

From Civic Voice to Synthetic Influence: AI, SDGs, and the Future of Political Communication

Daniele Battista, PhD
Arthur Gugliucciello
University of Salerno, Italy

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is becoming an infrastructure of political communication rather than a discrete campaign tool. It affects how sustainability issues become visible, how publics are segmented, how institutions listen, and how political claims are verified. This article examines the relationship between artificial intelligence and the Sustainable Development Goals through a communication-centred perspective. A critical qualitative review of scholarship and institutional documents is combined with an illustrative comparative reading of three purposively selected cases: UNDP's NDC x SDG Insights, Decidim Barcelona, and the UNDP-UrbanistAI consultation in Skopje. The cases were chosen to represent data-to-narrative translation, the organization of civic input, and generative co-creation. The analysis supports a four-dimensional matrix based on visibility, voice, verifiability, and vulnerability. The analysis shows that automated systems can translate complex policy data into accessible narratives, support deliberation, and widen the reach of public communication. The same infrastructures can also fragment audiences, intensify political targeting, automate persuasive content, and erode trust through synthetic media and opaque moderation. Their democratic value therefore depends on disclosure, contestability, plural exposure, human oversight, and equitable access. Responsible governance should treat communication as a constitutive dimension of sustainable policy rather than a downstream exercise in dissemination.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; Sustainable Development Goals; political communication; algorithmic accountability; democratic participation

Introduction

The politics of sustainability is also a politics of communication. Sustainability targets become politically actionable only when data and goals are translated into public priorities, distributive trade-offs, responsibilities, and narratives about who should act and who bears costs; communication therefore shapes not only awareness, but also the legitimacy of sustainable policy. The Sustainable Development Goals do not enter public life as neutral facts: they are selected, framed, narrated, contested, and translated into claims about costs, responsibilities, and possible futures. In a deeply mediatized and platformized public arena, those processes increasingly occur through infrastructures that rank visibility, profile audiences, recommend content, and automate interaction (van Dijck et al., 2018). Artificial intelligence extends this transformation by adding predictive segmentation, generative production, conversational interfaces, and automated moderation to the repertoire of political actors.

Research on digital politics has already shown that platforms reorganize leadership, representation, and audience relations. Digital embodiment shows how online political identity is co-constructed through mediated performances (Auriemma et al., 2023). Studies conducted in Italy provide one strand of the comparative literature, showing how visual formats, personalization, and platform-specific styles can turn political performance into a form of continuous audience governance (Battista, 2023b, 2023c, 2024c; Battista et al., 2026). These Italian studies are used here as theoretical background, not as the empirical study area: the three institutional cases analysed below are international and were selected for their different communicative functions. AI does not replace these dynamics; it intensifies them. It can lower the cost of producing persuasive messages, increase the granularity of targeting, and make institutions appear permanently responsive. At the same time, it can conceal the choices through which public attention is allocated and political relevance is constructed (Jungherr, 2023; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018).

This article asks how AI-mediated political communication can support public engagement with the SDGs without weakening the common informational conditions required for democratic judgement. The analysis addresses Agenda 2030 as an integrated framework, but its democratic communication focus is anchored especially in SDG 16, including inclusive and participatory decision-making (Target 16.7) and public access to information (Target 16.10); the selected cases also engage SDG 11 on

sustainable cities and communities and SDG 13 on climate action (United Nations, 2015). Its argument is that the democratic quality of AI cannot be inferred from efficiency, reach, or engagement alone. It must be assessed through four communicative dimensions: visibility, or what becomes publicly salient; voice, or who can speak and be heard; verifiability, or whether claims and procedures can be inspected; and vulnerability, or which groups and institutions bear the risks of manipulation and exclusion. This shift places communication at the centre of AI governance and recasts the SDGs as contested political agendas rather than merely technical targets.

From platformization to algorithmic political communication

The hybrid media system described by Chadwick (2017) is now increasingly organized by platform power. Platforms do not simply carry political messages: they establish the conditions under which campaigns, institutions, journalists, and citizens encounter one another. Their data structures and commercial priorities become embedded in public communication (van Dijck, 2013; Poell et al., 2019). Algorithms remain shaped by institutional choices and human agency rather than operating as autonomous media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2018), but their opacity and scale redistribute communicative power toward platform companies and technical intermediaries (Gillespie, 2018; Kreiss, 2016).

AI broadens this infrastructure along three connected axes. First, it enhances audience modelling: digital traces can be used to infer preferences and tailor messages to narrowly defined publics (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2018). Second, it automates symbolic production, enabling rapid variations of text, image, audio, and video. Third, it performs relational work through chatbots, recommendation systems, and content moderation. These functions affect not only elections but also everyday communication through which governments explain policy, claim responsiveness, and construct legitimacy (Ju et al., 2023; Kankanhalli et al., 2019).

These axes should not be mistaken for a simple modernization of campaign technique. Digital media have already required political organizations to retool routines, professional roles, and forms of public listening (Jungherr et al., 2020). AI adds a generative layer to this adaptation: communication can be tested, recombined, and optimized continuously in response to behavioural data. Its power is also anticipatory. Political actors and citizens imagine how ranking systems will react and modify their conduct accordingly, so algorithmic power operates through expectations as well as outputs (Bucher, 2018). In the most adversarial form, computational propaganda combines automation, platform affordances, and organized human strategy to simulate popularity or intensify conflict (Woolley & Howard, 2018). In institutional SDG communication, the same logic can

produce a quieter distortion: policy messages may be optimized for measurable engagement at the expense of complexity, uncertainty, or politically inconvenient trade-offs.

This development supports the notion of algorithmic political communication: a field in which message production, circulation, reception, and feedback are jointly structured by data and automated inference. Studies of platform leadership and political personalization show that digital visibility is relational and uneven, while work on AI and media-politics stresses that technical affordances become politically consequential through narratives, institutions, and strategic use (Battista, 2024a, 2024b; Battista & Petrone, 2024). The relevant question is therefore not whether AI is intrinsically democratic, but which actors can use it, under what rules, with what forms of public accountability, and to whose communicative advantage.

Methods

The study adopts a critical qualitative review combined with an illustrative comparative case reading. Academic research on political communication, platform governance, disinformation, AI ethics, and communication for development was read alongside selected institutional documents. The review was organized around sources that explicitly address how automated or data-driven systems mediate public visibility, citizen input, verification, or vulnerability in sustainability and democratic communication. Three cases were purposively selected: UNDP's NDC x SDG Insights, Decidim Barcelona, and the UNDP Accelerator Lab/UrbanistAI consultation in Skopje. The cases were chosen because they represent three different communicative functions, respectively: data-to-narrative translation, the organization of citizen input, and generative co-creation, while also varying in institutional level and degree of automation. The design is interpretive rather than evaluative and does not claim causal generalization (Yin, 2018).

The review privileges sources that explain communicative mechanisms rather than cataloguing AI applications by sector. Case selection was not country-based and does not treat Italy as the study area. NDC x SDG Insights is a transnational UNDP policy initiative; Decidim Barcelona is a municipal participatory infrastructure in Spain and is included as a participatory baseline rather than as a fully AI-driven platform; UrbanistAI in Skopje is a local, facilitated consultation in North Macedonia using generative imagery. This maximum-variation logic enables comparison across policy coordination, digital participation, and face-to-face generative consultation. They are treated as analytic illustrations, not as equivalent technologies or best-practice rankings. Evidence concerns publicly documented design and use; the study does not audit source code, training data, or measured policy outcomes. This limitation is deliberate because the inquiry asks what

democratic criteria political communication research should bring to evaluation. It also means that conclusions identify conditions for responsible practice rather than estimating effects on attitudes or behaviour.

Each case is assessed through the four-V matrix. Visibility examines agenda-setting and framing effects; voice considers reciprocity, inclusion, and contestation; verifiability concerns provenance, intelligibility, and auditability; vulnerability addresses manipulation, discriminatory error, unequal access, and institutional dependence. This framework distinguishes participation from interaction and reach from democratic communication. It also prevents an instrumental reading in which any increase in engagement is automatically interpreted as civic empowerment.

Results

Communicating the goals: agenda setting, framing, and participation

Agenda 2030 requires more than measurement. Its implementation depends on sustained public attention and on the capacity to connect abstract global targets with lived local problems (United Nations, 2015). AI can support this task by detecting patterns in large datasets, generating accessible summaries, adapting information to linguistic or accessibility needs, and helping institutions answer recurrent questions. Research on AI and the SDGs identifies substantial potential across environmental, social, and economic domains, while also warning that gains are uneven and can be offset by new inequalities (Vinueza et al., 2020).

From a political communication perspective, however, translation is never neutral. A dashboard defines what counts as relevant evidence; a chatbot privileges particular formulations; a recommendation system distributes unequal visibility; and a generated image can make one policy future appear more imaginable than another. Communication for development therefore remains essential: participation, cultural adaptation, and local mediation must accompany technical deployment (Servaes, 2022). Without those conditions, personalization risks becoming a one-way strategy of persuasion rather than a resource for public reasoning.

The stakes are especially clear because SDG policies redistribute resources across time, territories, and social groups. Climate mitigation, urban mobility, energy transition, and social protection create visible winners, costs, and conflicts. AI-generated summaries can clarify such interdependence, but they can also depoliticize it by presenting contested priorities as the inevitable output of data. A communication-centred approach should preserve the distinction between evidence, prediction, recommendation, and political choice. It should also make uncertainty communicable: citizens need to know not only what a system proposes, but which assumptions, omissions, and value judgements structure that proposal. Public engagement becomes meaningful

when it can reshape the frame of the problem, not merely select among preconfigured options.

A responsible model should combine accessibility with plural exposure. Recommender systems can be designed to protect diversity rather than maximize only predicted engagement (Helberger et al., 2018), while public-sector AI should provide meaningful explanations and routes for human review. This approach is consistent with public-reason accounts of algorithmic accountability and with human-centred ethical frameworks (Binns, 2018; Floridi, 2018; Floridi et al., 2018; Taddeo & Floridi, 2018). It also aligns AI policy with the communicative rights implied by democratic participation: the ability to receive intelligible information, challenge classifications, and influence the terms of debate.

Across the three selected cases, these democratic conditions are present unevenly rather than fully realized. NDC x SDG Insights strengthens visibility by translating climate-development interdependencies into policy narratives, but citizen voice is mainly indirect (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Decidim Barcelona offers explicit proposal traceability and institutional response, while any use of clustering, summarization, or categorization must remain contestable so that minority positions are not flattened (Decidim, n.d.; Morozov & Bria, 2018). The UrbanistAI workshop in Skopje expands expressive participation by allowing participants to visualize alternative urban futures, while making prompt design, facilitation, and unequal digital literacy part of the communicative process (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). The cases therefore show partial and differentiated alignment with the four-V criteria rather than a single model of 'good' AI communication.

Comparative illustrations: visibility, voice, verifiability, and vulnerability

Three institutional illustrations clarify the framework. These are the study's purposively selected cases, not incidental worldwide examples, and they are compared as distinct institutional configurations rather than as a representative sample. UNDP's NDC x SDG Insights is a cross-national initiative that uses data, artificial intelligence, and systems analysis to connect climate commitments with development priorities and to produce evidence-based policy narratives, directly linking climate action with SDG acceleration (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Decidim Barcelona is a participatory infrastructure rather than an AI system per se; it is included as a baseline because its traceable proposal workflow and public institutional responses illustrate procedural conditions that any AI-assisted clustering or summarization layer should preserve (Decidim, n.d.; Morozov & Bria, 2018). In Skopje, a UNDP Accelerator Lab workshop used UrbanistAI to let participants generate visual proposals for cooler and greener public spaces,

demonstrating how generative systems can support collective imagination rather than merely disseminate finished plans (United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

Table 1: Communication-centred comparison of illustrative cases

Case	Visibility	Voice	Verifiability	Vulnerability
NDC x SDG Insights	Links climate and development data in a policy narrative.	Indirect support for coalition building.	Requires documented data and model assumptions.	Technocratic framing; unequal data control.
Decidim Barcelona	Surfaces proposals and public priorities.	Reciprocal if clusters remain contestable.	Open procedures and traceable proposals.	Minority meanings may be lost; participation remains unequal.
UNDP-UrbanistAI, Skopje	Visualizes alternative urban futures.	Workshop-based co-creation.	Requires prompt, facilitation, and revision records.	Visual authority, facilitation bias, and unequal literacy.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Decidim (n.d.), Morozov and Bria (2018), and United Nations Development Programme (n.d., 2024)

The comparison shows that the democratic value of these systems lies in the relationship between affordance and procedure. Data-to-narrative tools can make complex policy interdependencies visible, but they may shift authority toward actors who control models and datasets. Proposal clustering can help institutions process participation at scale, but categories must remain contestable because low-frequency or ambiguous claims may represent politically marginalized voices rather than noise. Generative visualization can lower barriers to expressing alternative futures, yet images carry a persuasive authority that may obscure how prompts, defaults, and facilitation shaped the result.

Across the cases, voice is strongest where automation expands a feedback loop rather than substituting for it. Citizens should be able to see how contributions were grouped, recover statements that resist categorisation, and receive a reasoned response from the responsible institution. Verifiability must therefore include procedural traceability: records of model use, prompt and data provenance where appropriate, revision histories, moderation criteria, and an explanation of how outputs entered the final decision. Such documentation converts transparency from a technical disclosure into a communicative relationship in which institutions can be questioned and held to account.

Consequently, participation cannot be measured by the number of clicks, prompts, or submitted proposals alone. It requires traceable influence

over decision-making and the possibility of dissent. Open-source design may improve scrutiny, but code transparency by itself does not resolve unequal expertise or access. Digital inequalities remain social and institutional inequalities; communities with limited connectivity, language resources, or technical capacity are also less able to contest automated representations (Salzano et al., 2023). Digital exclusion and low digital, media, or AI literacy, sometimes discussed as 'illectronism', are therefore not peripheral barriers: when access, skills, assistive resources, or alternative offline channels are absent, the formal availability of an AI-enabled participation system does not translate into an equal capacity to exercise democratic voice (Auriemma & Battista, 2023; Salzano et al., 2023).

Discussion

Result 1: AI-mediated SDG communication and the integrity of the public information environment

The first result indicates that AI-mediated SDG communication is democratically productive only when increased visibility and accessibility are accompanied by reciprocal voice, verifiable procedures, and protection against communicative vulnerability. Accessibility and personalization therefore cannot be assessed independently from the integrity of the shared information environment: the same infrastructures that translate policy complexity can also fragment audiences, personalize claims beyond public scrutiny, and accelerate synthetic or strategically unverifiable content.

The same infrastructures that expand communicative capacity can be used to fragment publics and manufacture uncertainty. Political microtargeting transforms citizens into inferred profiles and can deliver inconsistent claims to audiences that cannot easily observe one another. This weakens the publicity on which democratic accountability depends (Battista & Uva, 2023; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Engagement-oriented ranking can further privilege emotionally charged content, although evidence on filter bubbles is more complex than deterministic accounts suggest (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá, 2020; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

Generative AI adds scale and plausibility to this environment. Deepfakes and synthetic audio can falsely attribute speech, damage candidates, and create a liar's dividend in which authentic evidence is dismissed as fabricated (Battista, 2024a; Diakopoulos & Johnson, 2021; Langguth et al., 2021; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Social bots and coordinated networks amplify these materials, while misinformation can spread as a complex contagion through communities already structured by distrust (Ferrara et al., 2016; Törnberg, 2018). In sustainability politics, these techniques can delay collective action by attacking expertise, polarizing risk perceptions, or reframing long-term policies as elite coercion.

The communicative effect is not limited to persuading audiences that a false claim is true. A high volume of contradictory or unverifiable content can make shared judgement feel impossible, displace attention from substantive choices, and force institutions into permanent reactive correction. Synthetic media may therefore succeed by increasing uncertainty or cynicism even when individual fabrications are exposed. This is particularly damaging to the SDGs, whose implementation depends on long time horizons, cumulative expertise, and cooperation among actors who may disagree on means. The relevant resilience objective is not a perfectly purified information space, but an environment in which provenance, correction, and accountable interpretation remain socially available.

The problem is institutional as much as informational. Disinformation flourishes where public authority and journalism have lost credibility (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), and post-truth styles exploit the affinity between fragmented media orders and antagonistic political identities (Waisbord, 2018). Italian and international analyses similarly connect disinformation with security, rights, and democratic instability (Battista, 2023a; Battista & Uva, 2025; Gallo et al., 2022). Detection systems are useful but insufficient: automated moderation introduces errors and political choices of its own (Bontridder & Pouillet, 2021; Gorwa et al., 2020). Effective responses must combine provenance standards, rapid contextual verification, platform accountability, media and AI literacy, and opportunities for subjects to contest harmful content (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Saurwein et al., 2015).

Result 2: Institutional variation across visibility, voice, verifiability, and vulnerability

Governance must also address structural vulnerability. Data-intensive systems may reproduce discrimination, widen informational divides, and normalize surveillance as the price of personalized public services (Crawford, 2021; Eubanks, 2018; Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Evaluative and artificial intelligence literacy is therefore part of democratic resilience, because citizens need the competence to question classifications and claims rather than merely consume personalized outputs (Auriemma & Battista, 2023). The UNESCO ethical framework accordingly emphasizes transparency, fairness, human oversight, and inclusion (UNESCO, 2021). These principles should be translated into communication-specific duties: clear labelling of synthetic media, accessible explanations of targeting and recommendation, public archives of institutional AI content, independent audits, and non-digital channels for those who cannot or do not wish to participate through AI-mediated systems.

Read comparatively, the cases do not display a single democratic trajectory. NDC x SDG Insights is strongest on visibility and policy coherence

but leaves citizen voice largely indirect; Decidim institutionalizes traceability and reciprocal participation but requires safeguards against exclusion and over-simplified categorization; UrbanistAI broadens expressive participation through generative visualization while making facilitation, prompt design, and digital literacy more consequential. The four-V matrix therefore functions as a diagnostic rather than a ranking: each institutional configuration redistributes communicative benefits and risks differently.

Conclusions

Two findings emerge from the analysis. First, AI can improve the visibility and accessibility of SDG communication while simultaneously weakening common informational conditions; second, institutional design determines whether participation becomes reciprocal, verifiable, and inclusive. AI can make sustainability policy more intelligible, responsive, and participatory, but it can also turn public communication into an opaque system of prediction and behavioural influence. The four-V framework makes this ambivalence analytically visible. Visibility without voice produces publicity without participation; voice without verifiability leaves citizens unable to understand how their contributions were processed; verifiability without attention to vulnerability privileges those already equipped to audit systems; and inclusion without common exposure risks fragmenting the public basis of collective choice.

Communication-centred AI governance should therefore evaluate not only accuracy and efficiency, but also publicness, reciprocity, contestability, and distributive effects. Institutions communicating the SDGs should disclose when and how AI is used, preserve human responsibility for consequential decisions, document the provenance of synthetic content, design for plural exposure, and demonstrate how citizen input affects outcomes. Such safeguards are not constraints external to innovation. They are the conditions under which technological mediation can acquire democratic legitimacy.

The broader conclusion is that sustainable development cannot be separated from sustainable communication. If AI is treated merely as a faster channel, it may intensify the very inequalities and distrust that Agenda 2030 seeks to overcome. If it is governed as a political communication infrastructure, however, it can help institutions translate complexity without erasing conflict, widen participation without converting citizens into targets, and support collective action while preserving the right to question the systems that mediate it. Because the cases are international and purposively selected analytic illustrations, these conclusions should be read as transferable evaluative criteria rather than as population-level or country-specific generalizations.

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