

***BRIDGING OR LIMITING? THE DYNAMICS OF STATE-SPONSORED
DIGITAL INTERMEDIARIES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNICATION
ECOLOGY: A CASE STUDY IN PALEMBANG, INDONESIA***

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ABSTRACT

In an era of accelerated digital transformation, governments in Global South countries often rely on community groups as intermediaries to bridge the digital divide. However, existing literature often overlooks the tension between organic participation and state-managed mobilization in such initiatives. This article investigates the Community Information Group (KIM) in Palembang, Indonesia, a hybrid entity that combines community activism with state bureaucratic structures. Using the Communicative Ecologies framework, this study explores how KIM navigates their dual role as the “voice” of the government and the representative of citizens’ aspirations in the wake of the 2022 policy revitalization. Through a qualitative case study involving in-depth interviews and policy document analysis, findings show that KIM functions as crucial human infrastructure but is trapped in a dilemma of “institutional hybridity.” Although KIMs have succeeded in expanding the dissemination of technical information, their role is often reduced to that of gatekeepers who reinforce the state narrative rather than empowering critical citizen discourse. This study contributes to the literature on development communication by highlighting the limitations of state-sponsored participation in an increasingly digitized information ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Intermediaries, Communication Ecology, Community Information Groups (KIM), State Mobilization, Palembang.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the global communications landscape, the main challenge for governments in developing countries today is no longer solely the

provision of physical internet infrastructure, but rather the development of human infrastructure capable of translating digital information into tangible social benefits. Studies on digital intermediaries confirm that actors who are positioned between the state and citizens play an important role in determining access, interpretation, and circulation of information within the local communication ecosystem (González-Tosat & Sádaba-Chalezquer, 2021; Nielsen, 2018). In the context of ICT4D, these intermediaries generally take the form of human actors embedded in local communities who serve as a bridge between bureaucratic digital systems and the daily communication practices of citizens (Masiero, 2022).

In Indonesia, this challenge is being addressed through the revitalization of social structures inherited from the past, which are now being repackaged in digital format, one of which is the Community Information Group (KIM). Normatively, KIM is designed as an intermediary that bridges the rigid state bureaucracy with the fluid dynamics of society, as mandated in the Minister of Communication and Information Technology Regulation No. 08/2010. However, a number of studies show that community intermediaries formed and managed by the state often face structural tensions between the ideals of citizen participation and bureaucratic control (Wahyunengseh, 2019; Farhan, 2023). Instead of functioning as autonomous civil actors, such groups often transform into extensions of communication strategies.

Global literature on development communication also shows a critical stance towards top-down “community-based” digital initiatives. Various studies in Global South countries have found that although digital intermediaries can expand the reach of information and improve digital literacy, they also have the potential to reinforce the dominant narrative of the state and limit the space for critical public discourse if their communication agenda is institutionally bound (Katunga et al., 2023; Nelwamondo & Njenga, 2021). This phenomenon is in line with studies on digital democracy, which emphasize that increased digital participation does not necessarily result in substantive citizen empowerment due to the persistence of the digital divide and bureaucratic filtering mechanisms (Yanto et al., 2024; Wahidin et al., 2025). There is a theoretical tension that

has not been widely explored: Do groups such as KIM truly empower citizens to participate in digital public spaces (as envisioned by Habermas), or are they merely an extension of government public relations apparatus to control public narratives.

Palembang, as one of the metropolitan cities in South Sumatra, offers a unique empirical context for testing this question. In 2022, through Governor's Decree No. 576/KPTS/KOMINFO/2022, there was a massive effort to re-establish KIM amid the push for "Smart City" and regional digital transformation. This article not only traces the administrative history of KIM in Palembang, which had experienced stagnation prior to 2022, but also critically analyzes how KIM operates within the local communication ecosystem. This study argues that the success of KIM is not measured by how sophisticated the technology they use is, but rather by how capable they are of navigating their ambivalent position—between the demands of state bureaucracy and the organic information needs of the community.

The concept of "digital intermediaries" refers to actors—both human and non-human—who facilitate relationships between service providers and users. In the context of developing countries, these intermediaries often take the form of humans (neighborhood association leaders, youth leaders, cadres) who help citizens navigate complex digital systems. Star and Ruhleder (1996) refer to this as "human infrastructure," which is crucial but often invisible in technology policy design. This study positions KIM as such human infrastructure, which serves to translate national digital policies into everyday local practices.

To avoid technological determinism, this study adopts the Communicative Ecologies framework developed by Foth and Hearn (2007). This framework views communication not as a linear, one-way process (from the government to citizens), but as a complex ecological system involving interactions between: The Technical Layer consists of social media, government applications, and hardware. The Social Layer: Face-to-face meetings, social gatherings, and informal citizen networks. The Discursive Layer: The content of messages, narratives, and ideologies exchanged.

Through this lens, KIM is analyzed not as a single entity, but as a node in a broader urban communication network, which must compete and collaborate with other more organic information channels.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of KIM in Palembang. This design was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the complexity of social interactions that cannot be measured through quantitative surveys alone. The data collection methods used in this study were in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observation. The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following qualitative reporting standards (COREQ) to ensure rigor. This process involved coding interview transcripts, identifying patterns, and grouping themes related to the role of intermediaries, communication barriers, and power relations between the state and civil society.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Genealogy and Institutional Hybridity: Between Community and Bureaucracy

Research findings challenge the narrative that KIM is a purely bottom-up initiative. The history of KIM's formation in Palembang shows a pattern of state-led mobilization. A similar pattern was also found in previous studies on community intermediaries in Indonesia, which showed a strong dependence on state legitimacy, funding, and the direction of government policy (Wahyunengseh, 2019; Prismadani et al., 2025).. Although KIM is nationally defined as an institution “from, by, and for the community,” the reality on the ground in Palembang shows a strong dependence on state legitimacy.

The momentum of 2022, marked by the inauguration of 71 KIM Coordination Forum administrators by the Deputy Governor, was not a spontaneous rebirth of the community, but rather a response to instructions from the central bureaucracy to support the national digital transformation agenda. This creates institutional hybridity: KIM

administrators are ordinary citizens (academics, community leaders), but they hold government decrees and are often treated as extensions of government public relations (Diskominfo).

The implication of this hybridity is the emergence of loyalty conflicts. Interview data indicates that the function of “absorbing aspirations” is often dulled compared to the function of “disseminating development information,” because the incentive and legitimacy structure of KIM stems from the Governor’s decree.

b. KIM in Communication Ecology: Navigating Digital Friction

Analysis using the Communicative Ecologies lens reveals that KIM operates in an environment full of “friction.” The Palembang City Government aggressively promotes the use of official applications and social media as part of its Smart City performance evaluation.

However, the communication ecology of citizens is dominated by informal channels. The role of KIM becomes crucial as a translator. They take rigid official information from government websites or the official Instagram account of the Communication and Information Agency, “translate” it into everyday language, and distribute it through informal networks such as WhatsApp Groups (WAG) for citizens. Without this translation role, government information often stops at the elite village level. However, the findings also confirm the risk of a second-level digital divide: residents who lack adequate digital literacy remain left behind even though the infrastructure is available, as KIM increasingly rarely conducts manual face-to-face outreach.

c. The Participation Paradox: Dissemination vs. Aspirations

This study found a structural imbalance in the flow of information managed by KIM. The dissemination function (government to citizens) is much more effective than the aspiration function (citizens to government).

- **Narrative Dominance:** The material disseminated by KIM is dominated by the socialization of development programs, local government achievements, and anti-hoax clarifications that are in line with the government’s agenda.
- **Feedback Barriers:** Mechanisms for conveying citizen complaints are often blocked. Despite claims of two-way communication,

citizen aspirations often have to go through a long bureaucratic filter before being addressed by the relevant agencies.

This reinforces the criticism in global literature that state-sponsored participation initiatives in the Global South often risk becoming tools for public opinion management (co-optation) rather than substantial citizen political empowerment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study on the history and dynamics of KIM in Palembang reveals that KIM is more than just a social group; it is a critical intermediary infrastructure in Indonesia's digital ecosystem. The revitalization of KIM in 2022 through a Governor's Decree marks the state's efforts to reaffirm its presence in the local digital space.

Although KIM has succeeded in expanding the reach of public information and helping to “ground” bureaucratic language, this study concludes that their hybrid nature—as state-formed community entities—creates limitations for substantive participation. KIMs tend to function as effective gatekeepers in curbing disinformation, but are less effective in challenging power structures or aggressively fighting for the aspirations of marginalized citizens.

Implications: To increase their effectiveness, local governments need to give KIM greater autonomy in determining their communication agenda and reduce ceremonial administrative burdens. Without these reforms, KIM risks becoming merely a digital “megaphone” for the state, rather than a true bridge of communication for the people of Palembang.

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