

The Role of Media in Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Nigeria

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Gender digital divide is a front burner issue in the Nigerian society, especially in its digital economic aspirations. The divide caused by some factors including economic and cultural has seen women in Nigeria continue to lose on the benefits of ICTs. As such, there is a need to bridge the gap or at the least, minimize it. To achieve this, the media being strategic in creating and moulding individual and public opinions as well as strengthening courses have an important role to play. While there is a general dearth of literature on media and gender digital divide in Nigeria, empirical studies are even more conspicuously lacking. To this end, therefore, this paper attempted to explore the role of the media in bridging the gap. To do this, the researcher employed the qualitative research approach using the in depth interview format. Participants for the study comprised of eight Journalists and media practitioners who were selected using the Purposive sampling technique. The data analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis format and the study concludes that the media through its agenda-setting role, framing influence, and providing a platform for robust engagements will contribute to bridging the gender digital gap in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media, Gender, Agenda setting, Digital divide.

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Introduction

Advancements in ICTs have brought about increasing media-literate societies. As media evolved from the various era bringing about changes, improvements and challenges, one thing remained constant, its ability to influence and shape ideas and drive courses that impact societies. According to Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, (2003), the media contributes to achieving attitudinal changes for particular courses, thereby leading to economic and political transformation in a society.

Through the many functions that the media play, their powers come to bare and societies get to feel their impact. However, depending on how

it is used, the power of the media can strengthen a course or water it down (Grossman, 2022). That notwithstanding, they have played critical roles in bringing about development and growth. In terms of media usage and access, governments usually hold greater power. As such, they use their privilege to deepen or limit conversations about courses they consider rewarding or not to them (Grossman, 2022). On the contrary, those who are not in government adopt the media to either reduce the grip that government has on a given issue or to draw their attention on it (Grossman, 2022).

As agents of change, the media transmit ideas, information and reinforce value systems.

They are partly responsible for adjustments in the behavioural pattern of people in the society. Like many sectors of the society, media has also evolved over time to give more room for participation. This has of course altered the media space, as we know it, hence, the intensity with which media influence discusses is changing. The new media has further facilitated access to information, making it easier and cheaper to access. This in turn promotes inclusion for many marginalised groups. Because of the new media, there is an extension of media impact far beyond what it used to be. With the continuous advancements in technology, countries around the world now measure development of sectors such as the economy by the indices of access to and usage as well as compliance to ICTs (Eneh, 2010). This has further stretched the developmental marker of countries into the information haves and the have nots (Eneh, 2010). Therefore, countries characterised with more access to information will continue to dominate and lead others.

Digital divide is an issue of concern around the world; however, some parts of the world experience this more than others. For instance, there is a digital divide between developed countries and developing countries (Banyan Global, 2023). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) explained digital divide as the existing gap between, people, geographical locations and households with regards to access and use of ICT tools for a wide range of activities. Similarly, Ani, Uchendu & Atseye, 2007:356 defined digital divide as “the gap that exists between those who have and those who do not have access to the modern ICT such as telephones, computers, internet and related services”. Since societies world over now depend on the applications and usage of modern ICTs to thrive in their various sectors, the digital divide, despite efforts of stakeholders continues to slowdown development for some (Suleiman, 2023; Gilwald, Milek & Stork, 2010). Hence, the need for stakeholders including the media to identify and play its role to bridge the gap.

While the disparity exists between countries, it is even more pronounced among various groups in countries. In Nigeria, the gap between men and women is quite deep

(Suleiman, 2023), many factors ranging from stereotypes, inadequate policies, have been put forward as the reasons for the divide (Suleiman, 2023). Solutions and way forward have also been suggested. However, the role of the media in Nigeria, who apparently, are partners in development remain unexplored, hence, the need for this paper.

Literature review

Gender Digital Divide and the media

According to the OECD, gender digital divide refers to gender differences in means and proficiencies in terms of access to and effective usage of ICTs tools and devices within and between various groups. The changes brought about by the evolution in ICTs although highly beneficial to individuals and economies does not translate to equal access, ownership, usage among men and women in the society. If anything, the more advanced these ICTs get, the wider disparity in how they benefit the genders (Udeogu, 2023; Vimalkumar, Singh & Sharma, 2021).

However, Alozie & Akpan-Obong, (2016) argued that there is a deeper aspect of disparity, which is rooted in the sociology of ICTs. They explained that it is embedded in the ideals of patriarchy, which like many other aspects, ascribe leadership control of ICTs to men. This age long discrimination against women across societies continues to deepen the divide causing women to be passive users of ICTs, which limits how much they benefit from these technologies (Forenbacher, Husnjak, Cvitic & Jovovic 2019). Moreover, women must become active participants in the adoption, and even creation of ICTs, this will engender equity and a knowledge full society where everyone, regardless of gender can equally contribute to and benefit from technology (Alozie & Akpan-Obong, 2016).

Furthermore, many other reasons why gender digital divide exists have been identified. From the perspective of Suleiman, (2023), security and safety concerns online deter women from adopting and utilizing digital spaces. Women stand a higher risk of being harassed and bullied online compared to men. As a result, more women are either leaving or maintaining very low profile in digital spaces as a way of

protecting themselves. Similarly, Forenbacher, Husnjak, Cvitic & Jovovic, (2019) argued that socio-economic factors affect the likelihood of women owning ICT tools. They found that, level of income and access to certain infrastructure that facilitates ICTs like electricity affects the likelihood of people to own phones. In terms of level of income, men with higher income level will be more open to purchasing ICT devices like mobile phones as compared to women. contrarily, as argued by Gilwald, Milek & Stork (2010), people with lower income do not completely shy away from owning phones, instead, they become more disposed to purchasing less expensive phones. The downside of this is that, phones that are less expensive are limited in advanced features therefore, the level of usage is affected.

In addition, the OECD assert that at the root cause of digital gender divide lie a number of other issues ranging from affordability, education and digital illiteracy. The report showed that more women are affected by their inability to afford ICT tools, Moreover, the level of income does not only affect affordability for those without prior access, it further constraints women with access from maximizing its many possibilities. Furthermore, in many societies around the world, women are either less educated or not educated at all. This Lack of education continues to hinder women from knowing the benefits of being active adopters and users of technology. Thus, the report concluded that more than men, women are more likely to shy away from the internet assuming they do not need it. However, both formal and informal education designed in ways that are friendly will open their eyes to the possibilities of ICTs as well as reduce the fear of using technology. Also, arguments related to reliance on sophisticated infrastructure for ICTs and socio-cultural norms have been advanced (Ani, Uchendu, Atseye, 2007; Gilwald, Milek, Stork, 2010; Udeogu, 2023; Okocha, Edafewotu, 2022; Adeleke, 2020; Mumporeze, Prieler 2017). These arguments have centred on the fact that especially in developing countries, infrastructures for running ICTs remain inadequate and socio-cultural factors like the grip of gatekeepers such as husbands and parents continue to perpetuate the divide.

To close the gap, policies and initiatives that encourage and support equal opportunities for both genders, digital inclusion and literacy need to be initiated and implemented, (Suleiman, 2023). However, according to Grossman (2022), the decision regarding the direction of policy choices may not lie with the media, but they go a long way in influencing the level of visibility that issues receive. Generally, the media serve as partners employed to advance a course, which could spur a wider discussion and possibly map out a policy direction. Both new and traditional media continue to benefit from the opportunities that ICTs bring. It has widened their reach and by implication their influence.

Similarly, they could give prominence to issues by how much coverage they give to them. McCombs & Shaw (1972) asserted that beyond hearing about issues in the media, audience also learn to attach significance to those issues based on how frequently it features. Hence, the media's ability to emphasize certain issues lead to the determination of how important an issue is. By setting agenda, they project and amplify issues, drawing the attention of the public on the issue, and the more aware the public is, the greater the chances of government addressing the issues (Grossman, 2022).

Also, Bekkers & Edward (2018) argue that the media possesses certain means through which they influence issues. Firstly, by their access power, they have the ability to regulate the number of voices and interests that get a chance to advance a course. They create opportunities for some to advance their courses thereby creating the possibility of a wider reach for them while setting up barriers for others to limit their reach. This implies that the media through its access power can provide a chance or deny it to voices they consider worthy or otherwise. Secondly, they argue that the media is a tool that can be used to deliver programmes, thoughts and ideas to people. This suggests that they are a very highly sought resource for anyone including governments to mobilize, reach and stir action or inaction among people. Also the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD, 2018) argued that as a key stakeholder, the media has the power to use its platform to garner action and support for

digital gender inclusion policies and programmes.

Furthermore, through their framing and discursive power, they help unravel issues and give them direction and perspective. Through frames, the media simplify issues, making their essence easy to understand when communicated. According to Moy, Tewksbury & Rinke, (2016) framing refers to “the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” pp.7. The media in its support of a course can apply this power by putting its perspectives in frames that give specific meanings they desire.

Additionally, the media, especially the new media facilitates access to information. They make up the main potential source of information. Oginni & Moitui (2015) argue that for policy directions to have the needed impact, citizens must be engaged and the media provides a good platform for such engagement. While their argument is focused on general public policy making processes; with focus on social media, nevertheless, it offers a valuable insight into the role of the media by providing the platform needed for citizen engagement.

Gender Digital Divide in Nigeria

As the world continues to experience digital advancements, countries like Nigeria continue to grapple with deepening digital divide. While the issues abound, it is however, disingenuous to allude that stakeholders have been silent in proffering solutions to bridge the divide. For instance, the Federal Government through the National Information Technology Development Agency have introduced various initiatives and programmes aimed at digital inclusion of women in technology for development (Abah, Baptista, MacKenzie, 2023), this notwithstanding; Nigeria still has some work to do to bridge the divide.

The USAID in a learning brief identified three major factors among others contributing to gender digital divide in Nigeria. A number of other scholars also corroborated these factors-

1. **Access:** in Nigeria, more women have less access to technology than men do. This is attributed to such factors as affordability, location and cultural restrictions. For instance, USAID put the percentage of women who own mobile phones in Nigeria at 88% compared to men at 92% and only 34% of women use the internet as compared to 54% of men. In terms of location, more women live in rural areas than men do and most of the infrastructure required for internet and other digital tools are mostly in the urban areas (Eneanya & Atoh, 2021).

2. **Use:** the problem of use often stem from inadequate literacy. More women in Nigeria are either less educated or lack the requisite digital skills to navigate digital technology. By implication, there are less women taking up jobs related to technology or leveraging on their benefits (CITAD, 2018; Ibrahim, 2018).

3. **Security and Safety:** the risk of harassment online deter many women in Nigeria from adopting and using technology. Suleiman (2023) found in her study in Nigeria that over 80 percent of her respondents who are women, reported concerns about their safety online. They fear that they could be exposed to danger online. For example, in 2022, Tiwa Savage, a popular and accomplished Nigerian female pop star's sex tape was leaked all over social media. Similarly, Maryam Booth, an actor with more popularity in northern Nigeria also had naked pictures of her littered all over the internet. Both women faced a lot of backlash with people especially men further denying their women access to the internet. Such incidences put women in harms way and further deter many from adopting and participating in digital spaces.

Furthermore, gender digital divide in Nigeria fuels other divides such as economic and healthcare (Ani, Uchendu, Atseye, 2007; Suleiman, 2023; Ibrahim, 2018). One of the foremost upside of ICTs is that it has engendered greater access to information and healthcare. However, it is one thing for these possibilities to exist and another for it to be explored given the disparity in access between men and women. Because of the gap, women in Nigeria experience less access to information that will otherwise expose them to better healthcare and economic opportunities. The gender divide

impede their chances to access digital health resources and information, which could promote awareness (Suleiman, 2023; Eneanya & Atoh, 2021). Similarly, Ibrahim, (2018) argued that, the gender digital divide impacts negatively on national development. She reasoned that because of the challenges faced by women in Nigeria, their access and use of digital technology is limited. This in turn affects their ability to contribute to the development of the society and this inadequate participation further fuels the gender disparity in other facets in the society. This sentiment is also shared by, Suleiman, (2023) and Udeogu (2023) who also believe that the implications for society caused by the gender digital disparity does not only stop on online opportunities, but extends to other aspects offline such as the well being of Nigerian women.

Related Theory

The agenda setting theory is considered to be appropriate for this study. Although Walter Lippman conceived the idea of the theory in 1922, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw brought it alive and popularized it in their Chapel Hill study in 1972. The theory is centred on the idea that the media wields significant influence on the opinions and perceptions of the public on events and issues (Sabawo, 2024). Essentially, it posits that by highlighting some issues, the media sets the agenda for public opinion and that the media may not tell the public what to think but it certainly tells the public what to think about (Duru, 2018). Thus this implies that there is a correlation between media agenda and the importance that people attach to issues.

Furthermore, the theory has three basic assumptions according to Anaeto, Onabanjo & Osifeso (2008), as cited in Duru (2018:67) as follows:

- a. The media does not represent social reality since news is selected, and shaped by newsroom staff.
- b. Sources of news are limited for people because they do not prioritise all outlets, as a result, they rely on the mass media.
- c. Professional gatekeepers choose few media agendas, which, lead people to perceive certain issues as important.

This shows that the media possess the power to confer importance on issues by the salience they give to such issues. This can happen through the highlighting of issues and topics they consider important while ignoring others by paying less attention to them. This theory is a media effects theory, which emphasises the role of the media in shaping public discourses.

Methodology

The paper adopted a qualitative research approach to gather data for the study with the semi- structured, interview format. This method was chosen because it is a good approach for understanding the meaning and interpretation that people give to a phenomenon and their experiences (Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009). Thus, in order to understand the role of the media in bridging the gender digital divide in Nigeria there is a need to understand this from the perspective of media experts though the qualitative enquiry.

The sampling of participants for the study was carried out using the Purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling aims to get information from persons who are conversant and can provide relevant information on the subject under study. Hence, eight (8) journalists and media practitioners were purposively selected for the study (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2012). The participants were selected based on their experience, willingness to participate, and knowledge of the subject matter. They comprised of three (3) females and five (5) males. All participants work with local media organizations including Bauchi State Television Authority, Nigeria Television Authority and Bauchi Radio Corporation.

The collection of data was by face to face interview with the exception of three persons whose interview was conducted via phone call. It is however, pertinent to note that most of the interviews were constrained by time.

For data analysis, themes were arrived at both inductively and deductively. Inductively because the review of literature shaped the questions which somewhat pre-determined the direction of data and deductively by analysing responses and generating codes and subsequently themes.

Findings and Discussion

These findings exposed to a large extent that the participants see the role of the media in bridging gender digital divide in Nigeria as largely through media effects which many times occurs indirectly. The following themes emerged from data analysis:

Through Agenda setting

This one theme was very obvious from all participants. They revealed that the amount of time that the media gives to gender digital divide would go a long way in making it an issue of public concern. One informant said (*do you remember in 2014 when the abduction of school girls in Chibok became such an issue of national and international interest, the issue at the time became one of the defining events for the then administration, it became a point for discussion after the media gave it so much attention, it can be the same if attention is given to this too*). Another informant said (*once the media is interested in something, you can be sure that it is done...*). When asked in what ways the agenda on gender digital divide can be set by the media, participants revealed that when the media by the amount of extensive coverage they give to the issue, it would gain public attention and bring it to the consciousness of people.

The responses of participants although interviewed separately revealed an almost unanimous agreement on this theme. This finding is in line with the idea that the media wields a lot of power to determine which events or issues are considered of significance. Hence, it agrees with the tenets of the agenda setting theory as well as with some previous scholars who dissected and found that through agenda setting, the media plays significant role in influencing thoughts and policies. (Grossman, 2022; McCombs & Shaw 1972; Bekkers & Edwards, 2018; CITAD, 2018; Moy, Tewskbury & Rinke, 2016).

Through Debates and Discussions

Participants see the media as a viable platform where discussions and debates on gender digital divide and its associated issues can take place. They all see the media as a vehicle where the issue of gender digital divide can gain

prominence through robust discussions and engagements. A participant, stated that (*another thing the media can do to contribute its quota in bridging the digital divide is to offer its platform, be it print, broadcast and might I add, even the social media to gender experts, digital technology experts and anyone who has a level of influence on the issue to discuss practical solutions to the issue*). When asked further about how they can make their platform available, he added that (*through our programmes...Although I cannot say we have had a programme addressing digital divide directly, we have produced more than two programmes that x-rayed the roles and impact of women in tech, I think it means something and yeah I was part of the production twice as a reporter*).

Other participants also echoed this thought. another one said (*...in NTA, we have produced many programmes highlighting the government's efforts in pushing for an all-inclusive digital economy, we invite experts to analyse what the government is doing and where it is challenged....such programmes educate the public and advises the government to improve where necessary*). Another participant agreed thus (*discussion programmes encourage in depth look at issues, gender digital divide should not be an exception, in my opinion, we need to do more of that so that the gap can be minimized*).

This finding emphasizes the importance of media programmes and coverages in providing the needed and necessary information that the public and government needs to make decisions and policies about gender digital divide. It agrees with the idea espoused by Bekkers & Edwards (2018) that the media has the ability to regulate and anchor the number of voices that get a chance to advance a course. Through various ways in the media, they create opportunities for some thereby creating the possibility of a wider reach for them. On the other hand, setting up barriers for others in order to limit their reach. Hence, the Nigerian media can use its access power to create opportunities for individuals and organizations who advocate for gender digital inclusive policies to articulate and share messages of advocacy (CITAD, 2018). When deliberate efforts are made by the media to increase such access, their influence over such

issues grows and reaches a wider public as well as those in positions of authority.

It further corroborates the argument of Bekkers & Edwards (2018) who asserted that the media is like a conveyor belt through which commodities are transported to consumers. The media can leverage its resource power to get government and policy makers to feed on the losses women experience because of the divide by driving an agenda for them to study and implement (CITAD, 2018).

Framing of Gender Digital Divide

Data analysis also revealed that beyond agenda setting where the media gives extensive coverage to issues or events they consider important, how stories are presented is equally important. They revealed that the way and manner the media narrates the impact of the digital divide would affect the kind of attention it gets from authorities concerned. One of the female participants *shared* “*if the media sets the agenda and get people talking about gender digital divide in the country, how they talk about it also matters*”. Another participant, a male stated “*oh yes, the manner we present the issue matters a lot*” he further explained “*you see, giving perspective to the issue will influence not only what is thought about it but how it is perceived even by people who make policies, I mean government*”.

Similarly, another female participant explained that being journalists gives them access to the high, mighty and lowest in the society and so she believes, that leveraging on this advantage will contribute in bridging the divide in the way they share the real stories of women affected by the divide. She shared thus “*we have access to all classes of people in the society sometimes, it is an opportunity to tell the real stories of women affected by the digital divide and give them perspectives that would attract the attention of the public*”. Other participants also alluded that the manner in which they project the digital divide will influence how it is perceived. Moreover, they believe they have a duty as media to present the problem of gender digital divide in a way that makes it a pressing issue that needs quick and practical solutions.

This finding although similar to agenda setting, supports the proponents of the framing theory who suggested that the media wields great influence on its audience through the various frames they confer on the news and information that they disseminate (Moy, Tewskbury & Rinke, 2016). It also somewhat supports the assertion of (CITAD, 2018) that among the specific actors who have roles to play in bridging the gender digital divide in Nigeria is the media who must drive the agenda and ensure the messages are clear, practical and relevant.

Conclusion

Gender digital divide in Nigeria is exacerbated by many factors including cultural and economic. It is also clear that the gap has further put women on a disadvantage as they lose on the many benefits that come with being digitally perceptive such as economic and health benefits. To contribute in bridging the gap, the media in Nigeria must be willing to put to active use the enormous power it wields to invite and sustain attention on issues of gender digital divide. Through its framing and discursive power, access and resource power as seen in literature, and corroborated by findings of this study, it can beam the searchlight on the issues of digital divide through advocacy, media campaigns as well as monitoring of policies to ensure implementation. The digital space has expanded the reach and influence of media, therefore, the media in Nigeria will be able to contribute in closing the gap by also employing digital tools to reach both those responsible for policy making as well as citizens.

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