Al-Sawwah, 2019).

- 3- **Citizens rely heavily on private messaging through Facebook to communicate accountability-related concerns to municipalities and council members.** This hypothesis reflects findings that citizens prefer less confrontational and more direct communication channels in accountability processes (Shaheen, 2019).
- 4- **Municipalities and municipal council members demonstrate a higher level of internal responsiveness to citizen complaints than public responsiveness on Facebook pages.** This hypothesis is informed by research showing that institutions often respond administratively rather than publicly to citizen criticism (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).
- 5- **Municipalities and council members respond to citizens' negative or critical comments related to accountability on Facebook to a very low degree.** This hypothesis reflects concerns raised in previous studies regarding weak institutional engagement with public criticism on social media platforms (Shareem, 2021).

## Study Design and Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the role of Facebook in enhancing social accountability within local governments. The use of multiple research tools allows for triangulation of data sources and strengthens the analytical depth of the study by capturing both institutional practices and citizens' perceptions (Shaheen, 2019; Shareem, 2021).

The research is designed as a case study, focusing on the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, which are among the most active Palestinian municipalities on social media platforms. The case study approach is appropriate for exploring complex governance phenomena within their real-life institutional and social context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined.

### *Study Population and Sample*

The study population includes three main groups:

- 1- Members of the municipal councils of Ramallah and Al-Bireh and staff of the Public Relations Departments in both municipalities.
- 2- Citizens residing in the cities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh.
- 3- Media academics and specialists in the field of new media.

Regarding municipal officials, questionnaires were distributed to members of the municipal councils and public relations staff in both municipalities. Only 14 complete questionnaires were received, which is attributed to the limited responsiveness of some council members and officials to participate in the study, despite repeated follow-up attempts. Therefore, the sample does not aim to represent a statistically significant population, but rather to provide institutional insights into accountability practices and communication mechanisms within the municipalities. This approach is consistent with exploratory and case-based research designs in governance studies.

For the citizens' perspective, a questionnaire was distributed to 91 respondents from Ramallah and Al-Bireh, providing a broader understanding of citizens' experiences and levels of satisfaction with municipal responses through Facebook.

In addition, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with media academics and new media specialists to enrich the qualitative dimension of the study and to provide expert perspectives on social media and accountability practices

### ***Data Collection Tools***

The study relied on four main data collection tools:

#### **1- Questionnaires**

- A questionnaire for municipal council members and public relations staff, focusing on accountability mechanisms, responsiveness, and communication practices.
- A questionnaire for citizens, focusing on satisfaction levels and perceptions of municipal responsiveness through Facebook.

#### **2- Content Analysis**

A systematic content analysis was conducted on 89 Facebook posts published on the official pages of the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, their mayors, and selected municipal council members during January 2023. The analysis focused on the nature of publications, levels of interaction, presence of negative comments related to accountability, and institutional responses to such comments.

#### **3- Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with media academics and new media specialists to explore the perceived role of social media in accountability, awareness-raising, and the challenges facing digital accountability mechanisms.

### ***Data Analysis Methods***

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and mean values, in order to identify patterns of interaction, responsiveness, and satisfaction levels. Given the exploratory nature of the study

and the limited number of institutional respondents, advanced inferential statistical tests were not employed. Instead, the analysis focused on identifying trends and relationships that reflect accountability practices within the studied municipalities.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews and content analysis were analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns related to accountability mechanisms, institutional behavior, and citizen engagement.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

To enhance the credibility of the study, multiple data sources and tools were employed, enabling cross-verification of findings across questionnaires, content analysis, and interviews. Although the study does not aim to generalize statistically, the use of a mixed-methods approach strengthens the internal validity of the results by providing converging evidence from different perspectives.

### **Field Study and Results**

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and content analysis of Facebook pages related to the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh.

***Table 1. Study Sample Distribution***

Study Group	Number of Respondents
Municipal council members & PR staff.	14
Citizens.	91
Media experts (interviews).	3
Total	108

### ***Results of Semi-Structured Interviews***

The interviews conducted with media academics and new media specialists indicate that social media plays a noticeable role in supporting accountability practices at the local level. Interviewees agreed that accountability through social media has a greater potential impact than traditional media, as it allows direct and immediate interaction between citizens and public officials.

The findings also show that Facebook contributes to raising citizens' awareness of accountability-related issues and enhances community participation. Experts emphasized that citizens increasingly rely on social media to express concerns, criticize public performance, and draw attention to local problems. However, interviewees noted that the effectiveness of social media in achieving accountability remains constrained by institutional responsiveness and citizens' hesitation to publicly criticize officials.

Regarding accountability mechanisms, experts indicated that writing posts, commenting on official pages, and mentioning municipal pages or officials contribute to

drawing attention to specific problems. Nevertheless, these mechanisms were assessed as having a moderate effect on problem-solving outcomes. The interviews further identified several challenges facing accountability through social media, including citizens' fear of expressing opinions, limited awareness of accountability mechanisms, social pressures, and concerns about potential restrictions or bans.

### ***Results of Content Analysis***

The content analysis covered 89 Facebook posts published on the official pages of the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, their mayors, and selected municipal council members during January 2023. The analysis reveals that the majority of municipal publications focused on administrative announcements and invitations to citizens, particularly related to tax payments, while limited attention was given to addressing citizens' problems or presenting accountability-related decisions.

***Table 2. Distribution of Analyzed Facebook Posts by Source***

Source	Number of Posts	Percentage (%)
Ramallah Municipality page	30	33.7
Al-Bireh Municipality page	30	33.7
Mayor of Ramallah	4	4.5
Mayor of Al-Bireh	7	7.9
Council member (Ramallah)	13	14.6
Council member (Al-Bireh)	5	5.6
Total	89	100

Interaction levels varied across posts, with most publications receiving a high number of reactions (likes) but a relatively low number of comments. Citizens were more likely to interact passively than to engage in written dialogue. Of the analyzed posts, 31 publications contained negative comments related to accountability. These comments were primarily associated with posts inviting citizens to comply with municipal obligations.

The findings demonstrate a very low level of institutional response to negative or critical comments. Only two negative comments received responses from municipal pages, while the vast majority of accountability-related criticism remained unanswered. This indicates that although municipalities maintain an active presence on Facebook, public responsiveness to accountability-related feedback is limited.

***Table 3. Municipal Responses to Negative Accountability-Related Comments***

Item	Number	Percentage (%)
Posts with negative comments	31	34.8
Posts without response	29	93.5
Posts with a response	2	6.5

### ***Results of Municipal Council and Public Relations Questionnaires***

The analysis of questionnaires completed by municipal council members and public relations staff shows that citizens primarily use private communication channels, particularly Facebook messaging, to convey accountability-related concerns. Respondents reported a high frequency of receiving messages, mentions, and direct contacts regarding citizens' problems.

The results also indicate that municipalities and council members demonstrate a relatively high level of internal responsiveness, as complaints are often transferred to relevant departments or discussed within municipal structures. However, public interaction through comments on Facebook posts is less frequent, suggesting a preference for administrative handling over public engagement.

### ***Results of Citizens' Questionnaires***

The findings from the citizens' questionnaire (91 respondents) indicate that citizens perceive Facebook as an important platform for communicating with municipalities and raising accountability-related issues. Respondents reported a moderate level of satisfaction with municipal responses to issues raised through Facebook.

***Table 4. Citizens' Satisfaction with Municipal Responses via Facebook***

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
Responsiveness via Facebook	3.01
Speed of response	2.88
Public commenting allowed	3.18
<b>Overall satisfaction</b>	<b>3.01</b>

While citizens acknowledged that writing posts and sending messages via Facebook can draw municipal attention to specific problems, many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the speed and visibility of public responses. Overall, the results reflect a discrepancy between citizens' expectations of accountability through social media and the level of public responsiveness demonstrated by municipalities.

### ***Summary of Key Results***

The empirical findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

- Social media plays a moderate role in promoting social accountability at the local level.
- Facebook contributes significantly to increasing community participation and awareness.
- Citizens prefer private communication (messaging) over public commenting.
- Municipalities demonstrate high internal responsiveness but very low public responsiveness to accountability-related criticism.
- Citizens report a moderate level of satisfaction with municipal responses through Facebook.

## Discussion of Results

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of Facebook in enhancing social accountability within local governments. Consistent with the theoretical literature on social accountability, the results indicate that social media contributes to expanding spaces for citizen participation and awareness, yet does not automatically lead to effective public accountability (Messner, 2009; Sahi & Salami, 2019).

The study reveals that Facebook plays a moderate role in the social accountability process, supporting previous research that emphasizes the limited institutionalization of accountability mechanisms through digital platforms (Shaheen, 2019; Al-Sawwah, 2019). While citizens actively use Facebook to express concerns and raise issues related to municipal performance, this engagement does not consistently translate into visible public responses from local authorities. This finding aligns with international studies suggesting that public institutions often prioritize information dissemination over dialogic engagement on social media platforms (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).

One of the most significant findings of the study is the clear discrepancy between internal responsiveness and public responsiveness. Municipalities and council members tend to respond to citizen complaints through administrative and internal channels, such as transferring complaints to relevant departments, rather than addressing accountability-related criticism publicly on Facebook pages. This practice reflects an institutional preference for managing accountability issues privately, which may limit transparency and reduce citizens' trust in digital accountability mechanisms. Similar patterns were identified by Shareem (2021), who noted that community accountability in Palestinian local authorities remains moderate due to weak follow-up and public engagement mechanisms.

The study also highlights citizens' preference for private communication channels, particularly Facebook messaging, over public commenting. This behavior can be explained by social and cultural factors, including fear of confrontation, social pressure, and concerns about potential negative consequences of public criticism. These findings support Al-Rawi's (2018) argument that while social media provides open spaces for expression, structural and cultural constraints continue to shape participation patterns in Arab societies.

Despite the low level of public responsiveness, citizens reported a moderate level of satisfaction with municipal responses through Facebook. This apparent contradiction suggests that citizens may evaluate responsiveness based on problem resolution rather than public dialogue. While private responses may address immediate concerns, the absence of visible public accountability limits the broader societal impact of social media as a tool for collective oversight and learning.

Overall, the findings indicate that Facebook functions more effectively as a communication and service-request platform than as a mechanism for transparent public

accountability. The study underscores the need for local governments to move beyond symbolic digital presence and to adopt clearer institutional strategies for engaging with citizens' accountability-related feedback publicly. Strengthening digital governance practices and formalizing response mechanisms on social media platforms can enhance the role of Facebook in promoting social accountability within local governments.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several practical and policy-oriented recommendations can be proposed to enhance the role of Facebook in promoting social accountability within local governments.

First, local governments should adopt clear institutional guidelines for managing official Facebook pages, particularly with regard to responding to accountability-related comments and criticism. Establishing formal response protocols can help ensure consistency, transparency, and timely engagement with citizens' concerns.

Second, municipalities are encouraged to strengthen the role of public relations departments by assigning trained staff members who are familiar with municipal decisions, services, and procedures to manage social media platforms. This would enable more effective monitoring of citizen feedback and improve the quality of public responses to accountability-related issues.

Third, municipal council members should be encouraged to view social media not only as a communication tool, but also as a platform for public engagement and accountability. Allocating dedicated time to respond to citizens' messages and public comments—especially critical ones—can enhance trust and reduce the gap between citizens and local decision-makers.

Fourth, the Ministry of Local Government, in cooperation with civil society organizations, should organize capacity-building workshops for municipal officials focusing on digital governance, social accountability, and effective use of social media platforms. Such initiatives can contribute to institutionalizing accountability practices and improving digital interaction with citizens.

Fifth, efforts should be made to raise citizens' awareness of the importance of social accountability and the appropriate use of social media as an accountability mechanism. Awareness campaigns and training activities can encourage constructive participation and reduce citizens' reliance on private communication channels at the expense of public dialogue.

Finally, municipalities should work toward integrating social media engagement into broader accountability and transparency frameworks, ensuring that digital interaction complements rather than replaces formal accountability mechanisms. This integration can enhance the role of Facebook as a tool for both service delivery communication and public oversight.

## Study Limitations

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations are related to the nature of the research design, data collection process, and scope of analysis, and they should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study adopts a case study approach, focusing on the municipalities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh. While this approach allows for an in-depth examination of social accountability practices within a specific local governance context, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other municipalities or national settings. However, the objective of the study is analytical rather than statistical generalization, aiming to provide contextual insights into digital accountability practices.

Second, the number of completed questionnaires obtained from municipal council members and public relations staff was limited. Although questionnaires were distributed to a broader group, not all council members and officials responded, resulting in a total of 14 valid responses. This limitation reflects practical challenges in accessing institutional actors and does not undermine the value of the findings, as the responses provide meaningful institutional perspectives within an exploratory framework.

Third, the study relies primarily on descriptive statistical analysis to examine questionnaire data. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limited number of institutional respondents, advanced inferential statistical tests were not employed. While this limits the strength of statistical inference, the use of multiple research tools-including content analysis and qualitative interviews-helps compensate for this limitation by providing triangulated evidence.

Fourth, the content analysis was confined to Facebook publications during a specific time period. Although this allowed for focused and systematic analysis, extending the analysis over a longer period could provide additional insights into evolving interaction patterns and accountability practices.

Finally, social and cultural factors-such as citizens' fear of public criticism, social pressure, and preferences for private communication-may have influenced participation patterns and response behaviors on social media. These factors are difficult to measure quantitatively and represent an inherent limitation in studies examining digital accountability in socially sensitive contexts.

Recognizing these limitations does not diminish the value of the study; rather, it provides a transparent framework for understanding its findings and highlights opportunities for future research on digital governance and social accountability in local government settings.

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