

Article

The Paradox of Compliance: Procedural Signal Saturation and Conditional Distrust in Public Organizations

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Abstract

Public organizations communicate procedural compliance through audits, certifications, and disclosures, but additional communication need not increase trust. This conceptual article asks when repeated procedural signals cease to improve audience judgments and may contribute to distrust. A problem-oriented synthesis connects signaling, bounded rationality, institutional decoupling, procedural justice, and public value research, with persuasion knowledge providing an attributional bridge. Procedural signal saturation is proposed as a condition in which repetition supplies little additional usable information relative to available attention. Saturation alone predicts diminishing informational returns. Distrust requires an additional inference that repetitive self-justification evades a salient concern. This audience pathway is distinguished from an organizational pathway in which reporting demands displace responsiveness. Five propositions specify these relationships and a conditional feedback process termed the Compliance Trap. A measurement framework separates conduct, exposure, processing, attribution, trust, and legitimacy. Existing research informs the mechanism's components without establishing the complete sequence. The contribution is a bounded account of repeated compliance evidence that specifies contrasting predictions for information uptake and intent attribution, while retaining inattention, performance disappointment, and means–ends decoupling as alternative explanations.

Keywords: procedural signal saturation; compliance communication; public trust; institutional legitimacy; behavioral public administration; means–ends decoupling; transparency

1. Introduction

An audit can establish that an organization followed a procedure. Whether citizens encounter that finding, regard it as relevant, and revise their judgments is a separate question. Public management therefore needs to distinguish the production of compliance evidence from its reception. This article examines a particular situation: organizations repeatedly communicate favorable procedural evidence to a public audience, but additional communication yields little benefit and may, under specified conditions, provoke suspicion.

The expectation examined here is a bounded communication proposition: when an organization uses verified compliance as evidence of trustworthiness, an additional credible and relevant signal is expected to improve an otherwise uncertain audience's evaluation, other things equal. This is an analytical benchmark for the setting defined above. It is not attributed to every public manager, government, or theory of administration. The existence of a scorecard does not establish that its designers expect a higher score to produce public



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trust. In an empirical application, organizational communications or policy documents would need to establish that expectation for the setting being studied.

The benchmark has an identifiable connection to transparency research, which examines the expectation that making government information available improves trust. [Crepaz and Arian \(2024\)](#), for example, find different effects across political donation disclosure, asset declarations, and lobbying transparency. Their study concerns a related transparency expectation, not bureaucratic signal saturation. Public value scholarship and research on performance measurement have long questioned whether measured procedural achievements adequately represent public purposes ([Moore, 1995](#); [Bevan & Hood, 2006](#)). [O'Neill \(2002\)](#) likewise questions whether expanding accountability systems restores trust. These debates rule out treating automatic conversion as an uncontested assumption of the field.

The term Paradox of Compliance is used here as shorthand for a conditional tension: evidence intended to reassure can become ineffective or counterproductive even when the underlying procedures were genuinely followed. The immediate explanatory target is communication about compliance, not compliance itself. Necessary safeguards retain legal and ethical value regardless of their popularity. Neither low trust nor low participation, considered alone, demonstrates that an organization communicated too much.

The research question is: How and under what conditions does repeated procedural compliance communication cease to improve audience judgments and potentially contribute to distrust and weaker legitimacy in public organizations? The article proposes procedural signal saturation as one candidate mechanism component. The term denotes diminished additional usable information from repeated procedural signals relative to audience attention. An adverse judgment requires a further attributional process: citizens must notice the pattern and infer that the sender is avoiding their concern or managing appearances. A person who simply stops reading may experience saturation without becoming distrustful.

This mechanism is selected because it makes several otherwise conflated processes independently observable: compliance conduct, actual exposure, information uptake, interpretation of motives, and institutional evaluation. Its strength is discriminatory precision. It permits a test of communication effects while service quality remains constant. Its limitations are equally important. It does not explain every compliance–outcome discrepancy, applies only where some relevant exposure occurs, and requires evidence about audiences that administrative indices cannot supply. Its proposed incremental contribution lies in combining these elements for compliance-intensive public communication; it does not claim to discover bounded attention or negative signal interpretation.

Section 2 reviews the evidence and theoretical foundations. Section 3 explains the conceptual development approach and its limits. Section 4 presents the resulting mechanism, propositions, and conditional feedback process. Section 5 discusses the contribution and competing explanations. Section 6 sets out measurement, implications, limitations, and future tests. Section 7 concludes. No new empirical data or estimated causal effects are reported.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. What the Available Evidence Establishes

The literature reviewed here supplies evidence about related relationships, not a collection of confirmed saturation cases. Transparency, electoral administration, and audit studies investigate different interventions, units, and outcomes. A participation rate is not interchangeable with a trust judgment; the availability of a report is not equivalent to exposure; and transparency about poor performance can reduce trust through the information it reveals rather than through excessive volume. [Cucciniello et al. \(2017\)](#) synthesize multiple

forms and outcomes of transparency and emphasize contextual conditions. Their review makes heterogeneity a starting point for the present synthesis.

Negative transparency effects also predate the proposed construct. In a health-care priority-setting experiment, [de Fine Licht \(2011\)](#) reports that information about decision-making procedures can weaken general trust in health care and that framing affects perceptions. This establishes a relevant adverse response, but the intervention does not identify a repeated-exposure threshold. The present question concerns the informational and attributional consequences of repetition while the underlying procedural evidence remains stable.

[Wang and Guan’s \(2023\)](#) meta-analysis reports an overall positive transparency–trust relationship with contextual variation. This finding weighs against a general claim that transparency is corrosive. It also makes boundary conditions a legitimate research question. [Grimmelikhuijsen \(2023\)](#) examines algorithmic transparency and perceived trustworthiness, providing a specific setting in which the form of explanation matters. Neither source warrants attributing adverse effects to repetitive procedural messages without additional measurements.

Recent institutional trust research also directs attention to substantive governance attributes. The [OECD \(2024\)](#) report identifies responsiveness, reliability, fairness, and other dimensions relevant to institutional trust. Its contribution here is to keep service experience and institutional performance in the explanatory picture. It does not measure the proposed saturation mechanism. Contextual explanations are therefore retained throughout the synthesis; their specificity is an explanatory resource, not a shortcoming to be dismissed.

Table 1 distinguishes evidence that motivates the question from evidence needed to establish the mechanism. Its final column states the inferential limit of each source. Electoral comparisons require particular caution. Differences in outreach, accessibility, political competition, or mobilization can account for participation differences without any saturation process. Establishing the proposed audience pathway would require knowing what people encountered and how they interpreted it.

Table 1. Evidence relevant to the question and limits of inference.

Source and Setting	What It Supports	What It Does Not Establish
Cucciniello et al. (2017) Transparency review	Multiple transparency forms and context-dependent outcomes.	A single common cause of heterogeneous findings.
de Fine Licht (2011) Health-care decision experiment	Procedural transparency can weaken trust; framing matters.	Repeated-exposure saturation or a turning point.
Wang and Guan (2023) Transparency meta-analysis	Positive average trust effect with contextual variation.	A causal effect of repetitive procedural exposure or a universal decline.
Crepaz and Arian (2024) Transparency regulation experiment	Effects differ across political actors and disclosure interventions.	Bureaucratic communication saturation or a processing threshold.
Grimmelikhuijsen (2023) Algorithmic transparency	Relevance of explanation design to perceived trustworthiness.	Automatic overload from digital communication.
Bevan and Hood (2006); Power (1997) Measurement and audit	Reasons to investigate organizational responses to measurement demands.	Citizen exposure, saturation, or intent attribution.
OECD (2024) Institutional trust survey	Importance of substantive governance attributes in trust research.	The proposed exposure–uptake–attribution sequence.

Source: Authors’ synthesis of the cited works. These are selected component-relevant or motivational sources, not confirmed saturation cases.

2.2. Why These Theoretical Traditions Are Relevant

The selection follows the causal tasks the article needs to address. Signaling concerns how observable evidence informs judgments about otherwise uncertain qualities. Bounded

rationality and information overload concern limits on processing. Institutional theory concerns the relationship between prescribed practices and substantive outcomes. Procedural justice concerns the experience and interpretation of fair treatment. Public value and audit research concern the purposes and incentives through which compliance systems operate. These traditions are selected for explanatory relevance, not as an exhaustive or uniquely sufficient list.

Signaling theory connects observable signals to uncertainty about otherwise difficult-to-observe qualities (Spence, 1973). Contemporary work already recognizes receiver differences, signal combinations, feedback, and contextual limits (Connelly et al., 2025). The present article draws a narrower distinction between the credibility of an individual procedural signal and the additional information supplied by repeated exposure to the same evidence. Producing a certification can require costly verification, whereas reproducing it in multiple messages may require little additional effort. These are different costs: inexpensive repetition does not invalidate the underlying certification, and credible certification does not guarantee that each repetition adds information. Repetition can still benefit previously unexposed audiences or refresh forgotten information. The proposed boundary concerns already-exposed receivers and substantially unchanged evidence.

Bounded rationality provides a foundation for limited attention (Simon, 1971). Behavioral public administration applies psychological reasoning to administrative phenomena and citizen judgments (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Battaglio et al., 2019). Information-overload research examines causes, effects, and countermeasures across settings (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Arnold et al., 2023). Procedural signal saturation specifies a particular exposure condition within this broader problem: substantially unchanged procedural evidence repeatedly reaches the same audience. Its explanatory role in the framework is to separate reduced informational uptake from a further interpretation of communicative intent. Saturation itself remains distinct from that interpretation.

Institutional theory examines how formal structures respond to institutional expectations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and distinguishes gaps between policy and practice from gaps between implemented practices and their intended outcomes (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Genuine procedural compliance is fully compatible with means–ends decoupling. Saturation is consequently positioned as a possible audience process that can accompany or help explain a particular means–ends disconnect. It cannot displace that explanation merely by asserting that the organization is sincere. Means–ends decoupling also remains possible in the complete absence of public communication.

Procedural justice concerns the fairness people experience and perceive, including opportunities for voice and appropriate treatment (Tyler, 2006). Counting certificates does not measure that experience. A failure of publicity to generate trust is therefore not a refutation of procedural justice. The proposed contribution is to examine when publicity about procedures ceases to inform fairness judgments or activates an unfavorable inference about the sender. Public value scholarship further prevents legitimacy from being reduced to a communication outcome: citizens may reject a well-explained procedure because its substantive consequences conflict with their values (Moore, 1995).

The transition from overload to suspicion needs an additional foundation. The persuasion knowledge model explains how people use knowledge about a persuader's goals and tactics when responding to an influence attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Its application to public compliance communication is an explicit theoretical transfer, not an established result of that consumer research. Here it supports the possibility that repeated self-justification becomes an object of interpretation. It does not imply that recognizing persuasion always produces distrust.

Public authority changes the consequences of this interpretation. A citizen may be unable to choose another tax authority, licensing agency, or election administrator. Recognizing a persuasive tactic can therefore change perceived trustworthiness without changing service use or legally required compliance. The proposed transfer concerns intent recognition, not an assumption that citizens respond like consumers switching suppliers. Dependence, opportunities for complaint, perceived fairness, and the cost of contestation may condition the response. Continued compliance is consequently insufficient evidence of trust, while greater complaint activity may express scrutiny rather than rejection of legitimate authority. These are boundary propositions for public-sector application, not findings established by the original persuasion knowledge model.

2.3. Trust Legitimacy and Participation

Trust is treated as an audience's willingness to accept vulnerability to an organization's future conduct, conditional on expectations about its competence, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Legitimacy concerns the perceived appropriateness or acceptability of its authority and actions (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017). These judgments may be related without being equivalent. Participation is behavior shaped by resources, opportunities, incentives, political preferences, mobilization, and constraints as well as institutional evaluations (Verba et al., 1995; Norris, 2014). Citizens can participate to challenge an institution they distrust, or abstain for reasons unrelated to its legitimacy.

The immediate outcome of the proposed corrosive pathway is an adverse trustworthiness judgment. A further effect on legitimacy must be assessed separately; a further effect on participation is more distal still. "Participatory legitimacy" is retained as a research interest concerning legitimate institutional relationships expressed through engagement, not as permission to equate turnout with legitimacy. This separation restricts what aggregate electoral data can establish and makes the mechanism applicable to public services beyond elections without assuming identical outcomes across settings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Design and Source Selection

This article is a conceptual theory-development study using a problem-oriented literature synthesis. It combines theory synthesis with mechanism specification, consistent with the distinction between conceptual research designs discussed by Jaakkola (2020). The unit of synthesis is an explanatory claim or construct relationship. The product is a set of conditional propositions and discriminating tests, rather than a pooled empirical effect.

The starting set consists of the works on compliance, signaling, institutional legitimacy, transparency, and public administration used in the initial manuscript. The revision supplements this set through targeted public-web searches for recent signaling reviews, transparency-trust studies, information-overload reviews, and conceptual research methods. Searches used combinations including "signaling theory state of the theory and its future," "government transparency information overload trust citizens," "transparency trust experiment public administration," and "designing conceptual articles." Exact-title and DOI searches were then used to locate publisher or institutional records. The initial targeted update was conducted on 14 September 2026; a follow-up on 15 September checked adjacent transparency and accountability research and the sources used in the illustrations. The update gives attention to publications from 2023 onward while retaining relevant foundational works.

Selection was purposive. A source was used when it clarified a construct, established a relevant relationship, challenged an earlier claim, or specified a competing mechanism.

Publication recency alone was insufficient. Recent additions include both favorable transparency findings and research that complicates a simple communication–trust relationship. Publisher records and accessible abstracts were used for bibliographic and bounded findings verification; accessible full texts were used where available. The article does not claim full-text access to every cited work, exhaustive database coverage, a preregistered systematic review, independent double screening, or a quantitative estimate of the frequency of saturation.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The synthesis proceeded through four analytical operations. First, constructs previously treated as interchangeable were separated: compliance performance, signal production, citizen exposure, information uptake, attribution, trust, legitimacy, and participation. This operation determines which empirical findings are relevant to each link and prevents an organizational score from substituting for a psychological process.

Second, the explanatory traditions were compared by causal task and level of analysis, as summarized in Table 2. The comparison asks what each tradition already explains and what further observable sequence the proposed mechanism would add. Third, the argument was stress-tested with alternatives: citizens may ignore messages; distrust may precede exposure; a report may reveal genuinely poor conduct; or reporting work may worsen service delivery. These alternatives prompted the separation of informational saturation, conditional attributional corrosion, and resource displacement.

Table 2. Explanatory roles of the selected theoretical traditions.

Tradition and Anchor	Existing Explanatory Role	Role in the Proposed Framework
Signaling Spence (1973); Connelly et al. (2025)	Information about uncertain qualities and complex receiver responses.	Separate credible evidence from repetition of the same evidence.
Bounded rationality and overload Simon (1971); Eppler and Mengis (2004); Arnold et al. (2023)	Limits on attention and information processing.	Specify a plateau independently of distrust.
Institutional decoupling Meyer and Rowan (1977); Bromley and Powell (2012)	Implemented practices may fail to achieve intended outcomes.	Locate the audience process within a possible means–ends gap.
Procedural justice Tyler (2006)	Perceived fair treatment and legitimate authority.	Distinguish lived fairness from publicity about procedures.
Public value and accountability Moore (1995); Power (1997); O'Neill (2002); Rabbi and Sabharwal (2025)	Substantive purposes and verification arrangements.	Retain service outcomes and organizational incentives.
Persuasion knowledge Friestad and Wright (1994)	Interpretation of an influence agent's tactics and purposes.	Propose a conditional attributional bridge; transfer requires testing.

Source: Authors' synthesis. Traditions are selected for their explanatory tasks, not to claim exhaustive coverage or that competing theories fail.

Fourth, the revised relationships were expressed as five theoretical propositions with observations that could weaken them. The propositions serve as working theoretical hypotheses for later empirical research. They are not presented as statistically tested hypotheses or mathematical consequences of a fitted model. Table 3 links their constructs to candidate measures and identifies what remains unvalidated.

Table 3. Proposed measures and safeguards against construct conflation.

Construct	Candidate Measurement	Caution or Conceptual Foundation
Compliance conduct K	Verified adherence records; audit findings interpreted in context.	Measures conduct, not citizen exposure. Author specification.
Received exposure E	Participant-level exposure logs or controlled message doses over a specified period.	Publication counts alone do not measure receipt. Author proposal.
Attention and uptake	Task attention, comprehension, recall, and incremental information gains.	Combine behavioral tasks with reports of difficulty. Simon (1971) ; Arnold et al. (2023) .
Procedural saturation	Reduced incremental uptake under verified repetition and constrained attention.	Do not define saturation using low trust. Proposed measure, unvalidated.
Evasive attribution	Separate items on perceived avoidance and self-justification; open-ended explanations.	Adaptation requires cognitive testing. Friestad and Wright (1994) .
Perceived coherence	Audience ratings of fit between procedural claims and the concern or experience.	Not a mechanical ratio of organizational indices. Author proposal.
Responsiveness	Resolution quality and timeliness; verified follow-up; citizen experience.	Separate actual service from publicity about it. OECD (2024) .
Trust and legitimacy	Separate measures of future-conduct expectations and acceptance of authority.	Keep expectations of trustworthiness separate from legitimacy. Mayer et al. (1995) ; Suchman (1995) ; Suddaby et al. (2017) .
Participation	Context-specific engagement behavior with access and mobilization measures.	Distal outcome affected by resources and mobilization. Verba et al. (1995) ; Norris (2014) .
Compliance Trap	Dated audience feedback, managerial interpretations, publicity decisions, and repeated escalation.	Requires multiple feedback cycles and distinct audience/service measures. Author proposal.

Source: Authors' operationalization proposal informed by the works cited in this table. Candidate measures require validation before diagnostic use.

3.3. Standards of Inference

The synthesis is assessed against conceptual distinctness, consistency between causal claims and measures, explicit scope conditions, compatibility with existing explanations, and empirical discriminability. Evidence about a broad compliance–legitimacy disconnect is classified as motivational. Evidence about individual components informs theoretical plausibility. The combined causal sequence remains a proposal requiring direct tests. No constructed case, administrative ratio, or nonsignificant correlation is treated as confirmation.

3.4. Research Assistance

This is a conceptual theory-development article. It reports no original empirical dataset, statistical estimation, or newly generated empirical findings. Published empirical findings are interpreted as inputs to the synthesis. ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5), accessed through Codex in ChatGPT Work, assisted during revision with search-term generation, literature discovery, manuscript restructuring, drafting, and conceptual consistency checks. Candidate references were checked against retrievable publisher or institutional records; generated text was not treated as source evidence. The assistance was substantive and was not limited to language correction. The authors retain responsibility for the argument, citations, and final text. Purposive selection and uneven access to full texts limit the coverage of the synthesis.

4. Results of Conceptual Development

4.1. Constructs and the Proposed Mechanism

The results are conceptual outputs of the synthesis. Procedural signal saturation is proposed here as a domain-specific condition in which repeated exposure to procedural evidence yields little additional usable information about the organization relative to the audience's available processing resources. Its definition does not include distrust. This makes it possible to observe saturation without an adverse evaluation and to test whether an additional attributional process is necessary.

Compliance conduct, denoted K for clarity, refers to actual adherence to relevant requirements. Emitted communication volume refers to what the organization publishes. Received procedural signal exposure, E, refers to what an identifiable audience encounters within a defined period. Available attention, B, refers to task- and context-specific processing resources rather than a fixed personal trait. Information uptake refers to what is understood or retained. These are distinct constructs: K can remain constant while E changes, and publication counts can rise while E remains negligible.

An informational plateau is proposed when repeated messages largely reproduce already available evidence. Novel, relevant information can continue to improve judgments even at high message counts. Expertise, accessible summaries, or trusted intermediaries may also permit audiences to process more effectively. Accordingly, there is no universal threshold expressed as a fixed number of reports, and a high volume alone cannot diagnose saturation.

Attributional corrosion refers to a further process in which the audience interprets the communication pattern as evasive or disproportionately self-protective. The crucial condition is that some feature of repetition remains salient even when detailed processing declines. Repeated slogans or the mismatch between an advertised certification and an unanswered question may remain noticeable without detailed reading. The proposed mechanism is absent where the audience neither notices the pattern nor forms an inference about it.

Perceived coherence concerns the audience's assessment of whether procedural claims address and fit its relevant experience. It is not mechanically calculated from two organizational scores. Consider repeated claims that "all complaint-handling procedures were followed" alongside an unresolved concern. The inference of evasion depends on what the claim reasonably implies, what the audience expected, and whether the organization supplies a credible explanation. A truthful explanation of a necessary delay may preserve trust even when the outcome is disappointing. The framework therefore predicts conditional interpretation rather than inevitable suspicion.

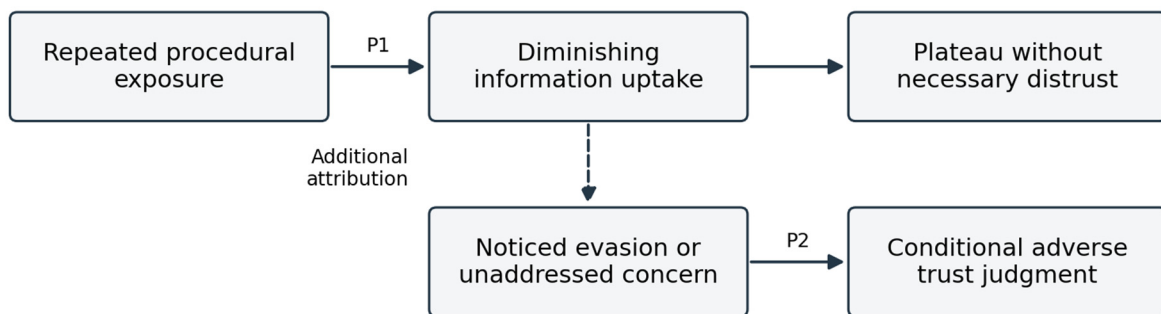
In Figure 1, repeated procedural exposure first connects to diminishing information uptake and then to a possible plateau in evaluation. The dashed downward link marks an additional condition: the audience notices a pattern that appears evasive or fails to address a salient concern. Only this attributional branch leads to the proposed adverse trust judgment. The lower pathway connects reporting demands to reduced responsiveness and unfavorable service-based judgments; it can operate even when citizens do not encounter procedural publicity.

4.2. Separating the Audience and Organizational Pathways

Figure 1 distinguishes the audience pathway from resource displacement. In the first, changing E can alter uptake and attribution while actual service performance remains stable. The diagnostic question is whether repetitive procedural communication produces a different evaluation from an informative or less repetitive message about the same organization and performance. A decline restricted to respondents who notice repetition

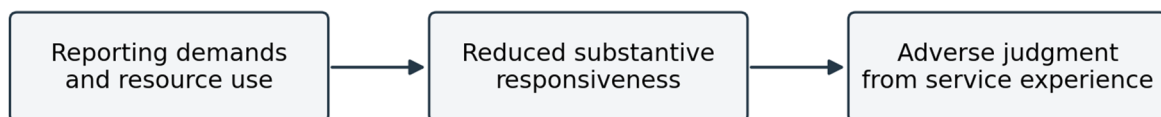
and infer evasion would be more consistent with the proposed attributional pathway than a decline across all respondents.

Audience pathway



P3–P4: responsiveness, relevance, prior beliefs, and attention support affect different links.

Organizational pathway



P5: a Compliance Trap requires observed escalation in response to feedback over time.

Figure 1. Proposed audience and organizational pathways. Source: Authors’ conceptual synthesis. Arrows indicate proposed relationships, not estimated effects. The dashed link requires noticed repetition and an additional evasive attribution; saturation alone does not imply distrust. P5 requires evidence of repeated organizational feedback cycles as specified in Section 4.4.

In the organizational pathway, increased reporting demands consume staff time, managerial attention, or budgets and may reduce responsiveness. A citizen who encounters poorer service can lose trust without seeing any compliance communication. Audit, measurement, and accountability-overload research provide established adjacent accounts of organizational demands and their consequences (Power, 1997; Bevan & Hood, 2006; Rabbi & Sabharwal, 2025). The present framework treats resource displacement as a competing and potentially interacting explanation, rather than renaming it audience saturation.

The distinction matters for corrective action. A better summary may improve information uptake but leave poor service unchanged. Faster complaint resolution may improve trust while the audience continues to ignore repetitive publicity. Either intervention can be valuable without “reversing saturation.” A claim that communication redesign restores processing requires evidence of improved uptake at comparable information demand. A claim that responsiveness reduces suspicion requires evidence about attribution, not merely a higher trust score.

4.3. Five Theoretical Propositions

The propositions are working theoretical hypotheses. P1 establishes the informational baseline against which the additional attributional claim in P2 can be tested; it is not presented as a new general law of information overload. Each proposition is followed by a feasible design and an observation that would count against it.

Proposition 1. *Among previously exposed audiences, additional repetitions of substantially unchanged procedural evidence produce diminishing gains in usable information as processing demands approach available attention.*

Design and qualification: Randomize repeated exposure while holding underlying compliance evidence, message readability, and service information constant; measure comprehension and recall after successive doses. Proportionate uptake gains across a broad range of repetition under constrained attention would weaken P1. A field study must measure receipt rather than infer it from publication counts.

Proposition 2. *Where diminishing uptake coexists with noticed repetitive self-justification that fails to address a salient concern, further exposure is more likely to lower perceived trustworthiness through evasive attribution than where the communication credibly addresses that concern.*

Design and qualification: Use a factorial experiment crossing repetition with concern-addressing content while keeping service outcomes comparable. Measure uptake, attribution, and trustworthiness separately. A trust decline without an exposure-induced attributional change favors another account. Suspicion before a processing plateau supports persuasion resistance but does not establish the proposed saturation-to-attribution sequence.

Proposition 3. *At comparable procedural exposure, credible evidence of responsiveness that addresses the audience's concern reduces evasive attribution, whereas restored information uptake additionally requires improved relevance, accessibility, or processing conditions.*

Design and qualification: Randomize concern-addressing evidence separately from an accessibility intervention. An attributional improvement without increased recall distinguishes recovery of evaluation from recovery of processing. Failure of credible, relevant responsiveness evidence to affect attribution would weaken the first claim; improved uptake without a changed processing condition would challenge the second.

Proposition 4. *Prior distrust and perceived communication–experience inconsistency strengthen the attributional pathway, whereas information-processing support weakens the exposure–saturation relationship.*

Design and qualification: Measure prior attitudes before exposure and randomize inconsistency cues and processing support in separate experimental contrasts. General distrust is not treated as reduced cognitive capacity. Longitudinal field data can assess temporal ordering but cannot automatically reproduce experimental control. Invariant effects across credible moderator contrasts would weaken P4.

Proposition 5. *When evaluation systems reward publicity output and managers interpret weak audience evaluations as a need for more procedural reassurance, ineffective communication prompts repeated escalation that can sustain a Compliance Trap.*

Design and qualification: Trace communication decisions and audience feedback over multiple cycles using dated records, managerial accounts, and exposure measures. The organizational feedback link requires its own evidence; citizen-level experiments alone cannot establish it. Consistent reduction in ineffective repetition, or publicity decisions unrelated to audience feedback, would weaken P5.

4.4. Conditional Outcomes and the Limits of Formalization

The propositions allow several response patterns. Credible new evidence may generate positive returns. Redundant exposure may produce a plateau. A declining response is proposed only where the additional attributional conditions hold and adverse interpretation outweighs any informational benefit. An inverted U is therefore one possible empirical

pattern, not a necessary implication of saturation. Even such a pattern would not identify the mechanism without evidence about uptake, attribution, and competing pathways.

The framework specifies conditions and causal links rather than a functional form. Informational benefits, attributional costs, and service effects require separate representation in any subsequent formalization. A turning point would require the marginal adverse effect to offset and then exceed the marginal informational benefit; an increasing saturation function alone does not supply that condition. Responsiveness can improve evaluation without restoring information-processing capacity. Accordingly, the propositions do not rely on an additive equation or on holding a dependent coherence term artificially constant.

The Compliance Trap is similarly a proposed dynamic process rather than a demonstrated equilibrium. Regulatory incentives may explain why organizations continue producing reports even when citizens ignore them: reports can serve a legitimate oversight audience with different information needs. A trap arises only if an organization misreads the public response and escalates an ineffective strategy, with consequences for the objective it actually seeks. Evidence must distinguish rational reporting to an oversight body from misguided efforts to reassure the public.

The proposed loop has four steps. First, managers receive weak or unfavorable audience evaluations despite favorable procedural records. Second, they diagnose insufficient reassurance rather than a mismatch between the message and the concern. Third, evaluation systems that reward visible communication output encourage additional repetition. Fourth, the repetition produces little informational benefit or reinforces an evasive attribution, generating further weak feedback. The loop closes when that feedback again triggers the same publicity response. Reporting obligations alone do not establish this feedback process.

The minimum longitudinal evidence is a dated sequence spanning at least two successive feedback-to-communication cycles: an audience evaluation, a documented managerial interpretation, a subsequent communication decision, and a later audience evaluation followed by renewed escalation. Verified exposure, service conditions, and the content of unresolved concerns are needed to distinguish the audience pathway from resource displacement. A disruption that changes incentives or supplies concern-specific feedback offers a further test: the framework predicts reduced ineffective repetition when managers can recognize and act on the mismatch. This is a dynamic research claim, not a diagnosis based on a single high-compliance/low-trust observation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Contribution Relative to Existing Explanations

The framework contributes a conditional process specification for repeated procedural evidence. Its distinctive analytical object is the difference between the cost and credibility of producing evidence and the informational value of circulating that same evidence repeatedly. Certification may remain credible while repetition supplies progressively less usable information to an already-exposed audience. Saturation specifies that informational condition; attributional corrosion specifies a separate interpretation of why the sender keeps repeating it. This distinction extends the application of signaling arguments to a stream of compliance communication without claiming that established signaling theory ignores receivers.

The incremental claim is most clearly expressed through contrasting interventions. With the same exposure dose and service outcome, improving accessibility should primarily affect uptake, while replacing self-justification with a credible answer to the concern should primarily affect evasive attribution. If an accessible message remains evasive, comprehension may improve without trust recovery. Conversely, a credible explanation

may improve evaluation without increasing recall of the repeated procedural detail. General overload and persuasion resistance can each explain parts of these patterns; the present framework brings their different outcomes, temporal ordering, and intervention targets into one falsifiable account. Its contribution is this integration for procedural evidence, not a claim that saturation alone generates distrust or that the component processes were previously unknown.

The contribution to institutional theory is an audience-level specification within a broader account of practice–outcome gaps. Organizations may implement procedures without achieving public purposes for many reasons, including unsuitable means or conflicting demands. The framework identifies a particular additional possibility when communication reaches citizens and produces identifiable processing and attributional changes. If outcomes are explained by means–ends decoupling without these audience changes, the saturation account receives no independent support.

For behavioral public administration, the contribution is to connect a micro-level information process to observable organizational responses while preserving levels of analysis. Citizen cognition does not automatically aggregate into organizational legitimacy. A multilevel account must identify whose judgments change, whether those audiences matter to institutional acceptance, and how their feedback reaches decision-makers. The optional feedback loop makes these links researchable rather than assuming them.

The framework also clarifies the relationship with procedural justice and public value. Publicity about a safeguard and a fair encounter are different experiences. Communication can help citizens understand a legitimate procedure, but its success cannot substitute for fair treatment or substantive public purposes. The practical implication is therefore to examine the adequacy of both the procedure and the communication that explains it.

5.2. Engagement with Recent Research

The positive average effect reported by [Wang and Guan \(2023\)](#) and the favorable findings in [Crepaz and Arian \(2024\)](#) constrain the present account: beneficial transparency remains an important baseline. The proposed mechanism concerns repeated, low-incremental-information procedural exposure under specified audience conditions. Those narrower conditions should be tested rather than inferred from heterogeneous transparency findings. A null or negative effect from another transparency intervention cannot simply be reassigned to saturation.

[Grimmelikhuijsen \(2023\)](#) directs attention to how information is explained in automated decision-making. This motivates testing accessibility and relevance as processing conditions rather than assuming that digital communication necessarily produces saturation. [Arnold et al. \(2023\)](#) similarly locate overload in the relationship between demands and processing conditions. The contrasting interventions above translate these insights into separate tests of uptake and intent attribution.

Two adjacent studies further delimit the contribution. [de Fine Licht \(2011\)](#) already demonstrates the possibility of adverse transparency effects; the current framework does not claim priority for that observation. [Rabbi and Sabharwal \(2025\)](#) examine accountability overload in public organizations; excessive organizational demands are therefore treated here as an established neighboring problem. The proposed audience mechanism instead requires verified repetitive exposure, diminishing uptake, and a separate attributional change. These distinctions identify what must be measured beyond an adverse trust response or a burdensome reporting system.

The recent signaling review by [Connelly et al. \(2025\)](#) rules out positioning the article as the first recognition of complex receiver responses. Instead, the proposed advance is a specific operational sequence for compliance communication, with distinct tests of uptake,

intent attribution, and evaluation. This more limited claim requires less rhetorical novelty and more empirical discrimination. The [OECD \(2024\)](#) findings keep responsiveness and fairness visible as substantive explanations that communication effects must not displace.

5.3. Rival Explanations and Discriminating Evidence

Four rival accounts deserve explicit attention. Under ordinary inattention, additional messages are ignored without an unfavorable judgment about motives. Under performance disappointment, information accurately reveals outcomes below expectations, so trust declines even when communication is concise and informative. Under resource displacement, reporting work worsens services, including for citizens who never encounter publicity. Under motivated interpretation or persuasion resistance, prior hostility or recognition of self-promotion may generate suspicion without a preceding information plateau.

These accounts may coexist. A strong test asks whether a saturation measure and an exposure-induced attributional change explain additional variation after relevant performance and prior-attitude conditions are addressed. It also asks whether the temporal ordering is consistent with the proposed sequence. Statistical mediation alone is insufficient: an unmeasured trait could affect both reported overload and distrust. Manipulations of volume, relevance, and motive cues, supplemented by independent measures of uptake, would provide stronger discrimination.

Electoral administration offers a demanding application because citizen behavior has numerous determinants. Integrity and participation indices can identify a descriptive mismatch that warrants investigation, but they do not record individual exposure, information uptake, or motive attribution. Case analysis must retain outreach, competition, socioeconomic conditions, and access as possible explanations. The illustrations below clarify the observations needed without eliminating these alternatives by construction.

5.4. Illustrations and Their Evidentiary Limits

A documented public-health setting illustrates why communication volume must be distinguished from message content. The joint statement hosted by the [World Health Organization \(2020\)](#) describes the COVID-19 infodemic as an overabundance of information and emphasizes accurate communication and listening to communities. It also addresses misinformation and disinformation. Those features make it a relevant setting for studying processing demands, but not a documented case of procedural signal saturation: the statement does not isolate repeated official compliance claims or estimate their effects on citizens' trust. Researchers would need to distinguish official procedural messages from misinformation, identify actual receipt, and measure uptake and intent attribution. The document supports the practical relevance of the question, not the full causal mechanism.

The following complaint-handling vignette is explicitly hypothetical. A municipal agency repeatedly republishes a genuine certification that it meets complaint-processing requirements. A resident has already understood that fact but still wants to know why a complaint remains unresolved. Additional exposure to the same certification may add little usable information (P1). If the resident notices the repetition and interprets it as avoiding the question, trustworthiness may decline through evasive attribution (P2). A concise account of the delay and a credible next step could reduce that attribution even if recall of the certification does not improve (P3). Prior experiences and accessibility support would condition different links (P4). A manager who treats persistent dissatisfaction as a need for more certification publicity could begin the escalation described by P5.

The vignette supplies a research design, not a factual diagnosis. If more publications do not increase actual exposure, P1 is not tested. If the resident distrusts the agency because of the unresolved service problem regardless of the message, performance disappointment is

sufficient. If an evasive inference appears immediately, persuasion resistance may explain it without prior saturation. A real-world case would require communication archives, audience evidence, and dated managerial decisions to determine which sequence occurred. The documented setting and the hypothetical sequence therefore perform different roles in the argument.

6. Operationalization Implications and Future Research

6.1. Measurement and Diagnostic Limits

Table 3 is an author-developed measurement proposal. Its entries are candidate indicators, not validated scales. The constructs must be tested for discriminant validity, particularly overload versus negative attribution and trust versus legitimacy. Self-reported saturation should be paired with independent comprehension or recall tasks. A low trust response cannot itself define saturation, because doing so would make the proposed explanation circular.

Organizational compliance records and audience evaluations should be displayed alongside one another, with separate units, populations, dates, and uncertainty. Trust and legitimacy require separate measures even when both are reported. Such a display can identify a discrepancy that merits investigation, but it cannot establish a communication mechanism. No conversion ratio or efficiency percentage is proposed: rescaling two unlike measures does not establish a meaningful common origin or a defensible ratio interpretation (Stevens, 1946; Velleman & Wilkinson, 1993). Diagnosis instead depends on the independent exposure, uptake, attribution, and service measures in Table 3.

6.2. A Research Agenda Organized by Identification Needs

The first task is construct validation. Interviews and cognitive testing can establish whether citizens distinguish unfamiliar information, redundant information, processing difficulty, and perceived evasion. Measurement should allow people to report low attention without distrust and distrust without overload. Exposure measures must refer to a specified sender and period. General questions about “too much government information” would not identify a procedural signal mechanism.

The second task is an experiment that varies repetitive procedural exposure while holding underlying compliance performance and service outcomes constant. A factorial design can separately vary whether the communication directly addresses a salient concern. Outcomes should include comprehension, recall, perceived relevance, motive attribution, and trustworthiness. Attention support can be varied in a subsequent design. Message length, novelty, readability, and emotional tone require control or independent manipulation so that a volume effect is not actually a content effect.

The design should compare plausible response forms, including a positive linear association, diminishing positive returns, a plateau, and a conditional decline. An inverted U should not be imposed as the only admissible model. Preregistered contrasts, adequate exposure variation, and replication across audiences are more informative than selecting a quadratic specification because it matches the theory. A nonsignificant linear coefficient is inconclusive; it does not corroborate saturation.

The third task is field research linking organizational communications to actual audience exposure. Panels can track prior trust, service encounters, media framing, and changes in evaluation. Process tracing can examine whether managers interpret weak public responses as grounds for more publicity and whether subsequent communication intensifies. Staffing and workload data are needed to test the separate resource-displacement pathway. Citizen-level and organization-level observations should be connected without inferring individual cognition from aggregate correlations.

Only after these tasks should the research examine downstream legitimacy and participation. Electoral applications would need controls appropriate to access, competition, mobilization, and social conditions. Administrative series can help select settings, but new receiver-side measures are necessary to test this mechanism. Digital communication is a comparative setting rather than an automatic risk factor: distribution technology can multiply messages while accessibility tools improve uptake. The direction of the net effect remains empirical.

6.3. Implications for Public Management

Managers should first identify the audience and purpose of each compliance communication. A technical report may be essential to an auditor while a citizen needs an explanation of how a decision affects a specific concern. Reusing one document for both purposes can create an accessibility problem without implying that the reporting requirement itself is excessive. The framework encourages audience-sensitive explanation alongside preservation of complete records and required disclosures.

A practical evaluation can distinguish availability, exposure, understanding, perceived relevance, trust, and service experience. If citizens do not encounter a report, the problem is reach. If they encounter it but cannot understand it, the problem may be design or processing demand. If they understand it but consider it irrelevant, the organization should examine the mismatch between what it demonstrates and what citizens need to know. If service delivery is poor, communication changes cannot substitute for operational improvement.

The strongest conditional implication is to avoid responding to weak public evaluations with repetitive self-certification before diagnosing the reason for those evaluations. Credible accounts of decisions, acknowledgment of uncertainty, explanations of constraints, and visible responses to concerns are candidates for evaluation, not universally established remedies. Their effects should be assessed through audience evidence rather than communication output counts.

At the organizational level, reporting burdens and service capacity should be examined together. Protecting time for substantive responsiveness may address resource displacement even if audience saturation is absent. Oversight systems can preserve procedural safeguards while reviewing whether duplicated reporting serves a clear purpose. A reduction in communication volume should never be inferred to justify less transparency about misconduct or fewer opportunities for scrutiny. The relevant question is whether public explanations make necessary information usable and appropriately accountable.

6.4. Limitations

The article specifies a mechanism rather than estimating its prevalence or causal effect. Its purposive synthesis cannot establish how representative the selected literature is. The transfer of persuasion knowledge to public compliance communication requires validation under public authority and limited exit. Tests should compare the integrated sequence with general information overload and existing signaling explanations using the same outcomes and conditions.

The framework also assumes that audiences can identify a sender and recognize some repetition. In fragmented media environments, citizens may attribute third-party repetition to the organization or fail to distinguish official from unofficial messages. Such attribution errors should be measured. Institutions with coercive authority or mandatory participation create additional difficulties for behavioral indicators of legitimacy. Findings from one audience or service cannot be generalized automatically to another.

The framework supplies neither a universal saturation threshold nor an estimated inverted U. Establishing a Compliance Trap requires longitudinal evidence of managerial interpretation and repeated escalation as well as audience responses. These limits define the empirical work required to evaluate the integrated account.

7. Conclusions

This article asks when repeated procedural compliance communication ceases to improve audience judgments and may contribute to distrust. The conceptual answer has two parts. Repetition can reduce the additional usable information supplied to an audience with limited attention. A further adverse evaluation requires an attributional process in which the noticed communication pattern is interpreted as evasive or insufficiently responsive to a salient concern. A processing plateau and a decline in trust are therefore distinct outcomes with different evidentiary requirements.

The proposed contribution is a bounded mechanism specification for public compliance communication. It separates conduct from exposure, distinguishes informational saturation from attributional corrosion, and locates resource displacement on a separate organizational pathway. Five propositions identify conditions for these processes and an optional feedback pattern termed the Compliance Trap. The model is compatible with means–ends decoupling and contemporary signaling theory, and its distinct value remains an empirical question.

For public management, the implication is to examine how procedural evidence becomes usable and relevant to citizens while preserving the safeguards and service capacities that give that evidence substance. A reduction in communication volume should never be inferred to justify less transparency about misconduct. More communication may help, have little effect, or provoke an adverse response depending on content, exposure, experience, and interpretation. By identifying separate informational, attributional, and organizational processes, the framework makes it possible to test which communication changes improve understanding, which responses address citizens' concerns, and which incentives sustain ineffective repetition.

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