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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communication for Social Change: Empowering Marginalized Communities through Participatory Media

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran Komunikasi untuk Perubahan Sosial dalam memberdayakan komunitas terpinggirkan melalui media partisipatif. Dalam konteks ketidaksetaraan sosial yang semakin kompleks, komunikasi partisipatif dianggap sebagai strategi efektif untuk meningkatkan kesadaran kritis, memperkuat kapasitas komunitas, dan mendorong transformasi sosial yang inklusif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus pada komunitas terpinggirkan yang secara aktif memanfaatkan media partisipatif seperti radio komunitas, platform digital lokal, dan media sosial. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis konten media komunitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan aktif komunitas dalam proses komunikasi dapat memperkuat posisi tawar mereka dalam pengambilan keputusan publik, memperluas jaringan advokasi, dan menciptakan ruang dialog yang setara antara komunitas dan pemangku kepentingan. Selain itu, media partisipatif berperan sebagai katalis dalam membangun identitas kolektif, memperjuangkan hak-hak sosial, dan mempercepat perubahan sosial yang berkelanjutan. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa komunikasi untuk perubahan sosial memiliki potensi strategis dalam mewujudkan keadilan sosial, memperkuat demokrasi partisipatif, dan memberdayakan komunitas terpinggirkan.

Keyword:
Communication for Social Change; Community Empowerment; Participatory Media

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Communication for Social Change in empowering marginalized communities through participatory media. In the context of increasingly complex social inequality, participatory communication is seen as an effective strategy to increase critical awareness, strengthen community capacity, and foster inclusive social transformation. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method on marginalized communities that actively utilize participatory media such as community radio, local digital platforms, and social media. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and community media content analysis. The results show that active community involvement in the communication process can strengthen their bargaining position in public decision-making, expand advocacy networks, and create an equal space for dialogue between communities and stakeholders. In addition, participatory media serves as a catalyst in building collective identity, fighting for social rights, and accelerating sustainable social change. These findings confirm that communication for social change has strategic potential in realizing social justice, strengthening participatory democracy, and empowering marginalized communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Social changes in the era of globalization and digitalization are growing increasingly complex in line with increasing global interconnection(Chitnis, 2005), the development of information technology, and rapid socio-cultural transformation. Globalization not only expands the flow of information across countries, but also establishes a new social structure that is more open and dynamic(Mäkinen, 2006). In this context, digitalization has changed the way people interact, organize, and build their collective identities. These changes bring opportunities for people to access information more broadly, but they also create new challenges such as digital divides, misrepresentations, and marginalization of certain groups' voices (Collins et al., 2021). Therefore, communication is a key instrument in managing social change in an inclusive and equitable manner, especially in the context of modern social development (Castells, 2010; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

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Within the framework of social development, communication plays a central role in encouraging the democratization of information and strengthening public participation, especially for marginalized communities. Participatory communication provides space for people to not only be recipients of information, but also producers of knowledge and social narratives(Butler & Adamowski, 2015). Through participatory media such as community radio, citizen journalism, and local social media, communities can build critical awareness, fight for their rights, and actively participate in the process of social change (Srampickal, 2006). Global trends show that the use of participatory media has become an effective advocacy strategy in expanding access to public spaces and strengthening social justice (Gumucio Dagron, 2001; Servaes, 2008; Rodríguez, 2011). Thus, participatory communication not only expands communication channels, but also shifts the position of marginalized communities into strategic actors in social development (Ackermann et al., 2009).

One of the fundamental challenges in social development today is the inequality of access to information and communication experienced by marginalized communities. Although digital technology is rapidly developing and promises more open access to information (Málovics et al., 2021), the reality is that marginalized groups still face structural barriers such as limited infrastructure, low digital literacy, and lack of representation in the mainstream media. This obstacle results in the voices and aspirations of marginalized communities often being marginalized from the public discourse space. The dominance of mainstream media that tends to be controlled by political and economic interests reinforces this inequality, so that the narratives and experiences of marginalized communities rarely find a proportionate place in the public conversation (Couldry, 2010; Fuchs, 2014). In this context, participatory communication is important to bridge the gap in access to information while expanding the space for marginalized communities' participation in social development (Pavarala & Malik, 2021).

The low representation and participation of marginalized groups in the public sphere has created a recurring cycle of social injustice. When communities do not have the means to express ideas, articulate needs, or construct their own narratives, then they will continue to be in subordinate positions in the social structure. This situation weakens their ability to negotiate and participate in public decision-making that affects their lives(Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Therefore, a crucial research question arises: How can participatory communication through the media strengthen the empowerment of marginalized communities? This question not only reflects the need to address the information gap, but also to change power relations in the public space towards a more inclusive and democratic structure (Rodríguez, 2011; Servaes, 2008). This research is thus directed to identify the strategic role of participatory communication in driving bottom-up social change (Davis, 2015).

Various studies show that participatory communication has a significant impact in expanding access to public space, strengthening critical awareness, and creating more democratic social advocacy mechanisms (Tufte, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2014; Servaes & Malikhao, 2015). This multidisciplinary approach makes communication a strategic tool in social change that is rooted in society.

A number of recent studies highlight the effectiveness of community media in building collective identities, strengthening social networks, and encouraging the mobilization of marginalized communities to fight for their rights. Community media, such as community radio (Carpentier, 2016), local digital platforms, and citizen journalism, have proven to be an alternative space for groups that have been marginalized by the mainstream media. Research shows that active participation in community media increases the capacity of the community to build its own narrative, counters the dominance of elite discourse, and strengthens bargaining power in the process of social development (Carpentier, 2016; Tacchi, 2012; Rodríguez, 2011). In this context, this research will expand the state of the art by highlighting more specifically the strategies of marginalized communities in utilizing participatory media as a means of advocacy and social transformation in the digital era, especially in developing countries (Sapnirund, 2017).

Most previous research on communication and social change has focused more on the effectiveness of mainstream media in disseminating development information and influencing public opinion, but few have in-depth examined the participatory role of media from the perspective of marginalized communities. The dominant research focus on the mass media causes the formation of a top-down bias in looking at the process of social change(Nishat & Tahir, 2024). In fact, marginalized groups have different communication dynamics and advocacy strategies from dominant groups, especially in efforts to fight for participation and representation in public spaces. Many studies emphasize the importance of media as a tool of development, but not many have explored how marginalized communities build counter-narratives against the dominance of elite discourse through participatory media (Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Gumucio Dagron, 2001; Rodríguez, 2011).

In addition, most development communication research is conducted in macro contexts—such as national policies, mainstream media, and structural impacts—so it does not explore the microdynamics that occur at the community level. The lack of empirical studies on community-based participatory communication

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practices in developing countries, especially Indonesia, shows a significant knowledge gap. In fact, the local context has an important role in shaping an adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable communication model. Thus, a more in-depth analysis of participatory communication processes, community advocacy strategies, and their impact on social empowerment is needed. This research seeks to fill these gaps by offering a bottom-up perspective in understanding the role of participatory media in building collective awareness and strengthening the bargaining position of marginalized communities (Servaes, 2008; Tufte, 2017; Carpentier, 2016**).** Based on this, this study aims to analyze Communication for Social Change: Empowering Marginalized Communities through Participatory Media (Abdullah et al., 2023).

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design to deeply understand the dynamics of participatory communication in marginalized communities. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore experiences, strategies, and communication practices from the perspective of community actors, not only from a structural or institutional perspective. The research locations focused on marginalized communities in urban and rural areas that actively utilize participatory media, such as community radio, local digital platforms, and citizen journalism. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews with community members, community media managers, and local stakeholders; participatory observation to understand the communication process and social interaction that takes place; and document analysis of community-produced media content. Source triangulation strategies and methods are used to increase the credibility and validity of research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The collected data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach with open, axial, and selective coding stages. This approach allows researchers to identify communication patterns, advocacy strategies, and counter-narrative forms built by marginalized communities through participatory media. The findings are then interpreted within the framework of communication theory for social change and participatory communication, to understand how the communication process contributes to social empowerment, expansion of access to information, and transformation of power relations in public spaces. In addition, the principle of reflexivity is applied to minimize researcher bias and ensure ethical engagement with the community. This methodological approach is expected to result in a deep contextual understanding of the role of participatory media in strengthening the bargaining position of marginalized communities (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Servaes, 2008; Tufte, 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Participatory Communication Practices and Social Dynamics

The communication models that develop in the participatory media practices of marginalized communities tend to be horizontal, dialogical, and collaborative, in contrast to the hierarchical and top-down mainstream communication models. In a horizontal model, every individual in the community has an equal opportunity to share their opinions, ideas, and experiences (Adiga, 2024). This communication process is bidirectional, where information is not only transmitted from one party to another, but is also negotiated through active interaction. The dialogical approach strengthens the critical awareness of the community, encourages *co-learning*, and expands the community's deliberative space. This model is in line with Paulo Freire's idea of *dialogical communication* as a means of social emancipation (Freire, 1970; Tufte, 2017).

Collaborative communication practices also emphasize collective involvement in decision-making regarding message content and communication strategies. Marginalized communities form local deliberation mechanisms that allow community members to determine the priorities of issues, campaign forms, and messaging methods according to their needs. In this context, participatory media functions not only as a channel for the dissemination of information, but also as a *space of resistance* in which communication structures are formed autonomously by the community. Cross-actor collaboration—between communities, local activists, NGOs, and civil society organizations—encourages the creation of solidarity and the strengthening of collective communication capacity (Carpentier, 2016; Gumucio Dagron, 2001).

Local actors play a strategic role in building and maintaining participatory communication dynamics. Community leaders serve as movers and facilitators, ensuring that the communication process is open, inclusive, and fair. Citizen journalists become the primary producers of local content that is relevant to the reality of the community, countering the biases of mainstream media narratives. Youth groups often act as innovators in utilizing digital technology and social media to expand the reach of messages(Dey, 2025). Meanwhile, women's groups play an important role in raising gender and social justice issues that are often overlooked. This synergy of local actors creates a dynamic communication network, strengthens social cohesion, and increases the effectiveness of community advocacy (Rodríguez, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2014).

Forms of participation in participatory media are very diverse and reflect the level of community agency.

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One of its main forms is local content production, where community members produce radio broadcasts, podcasts, short videos, and news articles that reflect the social issues around them(Santosa et al., 2020; Zulfa, 2020). In addition, public discussions and community forums serve as deliberative spaces to discuss pressing issues and formulate collective strategies. Community-based social campaigns, both offline and online, are a means of mobilizing support to fight for social rights and justice. This participation reflects the principle of *bottom-up communication* that allows the community to be the subject, not the object in the flow of information (Servaes, 2008; Tufte, 2017).

The process of forming *counter-narratives* is an important aspect of participatory communication practice. Counternarratives emerge in response to the dominance of mainstream media discourse that often ignores or distorts the reality of marginalized communities. Through participatory media, communities are able to articulate their life experiences directly, create alternative representations, and challenge stereotypes that have been attached to them. This process not only expands the diversity of perspectives in the public space, but also strengthens the bargaining position of the community in the social and political arena (Couldry, 2010; Rodríguez, 2011).

Overall, this participatory communication dynamic shows that community media functions more than just an information channel—it becomes a tool of social empowerment, a space of resistance, and a mechanism for strengthening collective identity. When marginalized communities have the capacity to manage their own media, they gain control over how they are represented and are able to strategically intervene in public discourse. This is in line with the *communication for social change approach* that places the community as the main agent in social transformation, not just the recipient of policies. Thus, participatory communication practices become an important foundation in creating a more democratic, inclusive, and equitable communication structure (Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Tufte, 2017).

The Impact of Participatory Media on Community Empowerment

Participatory media has a fundamental role in strengthening community agency by providing equal space to voice their aspirations, experiences, and interests. When marginalized communities have access to produce and distribute information on their own, they no longer become passive recipients of mainstream information flows, but rather become producers of social discourse(Asnur et al., 2024). This process creates a change in the communication structure from a top-down model to a horizontal and dialogical model. This strengthening of communication capacity contributes to increasing people's *critical consciousness* of their position in social and political structures (Freire, 1970; Tufte, 2017). As a result, participation in community media not only expands access to information, but also builds collective awareness as the initial capital for social empowerment.

One of the most significant impacts of participatory media is the strengthening of collective identity and social solidarity within communities. Through local content production, open discussions, and alternative narratives, communities can build a more authentic representation of themselves, different from the stereotypical images often constructed by mainstream media. This collective identity is important as a foundation for stronger social mobilization and policy advocacy(Parker et al., 2012). Community media creates a symbolic space that allows community members to feel recognized, have a voice, and connect with each other through shared experiences (Rodríguez, 2011; Carpentier, 2016). Thus, participation in the media is not only a technical process of message broadcasting, but also a social process that strengthens community bonds and expands networks of solidarity.

Participatory media opens marginal communities' access to deliberative public spaces, which were previously often closed to them. Through community radio, digital forums, and *citizen journalism*, people can express their opinions, voice criticism of policies, and build collective pressure on the government or other dominant actors(O'byrne, 2019). Access to public space is a form of political empowerment because it expands public participation in the public decision-making process. When community narratives can compete with dominant narratives in public spaces, their bargaining position in socio-political dialogue increases significantly (Couldry, 2010; Servaes, 2008). Thus, participatory media is an important instrument in the process of democratizing information and strengthening citizens' participation rights. Active participation in media production also strengthens critical literacy and the community's ability to generate its own knowledge. The community learns to manage technology, craft strategic messages, and understand the dynamics of media more broadly. This process not only enhances technical capabilities, but also deepens awareness of the power structures that surround public discourse. Through hands-on experience in media production, communities gain the capacity to interpret, criticize, and shape public opinion. This is in line with the concept of empowerment through knowledge, where the mastery of knowledge and information is a prerequisite for striving for sustainable social change (Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Gumucio Dagron, 2001).

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Access and Utilization of Participatory Media

Access to and utilization of participatory media by marginalized communities has experienced significant development along with advances in information and communication technology. Different types of media are used according to the characteristics and needs of the community, such as community radio, local digital platforms, social media, and citizen journalism(Butler & Adamowski, 2015). Community radio, for example, remains a strategic means in areas with limited internet access, because of its inexpensive nature, easy to operate, and reach the wider community. On the other hand, local digital platforms and social media (such as Facebook, WhatsApp Group, and Instagram) are used as spaces for interaction and distribution of information quickly and flexibly. Meanwhile, *citizen journalism* is an alternative medium for community members to convey their local realities to a wider public, thereby expanding the reach of discourse and advocacy (Gumucio Dagron, 2001; Carpentier, 2016).

The community's primary motivation in using participatory media is to disseminate local information, advocate for community issues, mobilize social solidarity, and strengthen collective identity(Srampickal, 2006). Participatory media allows people to control their own narratives, rather than simply receiving information from the mainstream media that is often biased or does not reflect their reality. Through this media, communities can report important events in their environment, fight for social rights, and strengthen their sense of belonging to their social space. In many cases, participatory media also serves as a means of informal education and strengthening social capital, which strengthens people's ability to deal with structural inequality (Rodríguez, 2011; Tufte, 2017).

Participatory media plays an important role in supporting social mobilization and advocacy for local policies. Through media-based community campaigns, people can pressure the government or relevant institutions to respond to the issues they face, such as social injustice, land grabbing, environmental issues, or discrimination. The use of social media and *citizen journalism* expands the reach of messages beyond the geographical boundaries of the community, creating a wider network of solidarity and strengthening the bargaining position of the community. Thus, participatory media is not only a communication tool, but also a political instrument to fight for social change and justice (Tacchi, 2012; Wilkins et al., 2014).

Despite facing resource limitations, marginalized communities are developing a variety of creative strategies to access and utilize media technologies. One of them is through self-training, where community members share technical knowledge about the use of digital media and devices(Ackermann et al., 2009). In addition, collaboration with NGOs and civil society organizations is an important strategy in obtaining training, technical support, and funding resources. Communities also often rely on alternative infrastructure such as the use of used devices, public Wi-Fi networks, or simple studios to manage their own media. These strategies reflect the resilience and adaptive capacity of the community in overcoming structural limitations (Servaes, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

Although the use of participatory media is growing, marginalized communities still face various structural challenges(Málovics et al., 2021). The digital divide is a major obstacle, especially in remote areas with minimal internet access or basic communication infrastructure(Garcia et al., n.d.). In addition, financial and technical limitations hinder the optimal development of community media capacity. Regulatory barriers are also serious issues, such as strict community radio broadcast licensing, content restrictions, or a lack of policy support for alternative media. These challenges often narrow the community's space for movement to use the media freely and sustainably (Couldry, 2010; Carpentier, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The result is that participatory media has a strategic role in empowering marginalized communities through strengthening communication capacity, expanding public space, and forming a counter-narrative to mainstream media. Access to community radio, local digital platforms, social media, and citizen journalism allows people to become active producers of information, not just passive consumers. This process strengthens collective identity, builds critical awareness, and expands public participation in the deliberative process and public policy advocacy. The dynamics of participatory communication that are horizontal, dialogical, and collaborative also create a discursive space that is more democratic, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. Thus, participatory media has proven to be an important catalyst in encouraging bottom-up social change. In addition, this study confirms the existence of structural challenges that still limit the sustainability of participatory media, such as the digital divide, limited infrastructure, and regulatory barriers. However, community-adaptive strategies—through self-training, collaboration with NGOs, and the use of alternative technologies—suggest that empowerment can grow organically from within the community itself. Therefore, public policy support, digital infrastructure improvement, and cross-sector collaboration are needed to strengthen the participatory media ecosystem. The implications of this research are both theoretical

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and practical: enriching the communication for social change literature and providing a basis for the development of more effective participatory communication strategies in empowering marginalized communities in developing countries such as Indonesia.

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