

# Media Narratives and the Case for Accelerated Digital Transformation in City of Johannesburg (2022-25)

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## 1 ABSTRACT

The City of Johannesburg (CoJ) continues to position digital transformation as a central pillar of its shift toward smart urban management, with platforms such as Joburg Connect, the e-Joburg Portal, and the My Smart City App intended to modernise service reporting, spatial data management, and administrative coordination. Yet media reporting from 2022–2025 paints a picture of severe governance instability, deteriorating infrastructure, and persistent service failures, raising critical questions about the role digital systems can realistically play in stabilising a fragmented metropolitan region. Drawing on Digital Media Content Analysis of major South African media outlets, this study examines how service delivery narratives construct public perceptions of municipal capacity and identifies the governance gaps that digital systems could potentially address.

Media accounts consistently portray Johannesburg as experiencing chronic infrastructure failures, leadership volatility, and weak institutional coherence. These narratives reveal that service failures are often exacerbated by slow information flows, poor interdepartmental coordination, fragmented reporting mechanisms, and an absence of real-time operational data, precisely the areas where digital service delivery tools have the greatest transformative potential. Rather than viewing digitalisation as a superficial “digital band-aid,” the media evidence suggests that more comprehensive adoption of integrated digital systems could strengthen early detection of service failures, improve cross-regional coordination, and allow planners to make more evidence-driven decisions.

The study argues that Johannesburg’s governance crisis demonstrates not the limits of digital transformation, but the urgency of accelerating it. Effective metropolitan management will require the expansion of interoperable digital platforms, citywide data governance standards, and unified reporting frameworks capable of producing equitable, real-time insights. Strengthening digital adoption is therefore essential for rebuilding institutional capacity, restoring citizen trust, and improving the responsiveness of regional planning systems.

**Keywords:** Digital governance, Smart urban management, Digital service delivery tools, Media narratives, City of Johannesburg

## 2 INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of digital technology in cities across the globe is becoming an essential component of urban government, providing citizens with streamlined access to municipal services and increased opportunities to participate in their local government. The development of the 'smart city' concept has driven a major shift in how municipalities govern their cities and provide services to citizens, through the integration of digital technologies into solutions for complex urban problems (Fernandez-Anez et al., 2018; Lytras et al., 2018).

Johannesburg, the largest metropolitan municipality in South Africa, has established a "Smart City" vision, which reflects the current international trends toward automation, using data to inform decisions, and delivering services electronically (Netshirando, Munyoka, & Kadyamatimba, 2024; City of Johannesburg, 2021).

In the last ten years, Johannesburg has launched numerous digital platforms to increase the efficiency of its municipal operations and to engage citizens. Some of these digital platforms are the e-Joburg portal to pay bills online, the Joburg Connect application to interact with customers, the My Smart City mobile app to report faults, geographic information systems to create and manage maps based on geographic information, and cloud-based administrative systems (City of Johannesburg, 2022). These are part of a larger initiative by South Africa to transform digitally, supported at the national level by policies and frameworks like the

National e-Government Strategy (2017), the National Integrated ICT Policy (2016), the SA Connect Broadband Policy (2013) and updated versions of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) legislation regarding the collection, storage and usage of personal information (Government of South Africa, 2025; DPSA, 2021).

Despite significant advances in technology and other forms of innovation, the performance of service delivery for residents of Johannesburg continues to deteriorate, as evidenced by repeated failures of city infrastructure, disruptions to the water supply system, continued power outages, a complete collapse of the city's waste management systems, and overall urban decay. Leadership instability is another issue hounding the city of Johannesburg, where there have been nine mayors in the last eight years, creating an environment that does not allow for effective and continuous governance (Masiya, 2022; The Star, 2024). Reporting on the crisis of public trust and frustration in the form of protests and failed governance at all levels of service delivery in 2022-2025 through the media demonstrates a broad level of public dissatisfaction.

### 3 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Smart Governance and Urban Digitalisation

Digital governance is one of the most important aspects of urban transformations for all cities globally and for cities both in the developed and developing world. The smart city agenda has been gaining momentum globally as cities are looking to use digital technologies to improve the way they govern locally with improved efficiency, increased transparency, and greater inclusion in the participatory processes of local governance (Lytras et al., 2018; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). At its heart, smart governance represents the idea that digital technologies will improve public administrations, citizen involvement, and provide evidence-based decision-making through data analysis (Connolly & Bannister, 2012). Examples of cities that have established themselves as model smart city environments include Barcelona, Singapore and Tallinn, and these cities represent highly advanced smart city environments where digitalization is incorporated into transport, energy, planning, citizen reporting, and administrative functions (Espinosa & Pino, 2024; Bakıcı, Almirall, & Wareham, 2013). These examples demonstrate that while technology is necessary for digital transformation, it is also dependent upon governance stability, institutional capacity and coherent strategic leadership.

#### 3.2 Digital transformation in the Global South

Digital Transformation in the Global South is quite a different picture. While there is increasing enthusiasm for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) -based governance models globally, numerous municipalities in Africa are finding it challenging to acquire the fundamental resources required to be able to implement and sustain e-government systems, which include reliable electrical power, robust physical infrastructure, affordable Internet access, and adequate governmental administrative capacity (Shava & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2025; United Nations, 2022). In South Africa, municipalities face countless structural issues that continue to impede the development of their technical capabilities, including outdated municipal infrastructure, significant operational deficits, severe shortage of skilled personnel, and unequal distribution of access to technology. These systemic deficiencies exacerbate the digital divide, resulting in poor access to data, digital tools, and digital knowledge among low-income communities who are frequently unable to afford the necessary technologies or obtain the necessary education to use them effectively. Therefore, unless the root causes of inequality are addressed through digitalization, it will inadvertently perpetuate exclusion rather than create a more inclusive civic environment

#### 3.3 Johannesburg's Digitalisation Journey

While numerous studies have identified the many technical and infrastructural barriers to digital transformation in developing cities, other barriers are also significant, namely, political instability, poor governance and accountability, and the fragmented nature of governance itself. Scholars note that successful digital initiatives require long-term strategic coordination, stable political backing, and reliable implementation (Netshirando, Munyoka, & Kadyamatimba, 2024; Munyoka & Maharaj, 2019). In many instances, such efforts will be derailed due to changes in government, and therefore, leadership, or a shift in priorities by municipalities, resulting in systems being only partially implemented, abandoned digital projects, and a general waste of digital investment (Netshirando et al., 2024). For example, as a result of

coalition instability, there have been numerous changes in executive leadership in Johannesburg since 2007, which has caused an unstable environment in providing an improved strategic vision, and thus undermined institutional memory and coordination (Masiya, 2022). Smart governance theory notes that technology alone cannot overcome the deficiencies associated with poorly functioning institutions of governance; therefore, a strong institutional base of administration, a predictable political environment, and coordinated service delivery systems must exist before technology may be successfully integrated into governance (Meijer & Bolívar, 2016; OECD, 2020).

### 3.4 Governance structure of the City of Johannesburg

Johannesburg is South Africa's largest metropolitan municipality and is an intricate urban system that provides the majority of South Africa's economy, politics, and culture. It has over 4,8 million people residing within its borders (Stats SA, 2022) and is governed using a decentralized and multi-layered system intended to address the size and diversity of Johannesburg's urban service delivery. A clear understanding of this structure is critical to understand the city's digital transformation trajectory because the administrative capability, institutional configuration, and political arrangement will influence how digital and non-digital services are developed, delivered, and experienced by residents.

Johannesburg has adopted a decentralized regional model that includes seven administrative regions (A-G) that are designed to place the provision of municipal government closer to community members, while at the same time ensuring that the development of each region remains aligned with the overall city-wide development priorities outlined in the Local Integrated Development Plans (LIDPs) (City of Johannesburg, 2022). In this model, each of the seven administrative regions addresses the socio-economic conditions specific to each area (e.g., Sandton, Alexandra, Diepsloot, Soweto, and Orange Farm) that reflect the unique needs of each area, and ensure that service delivery addresses spatial inequality and varying levels of development.

The decentralized regional model is further supported by a network of Municipal-Owned-Entities (MOEs) that provide a number of key municipal services. Examples of these entities include; City Power, Johannesburg Water, Pikitup, Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA), City Parks, Metrobus, and the Johannesburg Zoo. All of these MOEs are required to function on a business basis and achieve financial sustainability while providing their mandated public service. The creation of the MOE structure was intended to create efficiencies in service delivery and to create professionalism in the delivery of public services; however, the use of a network of separate, autonomous MOEs creates significant coordination challenges that can impact the deployment of digital technologies.

Administrative activities are centred at the Metro Centre in Braamfontein. It is home to the offices of the City Manager, and all other administrative departments; and is therefore where the City Manager, who heads up all the various departmental areas of responsibility, including emergency services, public safety, libraries, heritage management, spatial planning, land use regulations, and traffic control, is located (City of Johannesburg, 2022). Johannesburg has also developed a number of sophisticated administrative systems in recent times, one example being the Land Information System (LIS), a fully digital platform that brings together data on properties, land uses, payment history, and ownership details to provide a level of transparency and enable the development of data-driven planning processes. The appointment of a Chief Information Officer (CIO) further demonstrates the city's determination to formalise its digital governance structure and ensure that it complies with national data management and access to information laws.

In terms of political administration, Johannesburg is governed via the mayor-council model of government as established by the Municipal Structures Act (Act No 117 of 1998). The legislative component of the government comprises a 270-member city council consisting of 135 ward councillors elected from each of the wards of the municipality, and 135 proportional representation (PR) councillors. These members of the city council are responsible for making bylaws, approving the annual budget, and ensuring that the executive branch of government provides adequate oversight and accountability (City of Johannesburg, 2022). The executive component of the government is headed by an Executive Mayor, who is supported by the Mayoral Committee. The role of the Executive Mayor and the Mayoral Committee is to lead the direction of the municipality's policy agenda, provide oversight and direction of the service delivery process, and provide strategic leadership to achieve the municipality's long-term objectives. The administrative function of the government is provided by the City Manager, who is responsible for implementing the policies of the

municipality and providing coordination and oversight functions for the provision of services by the various departments and branches of the municipality. This layering of the three components of the local government model is theoretically designed to provide a balance between the legislative oversight of the executive, the policy direction of the executive and the implementation of those policies through the administrative function. However, the political environment within Johannesburg has historically been unstable and subject to changes in coalitions and leadership, resulting in no single political party winning sufficient support in any of the municipal elections held since 2000 to form a stable government.

The instability of the mayoral office due to coalition governance has caused the City of Johannesburg's political structure to be in a state of constant flux. As a result, the City of Johannesburg has implemented reform intended to create accountability within the institutions and streamline communication channels; for instance, it now allows regional directors to report directly to executive directors and not through several layers of bureaucracy. However, despite these attempts at centralization, fragmentation remains a persistent problem that can disrupt long term planning and continue to hinder the ability of departments to provide continuity for their digital transformation projects. The Citizen Relationship and Urban Management (CRUM) initiative, has been identified as an important administrative innovation which is aimed at improving how local government responds to citizens' needs at the front line, by sending multidisciplinary teams to deal with problems such as unauthorized electrical connections, litter and the destruction of public works (City of Johannesburg, 2022). Although, the CRUM represents a step towards decentralizing citizen responsiveness and toward enabling participatory urban management, ultimately its success will depend on a number of governing factors beyond the control of the initiative itself, for instance, lack of funding, high staff turnover rates and poor interdepartmental coordination.

The total governance of Johannesburg depicts an institutionally complex city that has political instability and a mixed governance model of corporate service delivery. This type of governance will affect how well the city is able to deliver effective digital solutions. The city's governance structure includes the appropriate institutional architecture to create the conditions for smart governance (decentralization, the presence of a dedicated MOE, developing data-based administrative tools), but the operational realities of governance include fragmented decision-making authority, variable institutional capacity, and unstable policies. Therefore, the city's digital development strategy is directly connected to its governance coordination, administrative efficiency, and political stability. An understanding of the governance system of Johannesburg creates important background for understanding the constraints, problems, and contested perspectives described in the media stories examined in this research study.

### **3.5 Media, Governance, and Public Perception**

The media has an important role in this governance environment – it is not only a source of information but also helps set agendas and holds the government accountable. The way the media reports government performance affects the way citizens perceive their government's performance; magnifies citizen frustration with government; and ultimately determines the level of trust that citizens have in government (Abrahams & Everatt, 2019). Where citizens depend upon media to be informed regarding the operation of local government, the media's portrayal of issues like corruption, poor service delivery and political instability, significantly affect the legitimacy of government action. The media's reporting of digital tools, both positive and negative, significantly contributes to how citizens interpret municipal digitalization efforts. Therefore, the media provides a primary source of evidence through which to assess public sentiment toward smart city initiatives.

### **3.6 Identified Research Gap**

The City of Johannesburg (CoJ) is working to transform digitally as well as to create a smart city, but there have been consistent and wide-ranging reports of serious and ongoing failure of basic services and crippling political instability in the public media. Most existing scholarly research has focused upon the technical and administrative efficiency of digital government, therefore, it has largely ignored the influence that non-technical governance failures can have on the success of digital government. This study addresses this gap by systematically examining how public media narratives report and exaggerate underlying governance crises, and how this reporting of governance crises fundamentally reduces public trust and participation in CoJ's digital initiatives.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an interpretive qualitative research methodology to evaluate how media stories represent municipal service provision and the ability of local governments to govern the city of Johannesburg. The researcher selected an interpretive qualitative research methodology because it examines how meaning, perception, and institutional capability are socially constructed and conveyed through discourse instead of being seen as objective measures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A qualitative content analysis (QCA) method was applied to analyze systematically textual data collected from major South African media sources, which include South African national newspapers and online news sites. In media-governance research, QCA provides an effective means for identifying dominant narratives, patterns of framing, and latent meanings contained in public communication (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Schreier, 2016).

Media content produced from 2022-2025 was analyzed during a time when increased service delivery disruption, political instability, and governance issues were evident in the city of Johannesburg. Media items that referred to municipal services and digital systems were sampled for use in this analysis. A combination of deductive and inductive thematic coding methods was used to identify common themes in these samples. The coding scheme was developed based on deductive coding from extant literature on Smart Urban Governance, Digital Transformation and Metropolitan Management (Anthopoulos, 2017; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016; Kitchin et al., 2019) and inductive coding to allow for new themes to be identified as they emerged from engaging iteratively with the sample.

A focus was placed on identifying recurring narrative frames of responsibility and attribution for service delivery failure and governance capacity issues. Additionally, a particular focus was placed on whether digital systems were referenced as tools to monitor and coordinate service delivery, to improve accountability or to undertake institutional reform. Media framing theory was also used as an analytical lens to examine how repeated representations have shaped public views of municipal performance and institutional legitimacy (Matthes, 2017).

As the study utilizes only publically available media sources and does not involve a direct interaction of the researcher with any participant(s), the study represents an extremely low level of ethical risk. The media and document based research has been identified as being exempt from the formal ethical approval requirements in accordance with accepted ethical guidelines to media and document based research (British Sociological Association, 2017).

## 5 FINDINGS

The qualitative content analysis was synthesized to identify the most common service delivery narratives as a result of the media scan and group them into key thematic categories based on frequency, intensity and emphasis of the narratives. The themes outlined below represent the issues that have been consistently highlighted within Johannesburg's media coverage from 2022 through 2025; they provide insight into how service delivery challenges, and the use of digital municipal tools, are portrayed across various media outlets. The themes are summarized in the table below, along with an estimate of the number of media outlets reporting on these themes, and the overall focus of their reporting on this theme. The thematic map is intended to empirically support which service delivery failures are the most visible within the public discourse, and highlight the “fragmentation gap” between high level policy objectives and the day-to-day realities of operation in the City of Johannesburg.

Theme	Volume of Media Outputs*	Media Platforms	Representative Narrative Focus
Water & sanitation	High	Print, Online, Broadcast	Prolonged outages, tanker reliance, health risks
Electricity supply	High	Broadcast, Print	Power cuts, infrastructure overload, protests
Governance instability	Medium-High	Print, Online	Leadership turnover, coalition politics
Citizen protest & trust	Medium	Print, Broadcast	Road blockades, service-related protests
Informal settlements	Medium	Investigative, Online	Extreme exclusion, sanitation collapse

Table 1: Dominant Service Delivery Themes in Media Reporting on the City of Johannesburg (2022–2025)

## 5.1 Scope and Nature of Media Coverage

Following the media scan it has been confirmed that municipal service delivery in the city of Johannesburg, is an extremely high-profile, and continually reported issue throughout Gauteng's large print and broadcast media; both national and regional outlets have frequently covered service delivery issues, government instability, and citizen protests through The Sowetan, The Star, eNCA, SABC News, City Press, and Daily Sun. Given that Gauteng functions as the economic and media center of South Africa, the service delivery issues in Johannesburg receive much greater than proportional national coverage and thus are exposed to significantly higher levels of national scrutiny and shape opinions regarding metropolitan governance.

Reports of this nature are becoming increasingly common, and as such, the overall trend of the service delivery narrative is trending toward a "crisis". The tone of many reports has become critical; citizens feel frustrated, and institutions appear to be failing. The most obvious examples include "residents say they have been forced to fend for themselves due to the continuous collapse of basic services." (The Sowetan, 2024) and "Johannesburg remains a city that struggles to keep the electricity on and the water flowing." (eNCA, 2025) As such, service delivery failures are no longer seen as episodic; rather, they are now viewed as systemic and ongoing.

## 5.2 Dominant Service Delivery Themes in Media Reporting

### 5.2.1 Water and Sanitation Failures as a Chronic Urban Crisis

Water supply failures were the leading problem area for the entire duration of this research study. Prolonged water interruptions, water tankers, burst pipes, aging infrastructure, unauthorized connections, and Johannesburg Water's inability to provide a guaranteed supply during peak demand were identified by media reports as major problems. The media consistently depicted long stretches of time (days to weeks) without water, with few explanations from city officials. Residents interviewed by SABC News stated "We have not had water for weeks, and no one from the City tells us when it will be fixed" (SABC News, 2023).

Other media accounts included communities queuing for extended periods at water tankers, which arrived late or not at all (The Star, 2024). These experiences are especially prevalent in township/ informal settlement areas such as Meadowlands, Kanana Extension Four, and Diepkloof, where water shortages intersect with sewage failures, creating serious public health issues. The lack of timely communication and the slow response times from city officials reinforce citizen perceptions of government inefficiency and disengagement.

### 5.2.2 Electricity Supply Disruptions and Infrastructure Overload

Electricity outages are the second most common theme for the media. While the media's coverage of these issues is frequently framed through the residents' protests in areas like Northriding and Alexandra, the violence against city power employees who attempt to repair the power outages is documented.

An eNCA report cited a resident who stated that "electricity goes off almost every week, and when technicians arrive, they leave without fixing anything" (2024). In addition to this, The Sowetan reported that City Power personnel were "forced to withdraw from an area after coming under attack while responding to an outage" (2023). Former Mayor Kabelo Gwamanda's official comments about the electricity failures frame them as the result of the lack of planning, poor use of existing capacity due to overloading, and poorly coordinated departments, rather than just budgetary constraints. These comments further support the view that the problems caused by electricity failures represent governance failures at the level of planning and departmental coordination.

### 5.2.3 Governance Instability and Leadership Turnover

Media reports indicate that leadership instability is a common theme of explanation for service delivery failure. Frequent changes in political leadership are repeatedly linked to the poor performance of services by media outlets, which reported on the fact that in Johannesburg alone there have been nine different mayors during the last eight years. In articles it was explained that both short mayoral tenures and coalition-based government create conditions where it is difficult to achieve institutional memory, long-term planning and continuity.

The same political analyst who was interviewed by The Star stated that “every new mayor arrives with a new agenda, leaving incomplete projects and stalled reforms behind” (2024) similarly, IOL referred to Johannesburg as “a city trapped in permanent transition, unable to implement long-term solutions” (2023). Media commentaries regularly relate leadership instability to the lack of progress with respect to the repair of its damaged physical infrastructure, its inability to develop effective accountability mechanisms, and its slow pace of implementation of digital reforms. Therefore, the media portrays leadership instability as a systemic barrier to effective governance and not simply a political issue.

### **5.3 Citizen Protest, Trust Erosion, and Public Perception**

The majority of citizens across all the years expressed their frustration through media reports about protests, which were viewed as reactions to the prolonged lack of services rather than one-off disruptions to services. Media documented protests in areas such as Bruma, Cyrildene, Malvern, Houghton, Diepkloof, and Soweto to be examples of the accumulated dissatisfaction of citizens regarding water, electricity, waste collection, corruption, and unauthorized development.

A protester was quoted by City Press (2024) stating, “we only get attention when we block roads or burn tyres”. This is an example of a common theme of citizens, indicating that formal complaint channels do not work effectively. Survey-based data from Gauteng City Region Observatory Quality of Life Survey has also been used by media to reinforce this view, with media reporting that “more than half of Johannesburg residents remain dissatisfied with municipal services” (Daily Sun, 2023). Media analysis of decreasing public trust is being associated with political uncertainty, erratic and uneven service delivery, and what appears to be corrupt practices.

#### **Informal Settlements as Sites of Extreme Service Exclusion**

Media representations depict informal settlements as sites of compound vulnerability, where, in relation to service delivery failures, the impacts are at their most severe. For example, the Kanana Extension Four community was documented by the Wits Vuvuzela in a report on an extreme case of sanitary failure, an absence of electricity supply, and unsafe housing conditions.

A recent report noted, “raw sewage runs openly between shacks, while residents have no access to electricity or refuse removal” (Wits Vuvuzela, 2022). Such media coverage highlights the intersection of service delivery failures with poverty, geographic marginalization, and low levels of institutional presence. Moreover, this media coverage illustrates how informal settlements are largely unaccounted for within formal data collection/monitoring/reporting systems, which serves to support notions of unequal data visibility and 'governance blindspots'.

### **5.4 Implications for Digital Governance and Planning Systems**

Despite predominantly negative coverage of crises by the media, both media and residents commonly attribute the root cause of breakdowns in the delivery of services to gaps in information, failures in coordination, and slow responses from the government. A common complaint of residents is that “no one tells us what is happening or when services will be restored” (SABC News, 2024). The lack of communication and transparency is an area where digital governance and planning systems can provide significant added value, particularly in terms of real-time monitoring of services, reporting across all municipal-owned entities, enhancing interdepartmental coordination, and facilitating transparent communication with citizens.

Rather than dismissing the potential of digitalisation, the media provides evidence that the crisis in Johannesburg is the result of an uneven or incomplete implementation of digital technology, rather than the technologies themselves being inherently flawed. The indirect support of media narratives for the proposition that accelerated, complete, and inclusive digital systems will be necessary for stabilizing metropolitan governance and regaining the trust of citizens is thus supported.

## **6 DISCUSSIONS**

The conclusions suggest that there are serious limits on how much a city can rely on its digital systems to solve long-standing urban governance problems. With respect to Johannesburg's media coverage in this study, it was shown that, although new digital systems have been put into place, they do so under the same

constraints as were present before their creation. Thus, this supports the critical smart governance literature (Kitchin et al., 2019) and (Meijer & Bolívar, 2016), that, regardless of what digital systems are developed or implemented, technology is unable to compensate for unstable governance, poor coordination among institutions, and poor accountability structures. Thus, the most significant obstacle to effective digital urban management is the level of governance instability and not the amount of technological capability available.

The results show that in addition to this, media coverage does not support the idea of dismissing digitalisation as only a surface-level or symbolic approach. Instead, it is implied by the media narratives that more complete digital systems can produce improvements for service delivery (e.g., via use of real-time data, facilitating cross-agency coordination, and providing early warnings), which would be most effective when digital tool usage are embedded in a consistent set of institutional norms and have the backing of strong, continuous, and relatively stable organizational capacity and leadership.

This research will contribute an innovative empirical view to the "smart governance" literature through media representation, examining how the way media represent digital government development is related to citizen perceptions of the institutions involved, their legitimacy, and the expectations that exist for future development in these areas. It also highlights the need to treat digital reform as a governance reform and not simply a technological reform when service delivery failures persist, and political stability is at issue. Additionally, if significant improvements in coordination, accountability, and responsiveness do not occur as a result of digital reform, then there is a real risk that it may be seen by citizens as simply a symbolic gesture.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study investigated how media narratives create public perceptions of service delivery and governmental capacity in the city of Johannesburg, particularly examining the role of digital systems within these media representations. The results show that the service delivery crisis in Johannesburg is largely represented by the media as being due to governance instability, changes in leadership, and institutional fragmentation, rather than failures of technology.

These challenges do not suggest that digital transformation has failed; instead, they are indicative of the need to fast-track digitalisation and simultaneously stabilize institutions. Integrated digital platforms, standardized data governance structures, and harmonized reporting frameworks were identified as key to improving metropolitan responsiveness, increasing accountability, and regenerating citizen trust.

Within a larger research project concerning how citizens view digital local government services, this paper contributes to the debates on smart governance and digitalization of metropolitan areas of the Global South through an emphasis on the role of public debate to legitimate and form expectations of digital reform.

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