

The Internet and Social Media Contribution to Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Society

Geoffrey Mwamba Nyabuto

Information Technology
Kibabii University

Abstract- The Internet as loosely defined, is a network of networks (Kumar & Deepa, 2015). Behind these networks are many social and economic opportunities that have become key enablers on many fronts. It is through the Internet that social media has become a possibility and whose use has directly or indirectly led to either the inclusion or exclusion of individuals from one or more aspects of social life. With inclusion, the use of social media has ensured that individuals have equal opportunities, access to resources and chances of participation regardless of their background and location. On the other hand, in exclusivity, social media or the Internet denies some of its users a chance to be part of the bigger picture due to one or more reasons.

This paper does a systematic review of the literature on the Internet, what it is and the different theories that seek to explain its originality or existence. The paper also reviews social media as a product of the Internet and how it has been used to enhance inclusivity and exclusivity in the same measure. It further discusses some of the contributions social media has made to societies as well as how it has been used to enhance inclusion and exclusion. With examples, the paper shows how social media has been incorporated and become part of our normal life. Lastly, it summarizes some of the strategies that can be implemented to minimize exclusion and how society plays a pivotal role in achieving this.

Index Terms- Internet, social media, inclusivity, exclusivity, activism, crisis response, social media SMEs, social media developing countries, social media challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a field of computing that evolved in the 90s due to the use of various computing inventions including the Internet. Since its evolution, ICT has revolutionized how we interact, share information, and carry out our day-to-day activities. One of the developments that led to the high adoption and use of ICT in every sphere of human life was the Internet (Jin & Jin, 2014). The internet is a complex phenomenon that was created in the 20th century, and it laid the ground for the fourth industrial revolution.

In developing countries, poverty is a common phenomenon that has denied many people an opportunity to get and meet basic human needs.

This has made the poor unable to access basic human needs including basic healthcare services. With advancements in technology, we have seen several aspects of its use in the inclusion of such people to ensure access to affordable livelihood services like financial services, employment opportunities, general information, and healthcare services among others.

II. PHILOSOPHY OF THE INTERNET

Aristotelian philosophy conceives the Internet in four connected but distinguishable aspects (Ropolyi, 2018). The first aspect is the technological aspect which views the Internet as having evolved as a project of ARPANET as research on packet switching (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, & Kahn, 2009). In this aspect, the Internet is viewed as a network of networks i.e., a global network that allows computers and computing devices to communicate and share information all over the world (Alani, 2023).

The second aspect is the internet as a communication tool. In this context, the Internet is viewed as a medium that allows people to share information. The third view is the Internet being a cultural medium and lastly, as an independent organism in the world that exists independently.

Development of networks roots back to the 1960s when the first networks were built based on demand. The world wide web was built in the 1980s where networks were connected to each other to form the world wide web of networks called the Internet. Explosions on inventions based on the Internet were witnessed in the earlier years of the 2000s. This has led to the creation of

current technologies like the Internet of Things, Cloud computing among others. This history is important for us to appreciate how far the internet has come and the social and cultural environment within which the Internet was created (Ropolyi, 2018).

Taking into consideration the use of the Internet, two characteristics come into play, the first one is how quickly the use of the Internet is changing which makes its future use unpredictable. Secondly, Internet users are active agents who don't just follow the rules of use but rather participate in its construction and shaping of how they feel it should be used. So, for us to better understand the Internet, it is paramount to understand how it emerged, how it has evolved and its intertwining nature to the social and cultural environments.

1. Philosophy of Social Media Technologies

Social media is a group of websites and applications like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram that allows users to create and share content over the Internet. These sites share common characteristics like the creation and sharing of information, but they differ in architecture, structure, and user bases (Davis, 2016). There exist several categories of social media sites. They include social networking sites that allow users to create new networks and meet and exchange information. An example of social networking sites includes Facebook and dating sites among others. Another category of social media sites is microblogging sites that allow users to broadcast messages to a large audience. An example of microblogging sites includes Twitter and Instagram.

Research in the sphere of social media takes different streams based on one's research on the Internet. For example, some research may focus on the technological aspects of social media. As discussed above, social media was created out of the successful adoption of the Internet. This aspect of the research will be biased towards the technological aspect of social media. Researchers from fields like computer science have dedicated most of their time to understanding the technological aspect of the Internet and social media. It is through this aspect of research that we have incorporated Artificial Intelligence (AI) into social media. This has enabled automated ways of tracking and analyzing social media users' behaviors hence making the development of intelligent services for users possible.

2. Contributions to the Well-being of Society

The Internet and social media have made the biggest mark on human social life in the 20th century. The Internet has enabled the creation of virtual social communities and enhanced collaboration among people.

This has further been enhanced by the development and inclusion of smartphones to enhance socialization and reach even the underprivileged in developing countries. Among the positive contributions of social media to the society include:

Social Connections

With social media, it is now easier for people to create and maintain relationships. Through social sites like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp and others, people can easily remain in touch despite being thousands of miles apart. Family and friends can continue sharing information that is both textual and pictorial virtually. With the increase in computing power, social media users can now easily access and share information in real-time.

The creation of communities of like-minded people has also been made possible by the Internet. For example, Facebook allows its users to create groups and pages where they can freely share information, join, and collaborate with other like-minded people. Some of these communities have ended up creating powerful resolutions that have greatly impacted human beings (Ye, 2023). Through such groups, individuals can share information regardless of their location or background.

Crisis Response Tool

Social media has been used as a crisis response tool in case of calamities. During such times of distress, social media has come in handy as a tool that has helped share credible verified information. For example, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were heavily used to track and share credible information on this pandemic. Through misinformation and disinformation, social media was able to evolve and become a tool for sharing credible instant information. Initially, many of its users were sharing fake and malicious information about the pandemic but later, social media sites were able to flag such information (Madziva, et al., 2022). Sharing of information in social media during crisis has been rapid and in real-time ensuring users can get all the verified information as it becomes available. Authorities have used this mode of information sharing as it can reach a large audience at a very low to no cost. Sharing such credible information reduces anxiety and increases situation awareness (Marzouki, Aldossari, & Veltri, 2021).

Social media has been used to share real-time photos, videos, or textual information from scenes to show the real crisis as it unfolds. This has enabled authorities to quickly draft specific response strategies as they have credible information about the situation. Social media has also been used as an efficient communication and coordination tool during times of crisis (Medina & Diaz, 2016). It enables the sharing of information between the affected individuals and the response team. This enables the team to know the real situation on the ground and use specific strategies to reach and support the affected. Guidance and support can be provided by the responders to the affected people by using social media.

Coordination of humanitarian aid has also been made possible using the social media tool. Through this tool, authorities and individuals have been able to support resource mobilization to

support the affected populations (Lough, 2022). Apart from the coordination of humanitarian aid, social media has been used to provide psychological support through the formation of online communities that can provide mental and emotional support. Through close monitoring of social media usage and information sharing, crisis responders can know people's opinions about the crisis and strategize to respond to it in a better way.

Support Activism

Since its inception, social media has played a key role in supporting activism across the world. Social media has been used to show solidarity hence promoting social justice and awareness through different posts, campaigns, and hashtags. Hashtags like #Black Lives Matter became very popular out of the 2012 shooting of a 17-year-old boy. Out of the hashtag, there have been renewed efforts to support black lives as organizations like Sage Journals have allowed the free publication of papers whose research relates to this hashtag (Mir & Zanoni, 2021).

Beyond the awareness, solid commitments, donations, and other activities have also been developed and enhanced through the platform. Other groups of people use social media to advance their civic activism since they find it important to use the platform to express their social and political views and use it to find and form communities with others who share the same views (Hong & Kim, 2021). This has fostered good governance as they can put leaders on the spot about their performance. It also allows them to feel and be part of the leadership and contribute towards their governance.

Improved Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

Small and Medium Enterprises play a key role in the economy of many countries, especially developing countries. According to the Kenya Economic Survey 2022, SMEs contribute over 96% of all businesses, creating 30% of the jobs annually with a contribution of 3% of the GDP (Wakiaga, 2023). Social media has been used to promote businesses as it provides a platform where they can advertise their products and services and reach millions of their intended customers freely or at a low cost. Some businesses have opted to use social media as their only platform to market and sell their products. Using traditional media for advertisements like television and radio is very expensive, especially for SMEs which have limited funds. Social media comes as a cheaper and more reliable option for such businesses (Gekombe, Tumsifu, & Jani, 2019).

Online presence is one key thing that businesses should enjoy as it offers a competitive advantage to other businesses without this presence. Some of the benefits businesses with an online presence enjoy are a wider reach of potential customers, reduced business running costs and easier ways of getting customer feedback through reviews. However, the development of software systems is a bit expensive and time-

consuming activity. For example, the development of a business website needs resources like technical skills, and money to host and maintain the website. This is where social media comes in handy as the cost of setting up a page, or a Twitter handle is free. With these, small businesses can easily create and spread their presence without any additional cost. As an example, a small club in Mumias, Kakamega County became an internet sensation with its posts on social media and in turn the club became very popular within a very short time (Ajon, 2023).

Expansion and Promotion of the Creative Art Industry

The creative industry has benefited a lot from social media. Social media sites like YouTube, Netflix and TikTok have been used to promote artistic and creative industries. With such platforms, artists can create and promote their art by sharing and making revenue from these platforms. Apart from the big video-sharing sites, other sites like Facebook and Twitter can also be used to promote the artistic industry and it allows artists to create and share content hence allowing them to market themselves. As of the end of 2022, there were approximately 5.64 million creators who were able to earn from Instagram and an estimated 2.19 million on YouTube (Flynn, 2023). The creative industry has successfully used social media platforms to market their products hence targeting and reaching many potential customers regardless of their geographical location (Romdonny & Maulany, 2020).

Social media has been used in the art industry to increase brand awareness, hence increasing visibility. Through this, artists can engage positively with their users, get user feedback on their work, use the platform to showcase their artwork and share with their potential customers. As discussed above, artists can use sites like TikTok to share short viral videos, hence marketing themselves. From another perspective, using social media will enhance creativity among artists as it gives them the necessary exposure that could have been very expensive. For example, using social media you can view cultures and events as they happen all over the world hence as an artist you can use this to enhance and develop your artistic work.

Increased Collaboration and Productivity

Collaboration is at the heart of social media and the Internet since it easily and quickly connects its users. Through collaboration, several developments and advancements have been possible. Social media users have been able to collaborate on several projects like pushing for social justice and incorporating several legislations among others. The creation of communities with a common background and interest has been made possible by social media and using such communities has made it possible for their common well-being. For a successful collaboration, users must agree and share common values. These are the values that bind and bring them together. With social media communities and collaborations, each member is free to share their insights and unique

experiences. The use of social media among employees also has shown a positive impact on their collaboration hence companies are advised to integrate it into their talent management strategy (Naim & Lenka, 2017).

Cultural Exchange

The world we live in is full of interesting things including different cultures that we exhibit. They range from social, religious, and language among others. The Internet and social media have made the world look like a small village that is accessible via either a computer or a mobile device. Through enhanced collaboration, social media has also increased cultural exchange and diffusion. Sharing photographs and different cultural activities on social media has allowed users to interact and know different cultures exhibited through lifestyle and preferences in the world (Grincheva, 2015). Among international students, social media has been used as a tool to bridge the gap for these learners who want to advance their studies in foreign countries that have different cultures (Zaw, 2018). Normally there is a culture shock for such students as they know nothing of the countries they are visiting, and they may end up being mentally depressed. Using social media can help them learn about the culture of these countries even before they visit them. However, instances exist where some communities have been left behind in terms of cultural incorporation hence making it difficult for them to showcase their culture in the information age (Otenyo, 2017).

III. FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY USING THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

Internet and social media have played a key role as economic and social enablers on many fronts. Social media has been embraced in many parts of human life, be it education, health, agriculture, finance, and all others. Looking at this phenomenon, it is worth understanding how it has been used to advance inclusivity in human development.

One of the key enablers of inclusivity is the level of education of the technology users. Educated people are likely to be included in the use of technology as they can use and navigate through it. For example, it is easier for one to use a social media page to connect with an organization if you can read different menu items and know how to navigate the site. At the same time, social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and others have been used by professionals to teach people how to undertake different activities. For example, several YouTube channels are currently being used to train people in different fields ranging from finance, health, technology, agriculture, and others. Through this, social media is being used as a tool to enhance inclusion. Many learning institutions have incorporated the use of technology to train and equip learners with the necessary information. Virtual learning has made it

possible for students to undertake classes from their comfort, enabling them to undertake a course being offered thousands of miles away (Njoki & Wabwoba, 2015). This has allowed students to undertake courses that they could otherwise not have undertaken if they were offered in person.

Social media has created employment opportunities for millions of users. Social media sites like Facebook have made it possible for people to run their businesses at a low to no cost. Other sites like YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and others have been used by millions as a source of employment. Users can create YouTube channels where they share information and get paid (Lupşa-Tătaru & Lixăndroiu, 2022). Apart from creating direct employment. The use of social media has also made it possible for job seekers to locate and apply for job opportunities. Sites like LinkedIn have been used by organizations to share opportunities within organizations. In addition to companies getting a wider pool of applicants, the use of social media can help candidates prepare better for the interviews and even learn new skills that can make them more marketable and productive. These sites not only make it easier and possible for job seekers to find and apply for jobs but also for recruiters to source talent (Gandini & Pais, 2018).

Traditionally, financial institutions did not have a platform where they could engage and share information with their users freely and cheaply. Social media came in to ensure that any user who had internet access and knowledge of how to use phones and computers could easily access and use these computing devices to access all necessary information. Nowadays, financial institutions have active Facebook pages, Twitter handles and others where they can engage their users by sharing credible information about their services. At the same time, financial institutions have used these social media sites to capture user feedback on their products, making users feel part of the solutions and services offered by the institutions (Scanlon & Dunn, 2022).

The development and incorporation of mobile money and fintech services have increased access to financial services for users. Currently, users can use their mobile phones through m-banking and e-banking to perform transactions. Bank subscribers can easily withdraw and send money using these devices in their comfort. This has reduced transactional costs including the cost of travelling to ATMS or banks to do the transaction. At the same time, it has reduced the amount of time taken to wait in long queues to do transactions. Apart from reducing operational costs for the users, it has also reduced the cost for financial institutions as customers will only go to the bank to undertake transactions that they cannot do using social media and mobile services.

In healthcare, social media has been used by both healthcare providers and their clients to locate and share. social media can be used to increase inclusivity in the healthcare industry by

giving service providers a conducive environment to engage and empower their clients (Househ, Borycki, & Kushniruk, 2014). Many healthcare providers have websites and social media links where they can share information about the services they offer as well as discounts when available. This makes it easier for others seeking this service to link up and get the service. Without the Internet, it could have been expensive to know which hospital offers its preferred services.

Social media has also led to the development of online/virtual hospitals. Using the Internet, a client can seek and get health services virtually. This has given the underprivileged people in the community an opportunity to seek medical services, and social and emotional support from anywhere in the world at a cheaper cost (Khan, Saleh, & Quazi, 2021).

In agriculture, social media has extensively been used by farmers to market and sell their products as well as seek educational services about farming. Many farmers are now able to link up directly and sell their products to end users without middlemen, hence maximizing profits (Naruka, et al., 2017). Virtual agrovets have also come in handy to ensure farmers have all the information needed to carry out their farming activities without challenges. Farmers can use social media to network and share valuable information by creating online communities allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect and share experiences about agriculture. Farmers can use social media to connect to authorities and be part of policy formulation. This plays a key role as it instills a sense of belonging and inclusion to the farmers.

As discussed above, social media has been used in many spheres of human life to ensure as many people as possible are included in both social and economic agenda and they can freely contribute to the well-being of others in the community. Social media has given the voiceless a voice where they can air their views and demand to be heard.

IV. INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES' CONTRIBUTION TO EXCLUSIVITY

Whereas the use of social media has fostered and enhanced inclusivity in many spheres of life, it has to some extent contributed to exclusion in other contexts. One of the most common ways that the use of social media has led to exclusivity is through the digital divide. This refers to the barriers that have been created by the use and adoption of technology. Individuals from underprivileged backgrounds lack the basic resources to buy and use these technological devices. For example, individuals from low-income communities are likely to miss the necessary finances to buy digital devices like phones that they can use to connect to social media. On the same front, even if these individuals have the necessary resources, their geographical locations are prone to having an unreliable

internet connection which is a pre-requisite to accessing social media.

The use of machine learning and artificial intelligence could potentially lead to the exclusion of some individuals from enjoying the full benefits of social media. Artificial intelligence is powered by algorithms that learn from data to make predictions on what individuals can see on social media. If the data used to train the algorithm has a historical bias, such an algorithm may likely continue advancing the exclusion of some individuals from social media. Bias, in this case, could be due to racial, geographical or any other factor.

The use of social media can potentially lead to unintended bias since the creation and use of social communities and groups are based on the concept of like-minded people. This can be a result of some beliefs, and cultures and it can potentially exclude such individuals from having different views other than what the social communities they are in advocate for (Levy, 2020).

Cyberbullying and online harassment have been a long cause of social exclusion among social media users (Lai, et al., 2017). Cyberbullying creates a harsh and unwelcoming environment for new social media users, hence forcing them to shy off from using the technology. Such activities of cyberbullying others can potentially lead to exclusion from the use of social media as bullied individuals pull off from social media and will not freely use it. Such individuals tend to develop mental health issues that can easily lead to depression (Schodt, Quiroz, Wheeler, Hall, & Silva, 2021).

Exclusivity can potentially be created by language barriers since social media is a global tool and anyone online can use it. As is in the current world, English is the most common language used on many social media sites and this can potentially lead to the exclusion of all individuals who cannot speak English (Wabwoba, Micheni, & Njoki, 2015). It creates a barrier for such individuals who cannot read and even write in this language (Carrascosa, Cuevas, Gonzalez, Azcorra, & Garcia, 2015). Joining such conversations and communities becomes a problem making language-marginalized individuals shy off from contributing and sharing with others.

Influencers on social media can create virtual exclusion as they are fond of creating classism within social media. They tend to set standards that make other social media users who cannot achieve them shy off from using and positively contributing to social media. Classism makes others have a feeling of lack and inadequacy and this can potentially lead to exclusion (David & Roberts, 2017).

System design issues can potentially lead to exclusivity as some systems are not designed for all. For example, systems that implement the use of biometrics to implement security can lead to the exclusion of users who might be missing those

biometrics. Users who do not have fingerprints could potentially be locked out of systems that use fingerprint technology as the sole technology for verification (Wabwoba, Micheni, & Njoki, 2015).

Mitigation Measures to Minimize Exclusivity

1. Education and Increased Digital Literacy and Access

It is key to put in place deliberate mechanisms so as we bridge the digital divide gap. This can be made possible by making digital equipment affordable. Over time, the cost of acquiring computing devices has been reduced and their processing capability has increased. For it to be possible to ensure each one of us can access and use the Internet and social media, it is key to ensure even the underprivileged can access it. Apart from the cost of purchasing the device, people should be given the necessary skills to enable them to use these devices.

Digital skills should also encompass skills on how to use social media not to harm others and self. To ensure inclusivity in the use of social media, the government and investors should also ensure there are stable and reliable internet connections even in rural places where people have challenges accessing and using social media. Ethical behaviors should also be part of the package for digital literacy, and this should ideally be included in the curriculum.

2. Improved AI Algorithms

With the increased uptake and adoption of artificial intelligence among social media sites, software engineers need to develop machine learning algorithms without historical biases. This will ensure that the earlier marginalized communities will not continue being marginalized as the algorithms will break that cycle. This calls for a thorough analysis of the data used to develop and train these algorithms as their performance fully relies on this data. Any bias should be removed without introducing others as the algorithm is being improved and deployed.

3. Policy Development

Authorities should develop digital inclusive policies that foster inclusivity among social media users. Policies should be developed to curb cyberbullying, harassment, and any form of sharing and propagating hate speech. Making social media a safe space will go a long way in instilling a sense of confidence among social media users. Such a conducive environment will allow marginalized communities to freely share their opinion and feel like they are part of the bigger team. Policy development will also address the issue of digital literacy, and economic development for marginalized communities among others. Civil society groups together with policymakers and other concerned individuals can put together concerted efforts to ensure that social media is made to work for all including the marginalized and excluded.

4. User Responsibility

Social media gives its users a rare opportunity to interact and share with the world. It is therefore important to make users more responsible and encourage them to respect other online users. Social media should be more welcoming to new users and a conducive environment should be laid to make it possible for new users to feel part of the bigger team. It should be our responsibility to build such an environment.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, since its inception, social media and the Internet have been integrated and played a key role in human life. The integration of social media has made it easier for people to communicate, collaborate and share a lot of valuable information. Good use of social media will foster the inclusion and well-being of its users and organizations and policymakers should have concerted efforts to ensure that it works for us all. Social media has made it possible for great economic and social development ensuring that even the least privileged individuals in communities can access and use information freely or at a low cost. Despite social media fostering and increasing inclusivity, to some extent, it has laid the ground for social and economic exclusion. Therefore, it is up to us all as users to work together to ensure anything that leads to exclusivity is minimized.

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