

Citizen Journalism, Information Disorder, and Democratic Stability in Nigeria

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has transformed the landscape of news production and dissemination in Nigeria, giving rise to the increasing prominence of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism enables ordinary individuals to gather, produce, and distribute news content outside the traditional structures of professional media institutions. While this development has broadened public participation in information sharing and democratic discourse, it has simultaneously intensified the challenge of information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. In the Nigerian context, where political tensions, ethno-religious sensitivities, and weak information verification systems often intersect, the proliferation of unverified citizen-generated content has significant implications for democratic stability. This paper examines the relationship between citizen journalism, information disorder, and democratic stability in Nigeria. It explores how the accessibility of smartphones, social networking platforms, and digital communication tools has empowered citizens to act as alternative information providers, especially during political events, elections, and crises. However, the absence of professional gatekeeping, editorial oversight, and fact-checking mechanisms frequently leads to the rapid circulation of inaccurate or manipulated information. Such information disorder can influence public perception, deepen political polarization, incite social tensions, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The paper adopted secondary data to interrogates the dual role of citizen journalism as both a facilitator of participatory democracy and a potential driver of information instability. The paper argues that while citizen journalism has enhanced media pluralism and accountability, its unregulated nature poses risks to democratic processes when misinformation spreads unchecked. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for stronger media literacy, ethical digital practices, collaborative fact-checking initiatives, and policy frameworks that promote responsible citizen participation in the digital information ecosystem.

Keywords

Citizen journalism, information disorder, democratic stability, misinformation, digital media, Nigeria.



I. Introduction

Citizen journalism refers to the production and dissemination of news and information by ordinary individuals outside formal media institutions. Its rapid emergence has been facilitated by the widespread adoption of mobile technology and social media platforms, enabling citizens to document events, share information, and influence public discourse in real time (Gillmor, 2004; Bruns, 2008). In Nigeria, citizen journalism has been especially visible during socio-political events such as the #EndSARS protests, the 2023 general elections, and local community protests over infrastructural neglect or environmental hazards. Platforms such as Meta, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram have enabled ordinary Nigerians to report events in real time, often bypassing traditional editorial gatekeeping (Okoro, 2020; Eze & Eke, 2019).

While citizen journalism democratizes information production and empowers marginalized voices, it also poses challenges to democratic stability due to the rapid spread of

unverified content, algorithmic amplification, and low media literacy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Adekoya, 2018). This paper examines citizen journalism as both a democratizing tool and a source of epistemic vulnerability in Nigeria. Citizen journalism in Nigeria operates within a context of political polarization, weak institutional trust, and over-reliance on social media as the primary news source. These factors increase the risk of information disorder, potentially undermining public trust and democratic processes (Ekwueme, 2019).

Thus, the rapid advancement of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the global information ecosystem, reshaping the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. In many societies, the traditional dominance of professional journalists and established media institutions as primary gatekeepers of information has been challenged by the rise of participatory digital platforms (Oreoluwa et al., 2024). This transformation has given rise to citizen journalism, a phenomenon in which ordinary individuals actively participate in the processes of gathering, reporting, and disseminating news through digital tools such as smartphones, blogs, and social media platforms. In Nigeria, the growth of internet connectivity and the widespread use of platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube have created an enabling environment for citizens to contribute to the public information sphere in unprecedented ways.

Citizen journalism has been widely celebrated for democratizing the media landscape by allowing marginalized voices to participate in public discourse and by enabling real-time reporting of events that may otherwise receive little attention from mainstream media organizations. In Nigeria, citizen-generated content has played important roles during major political and social events, including elections, protests, and security crises. For example, during the End SARS protests, digital platforms were extensively used by citizens to document incidents, mobilize public support, and draw international attention to issues of police brutality and governance (Yar'Adua et al., 2023). Through such engagements, citizen journalism has strengthened participatory communication and expanded the scope of democratic engagement by allowing citizens to act not only as consumers of news but also as producers and distributors of information.

However, the rise of citizen journalism has also generated significant concerns regarding the quality, credibility, and reliability of information circulating within the digital public sphere. Unlike professional journalism, which typically follows established editorial standards, fact-checking procedures, and ethical guidelines, citizen journalism often operates without formal gatekeeping mechanisms. This absence of institutional oversight increases the risk of information disorder, a term used to describe the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation within communication systems. In Nigeria's highly polarized political and socio-cultural environment, such information disorder can easily amplify tensions, distort public understanding of critical issues, and undermine informed democratic participation.

Information disorder has become particularly problematic in Nigeria because of the speed and scale at which information travels across digital networks (Maradun et al., 2021). False or misleading information can quickly go viral through social media networks and messaging applications, often reaching millions of users before verification or correction occurs. In contexts marked by political competition, ethnic diversity, and security challenges, such as election periods or communal conflicts, misinformation can fuel distrust, panic, and hostility among citizens. The consequences extend beyond the information sphere, affecting governance processes, electoral integrity, public trust in institutions, and overall democratic stability.

Democratic stability depends heavily on the availability of credible information that enables citizens to make informed political decisions and participate meaningfully in governance processes. When the information environment becomes saturated with manipulated or misleading content, citizens may struggle to distinguish between verified facts and fabricated narratives. This condition weakens the deliberative foundations of democracy and may erode trust in democratic institutions such as electoral bodies, the judiciary, and the media itself. Consequently, the intersection of citizen journalism and information disorder presents both opportunities and risks for democratic governance in Nigeria (Kurfi et al., 2023).

Despite these concerns, citizen journalism remains an integral component of contemporary digital communication systems. Its capacity to enhance transparency, expose abuses of power, and broaden access to information cannot be ignored. The challenge therefore lies not in suppressing citizen participation in news production but in developing mechanisms that promote responsible information sharing, digital literacy, and ethical communication practices (Hile et al., 2023). In this context, this paper examines the complex relationship between citizen journalism, information disorder, and democratic stability in Nigeria. It seeks to understand how citizen-generated information shapes public discourse and how the circulation of unverified or misleading content can influence democratic processes.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. Examine the epistemic vulnerabilities of citizen journalism in Nigeria.
2. Analyze the role of citizen journalism in the spread of information disorder.
3. Evaluate the implications of citizen journalism for democratic stability.
4. Propose strategies for mitigating risks while preserving participatory benefits.

1.2 Context of the Paper

Citizen journalism is globally recognized as a democratizing force in media. It amplifies voices often excluded from mainstream media and enhances accountability (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Bruns (2008) describes “produsage,” highlighting collaborative content creation by ordinary citizens, challenging traditional top-down news production. In Nigeria, citizen journalism demonstrates both opportunities and challenges: Amplification of marginalized voices and increased civic engagement (Okoro, 2020). Real-time documentation of social movements such as #EndSARS and community protests (Eze & Eke, 2019). Rapid, unverified dissemination can spread rumors and misinformation (Ekwueme, 2019; Adekoya, 2018). Lack of ethical training among citizen journalists increases public vulnerability to misinformation (Okoye, 2020).

The contemporary Nigerian media environment has undergone profound transformation as a result of rapid digitalization, widespread internet penetration, and the growing adoption of mobile communication technologies. Over decade, the accessibility of smartphones and social networking platforms has significantly altered how information is generated and disseminated across the country. Digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and YouTube have become major channels through which Nigerians access news, share opinions, and participate in national conversations. Within this evolving digital communication landscape, citizen journalism has emerged as a powerful force that enables ordinary citizens to document events, report incidents, and circulate information beyond the structures of traditional media institutions (Aondover et al., 2022).

Historically, news production in Nigeria was dominated by professional journalists working within established media organizations such as newspapers, radio, and television stations. These institutions traditionally served as gatekeepers responsible for verifying information and maintaining editorial standards. However, the rise of participatory media

culture has disrupted this conventional model. Individuals now possess the technological capacity to capture real-time events through mobile devices and instantly distribute content to vast online audiences. In many situations, particularly during political crises, elections, protests, or security incidents, citizen-generated content often reaches the public faster than reports from professional media outlets.

While the expansion of citizen journalism has strengthened public participation and increased the diversity of voices in Nigeria's information ecosystem, it has also coincided with the growing problem of information disorder. The digital media environment allows unverified, misleading, or deliberately manipulated information to circulate rapidly among online communities. In Nigeria, this challenge has been particularly visible during politically sensitive moments, including electoral contests, communal conflicts, and national security emergencies. The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation through social media networks and private messaging platforms has complicated the ability of citizens to access accurate and credible information. (Aliyu et al., 2023).

The implications of this phenomenon are significant for democratic governance. Nigeria operates within a complex socio-political context characterized by ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, regional political competition, and ongoing security challenges. In such an environment, inaccurate or inflammatory information can easily escalate tensions and shape public opinion in destabilizing ways. For example, during major civic mobilizations such as the End SARS protests, digital platforms became key spaces for both legitimate citizen reporting and the circulation of contested narratives about events unfolding across the country. While citizen journalism helped expose incidents and mobilize global attention, it also highlighted the vulnerabilities of digital information systems to manipulation and rumor propagation.

Furthermore, the speed of digital communication often outpaces institutional mechanisms for verification and correction. Traditional media organizations, fact-checking initiatives, and regulatory agencies frequently struggle to respond quickly enough to viral misinformation. As a result, misleading narratives can influence political attitudes, deepen social polarization, and undermine public trust in democratic institutions. These dynamics raise critical questions about the role of citizen journalism within Nigeria's democratic process and the extent to which information disorder threatens democratic stability.

This paper is therefore situated within the broader scholarly discourse on digital media transformation, participatory communication, and democratic governance in developing societies. It examines the intersection of citizen journalism and information disorder within Nigeria's evolving digital communication environment and explores how these dynamics influence democratic stability. By contextualizing citizen journalism within Nigeria's socio-political and technological realities, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of both its democratic potentials and the risks associated with the unchecked circulation of digital information.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts Gatekeeping Theory, which provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of information production, selection, and dissemination within media systems. Originally developed by Kurt Lewin and later applied to journalism studies by David Manning White, the theory explains how information passes through various "gates" before reaching the public. These gates are controlled by editors, journalists, and media institutions who decide which information becomes news, how it is

framed, and when it is published. Through this process, professional media organizations traditionally act as filters that ensure accuracy, credibility, and ethical standards in news reporting.

In the context of Nigeria's traditional media system, gatekeeping has historically played a critical role in maintaining journalistic integrity and limiting the spread of unverified information. Editors and newsroom professionals evaluate newsworthiness, verify facts, and ensure that content aligns with professional codes of ethics before publication. This process reduces the likelihood of misinformation entering the public sphere and helps maintain public trust in the media. Gatekeeping therefore contributes to the stability of democratic discourse by ensuring that citizens receive reliable information necessary for informed participation in governance (Vitalis et al., 2025).

However, the emergence of citizen journalism has significantly disrupted the conventional gatekeeping structure. Digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (Twitter) allow individuals to publish and circulate information instantly without passing through the editorial processes that traditionally defined professional journalism. In this environment, the gatekeeping role once performed by trained journalists has been weakened or bypassed entirely. As a result, information flows more freely but often without adequate verification, increasing the likelihood of misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated content circulating widely.

This shift from institutional gatekeeping to decentralized information production is particularly relevant to the problem of information disorder in Nigeria. Citizen journalists frequently share eyewitness accounts, images, or videos of unfolding events, but such content may lack contextual accuracy or factual verification. In politically sensitive or crisis situations, unverified reports can spread rapidly across digital networks, shaping public perception before credible information becomes available. Consequently, the weakening of traditional gatekeeping mechanisms contributes to the proliferation of misleading narratives that may influence political attitudes, fuel social tensions, and threaten democratic stability.

At the same time, Gatekeeping Theory also helps scholars understand the evolving nature of information control in the digital era. While traditional media gatekeepers may have lost exclusive control over information flows, new forms of gatekeeping have emerged within the digital ecosystem. Algorithms, platform moderators, fact-checking organizations, and influential social media users increasingly shape which content becomes visible or viral online. These emerging digital gatekeepers play a crucial role in determining the visibility, credibility, and circulation of information within contemporary media environments (Obasi & Msughter, 2023).

Therefore, the relevance of Gatekeeping Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how the transformation of information control structures influences the relationship between citizen journalism and information disorder in Nigeria. The theory highlights the consequences of weakened editorial filtering mechanisms and underscores the need for alternative forms of digital accountability, media literacy, and collaborative verification systems (Aondover et al., 2025). By applying Gatekeeping Theory, this paper provides a conceptual lens through which the challenges and opportunities associated with citizen journalism can be better understood in relation to democratic stability in Nigeria.

III. Research Methods

Although this is a conceptual paper, a brief methodological explanation guides the approach. The study uses a qualitative, literature-based approach, incorporating document analysis of Nigerian citizen journalism cases (e.g., #EndSARS, 2023 elections). Review of digital content from platforms like X, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram. Thematic analysis of recurring patterns in information dissemination, verification practices, and public engagement. This approach allows an interpretive understanding of citizen journalism's role in Nigeria's democratic environment.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Model

Citizen Journalism → Algorithmic Amplification → Information Disorder → Democratic Strain. This model illustrates how citizen-produced content interacts with social media algorithms, influencing public perception and democratic stability. The conceptual model of this study explains the relationship between citizen journalism, information disorder, and democratic stability in Nigeria. The model is built on the assumption that the increasing participation of citizens in news production through digital platforms significantly influences the nature of information circulating within the public sphere. While citizen journalism can enhance democratic participation by expanding access to information, the absence of strong gatekeeping mechanisms may facilitate the spread of information disorder, which in turn affects democratic stability.

At the first level of the model is citizen journalism, which represents the independent production and dissemination of news and information by ordinary individuals using digital technologies. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and YouTube enable citizens to capture events, share opinions, and report incidents in real time. This development democratizes the flow of information by reducing the monopoly of traditional media institutions and expanding the range of voices participating in public discourse. However, because citizen-generated content often bypasses professional editorial oversight, it increases the likelihood that inaccurate or misleading information may circulate widely.

The second component of the model is information disorder, which refers to the presence and spread of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation within the information ecosystem. Information disorder functions as an intermediary variable in the model. When citizen journalism operates without verification mechanisms, it can contribute to the rapid spread of false or manipulated information across digital networks. In Nigeria's socio-political context—characterized by electoral competition, ethnic diversity, and security challenges—such misinformation can intensify political polarization, distort public perception, and generate social tension (Aondover et al., 2025).

The third component of the model is democratic stability, which represents the strength and resilience of democratic institutions, public trust in governance, and the quality of citizen participation in political processes. Democratic stability depends largely on the availability of credible information that allows citizens to make informed decisions during elections, public debates, and policy discussions. When information disorder becomes widespread, it weakens the quality of democratic deliberation, erodes trust in institutions, and may contribute to political instability.

The conceptual model therefore proposes a causal relationship in which citizen journalism influences democratic stability through the mediating effect of information disorder. In other words, the impact of citizen journalism on democracy can be both positive

and negative depending on the extent to which information circulating within the digital public sphere is credible and verified. Where responsible information sharing and digital literacy exist, citizen journalism can strengthen democratic participation and accountability. Conversely, when misinformation spreads unchecked, it can undermine democratic stability by misleading citizens and fostering distrust in public institutions (Aondover et al., 2025).

Additionally, the model recognizes the moderating role of factors such as media literacy, digital regulation, and fact-checking mechanisms. These factors can reduce the harmful effects of information disorder by improving citizens' ability to critically evaluate information and by introducing verification processes within the digital communication environment (Aondover et al., 2024). Strengthening these moderating mechanisms can therefore help ensure that citizen journalism contributes positively to democratic governance rather than destabilizing it.

The conceptual model positions citizen journalism as the independent variable, information disorder as the mediating variable, and democratic stability as the dependent variable, while recognizing the moderating influence of media literacy, digital regulation, and fact-checking initiatives. This framework provides a structured lens through which the study examines how digital citizen participation in news production shapes the quality of information and ultimately affects democratic governance in Nigeria.

V. Conclusion

Citizen journalism is a powerful tool for democratization, accountability, and civic engagement. However, Nigeria's fragile democratic environment, low media literacy, and algorithmic amplification create epistemic vulnerabilities. Integrating citizen contributions with institutional safeguards and promoting ethical responsibility is essential for sustainable democratic participation. The paper demonstrates that the relationship between citizen journalism and democratic stability is mediated by the quality and credibility of information circulating within the digital ecosystem. When information shared by citizens is accurate and responsibly communicated, it can enhance democratic participation by exposing governance failures, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting accountability. Conversely, when digital communication spaces are saturated with misinformation and unverified narratives, citizens may struggle to make informed political decisions, thereby weakening the deliberative foundations of democracy.

In this contestation, the paper underscores the importance of strengthening mechanisms that promote responsible information practices in Nigeria's digital communication environment. Media literacy initiatives, collaborative fact-checking efforts, and improved regulatory frameworks are essential for mitigating the risks associated with information disorder. Equally important is the need for stronger partnerships between professional journalists, digital platforms, and citizen content creators to ensure that the benefits of citizen journalism are harnessed without compromising the integrity of public information.

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