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Ethical Dimension of Citizen Journalism; Implication on News Gathering

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Abstract

In the 21st century, citizen journalism has significantly impacted the way news is gathered and reported. It has become a regular contributor to mainstream news, providing information to the public. The interactivity and speed of citizen journalism has posed a challenge to traditional news gathering and dissemination. The paper examined the impact of citizen journalism on traditional news gathering and dissemination. This study is guided by the Democratic Participant Theory, which emphasizes the importance of media access for all citizens, the research investigates how citizen journalism has broadened news sources and fostered a more democratic media landscape. Employing a qualitative research methodology that involved the analysis of secondary data, including academic literature, news articles, and social media content related to citizen journalism, the study explores the evolving landscape of news production and consumption. Citizen journalism has broadened access to a variety of news and provided opportunities for a more democratic practice of journalism. However, some citizen journalists have deviated from the principles of the profession by reporting unnecessary and irrelevant issues, causing disaffection in society. This study reveals that citizen journalism and some social media platforms are jeopardizing the efforts of conventional journalists towards ensuring good and smooth practice of the profession. Ethical challenges of citizen journalism include the spread of misinformation, disinformation, cyberbullying, privacy violations, online harassment, and the amplification of divisive and harmful content. To address these challenges, the study recommends that the government should expedite its plan to regulate social media use, and social media operators should adhere to the core ethics of conventional journalism, such as accuracy and objectivity in news gathering and dissemination.

Keyword

Citizen Journalism, Ethics, Journalism, Social Media, Dimension

1. Introduction

Citizen journalism, as defined by [42] is a rapidly evolving form of journalism where ordinary people take the initiative to report news or express their views about events in their communities. These citizen reporters are self-reliant and freelance, not affiliated with traditional news organizations. [8] also describes citizen journalists as individuals who report on their neighborhoods or residential districts without formal training or affiliation with news organizations. [31] adds that citizen journalists create news and information content, such as text, video, audio, and interactive media, for public consumption. The rise of mobile devices, social media, micro-blogging, and other digital tools has enabled people to

publish their own stories and cover their own communities, reducing the monopoly of information gathering and dissemination by traditional media. This has led to more interactive media environments where people can consume media as desired and needed, rather than being restricted by media producers' schedules and content. As a result, citizen journalism is gaining acceptance in Nigeria, with many people actively participating by developing websites and blogs to distribute information.

The effectiveness of citizen journalism has been studied, and its significance is evident in recent events such as the #EndSARS protests, the #Obedient Movement, and the #JusticeForMohbad campaign. However, [30] found that the use of social media platforms in these movements has led to the spread of unverified and amateur information, causing panic and division in society. Citizen journalism allows anyone to become a journalist through the use of new media technologies, but it lacks the principles of objectivity, fairness, and balance that professional journalists follow. Critics argue that citizen journalism is characterized by issues of trust, credibility, and lack of objectivity and balance [8, 15]. While supporters believe that citizen journalism is beneficial to society, opponents argue that it can harm peaceful existence and governance. The rise of citizen journalism is attributed to three critical elements: open publishing, collaboration, and distributed content. Wikipedia is a prime example of a successful citizen journalism project, as it allows for open publishing and collaborative content creation. However, the quality and content of citizen journalism platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, have been criticized for their lack of quality and content.

As citizen journalism continues to gain popularity in Nigeria, particularly through social media platforms, it has raised significant ethical concerns that require thorough examination. The lack of traditional editorial oversight in digital journalism has led to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, cyberbullying, privacy violations, online harassment, and the amplification of divisive and harmful content. These issues have far-reaching implications for Nigerian society, including public health, elections, security, and societal cohesion.

Citizen journalists, who gather, process, research, report, analyze, and publish news and information using a variety of digital technologies, have gained prominence and become a powerful force in the media landscape. The rise of citizen journalism has been attributed to the critical elements of open publishing, collaboration, and distributed content. However, the lack of conventional journalistic processes and methodologies has led to unethical practices in citizen journalism.

Studies on citizen journalism in Nigeria have focused primarily on urban dwellers and professional media practitioners, with less attention given to rural areas. Therefore, it is crucial to explore further the ethical dimension of citizen journalism and its implications on news gathering, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria. Understanding the phenome-

non of citizen journalism from an ethical perspective will advance our understanding of the practice and demonstrate ways in which it could be improved. The outcomes of this study will contribute to the growing body of studies on alternative, participatory, and citizen journalism.

2. Review of Related Literature Concepts

As the landscape of journalism continues to evolve, the rise of citizen journalism has become a game-changer in the industry [4] Empowered by affordable and accessible technology, individuals can now document and share events as they unfold, challenging traditional news channels and reshaping the news landscape [9]. Citizen journalists, who have a deep understanding of their communities, can bring attention to stories that would otherwise go unnoticed [9]. However, the lack of traditional editorial oversight in digital journalism has led to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, cyberbullying, privacy violations, online harassment, and the amplification of divisive and harmful content [33, 49]. These issues have far-reaching implications for society, including public health, elections, security, and societal cohesion [54].

The rise of citizen journalism has also raised significant ethical concerns [4] While high-quality journalists protect the public from consuming misinformation and adhere to journalistic ethical guidelines, there is concern that individual content creators may not abide by such high principles [13]. Citizen journalism lies in its ability to democratize the news, providing a platform for marginalized voices to share their stories, advocate for social justice, and hold those in power accountable [50]. Scholars agree that citizen journalism promotes the intense use of multi-media technologies for news reporting by citizens and for citizens [34, 38].

Studies on citizen journalism in Nigeria have focused primarily on urban dwellers and professional media practitioners, with less attention given to rural areas [12]. Therefore, it is crucial to explore further the ethical dimension of citizen journalism and its implications on news gathering, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria [4]. Understanding the phenomenon of citizen journalism from an ethical perspective will advance our understanding of the practice and demonstrate ways in which it could be improved [26, 30]. The rise of citizen journalism has had a significant impact on traditional news gathering and dissemination practices. [50] argue that citizen journalism promotes a secular method of information dissemination, forcing traditional media outlets to adapt and embrace citizen-generated content. [40] suggests that the increasing influence of citizen journalism outlets has led to new ways of re-inventing news production, with many news organizations actively seeking user-generated photos, videos, and eyewitness accounts to enhance their reporting.

Scholars have explored the motivations and roles of citizen journalists, as these concepts help to explain their goals and self-identity. People engage in citizen-journalism activities for various reasons, including an interest in writing, multimedia

artistic storytelling, critiquing traditional news media reporting practices, sharing expertise, building communities, advocating for particular causes, or having their work read by a significant number of people [25, 19]. Many citizen journalists are driven by creative expression or social responsibility motivations, and they are often not motivated by financial gain. Instead, they are involved, self-interested, self-motivated, and educated individuals who want to engage and inform the public about particular issues. Citizen journalism has become a catalyst for social change, with viral content sparking national and international conversations, mobilizing communities, and influencing policy decisions [40].

However, citizen journalism also presents challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation, cyberbullying, online harassment, privacy violations, and the amplification of divisive and harmful content. Citizen journalists may not have the same level of training and fact-checking resources as professional journalists, leading to the dissemination of false or misleading information. Additionally, citizen journalists may not always adhere to the same level of privacy and protection of sources as professional journalists, leading to the publication of sensitive information without proper consent or consideration for the potential harm it may cause [41, 42].

2.1. Ethics of Journalism Defined and the Code of Ethics for Journalists

According to [35] journalism profession serves as the leading light for the public. It guides and satisfies people's information needs by providing useful, accurate, timely and well distilled reports about issues and events at all times. By all normative standard and expectation, the media practitioners are expected to reflect a sense of responsibility in their reportage. This can be ensured when they are objective, truthful, fair and balanced in their reportage. Without this essential role, the media cease to be relevant to the people. The International Federation of Journalists has established twenty-six (26) codes of ethics for journalists, which may have influenced the code of ethics of the Nigerian Press Council [15]. The Nigerian Press Council has established a comprehensive code of ethics emphasizing principles such as editorial independence, accuracy, fairness, privacy, and avoiding the glorification of violence. The code also prioritizes protecting children's rights, ethical sourcing, public interest, and press freedom (Nigerian Press Council, 2009, cited in [5]. Ethical considerations are crucial in guiding human conduct, addressing questions of fairness, accuracy, and minimizing harm [1] Aristotle introduced the term "ethics" in philosophical discourse, emphasizing the importance of evaluating actions based on criteria for human behavior. In traditional African societies, a strong emphasis has been placed on communal living, where individuals prioritize the well-being of the group and adhere to social norms to maintain harmonious relationships [3]. However, the importation of individualism has constrained ethical and moral conduct, often relegating it to individual conscience [47]. Every environment is governed by laws and ethics, which serve as guidelines for behavior and yield three-fold impacts, encompassing legal, ethical, and social dimensions [1]. The emergence of new norms, or "Nettiquette," has guided ethical behavior and communication among netizens in the context of the internet [16]. While ethical standards like fairness and balance are still essential, even for individual users of social media who aren't held to the same standards as mainstream media outlets [7]. Social media platforms have faced significant ethical challenges, including the dissemination of misinformation, the amplification of hate speech, and the spread of propaganda [30].

Mainstream media outlets are subject to regulatory measures, while social media is [33, 51]. The Nigerian Cybercrime Act of 2015 stands as a significant mechanism for the regulation of social media, but it's important to note that mainstream media outlets are subject to regulatory measures that social media is not [51]. As social media continues to proliferate, it's crucial to address the ethical implications of its use, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, where it presents both opportunities and challenges. This can be achieved through the implementation of ethical guidelines and training programs for social media users, as well as the establishment of regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible and accurate dissemination of information. Collaboration between traditional and citizen media outlets is also necessary to ensure the highest level of accuracy, reliability, and fairness in news reporting. By exploring the implications of social media on news gathering in Nigeria, we can advance our understanding of the practice and work towards improving its quality and impact. Social media, while instrumental in raising political awareness among Nigeria's electorate, has simultaneously been used for negative propaganda and the dissemination of unethical content, such as fake news and hate speech [18]. Social media platforms have made it easy for fake news to spread rapidly, which can be dangerous and have serious consequences [17]. Moreover, the traditional principles of photojournalism, which prohibit the indiscriminate use of photos, images, and videos, have been frequently disregarded by numerous social media users [36].

The increasing concerns regarding the ethical implications of social media use in Nigeria have led to calls for regulation. However, the majority of regulatory efforts have focused on national security concerns, with the introduction of bills such as the "Frivolous Petitions (Prohibition) Bill 2015" or the "Social Media Bill" since 2015. While these bills aim to control social media usage, prioritizing social media regulation for national security reasons may be misguided as it could potentially hinder public discourse on critical matters related to national security and governance. Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, protected under Section 33 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and it is

crucial to find a balance between this right and the need to curb unethical social media use.

A comprehensive approach, combining government regulation, self-regulation rooted in African ethics, and media literacy, may offer a more effective means of addressing these concerns. This approach draws on the communal ethos of African traditional culture, where individuals conform to social groups to preserve harmonious relationships, as a foundation for self-regulation, with individuals adhering to ethical principles to preserve harmonious human relationships [24]. Furthermore, media literacy initiatives can empower individuals to recognize and mitigate the dangers associated with social media, such as the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. [52]

2.2. Implications of Citizen Journalism on News Dissemination, Consumption Patterns, and the Overall Transformation of Journalism

Citizen journalism has emerged as a transformative force in the realm of news gathering, fundamentally altering established paradigms and affording individuals a direct role in shaping the consumption habits of news audiences [7, 17]. It generally epitomizes the belief that the experiences of people personally involved with an issue present a different and often more complete picture of events than can be derived from the perspective of an outsider. While providing unprecedented opportunities for instantaneous updates and inclusive participation, has concurrently introduced challenges, notably the proliferation of misinformation and the development of filter bubbles. To effectively harness the potential of this transformative phenomenon, it is imperative to delve into the various dimensions of citizen journalism, understanding both its advantages and the challenges it presents.

Instantaneous News Revolution: Participatory journalism, particularly facilitated by social media platforms, has disrupted the traditional news cycle by offering real-time updates. A significant shift toward social media in shaping youth news preferences, with citizen journalism seen as more reliable, affecting the credibility of mainstream media [17].

Citizen Journalism and User-Generated Content Empowerment: Social media platforms empower individuals to transition into citizen journalists, providing a means to share news directly from the heart of events. User-generated content, including eyewitness videos and firsthand accounts, has become a valuable source for breaking news. New technologies have produced, therefore, a change in the balance of power that has transformed the markets of information, communication and culture: this change of paradigm, which implies the democratization of information, is leading inexorably to the democratization of journalism. However, the challenge persists in verifying the authenticity of such content, posing a dilemma for journalists and consumers alike [14].

Democratization of News Landscape: The democratizing effect of social media on the news landscape is evident, granting a voice to marginalized communities and alternative perspectives. Users can curate their news feeds, follow independent journalists, and engage with diverse viewpoints, challenging the traditional dominance of gatekeepers in the news industry [43].

News Virality and Misinformation Challenge: The viral nature of social media can quickly amplify both accurate news and misinformation. The challenge lies in combating the spread of fake news through initiatives such as fact-checking, content moderation, and changes in algorithms. Navigating this vast sea of information requires enhanced news literacy and critical thinking skills [2, 21].

Audience Engagement and Interactivity Transformation: Citizen journalism transforms the passive act of news consumption into an interactive experience. Users can actively engage with news articles, share content, comment, and participate in discussions. Users add their cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that users have with media content or brands. This two-way communication fosters a more engaged and participatory news culture [11].

Personalized News and Filter Bubbles Challenge Social media algorithms personalize news feeds by analyzing user interactions and presenting content that aligns with their existing beliefs. This creates "filter bubbles" where individuals are primarily exposed to information that confirms their viewpoints, potentially limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and contributing to increased polarization and the spread of misinformation. Initiatives are underway to promote algorithmic transparency and encourage exposure to a wider range of perspectives to mitigate these effects. [46]

Watches the Watchdog (Check and Balance): Citizen journalism serves as a crucial check and balance mechanism, reducing the influence of mainstream media ownership, advertisers, and government interference. Its proximity to news sources often provides eye-witness accounts that challenge traditional narratives. In repressive countries, eye witness reports and images taken by ordinary citizens are often the only testimony available and can help influence international politics. [42, 14].

Gates Came Down and Democratization of Information: Citizen journalism has dismantled the gate-keeping functions of traditional media, democratizing the dissemination of information. The ubiquity of internet access and smartphones means that anyone can become a citizen journalist, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive media landscape [19].

While citizen journalism has ushered in positive changes, such as increased inclusivity and diverse perspectives, it has not been without criticism. Instances during national emergencies, where citizen journalists were accused of potentially hampering rescue operations, underscore the need to strike a delicate balance between the benefits and challenges inherent in this evolving landscape. Responsible engagement, media literacy, and continued efforts toward enhancing the reliability of citizen-generated content are pivotal for ensuring the positive impact of citizen journalism on the broader news eco-

system [12, 17, 5].

2.3. Ethical Implications on News Gathering

Citizen journalism has sparked diverse reactions over the years, with some praising its virtues and others underscoring its drawbacks. Achieving a nuanced understanding necessitates an impartial exploration of both the advantages and disadvantages associated with this distinctive form of journalism [28]. Participatory journalism, exemplified by citizen journalism, facilitates the active involvement of both professional and non-professional journalists, transforming the public from passive news consumers into active contributors to news gathering [55]. This shift, particularly evident on social media, has disrupted the once-dominant monopoly of mainstream media, rendering journalism more democratic and participatory [1].

A prominent advantage of citizen journalism lies in its immediacy, surpassing traditional broadcast media in the swift dissemination of news. Through platforms like blogs, citizen journalists have brought to light issues such as political corruption and police brutality, providing swift and unfiltered accounts. The term "We Media" or "Our Media" aptly captures the essence of this journalism, as the audience not only reacts promptly to news but also contributes to its content. However, this democratization of information comes with challenges for social media platforms in moderating content, raising concerns about censorship, freedom of speech, and bias.

Despite these benefits, citizen journalism faces critiques, especially regarding the credibility of its content. Scholars have raised concerns about the potential for spreading falsehoods and unethical practices under the guise of journalism [21]. The reliance on anonymous sources poses risks of factual inaccuracies, ethical lapses, lack of objectivity, and the dissemination of opinions disguised as facts. Traditional gate-keeping processes, executed by experienced journalists and editors, aim to filter out such inaccuracies and biases, employing tools like legal knowledge and stylebooks such as the Associated Press Stylebook.

In the Nigerian context, modern journalism, including citizen journalism, has encountered criticism related to integrity and trustworthiness. Some commentators criticize citizen journalism for its potential to spread misinformation and unethical practices under the guise of news reporting [36, 39]. Additionally, a segment of the public expresses' skepticism towards traditional journalists, perceiving them as susceptible to disseminating falsehoods. Additionally, concerns have been raised about the role of blogger/citizen journalists in fueling civil unrest, political instability, and ethno-religious crises. Instances like the military operation in Abia state and controversies surrounding public figures during the 2023 general election have drawn criticism for the alleged trivialization of issues of national interest [7]. Most people agree that news organisations and journalists should reflect all sides of an issue and not push a particular agenda.

In conclusion, while citizen journalism brings about notable advantages such as immediacy and inclusivity, it grapples with challenges related to content moderation, credibility, and potential societal impacts. The ongoing debate surrounding the role of citizen journalism underscores the importance of navigating these complexities to ensure a responsible and impactful media landscape.

3. Media Literacy and Social Media Ethics

The concept of 'media literacy' has frequently been clouded in conceptual ambiguity. The *International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy* [22] posit that media literacy serves as a tool designed to empower individuals in understanding, creating, and negotiating meanings within a culture dominated by images, text, and audio. [9] offer their definition, characterizing media literacy as a skill set that enables critical engagement with the messages conveyed by the media. In essence, a media-literate individual possesses the capability to decode, assess, scrutinize, and generate content across both traditional and digital media platforms [1].

In the evolving landscape of digital technologies, [20] underscore the increasing significance of media awareness. This heightened consciousness is particularly crucial among the burgeoning youth, who extensively utilize various social media platforms to fulfill diverse needs. Bulger and Davison [12] assert that contemporary media literacy centers around five core themes: youth participation, teacher training, parental support, policy initiatives, and the establishment of an empirical foundation. They stress that these initiatives show promise, especially in responding promptly to breaking news events, bridging the gap between critical thinking and behavioral changes, and evaluating partisan content. While acknowledging the scarcity of comprehensive evaluation data regarding media literacy efforts, [12] unambiguously affirm the indispensability of media literacy for ethical communication within online spaces.

A study [8] directs attention to studies conducted by [56] highlighting the effectiveness of literacy interventions in enhancing knowledge and combating unethical practices, including the detection of fake news and the mitigation of its influence. Consequently, it can be asserted that, beyond regulatory measures, nurturing media literacy among citizens in both formal and informal educational settings emerge as a paramount necessity for promoting the ethical utilization of social media.

3.1. Some Existing Laws, Regulations, and Their Effectiveness in Addressing Social Media Ethics

In Nigeria, the proliferation of social media has raised

concerns about its impact on society, particularly regarding its ethical implications [17, 53]. While existing laws and regulations touch upon various aspects of social media use, their effectiveness in curbing unethical behavior is debated.

Cybercrime Act (2015): This law is important for social media because it deals with cybercrimes like identity theft, hacking, and cyberbullying [3]. Cyberbullying is when someone sends mean messages to someone else through electronic devices [29]. The law says that cyberbullying is against the law and can result in a fine of about $18,000 or two years in prison [5]. However, some people say that the law is not always enforced, and cases may not be investigated or prosecuted quickly [1].

Data Protection Regulations: The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) has created rules to protect people's personal information online [32] These rules say that companies must get permission from people before using their information and tell them what they will do with it [34]. NITDA also wants to create a group to make sure that these rules are followed [32]. However, it can be difficult to enforce these rules, especially on social media platforms [1].

Freedom of Expression: The Nigerian Constitution says that people have the right to express themselves, even online. This includes using social media [9]. However, it can be hard to balance this right with the need to stop harmful content and misinformation [23].

Lack of Specific Social Media Legislation: Nigeria does not have laws that are just for social media. Instead, they use other laws to deal with issues that happen on social media 53. This can make it hard to know what is allowed and what is not allowed.

Global Social Media Platforms: Many popular social media platforms are used all over the world, not just in Nigeria [1]. The Nigerian government has limited power to influence or enforce rules on these platforms because they are not based in Nigeria [39].

There are laws and rules in Nigeria to deal with social media, but some people think that they are not always enforced or effective [9]. Policymakers and regulatory bodies are working to find ways to adapt these laws to the changing digital landscape and make sure they are enforced, especially when it comes to issues like cyberbullying, misinformation, and privacy violations [5].

3.2. Solution to Addressing Ethical Challenges of News Gathering and Reporting on Social Media

Nigeria faces numerous ethical issues on social media, it's important to find practical solutions for a more responsible and ethical digital space [17].

Education on Media Literacy: Teach users how to navigate social media responsibly. Campaigns and education can help people evaluate information critically, distinguishing between reliable and false content [44, 53].

Boosting Cybersecurity: Make online spaces safer by improving cybersecurity measures. Collaboration with internet service providers and social media platforms can help prevent cyberbullying, online harassment, and hacking incidents [1].

Enforce Existing Laws: Ensure that the laws and regulations governing social media are effectively implemented [9]. Strengthen law enforcement capabilities to hold those engaging in malicious activities accountable.

Collaboration with Platforms: Work together with social media platforms. Collaborative efforts can lead to the development and enforcement of community guidelines, content moderation, and mechanisms to report and address abusive content.

Promote Positive Online Behavior: Encourage positive and respectful conduct online. Promoting constructive engagement, empathy, and tolerance can help reduce hate speech and incendiary content [45].

Cultural Sensitivity: Tailor solutions to Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape. Craft policies and interventions that resonate with different cultural groups for more effective results [9].

Empower Regulatory Bodies: Strengthen the capacity and independence of regulatory bodies overseeing ethical standards on social media [10]. Ensure these bodies have the necessary resources and authority to fulfill their mandates effectively.

User Responsibility: Encourage users to take responsibility for their actions online. Raise awareness about the consequences of online behavior and promote ethical, respectful, and constructive interactions [1, 17].

Research and Monitoring: Conduct ongoing research to understand emerging trends and challenges on social media [34]. This research can inform the development of responsive policies and strategies.

Government-Platform Dialogue: Establish an ongoing dialogue between the Nigerian government and social media platforms. This dialogue can lead to the development of policies that align with the global digital landscape while addressing unique challenges within Nigeria [48].

Mitigating ethical challenges on social media in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach involving various stakeholders, from individuals to regulatory bodies and social media platforms. By implementing these solutions and strategies, Nigeria can harness the positive potential of social media while minimizing its adverse effects [5, 53].

3.3. Empirical Review

Numerous studies have delved into the ethical dimensions of citizen journalism and its impact on news gathering. [7] conducted research on the Implications of Citizen Journalism on Mainstream Journalism, utilizing secondary data. The study highlighted a significant challenge posed by citizen journalism—their capacity to deliver news instantly, which

competes with mainstream media in news dissemination. The findings revealed that while online news may be factually correct, it often exhibits flaws such as a blatant disregard for ethics, lack of objectivity, impartiality, and balance. Moreover, it may carry hidden agendas or present opinions as facts, potentially resulting in defamatory statements that cast subjects in a negative light. Another identified challenge is the role of citizen journalism in fueling civil unrest, political instability, and ethno-religious crises, hindering overall societal growth and development.

In a similar vein, [16] conducted research on "The Practice of Citizen Journalism at the Kibera News Network." This ethnographic case study, situated in Nairobi, sought to assess the alignment of citizen journalism practices with conventional journalism standards. The study explored how citizen journalism complemented the news and information ecosystem within its locality and examined its challenges to legacy media practices. Findings indicated that despite lacking formal journalism training, citizen journalists were cognizant of journalistic expectations. Their practices contributed significantly to the news and information ecosystem in Kibera, challenging the focus of news productions in legacy media. The study proposed that, despite inherent weaknesses, citizen journalism could synergize with traditional media to offer democratic value to a country like Kenya.

These studies underscore the diverse and multifaceted challenges facing citizen journalism in Nigeria, encompassing issues such as news virality, misinformation, audience engagement, and interactivity, along with concerns about objectivity, impartiality, and balance. Addressing these ethical dimensions necessitates enhanced regulations, rigorous training, and professional development for citizen journalists, along with a heightened focus on audience research measures.

4. Theoretical Framework

In any academic discipline, a foundation of theories exists to explain phenomena within that field. [37] contends that "knowledge does not exist in a vacuum." This study is grounded in the Democratic Participant Media Theory, which emphasizes the societal foundation and values horizontal (peer-to-peer) communication over vertical (top-down) communication [27]. The theory asserts the need to dismantle existing bureaucratic, commercial, and professional hegemony in media systems, aiming to ensure broader media access for all potential users and consumers [27] introduced this theory to address the needs of citizens and challenge the dominance of centralized, commercialized, state-controlled, and professionalized media, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to [27], the theory gained expression through the push for local and community radio and television, favoring small-scale, non-commercial, and cause-committed media. Participation and interaction were central concepts, and the theory criticized parliamentary democracy for becoming detached from grassroots origins. It also opposed a 'mass society' characterized by over-organization, centralization, and limited opportunities for individual and minority expression.

McQuail [27] underscores that "the central point of a democratic-participant theory lies with the needs, interests, and aspirations of the active 'receiver' in a political society." It emphasizes the right to relevant information, the right to respond, and the right to use communication means for interaction in small-scale settings, such as communities, interest groups, and sub-cultures. The theory argues that these settings are more effective than large-scale, professional media. In practice, the theory's insistence that communication should not solely be in the hands of professionals finds application in the structure and general operations of citizen journalism and bloggers.

5. Conclusion

This study critically delves into the ethical dimensions surrounding citizen journalism's impact on news gathering, dissemination, and its broader implications for journalism as a whole. Notably, it highlights how citizen journalism has disrupted the longstanding monopoly of mainstream media, transforming journalism into a more democratic and participatory endeavor. While social media, a prominent platform for citizen journalism, provides unprecedented opportunities for real-time updates, engagement, and inclusivity, it also introduces challenges like misinformation and filter bubbles. The evolving nature of social media necessitates a focus on responsible journalism, media literacy, and platform accountability to harness its transformative potential and ensure a diverse and informed news ecosystem.

Media literacy, conceptualized as a tool enabling individuals to navigate a culture dominated by images, text, and audio, emerges as a crucial aspect. Despite a lack of comprehensive evaluation data on media literacy endeavors, the study underscores its indispensability for fostering ethical communication within online spaces. The study advocates for regulatory measures and the promotion of media literacy in both formal and informal educational settings as paramount requirements to ethically utilize social media for news gathering and dissemination.

Participatory journalism is observed to be rapidly growing in the country, injecting new vigor into mainstream journalism practices [6]. However, the study emphasizes the necessity to monitor citizen journalists for the proper use of social media. It recommends a synergistic relationship between social media and modern journalism to determine the most effective pathways for journalism practices in the country. This approach aims to establish a balanced harmony, acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of these two significant trends in journalism.

6. Recommendations

Journalism, whether practiced traditionally or online, is deemed a noble profession. Individuals entering this field should possess the necessary qualifications and undergo comprehensive training by relevant stakeholders to understand and uphold the profession's principles.

Online publishers should establish a unified front, forming a union to agree on ethical, operational, and professional conduct guidelines. The union should enforce sanctions against online journalists who violate the established code of conduct. Additionally, vigilant monitoring of citizen journalists' activities is recommended.

Institutions offering journalism education that have yet to incorporate online journalism courses should introduce them. Making these courses mandatory for students can significantly contribute to enhancing the practice of online journalism and addressing knowledge and competence gaps among Nigerian journalists.

Foster a strong collaboration between media organizations. Traditional and citizen journalists can engage in story exchange, staff training, shared bylines, and office space utilization where necessary. This collaborative effort aims to tackle issues such as originality, plagiarism, and ethical concerns.

With the rise of social media as a prominent source of information, operators must adhere to the fundamental ethics of conventional journalism, emphasizing accuracy and objectivity in their news dissemination.

Recognizing the credibility bestowed upon social media as news sources, operators should strive to maintain and enhance this credibility for effective modern journalism.

Instead of perceiving social media as a threat, it should be viewed as an advancement in mass communication. Social media serves as an alternative and complementary platform for news transmission in the modern era.

Social media operators are urged to observe the fundamental ethics of conventional journalism, emphasizing accuracy and objectivity in their responsibilities for news dissemination.

The study recommends expediting government plans to regulate social media usage. This is seen as a measure to mitigate the spread of fake news in society and safeguard the interests of Nigerians.

Abbreviations

NITDA	National Information Technology Development Agency
IEML	International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Author Contributions

Emmanuel Jibb Adams is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Research Field

Emmanuel Jibb Adams: International communication, Development Communication, Citizen Journalism, Digital Media, Media Law