



The Intersection of Digital Inclusivity and Media Sustainability, Challenges and Opportunities in Marginalized Communities

UMMUL-KHAYR SALEH SHEHU,
MENDOS BALA DOGO,

Kaduna State University, Nigeria

BINTA KASIM MOHAMMED
AYODELE B. JOSEPH

MUHAMMAD HAMISU SANI
Baze University, Abuja, Nigeria

Abstract. This study examines the intersection of digital inclusivity and media sustainability in marginalized communities, with a focus on the barriers that prevent equal participation in the digital age and the opportunities that can strengthen community media. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources such as journal articles, policy documents, and reports from international development organizations, the paper explores how factors like poor infrastructure, high internet costs, digital illiteracy, weak policy support, censorship, and limited access to digital tools undermine both inclusion and the long-term sustainability of local media. The study argues that these challenges disproportionately affect rural, low-income, and underserved populations, limiting their access to information, civic participation, education, and economic opportunities. At the same time, it identifies promising pathways for change, including mobile technology, community networks, local content creation, partnerships among governments, NGOs, and the private sector, and the use of open-source and community-based media models. Guided by Development Communication Theory, the paper emphasizes that communication technologies can support social empowerment when access is equitable and local voices are included. The findings suggest that improving digital infrastructure, expanding digital literacy, and adopting inclusive policy frameworks are essential for building resilient media systems that serve marginalized communities. The study concludes that digital inclusivity is not only a matter of access, but a foundation for sustainable media, democratic participation, and inclusive development.

Keywords: Digital Inclusivity, Media Sustainability, Challenges, Opportunities, Marginalised Communities.

1. Introduction

One of the largest forces in the contemporary world is the digital transformation. It changes the way people communicate, work as well as inform everywhere. It implies that the digital technology is present in most aspects of life and government and has caused massive social and economic transformations. According to Margel, Edelmann, and Haug (2019), the change in digital does not solely consider gadgets. It also implies thinking of ways of working differently, working more quickly and seeking new forms of interaction between governments, citizens and businesses. The internet and mobile phones have connected billions of people across the borders and accelerated innovation (Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug, 2019). As Kende, Rose, and Yates (2017) observed, mobile internet in the developing nations has been a tremendous relief in terms of delivery of information, education, and new business opportunities. However, despite these changes being good, most people, particularly poor people, are not able to enjoy the benefits due to infrastructural deficit, poverty and insufficient access to digital trends and processes. Online inclusivity is essential to minimization of inequality as sciences technology. It is concerning the provision and access of digital tools by everyone, old, rural and poor people. Research indicates that one of the issues is that older adults are uneducated and unconfident about using phones and apps (Laksmi, Dinakrisma, Abdiel, Susanto, Pujitresnani, Lukmana, and Yusuf 2024). On

the same note, Menyah and Nketiah (2018) affirm that inadequate infrastructure, lack of income, and low internet connectivity in sub-Saharan Africa makes people disconnected. The digital inclusion debate also involves media sustainability since it demonstrates how information is created, distributed, and stored in the society (Moyo, 2019). Media allows individuals to know, to speak and when it is done well, can make individuals to be empowered. According to Moyo (2019), some African countries, such as Zimbabwe, distrust and regulate digital media, which makes it less advantageous to people.

Mohanty (2020) explains that in order to make the media a sustained source of information particularly to marginalized communities we must decolonize knowledge and empower locals to enable the media to record authentic experiences. Sustainable media refers to the fact that information remains accessible and adaptable even in harsh circumstances. This study is primarily driven by the fact that marginalized groups are being left out in the digital transformation. In the contemporary world, there are numerous individuals residing in isolated and underserved regions where they have no access to the digital world. According to Mesa (2023), the low level of education and digital illiteracy precondition the difficulty in believing online services and utilizing digital platforms among people. According to Li and Xu (2024), although digital government can aid the urban areas in their development, it has minimal impact on rural and poor localities. According to Lubis, Purnomo, Lado, and Hung (2024), e-governance can be used in facilitating sustainable development, though the policies have to reach all persons. This paper is required to address the interplay of digital inclusion and media sustainability on the peripheral societies. It will explore the primary obstacles that prevent complete participation and also point out the opportunities that can result in equality, empowerment and sustainable communication in the digital world.

2. Digital Inclusivity and Media Sustainability

One of the most significant questions of the information world of the modern era is the digital sustainability on the border of media sustainability (Moyo, 2019). The digital technology is transforming the way we construct, disseminate, and consume information and hence enabling everyone to have equal access to such tools should become a critical concern in sustainable media. Digital inclusivity refers to the ability of all people to access and utilize digital tools, infrastructure, and skills to become members of the digital economy and digital world of information.

Incorporating people digitally helps the media to reach more people, engage and involve more people, and generate new ideas. According to the World Bank (2020), education, civic participation, and economic growth also contribute to maintaining the media in place with equal access to digital tools. Unless we take the initiative to target the marginalized groups, digital advancements will continue to harm individuals as they would leave millions with no information and the capacity to contribute to social conversations.

Digital inclusiveness does not only have to do with device ownership. It involves developing capacity, trust, and infrastructure to enable individuals to maximize digital media. According to Raihan, Subroto, Chowdhury, Koch, Ruttan, and Turin (2024), digital equity considers the connectivity, literacy, affordability, and empowerment, and these aspects define the way individuals deal with online content. The absence of content or the inability of all people to engage has resulted in media sustainability in most parts of Africa and South Asia. Jensen (2019) equally discovered that not only do developing countries with poor infrastructure and costly devices inhibit access to information, but also slows down the process of media business expansion.

The effectiveness of the media is determined by the ability of digital inclusiveness to expand the size and economic breadth of an audience. The wider reach of the audience will be essential to the long-term viability. In Kenya, Munyua (2018) observed this through community initiatives such as Kenya Connect that operate business friendly relationships in assisting rural communities to view local news. Moyo (2019) cautioned that without the digital access and political decision on the media guidelines, people might lack trust and free speech might die. Sustainable media ecosystem should strike a balance between the emerging technology and equity to ensure that no one is left out in information world including the urban and rural, the rich and the poor. Digital inclusiveness also makes media remain robust by promoting innovation and collaborating across industries. Ishengoma and Shao (2025) demonstrate that digital initiatives that resonate with the sustainable development objectives assist governments and NGOs to develop systems that integrate both social empowerment and economic development. Kibria and Hong (2024) further included that inclusive digital regulations establish transparency, citizen engagement, and intersector relationships, which are beneficial to media. When media organizations collaborate with governments and technology companies to enhance access to the digital world, they create the system that promotes profit and democracy through disseminating information,

holding people accountable, and encouraging civic discourse. These kinds of partnerships can be used in poorer communities to amplify the voices of the locals, promote digital storytelling and to provide a platform to keep cultural traditions alive, and inclusivity is directly connected to the long-term strength of media.

3. Challenges of Media in Marginalized Communities

Insufficient Technological Innovation and Capacity

Technological and skills gap is a huge problem to the media in marginalized areas. In their argument on sustainable development, Lubis, Purnomo, Lado, and Hung (2024) argue that organizations (including media) should incorporate digital technology in their day-to-day activities. This is extensively lacking in most community media. They do not have the equipment, digital skills and the innovative thinking that they need to remain up-to-date. As an example, local broadcasting stations in rural Bangladesh or Nepal still use analog broadcasting, old school tape recorders, and manual editing. Although the digital transformation has increased the industries in the urban setting, the rural and small-scale media are left behind. According to Li and Xu (2024), the reason is simple, this is because they are unable to afford more sophisticated technology and the training required to use it. It is not a problem that is only found in Asia. In Africa, the same trends can be observed. In other nations, such as Nigeria, Malawi, and Uganda, community radio stations do not even have internet connectivity or even simple digital archiving systems (Menyah and Nketiah, 2018). Menyah and Nketiah note that the digital inequality limits the capacities of the media workers thus they can hardly create strong and competitive content. Mesa (2023) also mentions that journalists lack the necessary education and digital training and, therefore, cannot employ some of the most important tools, including data journalism, social media analytics, and mobile reporting. The result is the community media fall behind and cannot keep up with the times and cannot voice their opinions in the virtual world.

Their impact and applicability in the world is decreasing as the world grows more digital.

Political Intervention and Censorship.

Censorship and political interference on media largely influence the sustainability of media especially where the democratic institutions are not strong. According to Mohanty (2020), power and control oppress the voices of the marginalized and restrict the discussion of people. In such nations as Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and

Myanmar, government suppresses independent and community media by censorship, by revocation of licenses, or by using the threat of insecurity to intimidate journalists (Mohanty, 2020). Srinivasan, Diehm, and Fife (2017) demonstrate the possibility of digital surveillance systems, like the Aadhaar in India, to enable the state to gain more control over communication, which poses a threat to media freedom. Consider Nigeria once more. Radio programs in the countryside deal with issues such as corruption, land conflicts, or government accountability they usually face threats and intimidation by local officials or security agents. Nel (2020) notes that even private media are afraid of being retaliated against by the government and thus journalists will either self-censor or avoid being near to sensitive issues. Li and Xu (2024) take it a step further to state that in the instances where governments roll out such digital initiatives, they are used to acquire political interests instead of ensuring freedom of expression. This interference affects the trust of people, the freedom of debate, and it makes community media reluctant to report about the issues that most require the attention of the marginalized groups.

Inhibitions to Content Production and Distribution.

It is difficult to make and share content in marginalized groups. These barriers are noteworthy and pose a risk to the sustainability of local media. Laksmi, Dinakrisma, Abdiel, Susanto, Pujitresnani, Lukmana, and Yusuf (2024) also note the problem with the limited technological infrastructure and the weak internet connection that weighs down on local journalists. They have issues with collecting stories, editing them or passing information beyond their close vicinity. As an example, in rural Indonesia, community reporters have been known to travel hours to be able to post up a story or send an interview by slow internet which renders even simple communication challenging. The same can be said of the North of Nigeria where radio stations in places such as Katsina, Gombe and Bauchi will often go off air as a result of power cuts and outdated equipment. According to Menyah and Nketiah (2018), infrastructural difficulties and costs ensure that the local media cannot distribute the content via TV, radio, or online platforms. Nair and Prakash (2017) further explain that in most of the developing regions, there is more than just one language that presents further problems. The community media organizations need to recast or localize their content to different ethnic readers, which is more expensive and decreases the speed at which news is relayed. Rahman, Akter, and Hossain (2021) observe that female reporters and rural journalists

experienced difficulties in getting to their field of operation and connection with mobile data, which hinders their work in Bangladesh. A combination of all these issues makes it hard to have timely, relevant, and diverse news on the local media.

4. Bridging the Digital divide in Maginalized Communities

Digital technology has now defined who is included or excluded in the social and economic arena. But billions of people are still offline (Mohanty, 2020). According to International Telecommunication Union (2023), more than 2.6 billion individuals still do not have access to the Internet, and the majority of them reside in developing countries and rural areas. This is not just a technological problem, but it increases economic disparity and deprives individuals of education, medical support, and government information that is essential towards meaningful media participation. According to Jensen (2019), the main factors contributing to the lack of digital access in developing regions are low infrastructure, unreliable electricity, and the cost of devices and data is very high. As Menyah and Nketiah (2018) note, some of the worst connectivity gaps remain in sub-Saharan Africa, and marginalized populations have no access to digital services. This active rift is not merely physical access that entrenches exclusion and denies women, youth and rural populations the opportunity to participate in digital governance and media discourse. The largest hindrances in keeping marginalized regions offline have been affordability and accessibility.

Kende, Rose, and Yates (2017) note that although mobile Internet has enhanced connectivity in most developing regions, high data costs and poor connectivity networks continue to restrict the use of the technology. In Indonesia, Laksmi and colleagues (2024) discovered that older adults living in urban areas have issues with digital tools because of prices and the absence of proficiency that is a pattern among most of the Global South. In other countries like Kenya and Nigeria, local efforts like the Kenya Connect Project run by Munyua (2018) demonstrate that local action like affordable Internet and digital literacy programs could be effective. These initiatives, however, do not give much ground without regular support of policies and investment in digital infrastructure. The marginalized groups will not be able to be part of civic engagements and sustainable media opportunities as long as Internet access is costly and unstable. It is essential that the divides can be filled with proper policy and governance. Ishengoma and Shao (2025) suggest that transparency, education,

and citizen engagement are improved with the implementation of digital inclusion of e-government programs and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Li and Xu (2024) prove that a digital transformation of business introduced by the government could encourage the local economy and bridge the digital divide. However, inclusive digital policies fail to yield benefits when governments do not make it a priority, and they will create more marginalization. Moyo (2019) warns that in certain African countries, data is being digitized, and with it surveillance and limited information, trust is destroyed and no one wants to be involved. To address these challenges, Lubis, Purnomo, Lado, and Hung (2024) and Skariah and co-authors (2024) suggest e-governance models, focusing on the rural population, training of digital skills, and balanced technological distribution. Sound policy is capable of allowing marginalized groups to become active participants in the digital and media economy, and not just to be left behind.

Opportunities of Digital Inclusivity and Media Sustainability in Marginalized Communities

Digital inclusivity and media sustainability cease to become optional factors in equitable development in the 21st century but core requirements. Although there are actual problems in the life of marginalized communities in terms of accessing and using digital tools, there are new opportunities that can be used to overcome the gap and allow these groups to be involved in the digital world in a meaningful way. Inclusion and sustainability of media ecosystems Mobilen technology growth, community networks, the creation of local content, collaborative relationships, use of open-source tools, and social innovation are building new opportunities.

Mobile Technology and Community Networks

The mobile technology has become an influential force of digital inclusion in developing countries. Mobile phones are not only a luxury in places such as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but the internet accessibility to people in these regions is mostly and, in some cases, entirely, through mobile phones. According to World Bank (2020), one of the greatest changes in accessing information, education, and markets by marginalized groups is the use of mobile connectivity to access these functions. As an illustration, Kenya Connect program has created local community networks that ultimately provided rural areas, who had previously been out of the digital sphere, with affordable internet access (Munyua, 2018). Evidence In Nigeria, governments have been

undertaking initiatives like the Digital Switch over (DSO) and the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (202030) to widen broadband coverage, particularly in rural states, including Kaduna, Benue and Cross River. Citizens living in such regions are adopting the use of smartphones in order to get news, acquire skills, and engage in online studies. In a similar way, even in low-income communities in India and Indonesia, mobile applications are becoming popular and allow access to state services and other necessary health related knowledge (Nair and Prakash, 2017; Laksmi et al., 2024).

Leveraging Local Content Creation and Storytelling

The production of local content allows communities to be given the power to narrate their own stories. It safeguards the heritage of a culture and breaks the existing discourse which usually leaves it out. According to UNESCO (2021), digital spaces can solely become very inclusive when they enhance diverse voices and facilitate the development of local knowledge. The production of their own media by people be it community radio, social media, or even grassroots journalism makes them active contributors to the forming of the information as opposed to being passive consumers. Use the example of Nigeria: Arewa24, Wazobia FM, and Nigeria Info are the examples of how platforms based on the use of the local language and traditional storytelling could help unite people and make media more accessible (Mohanty, 2020). Women organizations and youth organizations in Africa and South Asia support recording the problems of genderbased violence, education, and environmental damage through the use of digital tools (UN Women, 2020; Mohanty, 2020). This form of narration informs as well as gives individuals some voice in the manner in which their culture is represented and preserved. According to Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014), the current digital divide is not as much related to access, but rather to who can creatively and meaningfully use technology. The development of this skill can be done through the creation of local content.

NGOs, Private Sector, and Governments Partnerships

There has to be collaboration in order to have digital inclusion and sustainable media. As UNDP (2020) and Breisinger, Keenan, and Mbuthia (2023) note, the successful development requires the policies that are influenced by the state and business. In many ways, NGOs are an essential element, since they offer digital literacy, promote the idea of equal access, and facilitate the creation of the infrastructure that

communities require to engage with (Mohanty, 2020). In Nigeria, rural youth and business people opportunities have been widened through programs such as the Digital Literacy for All Initiative program and collaborations between the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and Google Nigeria. In Indonesia, government bodies and technology firms have been collaborating to launch digital governance frameworks, which promote transparency and participation of citizens (Hartanto et al., 2021). In most African countries, there are massive collaborations that have led to the development of rural telecentres and community radio stations, which serve local media (Menyah & Nketiah, 2018). Chen, Huang and Ching (2006) emphasize that effective e-government and media projects in developing situations require cooperation between the government, the private investors and the local communities. These alliances bring financing, capabilities, and resources together to construct robust media systems. The existence of open-source and cost-effective digital tools offers real possibility of change particularly through availability and affordability of technology. The opensource software does not burden local creators or small organizations with the high cost of licensing software or lock them into inflexible, off-the-shelf packages. Rather, they will have an opportunity to localize tools to their local languages, make them specific to specific needs and create something that fits their communities.

Social Innovation and Community-Based Media Campaigns

Community-based media projects are critical to the promotion of digital inclusion and sustainable media as well. These programs make people rather than profits their center of focus. According to UNESCO (2021) and Mesa (2023), communities control their own media, which enhances trust and increases democratic participation. Consider community radio in Nepal, Nigeria and Ghana it is very important in the education, civic discussion and bridging communities. In Makurdi, Nigeria, Harvest FM provides rural people with the platform to share their stories, advertise the local culture, and talk about agriculture. In Zimbabwe, citizen journalism websites have been opened by digital activists against state-owned media and demand accountability (Moyo, 2019). These grassroot initiatives do not merely give voices to the marginalized. They demonstrate that media can be supported by volunteerism, community cooperation funding, and collaboration. According to Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug (2019), the lasting digital transformation is seen where innovation is based on social networks and technology is in the interest of the

population but not individual corporate interests. The inclusion and sustainability movement of making communities take charge of their own media, in a community where resources and autonomy to create this space exist, the movement does not just continue to grow stronger.

5. Theoretical Approach

The intersection between digital inclusivity and media sustainability is a complex issue that needs a solid theoretical background. The Development Communication Theory and the Participatory Communication Theory are two giant frameworks that inform this discussion. The two theories assist in explaining why communication and technology can facilitate social inclusion, empowerment of marginalized groups, and sustainable practices of media.

Development Communication Theory

Development Communication Theory developed in the 1950s and 60s under the influence of such scholars as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Everett Rogers. The authors preferred to see communication as more than a simple exchange of information but as a force of modernization and nation building especially in nations that attempted to progress. In *The Passing of Traditional Society*, Lerner stated that mass media is not purely a form of entertainment that it upsets traditional societies by introducing individuals to new concepts and stimulating them to engage in social transformation. Schramm expanded this concept and perceived communication as a bridge that would reduce the knowledge gap between the developed and the developing countries. It disseminates knowledge that drives education, economic growth and civilities. Rogers has subsequently proposed Diffusion of Innovations, which identifies the way through which new ideas and technologies are adopted. He stressed how this whole process can be expedited by the manner in which we communicate.

The theory is applicable to the current research as it directly correlates digital transformation and media development with the social aspect of progress. In an age of digital transformation, particularly in terms of inclusivity, it is clear that once groups that are marginalized have access to technology and information, they do not simply become up to date they can be jumping further. They can get new skills such as when farmers learn new techniques or people owning small businesses learn online marketing and all through the virtual medium. Nevertheless, it has a

significant exception. Subsequently, critics have remarked that the initial theory held the view that information flowed in one direction, the developed world towards others who tend to disregard the local knowledge and viewpoints. In spite of this weakness, Development Communication Theory can also present a worthwhile point of view. It throws light on the ways the media and communication technologies can spur inclusive development, the digital divide, and more sustainable media practices.

6. Research Methodology

This paper is qualitative in nature, as it is based on a broad spectrum of secondary sources. The research gathered the information in academic journals, institutional reports, policy papers, and global development publications addressing the topic of digital inclusivity and media sustainability in the marginalized communities. Key global perspectives are introduced by major reports of the World Bank (2020), UNESCO (2021), and the International Telecommunication Union (2023). Simultaneously, the regional studies by Africa and Asia provide the much-needed background regarding digital inequality and the problems of media. The research remains objective since it adheres to the credible secondary sources and it addresses a wide terrain.

7. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals that media sustainability is tightly connected with digital inclusivity in particular in societies with a low level of access to information and technology. The reviewed research notes that the lack of infrastructure, expensive internet access, and low levels of digital literacy increases the digital gap, particularly in rural and low-income populations. These issues prevent individuals to engage in online communication and restrict the possibility of local media to stay afloat. Both, the International Telecommunication Union (2023) and Jensen (2019) mention that millions of individuals remain offline, and it is a challenging task to provide media that benefits the community to flourish. Despite these issues, the research study identifies increasing opportunities of inclusive media in the face of cheaper mobile telephones, community-based projects and favorable government policies. Some examples of Kenya, Bangladesh and Indonesia indicate that these local digital literacy programs and grassroots connection project can make citizens have skills to participate in the digital economy. Digital access and sustainability can be enhanced by establishing a collaboration between governments, individual enterprises, and local media. In general, the results

indicate that reduced costs, increased infrastructure and enhanced digital capabilities are the components of equitable access and media sustainability in marginalized communities over the long term.

8. Conclusion

Digital inclusivity and media sustainability are closely related to each other particularly in societies that continue to experience very low levels of technology and information. In this discussion, it was apparent that the digital gap is still enlarging because of numerous issues, including ineffective infrastructure, high prices on internet services, low digital literacy, and ineffective policy support. These issues render the existence of local media difficult and full inclusion of the communities to the digital world. Meanwhile, there are improvement opportunities. Through participating in digital programs, communities can access education, business opportunities as well as information which can make their lives better. The media houses, which are trained, better technologized, and have equal chances in policies can also become stronger and more autonomous.

Inclusivity remains the greatest factor to the future media sustainability. All communities, however small and isolated, should have equal access to digital instruments that would allow them to be heard. Researchers and policymakers should continue seeking new methods of digital participation making it both easier and cheaper to all, in the future. This will not only empower the community media but will also aid development in becoming just, level and an inclusive activity that is real to all.

9. Recommendations

In order to create digital spaces that are more inclusive and sustainable to marginalized groups, it will not be sufficient to use chance alone. To achieve this target, specific policies must be in place, it must have consistent investment and leaders who must prioritize the needs of the people. Both UNESCO (2021) and World Bank (2020) mention that belonging to the digital world means being beyond merely having access to the internet. The underprivileged communities should have a policy that supports them and powerful systems of empowerment that are sustainable. It is here that the policy should intervene, provide equal opportunities to access the digital space, engage in it, and have a future in which digital tools are sustainable and accessible to everyone.

The basis is to fortify digital infrastructure and make it affordable. A lot of the marginalized communities,

particularly in the rural or near-urban regions have no sure electricity, no internet or even mobile. According to UNDP (2020), the digital access is a priority to human development since it transforms education, health, and economic opportunities. The governments should cease to view connectivity as a second-tier concern. They ought to encourage growth by having both public and private partnerships, spend judiciously on universal service funds and encourage their projects that the communities assist in designing and operating.

Digital literacy should also be added to the community education. The digital skills are not only no longer optional but also as significant as reading, writing, and math. According to UNESCO (2021), education systems should evolve to impart digital skills to the people required nowadays. Online learning should be mandatory, not optional, to community programs, adult training and school courses. This will educate individuals to utilize technology in a prudent manner and devise resourceful solutions that meet their demands.

It is also important to establish conducive policies and friendly regulatory environment. Governments have to intervene with specific regulations that promote transparency, creativity and engagement in digital life. Lubis, Purnomo, Lado, and Hung (2024) mention that transparency, accountability, and involvement of citizens are the keys to true e-governance and digital inclusion. Good digital policies ensure expression freedom, equitable access to information, and growth in community media. In so doing, it creates a place where the voice of each one can count and by being considered.

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