Strategies for Social Response to Risk: Research on the Connotation and Operational Mechanism of Digital Governance

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Abstract: In response to multifaceted crises arising from a risk society, transforming the current governance model through digital governance to achieve "decentralization" should be a key priority for the nation. By clarifying that digital governance involves collaborative participation of the government and other social governance entities, guided by civil society needs, and optimized through modern information technology to enhance governmental functions, this model aims to improve governance efficiency, unleash social governance potential, and advance the modernization of governance capabilities. It proposes establishing a digital governance framework comprising open decision-making mechanisms, citizen awareness cultivation mechanisms, digital evaluation systems, multi-stakeholder participation mechanisms, information resource allocation mechanisms, and institutional and legal frameworks. This framework provides actionable recommendations for digital governance development, driving the modernization of the national governance system and capabilities.

Keywords: risk society; digital governance; connotation; operational mechanism

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1. Introduction

With the advancement of productivity and technology, humanity has entered the post-industrial era, and human society has transitioned into a risk society. While nations have experienced rapid development over the past century, risks have accumulated at an unprecedented pace, gradually positioning them at the epicenter of this global risk wave. Under the dual influence of continuously emerging risks and the shifting risk transfer structure from core to periphery, risks are accumulating across various sectors. Society now faces intangible crises in economic, political, technological, and informational domains, making it increasingly challenging for governments to manage risks alone. To better fulfill people's aspirations for a better life and achieve the goal of building a socialist harmonious society, the Party Central Committee has proposed a more proactive approach to confronting and resolving contradictions. Addressing the issue that outdated

governance systems struggle to cope with the advent of a risk society, this paper explores the essence and operational mechanisms of digital governance in the new era, seeking pathways to address risks in this context.

2. Literature Review on Digital Governance

The concept of digital governance emerged alongside the expansion of digital technology and networked social relations. In both international and Chinese scholarship, it has gradually developed from earlier discussions of e-government and e-governance into a broader framework for understanding how digital technology reshapes public affairs, governance structures, and state-society relations. Against this background, domestic research has increasingly focused on the connotation, governance orientation, and practical operation of digital governance. (Zhu, Z., & Chen, D., 2014)

The integration of multi-stakeholder governance and modern information technology represents a key element of digital governance widely recognized by Chinese scholars. On one hand, the dynamic interactions among social governance actors—including governments, enterprises, citizens, and social organizations—are considered defining features of digital governance. These ongoing exchanges enable coordinated actions among stakeholders, enhance governance effectiveness, and drive social governance toward greater efficiency, scientific rigor, transparency, democracy, diversity, and inclusivity (Wei, L., Gu, C., Ni, G., Wang, Y., & Li, T., 2021). On the other hand, modern information technology serves as the foundational framework for digital governance. The rapid advancement of information technology has undoubtedly facilitated sustained connectivity among stakeholders, playing an irreplaceable role in resource sharing, interconnectivity, and knowledge integration processes within digital governance systems.

However, there remain some disagreements within academia regarding governance targets, priorities, and objectives, giving rise to several representative viewpoints.

Regarding the object of digital governance, existing research mainly presents two views. One view understands it primarily as the governance of digital resources and data, emphasizing data preservation, archiving, and reuse in the digital era. The other view understands it as the governance of public affairs under digital conditions, stressing the integration of digital technology with governance structures and public problem-solving. Compared with the former, the latter places greater emphasis on the governance process itself and provides a broader basis for explaining how digital governance responds to social risks.

In terms of value orientation, current studies also show two main tendencies. One treats digital governance mainly as a means of improving governmental operation, with emphasis on administrative efficiency, process optimization, and service delivery. The other stresses a citizen-centered orientation, arguing that digital governance should respond to public needs and expand citizens' channels of participation. The difference between the two is not simply one of emphasis. It reflects a deeper divergence over whether digital governance should be understood primarily as government reform or as a broader reconstruction of public governance relations. (Jia, K., 2020; Fan, B., & Wang, Y., 2021)

With regard to long-term objectives, one line of research highlights efficiency gains, viewing digital governance as a way to improve administrative coordination and governance effectiveness (Fan, B., & Wang, Y., 2021). Another line places more emphasis on governance modernization, arguing that digital governance is significant not only because it enhances efficiency, but also because it reshapes governance concepts, institutional arrangements, and the overall capacity of the governance system. This difference shows that existing scholarship has not yet formed a fully unified understanding of the ultimate direction of digital governance (Wei, L., Gu, C., Ni, G., Wang, Y., & Li, T., 2021).

Existing studies have provided important discussions on the object, value orientation, and developmental goals of digital governance, but three limitations remain. First, much of the literature stays at the level of concept description and element listing, while the author's own analytical position is often not clearly separated from the review of existing views. Second, although digital governance is frequently linked to governance modernization, the specific logic through which it responds to the conditions of a risk society has not been sufficiently clarified. Third, discussion of operational mechanisms is still relatively limited, and existing accounts often remain at the level of functional classification rather than mechanism analysis in a stricter sense. Accordingly, this paper re-examines the connotation of digital governance from the perspective of risk society and further discusses its operational mechanism.

3. The Connotation of Digital Governance

Conceptually, digital governance developed out of earlier discussions of e-government and e-governance. Early discussions of e-government mainly focused on the use of information and communication technologies to improve administrative efficiency, optimize governmental structures, and enhance public service delivery (Yang, Y., 2015). As the discussion developed, the notion of e-governance extended beyond government informatization and placed greater emphasis on interaction among multiple actors, public participation, and the use of technology in the governance of public affairs (Huang, H., 2018).

This paper understands digital governance not simply as the digital upgrading of governmental administration, nor merely as the governance of data and digital resources. Rather, it refers to a governance process in which the government and other social actors make use of digital technology to identify, coordinate, respond to, and regulate public risks and public affairs. In this sense, digital governance is defined not only by its technical basis, but also by its multi-actor structure, public orientation, and capacity for risk response.

More specifically, the connotation of digital governance in this paper can be understood through four dimensions. First, in terms of actor structure, it involves not only government, but also enterprises, citizens, and social organizations. Second, in terms of governance object, it is oriented toward public affairs and public risks rather than toward data management alone. Third, in terms of operational basis, it relies on digital technology, data connectivity, and platform-based coordination to reorganize governance processes (Han, Z., & Shan, T., 2015). Fourth, in terms of value orientation, it aims at improving governance capacity, strengthening public responsiveness, and advancing the modernization of the governance system (Wei, L., Gu, C., Ni, G., Wang, Y., & Li, T., 2021).

Under the conditions of a risk society, this understanding of digital governance highlights not only the application of digital tools, but also the reorganization of governance capacity through coordination, participation, information sharing, and institutional response.

4. Digital Governance Mechanism

In sociological analysis, a mechanism refers not simply to a list of institutional elements, but to the way different elements are connected and made to function together in a relatively stable process. From the perspective of a risk society, the significance of digital governance lies not only in the use of digital tools, but also in the formation of an operational structure through which risks can be identified, coordinated, responded to, and regulated. For this reason, the operational mechanisms of digital governance should be understood as a dynamic system in which different components perform distinct functions while remaining mutually connected (Zheng, H., & Li, Q., 1993).

4.1 The Basic Structure of the Mechanism System

The operational mechanisms of digital governance are not a set of isolated institutional arrangements. Rather, they form a connected process through which public risks enter the governance agenda,

governance actors are mobilized, information and digital resources are coordinated, governance outcomes are evaluated and adjusted, and the whole process is stabilized through civic support and institutional safeguards. In this paper, this mechanism system includes six interrelated components: open decision-making, multi-stakeholder participation, information resource allocation, evaluation and feedback, civic awareness cultivation, and institutional-legal safeguards. These components do not operate at the same level, but together form a mechanism chain that links agenda setting, participation, coordination, correction, motivation, and stabilization. The relationships among these components may be summarized as shown in Figure 1.

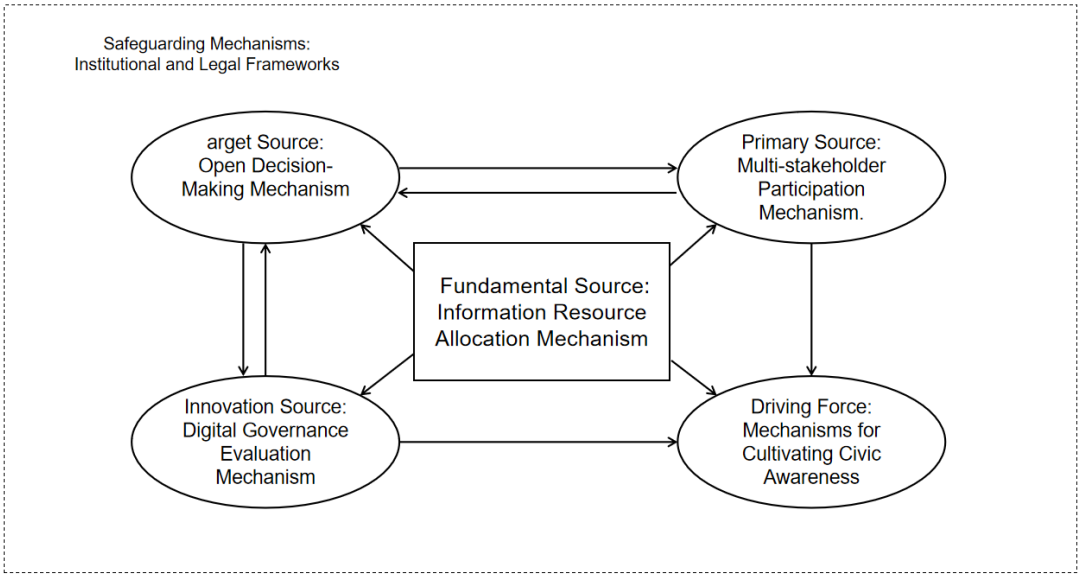

Figure 1. Digital Governance Mechanism System

4.2 Mechanism System of Digital Governance Model

(1) Target Source: Open Decision-Making Mechanism. In the context of a risk society, the first task of digital governance is to make risks visible and bring them into the governance agenda in a timely manner. The open decision-making mechanism refers to a shift from relatively closed governmental decision-making to a more open structure in which government departments, enterprises, social organizations, and citizens can participate in the identification of issues, the expression of demands, and the discussion of policy options through digital platforms. Its core function is to broaden the channels through which information enters the decision-making process, thereby improving the responsiveness and inclusiveness of governance. At the same time, this mechanism provides the entry point for the subsequent participation, coordination, and feedback mechanisms.

(2) Primary Source: Multi-stakeholder Participation Mechanism. Once public risks and governance issues enter the decision-making agenda, digital governance requires the coordinated participation of multiple actors. This mechanism refers to the involvement of governments, enterprises, citizens, and social organizations in governance processes that can no longer be effectively managed by the state alone. Its significance lies in transforming governance from a government-centered model into a collaborative structure in which different actors contribute information, resources, and problem-solving capacity. In this sense, multi-stakeholder participation is not a symbolic supplement to governance, but a necessary condition for expanding governance capacity under complex risk conditions.

(3) Fundamental Source: Information Resource Allocation Mechanism. Collaborative governance in digital settings depends not only on the willingness of actors to participate, but also on their access to relevant information and digital resources. The information resource allocation mechanism refers to the process through which data, platform access, and informational resources are distributed, shared, and connected among different governance actors. Its function is to reduce information asymmetry, improve coordination efficiency, and provide the material basis for cross-sector collaboration. Without such a mechanism, participation may remain formal, while actual coordination capacity remains weak.

(4) Innovation Source: Digital Governance Evaluation Mechanism. Because risks are dynamic and governance conditions constantly change, digital governance cannot rely on one-time decision-making alone. The evaluation and feedback mechanism enables governance actors to assess outcomes, identify problems in implementation, and adjust subsequent action on the basis of performance information, public response, and coordination effects. Its role is therefore not merely evaluative, but corrective. By linking governance outcomes back to the decision-making process, this mechanism helps digital governance maintain adaptability under uncertain conditions.

(5) Driving Force: Mechanisms for Cultivating Civic Awareness. The long-term operation of digital governance also depends on whether citizens are willing and able to participate in public affairs. The civic awareness cultivation mechanism refers to the gradual formation of citizens' awareness of rights, obligations, public responsibility, and participation (Shi, L., 2009). Its function is to provide a relatively stable motivational basis for digital governance, so that participation is not limited to temporary mobilization or technical access alone. In this sense, civic awareness cultivation is not external to the mechanism system, but an important condition for sustaining participation and enhancing the social foundation of governance.

(6) Safeguarding Mechanisms: Institutional and Legal Frameworks. The operation of digital governance must ultimately be stabilized by institutional and legal arrangements. This mechanism defines the boundaries of authority, regulates the collection and use of data, clarifies responsibilities among governance actors, and provides protections for citizens' rights. In the absence of such safeguards, digital governance may increase efficiency while simultaneously generating new risks related to power concentration, data misuse, and weak accountability. Institutional and legal safeguards therefore provide the normative and procedural boundaries within which the other mechanisms can operate in a stable and legitimate manner.

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