Citizen journalism and news objectivity: Issues, challenges and solutions

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Abstract - The rise of citizen journalism has transformed the media landscape, posing significant challenges to traditional news objectivity. This study aims to investigate the impact of citizen journalism on news objectivity by exploring issues, challenges, and potential solutions. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative content analysis of citizen-generated news reports with quantitative surveys of professional journalists and citizen journalists. The data collection involved analysing a sample of news stories from various online platforms and conducting interviews with key stakeholders. Results reveal that while citizen journalism democratizes information dissemination, it often struggles with issues of accuracy and bias, leading to concerns about objectivity. Challenges include the lack of formal training, editorial oversight, and the influence of personal or ideological agendas. However, the study also identifies potential solutions such as promoting media literacy, encouraging collaboration between professional and citizen journalists, and implementing fact-checking mechanisms. In conclusion, while citizen journalism contributes valuable perspectives and diversity to news reporting, addressing its challenges is crucial for maintaining journalistic standards. Ensuring objectivity in this evolving media environment requires a collaborative approach and the integration of rigorous verification processes.

Keywords: citizen journalism; news objectivity; media challenges; media literacy; fact-checking; journalism standards

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of internet media worldwide is a significant change that has fundamentally transformed how journalism is carried out. A crucial aspect of online journalism involves sharing editorial content through the Internet (Aliagan, 2018). As contemporary technology and societal

complexity increased, traditional communication methods faced a notable challenge. In response to this, local communities decided to explore ways to satisfy their curiosity about local events. This evolution led to citizens independently seeking and reporting news without adhering to standard journalistic procedures. Adelabu (2008) vividly describes this shift, stating that many mass media organizations are more focused on catering to advertisers than the needs of their readers or audiences. Consequently, people are reshaping the rules and roles of the game with the aid of information technology, particularly the internet.

Another reason citizen journalism is becoming more common in places like Nigeria is that what's happening around us is often more than what regular news covers. This means lots of things go unreported because either no journalist is assigned to cover them or they're not around when things happen. Burkholder (2010) says that when big news occurs, there's usually nobody ready to report on it right away. Reporters then have the freedom to put together the story for the next day's newspaper using interviews and videos. Sadly, there's rarely a chance to take a picture of breaking news.

Digital journalism, also known as online journalism, is a way of sharing news on the internet instead of using newspapers or TV. It involves putting news stories, features, and analysis on various online platforms.

Citizen journalism is when regular people in a community gather, process, and share news on their own. They create web pages to post news from their surroundings, often using phones or other devices to capture events. Because of modern technology and social media, more people are doing citizen journalism (Stephansen & Trere, 2019). Now, anyone with internet access can stay updated on global events from home, leading to fewer people reading traditional newspapers. The decline in printed newspaper sales has affected the business of media companies (Folashade, 2013).

The internet poses challenges for traditional news media. Online websites may take away classified ads from newspapers. Media companies are worried about losing viewers and readers to the internet. To deal with this, many print media companies are investing more in their online versions. As a result, more people are turning to online journalism for their news.

Citizen journalism, according to Rosen, is when regular people, once considered the audience, use the tools they have to share information with each other (as cited in Nguyen & Scifo, 2018). Markham (2009) adds that citizen journalism involves non-professional individuals actively participating in media production, which can be a form of political engagement.

Objectivity is a crucial aspect of journalism, but some citizen journalists lack the training to uphold professional ethics. Without proper training, they may not follow traditional journalistic standards of being objective, fair, and accurate. This contributes to the prevalence of fake news in citizen journalism, especially with the global reach of the internet. Many citizen journalists share news, whether true or false, without undergoing formal journalism training.

The rise of new media and social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and Instagram has impacted various aspects of human life. This study aims to explore the main issues, challenges, and potential solutions in citizen journalism. It seeks to understand the current state of citizen journalism and predict its future.

As media organizations focus on making money to sustain themselves, they sometimes overlook the interests of the people. The news content often does not truly represent the people's concerns. Dissatisfied with this, individuals turn to citizen journalism. Idoko (2012) points out challenges in Nigeria, including computer illiteracy, limited internet access, and high internet costs. These challenges highlight the need to investigate the issues and find solutions in citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism is when regular people collect and share information through social media, public platforms, and traditional news outlets. This can be done by non-traditional sources or the public itself. According to Nguyen and Scifo (2018), citizen journalism is always changing and expanding, often occurring on sites and forums where it's not the main focus but arises as needed.

In simple terms, citizen journalism, also known as participatory or guerrilla journalism, is the process where ordinary people take on the responsibility of spreading, gathering, and analyzing information or news, especially on the internet. It's a form of journalism conducted by non-professional journalists using websites, blogs, and social media (Encyclopedia).

This type of journalism is a departure from the traditional top-down communication of mainstream media. Bowman and Willis (2016) describe participatory journalism as a bottom-up phenomenon without much editorial oversight, where many simultaneous conversations take place in the web's social network.

Unlike traditional news organizations that filter information before publishing, citizen journalism emphasizes publishing information without much filtering. There is no gatekeeping in citizen journalism, allowing for a more open and fluid approach (Bowman & Willis, 2016). The term "citizen journalism" is broad and still evolving in meaning (Educause Learning Initiative, 2017).

Banda (2020) describes citizen journalism as a rapidly evolving form where ordinary citizens report news or express views about events in their community. It's news created by the people, for the people, and about the people.

Objectivity in journalism is crucial because it allows the audience to form their own opinions based on facts alone. According to Gauntlet (2001), objectivity involves analyzing the substance of gathered news items. To maintain objectivity, journalists should present the facts regardless of their personal agreement. Journalistic objectivity requires staying neutral and not taking sides in an argument. Journalists should report only the facts without expressing personal attitudes towards them (Warren, 2011). Objectivity encompasses three key concepts: truthfulness, neutrality, and detachment (Phillip et al., 2011). Truthfulness means committing to reporting accurate and honest information without distorting any facts to enhance the story (Phillip et al., 2011). Neutrality suggests reporting stories in an unbiased, evenhanded, and impartial manner.

This study is based on the Source Credibility Theory, as outlined by Hovland et al (1963). This well-established theory suggests that positive characteristics of communicators influence how receivers perceive and accept messages. Regardless of the format, the credibility of communication is significantly affected by the perceived credibility of the message source. Media credibility research has shifted its focus from individual characteristics to personal source behaviors in the media, such as objectivity, accuracy, fairness, and lack of bias. According to Hovland et al (1963), source credibility is crucial when individuals become active in the media. Two key elements that positively influence source credibility are perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source. Cornan et al (2006) further add that there are three dimensions of credibility: trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill. While these dimensions are not empirical realities, they are perceptions that can be shaped, managed, and cultivated. This requires a thoughtful approach to message design, delivery, and adaptation to the specific audience and media context.

The relevance of this theory to the study lies in the fact that technological advancements have transformed the landscape of journalism, giving rise to what we now term "online journalism." As noted by Amaefule (2012), we are in an internet-driven society where dominant technology shapes social existence. This aligns with McLuhan's idea that the dominant media of the time shapes media existence, evident in journalism's evolution with the adoption of new media. The Source Credibility Theory is particularly pertinent to this study because the credibility of online information has come under scrutiny due to the open nature of the new media space. The lack of gatekeeping in this space may impact the authentication of information, potentially leading to security concerns.

II. METHOD

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore the objectivity of citizen journalism, the challenges it faces, and potential solutions. The data collection process is twofold: qualitative content analysis of citizen-generated news reports and quantitative surveys targeting professional journalists and citizen journalists.

Additionally, interviews with key stakeholders provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities within citizen journalism.

2.1 Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative aspect of this research focuses on content analysis of citizen-generated news reports. A purposive sampling method is used to select a representative sample of news stories from various online platforms, including social media sites, independent news websites, and blogs. The sample includes a diverse range of topics, ensuring coverage of different genres of news reporting, such as political events, social issues, and local community news. The selected news stories are examined for elements of objectivity, bias, and the representation of facts. This stage of data collection aims to identify common themes, patterns, and narrative structures within citizen-generated content.

2.2 Quantitative Data Collection

To complement the qualitative analysis, quantitative data is gathered through structured surveys distributed to a carefully selected group of professional journalists and citizen journalists. The survey is designed to capture attitudes and perceptions regarding the objectivity of citizen journalism, the ethical challenges involved, and the potential impact of these reports on public opinion. The survey consists of a combination of closed-ended questions using Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, and a few open-ended questions to allow for brief qualitative responses. Participants are recruited via professional networks, journalism associations, and social media platforms to ensure a broad representation of perspectives. The survey results provide measurable data that can be analysed statistically to identify trends and correlations.

2.3 Interviews

In addition to content analysis and surveys, semi-structured interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, including experienced journalists, editors, media scholars, and active citizen journalists. The interviews aim to delve deeper into the challenges of maintaining objectivity in citizen journalism, exploring personal experiences, and gathering expert opinions on the future of citizen-generated news content. The interviews are conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms and are recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis.

2.4 Technique of Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data involves thematic coding, where the selected news reports are systematically examined to identify recurring themes related to news objectivity, bias, and the influence of personal perspectives. This process includes coding the data into categories that reflect different dimensions of news objectivity, such as fact-checking, source credibility, and the presence of opinion versus fact.

For the quantitative survey data, statistical analysis is employed. Descriptive statistics, such as mean, median, and mode, are calculated to summarize the general trends in the data. Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and correlation analyses, are used to explore relationships between variables, such as the level of journalism experience and perceptions of objectivity in citizen journalism.

Finally, the qualitative data from the interviews is analysed using a content analysis approach, identifying key themes and insights that emerge from the discussions. The interview data is cross-referenced with the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses to triangulate the results and provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding citizen journalism and news objectivity.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethics, serving as guiding principles for conducting activities with integrity and responsibility, are particularly vital in journalism. The advent of the internet has brought to the forefront a set of ethical concerns that bears some resemblance to the transformative impact of Gutenberg's printing press. In the current digital landscape, where anyone can potentially function as a journalist, the ethical landscape of journalism has encountered new challenges, particularly with the rise of citizen journalism (Ezeibe & Nwagwu, 2009; Hassan et al, 2024).

Citizen journalism, empowered by the internet, has blurred the lines between traditional journalism and individual contributions to news dissemination. While this shift allows for a more diverse range of voices, it also introduces ethical dilemmas that demand attention.

One significant ethical concern is plagiarism, where the lack of acknowledgment and outright copying of content is prevalent in online journalism. This raises ethical concerns as proper crediting is essential not only for maintaining journalistic integrity but also for avoiding legal complications that may arise due to intellectual property infringements (Talabi, 2011).

Accuracy is another pressing issue in the realm of online journalism. The ease of sharing information on digital platforms has led to questions about the reliability of online stories. Some online platforms are perceived as rumor mills, challenging the ethical imperative of verifying facts before publication, a cornerstone of responsible journalism (Ezeibe & Nwagwu, 2009).

The rise of obscenity in online journalism is also a notable ethical challenge. There has been an increase in the prevalence of explicit content, which challenges traditional ethical standards. This is particularly concerning in the context of reporting on children, as it raises ethical questions about societal values and responsible journalism practices (Greer & Mensing, 2016).

Fairness in reporting is compromised as derogatory language and explicit details are sometimes utilized to attract online traffic. While journalists are expected to adhere to fairness standards, these standards are sometimes forsaken in pursuit of online popularity, leading to a compromise in ethical reporting practices (Aliagan, 2018).

The absence of gatekeepers in citizen journalism is a significant ethical concern. Traditional editorial oversight, which acts as a safeguard against inaccuracies and misinformation, is often lacking in the realm of citizen journalism. This poses challenges to the trustworthiness of information disseminated online (Tijani, 2019).

Finally, citizen journalism frequently involves the replication of information, errors, and the dissemination of false information. This poses ethical concerns as false information can not only misinform the public but also incite hostility and injustice, undermining the reliability of citizen journalism as a credible source of information (Tijani, 2019).

In conclusion, addressing these ethical concerns is imperative to uphold the integrity and reliability of information in the digital age. It necessitates a collective effort from journalists, online platforms, and society at large to establish and reinforce ethical standards that prioritize accuracy, fairness, and responsible reporting in the dynamic landscape of online journalism.

In various parts of the world, citizen journalism is undergoing a transitional phase and faces numerous obstacles, demands, and critiques. This practice has democratized journalism by making it accessible to individuals without formal training. Thanks to the Internet and multimedia technologies like mobile phones and video cameras, practically anyone with access to these tools can now engage in journalism.

In Nigeria, citizen journalism has faced challenges in taking off. Adelabu (2008) notes that Nigerian journalists grapple with redefining the traditional model of journalism, which often perceives the public as passive recipients of information chosen by an editorial board. This outdated model views consumers merely as individuals who purchase media content, with limited interaction beyond occasional letters or opinion pieces.

While many Nigerian media outlets have transitioned to the internet, some still find it challenging to run online publications. It is essential to highlight that numerous Nigerian news outlets struggle with online journalism, not adequately preparing for the challenges posed by the internet and multimedia technologies. Despite this, computer-literate individuals are increasingly using the internet wisely, while the media industry strives to keep up with the evolving landscape.

Additionally, citizen journalists often operate without adhering to any mandated code of ethics, unlike mainstream media outlets. Itule and Anderson (2000) emphasize the gravity of journalists' responsibilities and the importance of a code of ethics. They argue that a code of ethics displayed on the wall is meaningless; what matters is a code that journalists internalize and use to guide their behavior. Journalists draw moral values from various sources, including friends,

family, and religious institutions. It is challenging for journalists to divorce their personal ideals from the ethics of their profession. People's participation in the news process, especially in citizen journalism, can sometimes result in imprecise or ethically ambiguous content in the realm of practical news reporting.

This collection of studies explores the evolving role of citizen journalism and its interaction with traditional media across various contexts. The works highlight how citizen journalism has emerged as a powerful tool for marginalized communities, offering an alternative platform for voices often overlooked by mainstream media. For example, Togtarbay and colleagues (2024) examine citizen journalism's impact in Kazakhstan, while Chadha and Steiner (2015) explore the potential and limitations of such initiatives in India. Similarly, Aliagan (2018) and Batta (2009) focus on the Nigerian context, analysing how traditional newspapers adapt to digital challenges and how peace journalism contributes to conflict management.

Other studies delve into the broader implications of digital transformation within journalism. Bishton (2011), Greer and Mensing (2016), and Franklin (2009) provide historical perspectives on the evolution of online journalism, noting significant shifts in reader engagement and content delivery. Ersoy (2016) contrasts peace journalism with traditional reporting, while Ezeibe and Nwagwu (2009; Acheampong, 2024; 2024) discuss media imperialism's influence on local narratives in Nigeria. Griffin (2000) and Gunter (2013) offer foundational communication theories that underline these discussions, emphasizing how digital platforms continue to shape news consumption and societal discourse.

The ethical challenges surrounding online journalism and citizen reporting are critically examined in works by Folashade (2013), Talabi (2011), Yusha'u (2013), and Miller-Carpenter (2008). These studies address concerns about objectivity, credibility, and journalistic standards as digital platforms grow in prominence. Noor (2016) and Horoub (2023) compare citizen journalism with mainstream media, particularly in conflict zones like Palestine, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities presented by grassroots reporting. Tse (2024) and Luo and Harrison (2019) further explore how citizen journalism influences media agendas and policymaking, offering regional insights from Taiwan and China.

The collection concludes with discussions on the broader societal impacts of citizen journalism. Albarado (2024; Amos & Joseph, 2023) and Peña-Fernández et al. (2024) provide an overview of citizen journalism's development and the decline of user-generated content in online media. Additionally, Sheen et al (2021) demonstrate how citizen reporting enhances government communication credibility during crises, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, Buntaine et al (2021) present the challenges faced by citizen journalism initiatives in improving public services, using a field experiment in Uganda to illustrate the practical limitations of grassroots reporting. Together, these studies offer a comprehensive view of how citizen journalism continues to redefine media landscapes and influence societal discourse.

The journalistic code of ethics serves as a comprehensive framework, comprising moral precepts, regulations, and standards that guide the conduct of journalists in their professional endeavors and interactions with the public. This set of ethical guidelines has evolved over time to ensure that information disseminated by journalists is characterized by honesty, accuracy, and fairness, while also providing a basis for challenging any unethical directives within the media industry.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) plays a pivotal role in the development and modification of this ethical code, having undergone revisions in 2011 to address the evolving landscape of journalism. The code delineates a set of principles that are fundamental for ethical journalistic practice, extending these guidelines to citizen journalists who engage in news reporting without formal training.

The key components of the journalistic code of ethics that citizen journalists are expected to adhere to include:

(1) Editorial Independence: Citizen journalists should exercise editorial independence, making autonomous judgments about the substance of news content.

(2) Accuracy and Fairness: The paramount objective is to ensure truthful, accurate, and equitable dissemination of information. This necessitates a commitment to objective, factual, balanced, and fair reporting, with a prompt correction of any erroneous or misleading material. The right of reply is emphasized as an essential practice, allowing individuals featured in news stories an opportunity to respond.

(3) Privacy: Respect for individuals' privacy is emphasized, with a general refrain from interfering in personal affairs unless it is evidently in the public interest. Public disclosure of personal details is justified only when serving the public interest, such as exposing major misdemeanors or crimes, anti-social activities, preserving safety, morals, and public health.

(4) Secrecy/Privilege: Upholding the concept of journalistic confidentiality, citizen journalists are expected to safeguard the identity of their sources, particularly when information is acquired "off-the-record" or as "background information."

(5) Decency: Citizen journalists should present themselves in a manner consistent with prevailing public opinion, refraining from the use of profane, insulting, or abusive language. Explicit details of sensitive nature, such as sexual actions, violence, or repulsive images, should be avoided, demonstrating sensitivity in handling situations involving shock or personal sadness.

(6) Discrimination: Citizen journalists are enjoined to refrain from making disparaging remarks based on an individual's sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, or any form of physical or mental disability.

(7) Reward and Gratification: The exchange of bribes, rewards, or favors to conceal or publish material is strongly discouraged. This underscores the importance of maintaining news as a fair, accurate, unbiased, and factual commentary on events.

(8) Violence: Citizen journalists should refrain from presenting or reporting acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities, or displays of excess in a manner that glorifies such acts in the public domain.

(9) Children and Minors: Identification of children under the age of 16 involved in cases of sexual offenses, crimes, rituals, or witchcraft is discouraged unless it is deemed necessary in the public interest.

(10) Access to Data: Transparent means should be employed in gathering information, with exceptional methods justified only when the public interest is at stake.

(11) Public Interest: Citizen journalists should strive to enhance public unity and welfare, aligning their reporting with the broader interests of the public.

(12) Social Responsibility: Promotion of universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, fairness, peace, and global understanding is encouraged among citizen journalists.

(13) Plagiarism: The direct copying of others' work without proper attribution or consent is expressly prohibited.

(14) Copyright: Adherence to copyright laws is emphasized, requiring proper acknowledgment when reproducing works as outlined by national and international laws.

(15) Responsibility and Freedom of the Press: Citizen journalists are encouraged to continuously work toward improving press freedom and responsibility, upholding the principles of media freedom, the right to freedom of expression, and the right of the public to be informed. This underscores the journalist's role in defending and maintaining the principles of media freedom and the public's right to be informed.

IV. CONCLUSION

The way that online journalism has changed the face of journalism cannot be disputed. It now serves as an outlet for those without one. Whistleblowing has been strengthened in an effort to reveal the dishonesty in our society. It has been shown that the majority of online media workers breach people's right to privacy and the code of conduct on fairness and truth. It is also indisputable that the majority of citizen journalists value their political, personal, and financial interests over the moral obligations of impartiality, balance, justice, and veracity while reporting

on news events. However, if the suggested fixes are implemented, the problem of citizen journalism can be resolved.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were therefore made by the study.

Journalism is a noble profession and so anyone venturing into it to practice either as a traditional journalist or an online journalist should be qualified and be properly trained by relevant stakeholders on the tenets of the profession.

Self-regulation is vital for online publishers. They should come together as a union and agree on the ethical, operational and professional conduct that should guide them. Sanctions should be meted out on any online journalist that goes against the stated code of conduct guiding the union. The union should equally keep an eye on the activities of citizen journalists.

Journalism institutions that haven't incorporated online courses should consider adding them to their curriculum and make it a compulsory part of students' education. This step is crucial to addressing the evident gaps in knowledge and skills during the training of Nigerian journalists and other communication professionals.

Media organizations should establish strong partnerships. Citizen journalists and traditional reporters can collaborate by exchanging stories, providing training for staff, using reporters' bylines, and sharing office spaces, especially in locations where only one of the partners has a bureau. This collaborative approach can effectively address concerns related to originality, plagiarism, and ethical standards.

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