

# CITIZEN JOURNALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

The study is bordered on Citizen Journalism as an emerging field of study which has raised serious concerns and controversies in contemporary Nigerian society. The practice of citizen journalism has flourished with the emergence of the internet and of other forms of ICT. The article examines the professional/ethical legal implications of the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria. After a thorough review of relevant literature, the Democratic Participant Media was selected as the appropriate theoretical anchor for the study. The study, being a survey, employed the quantitative research method to ascertain the perception of the public about citizen journalism. Findings revealed that the views of the public were ambivalent with one being supportive and the other one adverse to its practice. The article called for caution and restraint on both sides of the continuum as that would serve the society better.

**Keywords:** *Citizen Journalism, Professional Journalism, Ethical Implication, Morality.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Citizen Journalism as an emerging field of study has attracted serious concern and controversy among media practitioners, scholar/academies, governments and the general public. In the light of this, there has been an ambivalence of opinions as to whether the practice of citizen Journalism as a vocation should be encouraged or not. There are also strands of argument as to whether legislation should put in place to give it a legal framework. This school of thought wholes the view that according to it a legal framework should subject citizen Journalism to control, thereby checking the excesses of the citizenry which has been the bane of contention. On the other hand, those who are opposed to legislation opine that such legal framework would muzzle and restrain the freedom of expression which citizen journalism is currently enjoying.

In the view of proponents of the practice, an attempt to gag the practitioners of citizen journalism would be tantamount to arbitrariness and is contrary to the tenets of democracy where the freedom of expression is pivotal to its sustenance. Citizen journalism practice has largely flourished with the emergence of the internet and of other forms of ICT which have enabled users to reach out to the public with little constraints. Citizen journalism practitioners relish and luxuriate in the ambience of the magnitude of coverages which range from texts, pictures, audio and video.

Citizen Journalism differs substantially from traditional journalists in several ways: While, traditional journalists follow a professional pattern of gathering news stories, citizen journalists do not follow these professional routine methods. For instance, while traditional journalists are conscious to maintain journalistic standards to produce quality news reportage - contacting and varying sources, providing background of sources, relying on official sources and beats reports, citizen journalists do not bother about these basics.

A traditional journalist is one who works for a commercial news organization that focuses primarily on daily or routine delivery of information. Nip (2006) suggests that citizen journalism enables citizens to set the news agenda (NIP, 2006). Critics of citizen journalism are opposed to its practice on grounds that practitioners lack journalistic training, expertise and organizational affiliation. As a result of the lack of professional skills, their style of reporting may counter routine journalistic reporting norms in certain ways, either because they disagree with the established rules and norms or they

may not simply be familiar with these rules altogether. Critics also oppose the practice of citizen journalism because they perceive practitioners as creating and disseminating opinionated and biased, soft or hyperlocal community content across social media channels. Citizen Journalists deviate from objective reporting which is the basic norm of traditional reporting. Because the sources cannot be easily verified in citizen journalism, reports emanating therefore lack credibility and cannot be relied upon.

Citizen journalism is predicated on the fact that the citizenry has a social responsibility to survey the social environment and report events of common concern to the public for necessary actions. For instance, an incidence of rape imposes a responsibility on the society and government to take the necessary steps to prosecute the culprits, attention of appropriate authorities is drawn to it without which the matter would not be known. What is certain about citizen journalists is that they are not engaged by media organizations.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

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It is incontrovertible that information is power and knowledge of events and happenings around one's environment makes mankind more knowledgeable and conscious of his environment. Thus, the need to be conscious and aware of the social, political, religious and cultural environments imposes enormous responsibilities on all citizens, irrespective of their educational, political and social standing. Unfortunately, the hunger and quest for news and information on events and issues in the environments has driven both professional and non-professional media practitioners to engage in news reportage. This has raised serious concern among the government and the governed about the abuse of the unfettered freedom guaranteed in nations' democracies and this has been heightened by the emergence of free-from-all reportage (Citizen Journalism). This has raised serious concerns and controversy among members of the public as to whether the practice of citizen journalism should be sustained in the 21<sup>st</sup> century considering

the reckless abuse and its attendant implication on the moral sensibilities and the legal and ethical values of the society. The question is: should citizen journalism be allowed because it provides fillip to democracy? Will it be awarded a legal framework so that it can be sanitized and allowed to flourish in a democracy? These are some of the concerns of this article.

### *Objectives of the study*

The main objective of this article was to examine the ethical, legal and moral concerns of citizen journalism and their implication for the professional media practice in contemporary Nigeria. Specifically, the study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To ascertain the publics' perception of citizen Journalism in Nigeria.
- ii. To find out the ethical professional, moral challenges of citizen journalism in Nigeria.
- iii. To ascertain the legal implications of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is anchored on the Democratic-Participant Media theory. This theory supports the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of a community interest group or subculture. This theory has become more relevant with the emergence of new technology which has given the public access to communicate on a wide spectrum with little or no restraint.

The theory holds that greater attention should be paid to the needs and interests of the receiver in a given democratic society and calls for the pluralization and decentralization of media as opposed to monopolization and centralization. It suggests horizontal as against a top-down communication system. The Democratic-Participant media theory is believed to be closely involved in the ongoing life of the community they serve so that their readers and listeners could have considerable influence on the editorial policies.

This theory is relevant to this study in that it offers the public's unrestraint to monitor and report issues of concern in their immediate

environment, thereby giving them the opportunity to engage in the surveillance function of mass communication. It also places social responsibility squarely on the citizenry to report on socio-political events of all dimension – crime, rape, murder marriages, etc.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

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Citizen Journalism goes by different nomenclatures. It is severally referred to as participatory journalism, democratic journalism, guerrilla journalism or street journalism. It is essentially anchored or predicated on public citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. In the same vein, defines citizen journalism as an alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions in the professional journalistic practices but driven by different objectives, and ideals and relies on unconventional sources of legitimacy unlike the traditional mainstream journalism (ROSEN, 2008).

Citizen journalism gives audience members or the general public the opportunity to engage in informing others about happenings in their environment. What is unique in citizen journalism is that people who are supposed to be audience members can become news creators and distributors. Citizen Journalism was made more feasible by the development of various online internet platform. The new media technologies such as social networking and media sharing websites, in addition to the increasing, prevalence of cellular telephones, made citizen journalism more accessible to people worldwide.

Recent advances in new media have started to have a profound political impact (GILANDI, 2016). Due to the availability of technology, citizens often can report breaking news more quickly than traditional media reporters. This is because news items are not subjected to bureaucratic editorial procedures common with traditional news media. Notable examples of citizen journalism reporting from the major world events are the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the Arab Spring, the 2013 protests in Turkey, etc.

The challenge associated with citizen journalism is that it is heavily opinionated and subjective, unregulated, amateur and haphazard in quality and coverage. Since it is not properly organized, as a result of lack of framework and professional affiliation and resources, it cannot be said to serve the best interest of the public.

Citizen Journalism refers to news reporting by ordinary people, other than professional journalists, because it uses alternative sources to uncover facts. However, citizen journalism reportages can be delivered to the public via regular news outlets, online news outlets, social media and video streaming sites, such as YouTube.

Although citizen journalism has been criticized for several reasons, it however has its unique advantages, which include the fact that:

- ❖ It gives opportunity to cover all sides of the story.
- ❖ It gives opportunity to local people to report news and events that may elude mainstream media.
- ❖ It focuses on small, but vital stories.

While mainstream media may focus on big stories, citizen journalism focuses on people from all walks of life and exposes problems and challenges that connect people around their environment.

However, despite its usefulness, citizen journalism has its own challenges and pitfalls:

- ❖ News stories emanating from citizen journalism are not reality acceptable as compared to mainstream media where routine protocols are strictly followed before news is reported to the general public.
- ❖ The audience of citizen journalism is small compared to that of mainstream media.
- ❖ News of citizen journalism is subjective depending on one's predisposition. It may be an expression of opinion rather than an assertion of facts.

Citizen Journalism is complimentary rather than a replacement of mainstream journalism. It is therefore not a substitute, but should be regarded as supplementary or supportive of traditional media. Lending credence to this view, Dugan avers that citizen journalism could complement what a professional journalist did,

but it will not be a replacement for professional reporting, nor will it represent a panacea to the growing reader concerns about traditional media credibility (DUGAN, 2008). However, there is a growing concern about the ethical standards of citizen journalism. Joseph states that three elements were critical to the rise of citizen journalism and citizen media – open publishing, collaborative editing and distributed content. Recently, the report about the death of George Floyd, an African-American who was killed in Minnesota by a white police officer, was attributed to citizen journalism (JOSEPH, 2012).

#### **4. HISTORY OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM**

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Citizen Journalism has evolved in Tandem with the development of journalism generally. Citizen journalism, which is also referred to as network journalism or participatory journalism, is therefore also a chronicle of shifts in the nature of news, the authority of professional media producers, the media business, the shape of public debate and the technologies of social life more generally.

The idea of citizen journalism is not new as it actually existed before professional journalism came about. It should be noted that early American journalists were not professionals. They were untrained news gatherers who shared news with their communities. It is a misconception to state that citizen journalism is a relatively new phenomenon that emerged with the early twenty-first centuries. Darnella Frazier captured the video of Floyd being pinned down by the Minneapolis Police. Her 10 minutes video showed Floyd clinging to life and eventually being unconscious. The truth is that citizen journalism had existed longer than even the profession of journalism itself. This is true in that it was not until 1908, that the University of Missouri opened the doors of the world's first journalism school, when newspapers had been bound for centuries before that Hughes (HUGHES, 2011).

Joseph reports Glasser (2006) that the earliest form of citizen journalism is traced to the founding of the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when pamphleteers, such as Thomas Paine and

the anonymous authors of the Federalist papers, gained prominence by promoting their own publications. He further stated that the modern era of video footage of the assassination of president John F. Kennedy in the '60s and footage of police beating Rodney King in Angeles in the '80s were both captured by citizens on the scene of the event (JOSEPH, 2012).

Citing Gillmor (2008), Joseph states that:

What became known as citizen journalism is the result of the digital era's democratization of the media creation; and wide access to what people created, via, digital networks – after a long stretch when manufacturing like mass media prevailed (JOSEPH, 2012).

The fact that the founders of America included a clause in the First amendment protecting the freedom of the press lends credence to the reality that citizen journalism (non-professional journalism) predated professional journalism. Therefore, the early American press laid the foundation for modern citizen journalism in the United States. Lending credence to this view, Hughes opines that citizen journalism in the United States dates back to the time of the original thirteen (13) colonies. He credited Boston, the largest city in New England in the late 1600s and early 1700s as the epicentre of the development of colonial newspapers. Hughes held a story view that the first newspaper in America, Publick Werson, was published by what today's standards would classify as citizen journalists (HUGHES, 2011).

It would be recalled that the publisher of Publick Occurrences, Benjamin Harris, was a London Bookseller and publisher who fled from England upon his release from prison in order to print a seditious pamphlet. Harris Publick Occurrences was printed September 23, 1760, and was meant to be a monthly publication (Matt). The corollary is that most of the descriptions provided correlates and depicts a contemporary citizen journalist – an individual with no professional background in Journalism who provides the public with an alternate source of news using a variety of resources. It can therefore be aptly said that citizen journalism is not a new phenomenon, but had existed for

centuries before the advent of modern journalism. But, in recent times, citizen journalism re-emerged based on a number of factors such as technology innovation and media consolidation.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

This is a survey study which deals essentially with the current situation and measures the general perception, attitudes, opinions of Nigerians regarding the practice of Citizen Journalism in contemporary Nigeria. The study adopted the quantitative research method for the gathering of data using the questionnaire as the main measuring instrument. A total of 50 respondents were purposively selected to constitute the sample frame for the study out of which twenty (20) were drawn from academic staff and thirty (30) from the students' population of the Cross River University of Technology, Calabar Campus. Although the Calabar Campus has six faculties, the researcher concentrated on the Faculty of Communication Technology as the focus area. The population was restricted to the staff and students of the department of Mass Communication because they are knowledgeable in citizen journalism as a subject and would provide the appropriate responses on the information solicited.

The use of frequency tables was employed to present and analyse the data.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A total of 50 (fifty) copies of questionnaire were distributed to the respondents to ascertain the implications of citizen journalism on the public. The data obtained are hereby presented and analysed.

Table 1. Status of Respondents

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Students	30	70%
Academic staff	20	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey 2021.

Table 1 above is concerned with the status of respondents. The data shows that 30(70%) respondents were students, whereas 20(30%) respondents were members of the academic staff (Lecturers). This is because students constitute the bulk of the population in the department.

Table 2. Respondents who subscribe to two practice of Citizen Journalism

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Those who subscribe to citizen journalism	36	72%
Those who do not subscribe to citizen Journalism	14	28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

The data on table 2 indicated that 36 (72%) respondents subscribe to the practice of citizen journalism, while 14(28%) were opposed to the practice of citizen journalism.

Table 3. Reasons for Subscribing to Citizen Journalism

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
It satisfies the curiosity of the public	10	20%
It brings events and personality to limelight	10	20%
It creates awareness	5	10%
It helps to eradicate ignorance	10	20%
It gives the public access to information	8	10%
It gives the public opportunities to get firsthand information	7	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

Table 3 shows the view of respondents advancing reasons for their support for citizen journalism. From the data above, 10(20%)

respondents held the view that citizen journalism satisfies the curiosity of the public, 10(20%) say it brings events and personality to a lime light, 5(10%) say it creates awareness, 10(20%) are of the view that it eradicates ignorance; 8(16%) indicated that citizen journalism gives the public access to information, while 8(14%) respondents said citizen journalism gives the public opportunity to get first-hand information.

**Table 4. Reasons for not subscribing to Citizen Journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Facts are not verified	20	40%
It is subjective	15	30%
News stories are not edited	15	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

Table 4 above presents data indicating the reason why respondents are opposed to the practice of citizen journalism. The data indicate that 20(40%) respondents are opposed to citizen journalism because facts are not verified; 15(20%) said that information is subjective, while 15(20%) held that news stores are not edited.

**Table 5. Respondents views on Negative Implication of Citizen Journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Reports are sometimes obscure and offensive	15	30
Reports offend the sensibilities of the public	10	20
Reports are morally offensive and debase human dignity	15	30
Reports sometimes violate the privacy of individuals	10	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

Table 5 above, shows the views of respondents on the negative implication of citizen journalism. The data indicate that 15(30%) respondents stated that reports emanating from citizen journalism are sometimes obscene and offensive, 10 (20%) respondents were of the view that reports offend the sensitivities of the public; 15 (30%) opined that reports are morally offensive and debase human dignity, whereas 10 (20%) respondents indicated that reports emanating from citizen journalism sometimes violate individual privacy.

**Table 6. Respondents' view on Professional/Ethical Implications of Citizen Journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Sources of stories reports are rarely verified	10	20%
Reports are inaccurate and distorted	15	30%
Reports are subjective and biased	10	20%
Reports are unedited and devoid of professional touch.	15	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

The above table reflects the views of respondents on the professional/Ethical implication of citizen journalism. The data on the table indicate that 10(20%) respondents opine that sources of stories are rarely verified, 15 (30%) respondents said reports are inaccurate and distorted, while 10(20%) and 15(30%) held that reports are subjective and biased and reports are unedited and devoid of professional touch respectively.

**Table 7. Respondents' view on the Ethical and Legal Implication of Citizen Journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Reports are susceptible to litigation	20	40%

The veracity of reports cannot be guaranteed	10	20%
The credibility of the reports cannot be guaranteed	10	20%
Reports are not reliable	10	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

Table 7 above shows the views of respondents on the ethical and legal implications of citizen journalism. The data show that 20(40%) respondents opined that reports of citizen journalism are susceptible to litigation, 10(20%) held that the veracity and authenticity of reports cannot be guaranteed, 10(20%) said reports of citizen journalism are not credible while 10(20%) respondents opined that reports are not reliable.

**Table 8. Respondents' view on the Usefulness of citizen journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
It satisfies the curiosity of citizens to report events	15	30%
It serves as a social responsibility for members of the public to survey their social environment	15	30%
If fills the gap of traditional mainstream news media	20	40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

The data on table 8 above reflect the views of respondents on the usefulness of citizen journalism to society. 15(30%) respondents held the view that citizen journalism satisfies the curiosity of the citizen to report events, 15(30%) said it serves a social responsibility for members of the public to survey their social environment, whereas 20(40%) respondents indicated that

citizen journalism fills the gap of traditional mainstream journalism.

**Table 9. Respondents' view on legislation to control citizen journalism**

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
In favour of legislation	15	25%
Against legislation	35	75%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2021.

The table above shows that 15(25%) respondents are in favour of legislation (control) of citizen journalism, whereas 35(75%) are against legislation of findings.

Based on the data presented and analysed, a highlight of the major findings can be presented. Although concerns were raised about the emergence of citizen journalism, it is obvious that most respondents favour the citizen journalism practice because of the many benefits it offers to the public. This is hinged on several factors such as the provision of first-hand information to the public and giving opportunity to the public to access and give information readily, which would otherwise have eluded the public. However, there was a dissenting view about the practice of citizen journalism. This was hinged on the grounds that news story sources are hardly verified and also that it lacks ethical and professional standards.

Findings also revealed that citizen journalism is fraught with negative consequences, which border on immorality, litigation and the violation of the privacy of individuals. The other raised ethical concerns were inaccurate and distorted reports – the biased and subjective presentation of information, and the unedited reports which render the veracity and credibility of such stories unreliable.

The need to sustain the practice of citizen journalism was highly solicited on grounds that it fills the gap of traditional mainstream media and provides the public with the opportunity to satisfy its curiosity, discharging its social responsibility to survey the social environment.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

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Citizen journalism has remained a controversial phenomenon, contentious, as it is ambivalent. Whereas one strand of argument favours the practice of citizen journalism, the other is opposed to its practice. Those in favour of the practice of citizen journalism have advanced reasons for the sustenance of the practice, while those opposed to it have equally defended their position.

Citizen journalism is in consonance with democracy. It nourishes and provides fertile grounds for democracy to flourish. It also engenders the freedom of expression which is pivotal to the fundamental human rights. However, the impunity associated with the practice of citizen journalism borders on disdain for the moral sensibilities of the publics, based obscene display; the invasion of the right of privacy, which represents a subject on litigation.

The truth is that neither the outright rejection or opposition to citizen journalism, nor the absolute and unrestraint accommodation and practice of citizen journalism is good enough for the public. This calls for a convergence of the two school of thought, which requires that all and sundry should toe a middle line position. Thus, it behoves the practitioners to exhibit caution and be socially responsible, conscious of the fact that they have a state in guaranteeing moral stability, and in the healthy socio-cultural wellbeing of the society and community they live in.

The conclusion is that citizen journalism has come to stay and governmental authorities should not contemplate muzzling the freedom guaranteed in the nations' constitution. Rather, individuals should be encouraged to exercise restraint in that they have to be socially responsible.

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