

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EMPOWERING CITIZEN JOURNALISM: IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

BY

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Abstract

Citizen journalism has reshaped the media landscape by empowering ordinary individuals to participate in the news production process, largely through digital platforms and social media. This study explores the evolution of citizen journalism, its role in the media ecosystem, and the ethical challenges it faces. Through a review of literature, the research identifies how citizen journalism, by offering real-time reporting and alternative perspectives, has challenged the monopolies of traditional media. However, concerns about credibility, misinformation, and ethical standards persist due to the lack of formal training among citizen journalists. The study emphasizes the importance of maintaining journalistic integrity and the need for partnerships between citizen journalists and traditional media to promote balanced and reliable reporting. As the lines between these two forms of journalism blur, the future of journalism may involve greater collaboration, fostering a participatory and inclusive media environment. Recommendations include offering training for citizen journalists and encouraging partnerships with mainstream media to enhance ethical reporting.

Keywords: Social media, citizen journalism, media empowerment, ethical challenges, news credibility.

Introduction

Citizen journalism, driven by technological advancements and the rise of social media, has revolutionized how news is collected, distributed, and consumed. Traditionally, journalism was the preserve of trained professionals in established media houses. However, the emergence of digital platforms has allowed ordinary citizens to participate in the news production process, leading to a democratization of journalism (Noor, 2015). By leveraging platforms like blogs, social media, and forums, citizens are now able to share information, report on events, and engage in the journalistic process. This transformation has provided marginalized groups with a voice and has often challenged the monopolies of traditional media (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). This participatory form of journalism has empowered individuals to present alternative narratives and shine a light on stories that may not attract the attention of mainstream media outlets. As such, citizen journalism has evolved into a tool for social activism, allowing real-time sharing of events and mobilization of public opinion (Segun, 2024). However, this has also raised critical concerns about ethical standards and the credibility of news, especially in an era where the speed of information dissemination often eclipses accuracy.

Despite the transformative role of social media in empowering citizen journalism and facilitating public participation, significant challenges arise regarding the ethical standards and credibility of information disseminated through these platforms. Citizen journalists, who often lack formal training in journalism, are at risk of spreading misinformation due to inadequate verification practices and a lack of adherence to established journalistic ethics (Darmanto & Delliana, 2017). The immediacy with which news is shared on social media amplifies these challenges, as the rush to report breaking news can lead to the prioritization of speed over accuracy, thus fostering the proliferation of false narratives (Roberts, 2019).

In addition, the differences between traditional and citizen journalism is becoming more blurred as established media organisations face competition from amateur journalists who function without traditional editorial oversight. This raises ethical concerns regarding the accuracy and quality of news reported by citizen journalists, especially in critical or politically sensitive circumstances (Watson et al., 2014). Social media's worldwide reach makes it easier for local news to garner attention abroad quickly, which increases the possibility of false information spreading unchecked across national boundaries. After all, the main concern is how to balance the need to uphold news reporting's ethical integrity and credibility with the empowerment that social media offers citizen journalists. There is an urgent need to investigate how social media may be used to citizen journalism while making sure that ethical standards are maintained, as the lines separating traditional and citizen journalism continue to blur (Tse, 2024). By addressing these problems, we can create a media landscape that supports citizen and traditional journalism and promotes public trust as well as educated discourse in society.

Literature Review

Evolution of Citizen Journalism

Fundamentally, citizen journalism is the process of enabling non-professional journalists to obtain, report, and analyse news. According to Noor (2015), the emergence of digital media led to a spread of this democratic mode of news reporting. To elaborate, Thorsen (2020) points out that citizen journalism encourages public involvement in media production, thereby challenging the monopoly of traditional news organisations. Wall (2016) claims that postmodern journalism, which is distinguished by decentralised news gathering, is reflected in citizen journalism. According to Mutsvairo et al. (2022), citizen journalism operates within the networked public sphere, giving people a platform to discuss local concerns that might not be covered by major media. Similarly, Darmanto and Delliana (2017) assert that citizen journalism represents a change towards more participatory, user-generated news, upending the established gatekeeping responsibilities of traditional journalism.

Noor (2015) asserts that the emergence of citizen journalism occurred in the 20th century, along with the development of digital technology and the internet. It is defined by people or organisations producing, selecting, and distributing news material without the traditional gatekeeping functions performed by well-established media organisations. Technological developments that make it simple to access information and communication channels like blogs and social media are supporting the democratisation of journalism (Darmanto & Delliana, 2017). Furthermore, numerous types of citizen journalism have surfaced, including blogging, social media reporting, and crowd-sourced news efforts. While social media platforms provide the real-time sharing of information and a variety of perspectives, blogging provides a forum for personal narratives and comments on current events (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). According to Moon et al. (2020), it facilitates community reporting on events, thereby boosting local voices and tales that could otherwise go unnoticed by mainstream media. Building on this discussion of the evolution of citizen journalism, it is critical to explore the role of social media in empowering this new form of news reporting.

The Role of Social Media in Empowering Citizen Journalism

Social media has become an essential tool in the digital age, changing the way that news is reported and consumed while also facilitating citizen journalism. According to Aldaihani and Shin (2022), social media sites such as Twitter function as substitute news sources, allowing individuals to quickly and efficiently distribute information. Because of its instantaneity, citizen journalists are able to contribute to the news agenda by offering up-to-date information that contradicts the narratives of established media. Social media's contribution to increasing public engagement and participation in journalism is highlighted by this democratisation of information delivery. Moreover, during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, user-generated information has considerably influenced opinions of government

effectiveness regarding economic policies (Raza et al., 2022). Social media allows citizens to share their stories and ideas, which not only educates the public but also keeps government officials accountable. This demonstrates how social media can be used as a forum for advocacy and criticism, giving people the power to actively influence public conversation.

Pearce and Rodgers (2020) delve more into the phenomenon of social media as a platform for public journalism, contending that it creates a new kind of protest reporting. In this situation, social media helps activists feel more connected to one another in addition to providing a forum for dissenting opinions. Social media amplifies the voices of marginalised groups and promotes inclusivity in the media environment by enabling the rapid flow of information. This shift signifies a move toward participatory journalism, where citizens take on the roles traditionally reserved for professional journalists. Zayani (2021) emphasizes that the empowerment of citizen journalism through social media is rooted in audience engagement. Platforms such as AJ+ leverage interactive content to engage users, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for the information shared. This engagement is crucial as it transforms passive consumers of news into active participants, thereby enhancing the credibility and reach of citizen journalism.

Nonetheless, there are obstacles associated with the growth of citizen journalism on social media. According to Taibi and Na (2020), citizen journalism offers significant threats to traditional media since it undermines the authority of professional journalists and challenges established journalistic standards. The trend toward user-generated content raises important concerns about the future of journalism, especially with regard to upholding moral principles and fact-checking. Regarding the future of citizen journalism, Campbell (2015) postulates that the roles and practices of citizen journalists will change along with social media. Since citizen journalists are more and more responsible for assuring the accuracy and reliability of the information they disseminate, this change calls for a reconsideration of conventional journalistic values. Consequently, understanding these challenges and opportunities is essential for appreciating the broader benefits that citizen journalism offers to society.

Benefits of Citizen Journalism

Real-time Reporting

One of the most significant benefits of citizen journalism is its capacity for real-time reporting. Equipped with smartphones and access to social media platforms, ordinary individuals can document and share events as they unfold, often faster than traditional media outlets. Noor (2017) emphasizes that amateurs may frequently report breaking news with greater immediacy, especially during crises or in remote areas where established media are either absent or slow to respond. This immediacy was clearly demonstrated during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, where citizen-generated content flooded the internet, offering unfiltered visuals and narratives from the streets (Chiakaan et al., 2022). These rapid updates helped to build momentum and international awareness around the movement.

Community Engagement and Voice for the Marginalized

Citizen journalism provides a platform for underrepresented communities to voice their concerns and share their perspectives. Tse (2024) underscores how community-based citizen journalism engages local populations and elevates the voices of marginalized groups who are often overlooked by mainstream media. This localized form of reporting fosters inclusivity and ensures that social issues affecting disadvantaged communities are brought to light. In the Nigerian context, Otuya-Asohro (2024) notes that citizen journalism has been instrumental in highlighting injustices and mobilizing grassroots advocacy, particularly in regions where access to media coverage is limited.

Promotion of Democratic Participation

Citizen journalism plays a vital role in promoting democratic engagement, especially in societies where press freedom is constrained. Mutsvairo et al. (2014) argue that citizen journalism fosters active civic involvement by empowering individuals to participate in public discourse and hold authorities accountable. During the #EndSARS protest, citizen journalists were not just reporters but also participants in a democratic movement, using digital tools to amplify calls for reform (Chiakaan et al., 2022). This participatory nature strengthens democratic culture and encourages transparency in governance, making citizen journalism a key tool for good governance in emerging democracies.

Accountability and Higher Reporting Standards

Citizen journalism encourages accountability not only among political leaders and institutions but also within the journalism profession itself. Ali (2019) asserts that the presence of citizen journalists challenges professional reporters to maintain high ethical and professional standards, knowing their work will be scrutinized by a more informed and active audience. Otuya-Asohro (2024) notes that this dynamic has led to a more self-reflective and cautious media landscape in Nigeria, where professional journalists are compelled to be more accurate and responsible in their reporting.

Media Pluralism and Diverse Perspectives

Finally, citizen journalism enhances media pluralism by introducing multiple viewpoints and breaking the dominance of elite narratives. Danso et al. (2024) highlight that citizen-produced content contributes to a richer and more diversified media space. This diversity is crucial in societies where mainstream media are influenced by political or commercial interests. Noor (2017) also recognizes the role of citizen journalists in presenting alternative opinions, challenging the gatekeeping practices of traditional news organizations. In the case of the #EndSARS protest, the varied stories and testimonies shared by citizen reporters painted a more comprehensive picture of the movement, fostering a deeper public understanding of the issues at stake (Chiakaan et al., 2022).

Ethical Challenges and Credibility Issues

Transformation of the Media Landscape and Erosion of Gatekeeping Roles

Citizen journalism has fundamentally reshaped the way news is gathered, reported, and consumed. According to Aldaihani and Shin (2022), platforms like Twitter have enabled everyday individuals to actively participate in news dissemination, effectively disrupting the traditional gatekeeping role of professional journalists. This democratization allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints, enriching public dialogue. Additionally, the swift and accessible nature of citizen journalism, especially evident during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrates its potential to influence public perceptions of official narratives (Raza et al., 2022). As a result, citizen journalism has emerged as a vital counterbalance to mainstream media, offering alternative views and supporting a more pluralistic media environment.

Inadequate Training and the Risk of Misinformation

A major credibility issue arises from the fact that many citizen journalists lack formal journalistic training. Roberts (2019) emphasizes that this gap becomes particularly problematic during crises, where unintentional misinformation can mislead audiences. Taibi and Na (2020) point out that the uncontrolled spread of unverified information by citizen journalists poses serious risks to the credibility of news content. Moyo (2016) supports this view, noting that

in politically unstable environments, citizen journalists may inadvertently contribute to the spread of false information. This not only undermines trust but also complicates efforts to distinguish credible reports from misleading ones.

Ethical Dilemmas from Reliance on Unverified Sources

Villegas and Álvarez (2016) explore the ethical challenges faced by citizen journalists who rely heavily on social media for information without independently verifying its accuracy. This practice increases the risk of spreading false or misleading content, which can harm public discourse. The absence of structured editorial processes exacerbates this issue, making it difficult to uphold journalistic accountability within citizen-led reporting.

Lack of Recognized Ethical Norms and Skepticism from Professionals

Because citizen journalism typically does not adhere to established journalistic standards, it often faces skepticism from media professionals. Salaudeen (2022) notes that this lack of formal structure leads many trained journalists to question its legitimacy. Furthermore, Mutsvairo et al. (2014) argue that the absence of universally accepted ethical codes among citizen journalists hampers efforts to ensure objectivity and credibility in their reporting, leaving a significant gap in accountability frameworks.

The Lines Between Traditional and Citizen Journalism

The convergence of traditional and citizen journalism has profound implications for the media landscape. A symbiotic relationship that can improve news coverage but also raises questions about quality and authenticity is created when established media sources progressively include citizen-generated information into their reporting (Ali, 2019). As consumers navigate a complicated media environment where the distinctions between reliable journalism and personal opinion are frequently blurry, this merging of professional and amateur journalism causes an audience trust assessment to be reevaluated (Salaudeen, 2022). Noor (2017) discusses how citizen journalism has made it possible for regular people to compete with professional journalists, democratising the news-producing process. Apuke and Ayih (2020) have observed that the distinction between professional and amateur journalism has become increasingly hazy due to this competition.

This evolving dynamic of competition suggests the possibility of future collaboration between citizen and professional journalists. According to Mutsvairo and Salgado (2022), citizen journalism will likely continue to be included into traditional media formats since both types of journalism aim to address how the dynamics of news consumption are evolving in the digital era. There may be more cooperation between amateur and professional journalists in the future of journalism. As Thorsen (2020) points out, the combination of these two types of journalism calls for a reevaluation of what information is considered reliable. The consequences affect the media environment as a whole since traditional media may have to lower their standards in order to stay relevant in the face of citizen journalism. Given these developments, it is important to examine the implications of citizen journalism on the future of traditional media.

The Future of Traditional Media

The emergence of citizen journalism has a significant impact on traditional media's future. Traditional media sources must reconsider their roles and tactics in light of the increasing acceptance of citizen-generated content. According to Pearce and Rodgers (2020), traditional media has to accept that journalism is participatory and acknowledge that readers are no longer only viewers but also active contributors to the news. This change calls for more interactive and community-driven methods to news reporting in traditional media's audience engagement

strategies. Despite the challenges posed by citizen journalism, traditional media still holds significant advantages, especially in terms of resources, experience, and established credibility. According to Campbell (2015), in order for traditional journalism to be relevant in a media landscape that is becoming more crowded, it must concentrate on developing its distinctive qualities, such as investigative reporting and in-depth analysis. The discussion of traditional media's future naturally leads to an exploration of the future of citizen journalism and how both forms might coexist in the evolving media landscape.

The Future of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism will certainly continue to adapt as new technologies arise, presenting both opportunities and difficulties for its expansion. According to Peña-Fernández et al. (2024), there is a growing concern regarding the sustainability of user-generated material as a trustworthy news source, even as the growth of digital technologies has empowered citizen journalists. According to Mutsvairo and Salgado (2022), citizen journalism will grow, especially in areas where the state-owned media suppresses free speech. Salaudeen (2024) emphasises that in order to guarantee citizen journalism's longevity—especially in terms of maintaining its objectivity and credibility—ethical standards and accountability frameworks are essential. Tse (2024) argues that citizen journalism's survival will rely on its capacity to blend in with traditional media while maintaining its grassroots roots. The value of citizen journalism is likely to continue to rise as both forms of journalism adjust to an advancing media environment.

However, to ensure the long-term success of citizen journalism, it must address issues of trustworthiness and ethics. According to Horoub (2023), there is a pressing need for ethical standards that can assist citizen journalists in navigating the challenges of news reporting as the distinctions between traditional and citizen journalism become more and more blurred. Furthermore, the calibre and dependability of the information citizen journalists supply can be improved by educational programs targeted at raising their level of media literacy.

Conclusion

Citizen journalism has significantly disrupted the traditional media ecosystem, empowering ordinary individuals to participate in news production and offering real-time reporting. However, it faces ethical challenges and credibility issues that must be addressed for it to remain a sustainable and reliable source of news. The future of citizen journalism lies in its ability to evolve alongside traditional media, maintaining its participatory nature while ensuring accuracy and objectivity in reporting. In conclusion, the literature reveals a dynamic interplay between citizen journalism, traditional media, and the future of journalism as a whole. While citizen journalism has the potential to enrich the media landscape, it also poses significant challenges that must be addressed to ensure ethical and credible reporting. The future will likely see greater collaboration between citizen journalists and traditional media outlets, resulting in a more integrated and participatory approach to news.

Recommendations

1. Introduce formal training and workshops for citizen journalists to better their awareness of ethical journalism and fact-checking methodologies.
2. Encourage partnerships between citizen journalists and mainstream media organisations to ensure a more balanced media landscape by bridging the gap between professionalism and user-generated content.

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