

DYNAMICS OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND PROFESSIONAL MEDIA IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of citizen journalism on professional media practices in Rivers State, Nigeria. Embracing a qualitative stance, it uses Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to interpret data drawn from 14 interviews with purposively selected members of the Rivers State branch of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). The study revealed six themes – the reconceptualisation of news values, disruptions to editorial functions, redefinition of professional identity and roles, enhanced audience engagement, technological adaptation and multi-platform distribution, and training and policy realignment. The findings indicate that while traditional journalism has historically been regarded as a professional space marked by set standards, citizen journalism redefines these boundaries by compelling a collaborative rather than a competitive environment where news producers work together. The practice of journalism in Rivers State is shaped by its broader socio-political and economic context as the oil and gas hub in Nigeria, with conversations primarily centred around politics, community struggles and environmental challenges. This study contributes to knowledge of the interplay of citizen and professional journalism by unveiling the distinctive patterns of credibility negotiation, stakeholder engagement and editorial decision-making that are not as pronounced or urgent in other states or contexts with less politically charged resource environments.

Keywords: citizen journalism, digital media, media pluralism, participatory media, Rivers State

Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and social media platforms has transformed journalism worldwide, bringing citizen journalism to the forefront of contemporary media. Citizen journalism, defined as news gathering, reporting, and dissemination by individuals without formal journalism training, allows ordinary citizens to share real-time news and insights on events around them. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, this development has altered traditional journalism dynamics, enabling citizens to report on social, political, and cultural issues through blogs, websites, and social media (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

Citizen journalism, or participatory journalism, has empowered Nigerians with accessible tools to engage in the news production cycle. This grassroots journalism challenges the traditional gatekeeping roles of professional media, fostering a dynamic media environment where news distribution is no longer the exclusive domain of trained journalists (Ezeh, 2014). With widespread access to smartphones and the Internet, citizen journalism in Nigeria has surged, particularly in areas where

mainstream media coverage may be limited or censored (Salaudeen, 2022). While this has enriched public discourse by amplifying previously marginalised voices, it has also raised concerns over credibility, ethics, and professional journalism standards.

This evolving relationship between citizen and professional journalism, highlighting the collaborative yet competitive nature of news production in a networked digital ecosystem, is worth exploring. Against this backdrop, the study explores the dynamics of citizen journalism and professional media in Nigeria, focusing on Rivers State – the country's economic hub. Specifically, it addresses three research questions: How has the rise of citizen journalism influenced journalism practice in Rivers State? What are citizen journalism's perceived advantages and disadvantages among professional journalists in the state? What strategies have professional journalists adopted to adapt or compete with citizen journalists?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by networked journalism and agenda-setting theories, two complementary frameworks illuminating journalism's evolving dynamics in the digital age. Networked journalism theory emerged as a response to the transformative impact of digital technologies on professional media. It gained prominence in the early 21st century as advancements in digital communication and collaborative tools reshaped how information is produced, shared, and consumed. The rise of the Internet, social media, and participatory online spaces led to a shift from hierarchical news production models to more decentralised and collaborative approaches (Hermida, 2012; Fox & Duffield, 2013; Nip, 2019; Waisbord & Russel, 2020).

Jay Rosen, a media critic and journalism professor at New York University, introduced "The People Formerly Known as the Audience" in 2006, emphasising a shift where individuals were no longer passive consumers but active participants in news creation and dissemination. Social media platforms like X, Facebook, and collaborative content sites such as Wikipedia exemplified this shift, allowing both journalists and citizens to share information, engage in discussions, and collaboratively contribute to news production in real-time (Porlezza & Di Salvo, 2020; Müller & Wiik, 2023).

The networked journalism theory builds on ideas related to citizen journalism, participatory journalism, and open-source information sharing. It recognises that journalism in a networked environment is a collective effort involving professional and non-professional journalists. The theory highlights the interconnectedness of various actors in the media ecosystem and the potential for collaborative networks to enhance news diversity and quality. Therefore, this framework is critical to understanding the dynamics of citizen journalism and professional media in Rivers State.

In Nigeria, where social media platforms are widely used, citizen journalism allows individuals to break the news, provide eyewitness accounts, and offer unique perspectives. Networked journalism theory posits that this networked environment enables information to bypass traditional gatekeepers, facilitating direct information sharing with the public. This is particularly evident during crises when citizen journalists disseminate news rapidly, challenging the conventional roles of professional journalists and editors (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Spyridou et al., 2013).

The theory also emphasises the importance of verification and credibility in networked journalism, highlighting the role of both professional journalists and citizens in fact-checking information. This aspect is crucial in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news are prevalent and impact public trust in journalism. Networked journalism encourages audience engagement and offers diverse voices a platform,

contributing to a more democratised media landscape (Hayes & Silke, 2018; Hayes, 2021).

Networked Journalism Theory offers insights into the collaborative relationships between citizen and traditional journalists, recognising the interconnected nature of the media ecosystem. In Nigeria, this theory provides a lens to examine how these actors collaborate and share information within a network, enhancing the diversity and credibility of news content.

The agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, posits that the media can influence the public agenda by determining which issues receive attention and prominence in the public sphere (Kenechukwu, 2014). This theory is particularly relevant to studying citizen journalism and professional media dynamics in River State, Nigeria, as it offers insights into how citizen journalism contributes to shaping the news agenda alongside mainstream media.

Critical elements of Agenda-Setting Theory include media salience—the idea that the more coverage a topic receives, the more significant it appears to the public. Another element is the transfer of importance, where issues highlighted by the media become public priorities. The theory also acknowledges the media's role in framing issues and influencing people's thoughts and perceptions (Ezeh, 2014).

Citizen journalists in Nigeria often highlight topics that may be overlooked by mainstream media, introducing new perspectives and issues to public discourse. Through online platforms, citizen journalists can bring issues to the forefront, influencing public perception and awareness (Kissas, 2022). Examining this interplay between citizen journalism and the traditional news agenda sheds light on Nigeria's evolving dynamics of information dissemination.

Agenda-setting theory offers a framework for analysing citizen journalism's impact on public perception and issue prioritisation. By examining the relative salience of topics presented by citizen journalists and traditional media, researchers can gain insights into how citizen journalism influences the public agenda in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

The advent of citizen journalism as a democratised alternative to traditional modes of information generation and dissemination has garnered significant scholarly attention. The critical discourse surrounding the interplay between citizen and mainstream journalism includes an examination of global and national trends, the role of citizen journalism in the news production process, the inherent frictions with professional media institutions, the disruptive role of digital technologies, and the ethical and operational challenges associated with this evolving paradigm.

Romano (2010) provides a global perspective on the role of citizen journalism, noting its increasing importance in shaping public discourse and providing alternative perspectives to societal issues. Miller's (2019) conceptual analysis of citizen journalism explores its historical and theoretical underpinnings, categorising citizen journalism into distinct types, such as participatory and watchdog journalism. It also underscored the paradigmatic shift from traditional norms to community-centric reporting.

The studies by Allan (2013) and Uwalaka et al. (2023) point to the roles of citizen journalism in news production. Allan's concept of "citizen witnessing" captures the role of ordinary citizens in documenting crises using digital tools and in representing issues in ways that, in some instances, differ from mainstream journalists. Like Allan, Uwalaka and his colleagues also demonstrate that citizen journalists' accounts may

differ from mainstream reportage, particularly referencing Nigeria's 2020 #ENDSARS protests. The authors also underscored the disruptive role of digital technologies in facilitating information dissemination, mobilisation, online activism and connective mourning.

The literature also points to tensions in the intersection of citizen and traditional journalism practices, where professional journalists regard citizen journalists as competitors in some instances and collaborators in others. For instance, Domingo and Heinonen (2008) noted that weblogs and participatory platforms challenge traditional news paradigms, emphasising transparency and audience engagement. Unlike traditional gatekeeping practices, "which applied to the daily news practices of elite newsrooms engaged in an agenda-setting process with passive audiences", networked gatekeeping allows users to determine both the nature and flow of content (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, p. 142). This allows for a more democratised news production process, allowing alternative and previously excluded voices to be heard. While this lends to concerns about quality, ethics, and credibility (Noor, 2016), traditional journalists also understand the benefits that citizen journalists offer and, as such, incorporate them as sources and for the promotion and distribution of news content (Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Gulyas, 2013; Broersma & Graham, 2012). Thus, while frictions exist, the news environment is increasingly collaborative and complementary rather than competitive (Howard et al., 2011; Luo & Harrison, 2019). As detailed in Joe (2020), traditional and citizen journalists' framing of Boko Haram offers a more robust understanding of a critical issue like terrorism. Iwuoha and Aniche (2021) and Usman and Oghuvbu (2021) extend this discussion by noting that citizen journalism significantly impacts democracy and national security, especially in politically charged spaces.

However, integrating citizen and traditional journalists also poses challenges, such as ensuring quality control, ethical considerations, and the appropriate vetting of citizen-generated content (Mncina, 2023). Developing a proper vision and principles for these new ways of working and aligning them with the design of a collaborative working environment is crucial for successfully implementing such hybrid news environments (Sarı et al., 2010).

The existing literature predominantly addresses global and national perspectives on citizen and mainstream journalism dynamics. However, the nuanced interactions between legacy media and citizen journalists in collaborative or competitive news production contexts remain insufficiently examined. As Nigeria's economic, industrial, and commercial hub, Rivers State offers a critical case for exploring these interactions. By focusing on Rivers State, this study seeks to address the gap in generalised analyses that often overlook Nigeria's unique federal composition as a state comprising states, characterised by its layered governance structures and diverse identities.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative methodology, utilising in-depth interviews with registered members of the Rivers State chapter of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). While the NUJ comprises 445 journalists and media professionals, the analysis is based on data gathered from 14 purposively selected participants. This purposive sampling approach was instrumental in obtaining comprehensive insights from individuals with expertise, experiences, and characteristics most pertinent to the study's objectives. Moreover, the sample size aligns with the recommendations of Kuzel (1992, as cited in Bekele and Ago, 2022), who posits that a sample size of 12–20 participants is adequate for achieving maximum variation in qualitative research. This range balances diversity and feasibility, enabling an in-depth and manageable analysis. Table

1 summarises the key demographic and professional characteristics of the selected participants.

Table 1: Participants profile

Demographic Dimension	Subcategory	Frequency (n)	Participant Label
Gender Distribution	Male	8	
	Female	6	
Age Cohorts	Early-Career (25–34 years)	4	
	Mid-Career (35–44 years)	6	
	Late-Career (45–55 years)	4	
Professional Experience	Emerging Professionals (1–5 years)	4	
	Established Professionals (6–15 years)	6	
	Senior Professionals (16+ years)	4	
Media Affiliation	Radio Practitioners	5	Journalist (1-5)
	Television Practitioners	5	Journalist (6-10)
	Newspaper Practitioners	4	Journalist (11-14)
Professional Roles	Reporters/Field Journalists	5	
	Editors/Content Producers	4	
	Presenters/Anchors	3	
	Digital Content Specialists	2	

The data for this study was subjected to thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. This analytical process entailed an iterative engagement with the interview transcripts, beginning with repeated readings to ensure familiarity with the content. Subsequently, initial codes were systematically generated, followed by identifying, reviewing, and refining emerging themes. The final phase involved defining the themes and synthesising the findings into a coherent narrative.

Discussion of Findings

Six themes emerged from the thematic analysis of interviews with 14 journalists operating in Rivers State. These include reconceptualisation of news values, disruptions to editorial functions, redefinition of professional identity and roles, enhanced audience engagement, technological adaptation and multi-platform distribution, and training and policy realignment. Together, the identified themes demonstrate the transformative pressures altering journalistic engagement in Rivers State, driven by technological advancements, audience agency, and the evolving demands of the media landscape. These themes emphasise the need for media organisations to adopt more adaptive, collaborative, and strategic approaches to maintain relevance and credibility in a rapidly changing digital ecosystem.

Reconceptualisation of News Values – This theme addresses the understanding that what qualifies as news has broadened. Content deemed newsworthy is not just determined by editors but is now shaped by what ordinary people and communities consider relevant. For example:

In the past, our big men, aka editors, focused on politics and prominent personalities. Now, with ordinary citizens sending us video clips from small

villages, we realise everyday life—like a new borehole installation, the building of a market, or the invasion of villagers by herdsmen—is also significant to our audience (J6)

Moreover, many people now own mobile phones and have Internet access. This means marginalised, othered and grassroots voices now have more visibility owing to the affordances of platforms. According to Journalist J8:

We recently received a citizen journalist's report on the dilapidated state of a secondary school in Etche. The source detailed the schools' poor state and included photographs and videos, enhancing the message's credibility. This made us investigate further and lend our voices to the call to address the shortfalls in educational infrastructure in the area. A major report on dilapidated schools in Rivers State is in the works.

Additionally, participants emphasised that the absence of community media across many local government areas in Rivers State compels citizens to rely predominantly on social media platforms for information dissemination and engagement. Consequently, these platforms have become critical avenues for highlighting pressing community issues. Community-driven narratives have often achieved virality, prompting swift governmental intervention and response. This has emboldened other communities to adopt similar strategies to draw attention to local concerns.

This finding mirrors Harcup and O'Neil's (2017) expanded taxonomy of news values, which identifies shareability as an essential news value criterion. Shareability, defined as the potential of a news story to elicit widespread sharing and engagement on social media platforms, highlights virality's role in contemporary news dissemination (p. 1482). By bolstering the visibility of issues and events that traditional legacy media overlook, marginalise, or underreport, citizen journalism has widened the spectrum of stories, themes, and perspectives that shape public discourse (Mare, 2013). However, the proliferation of voices and expanded access presents significant challenges to maintaining quality, accuracy, and credibility—core pillars of journalistic practice. Unverified reports can, for instance, spark public unrest in the state (Wright & Mudhai, 2016).

Disruptions to Editorial Functions: Citizen journalism has introduced two challenges for editorial decision-making processes in traditional news organisations. First, as earlier detailed, professional journalists are no longer the exclusive arbiters of what constitutes newsworthiness. User-generated content increasingly shapes and, to some extent, determines the media agenda (Hermida, 2010; Kenechukwu, 2014; Kissas, 2022). Second, the inflow of citizen-generated material compels professional journalists to intensify their verification and fact-checking procedures. This is critical to preserving their credibility and maintaining professional standards.

These issues are particularly critical in reporting sensitive issues like protests, environmental degradation, elections or the SIM-Wike debacle, where citizens circulate live footage and eyewitness accounts through various digital platforms. Professional journalists interviewed for this study emphasised the added financial and temporal costs associated with content verification and the need for specialised tools and more rigorous editorial protocols. Interview participant J2 recounted as follows:

During the August protest, I spent seven hours working on a video sent to the station via WhatsApp because I could not just run it as is. Authenticity is important, and failure to verify content before we publish has in the past cost the station vast sums of money, not to speak of the embracement and *wahala* with NBC. A dear colleague recently lost her job over publicising an unverified and unvetted news story.

Also, J3 and J10 recounted situations in which they felt compelled to incorporate viral, citizen-driven narratives into their coverage, even when these events fell outside their initial editorial scope. These conditions illustrate the evolving editorial landscape in Rivers State as traditional newsrooms negotiate the tension between editorial autonomy and the incorporation of citizen-sourced reporting to maintain public trust.

Redefinition of Professional Identity and Roles: Citizen journalism has reimagined the traditional demarcations and practices of professional journalism. This has led to a convergence of professional and non-professional journalism domains as ordinary individuals actively generate and disseminate news content. As Noor (2016) notes, these intersections are complicated because while some citizen journalists possess formal training and experience in journalism, some professional journalists have adopted citizen journalism techniques. In addition, the advent of citizen journalism necessitates an ongoing redefinition of the professional journalist's role, skill set, and professional identity. In particular, practitioners now face intensified pressures to acquire advanced digital competencies, cultivate proficiency in social media engagement, and employ innovative storytelling approaches to remain relevant and practical. According to J9:

I spent four years at the University studying journalism. Today, however, anyone, even without a degree, can 'break' a story online and build massive followership to the extent that they can even take up my role and get better pay. My organisation recently hired an influencer to replace a big journalist. We all know why – this influencer has a huge fanbase, which could benefit the organisation financially. The job is no longer about reporting stories but also about being proficient with digital tools, curating and analysing content – thanks to the so-called amateurs!

Enhanced Audience Engagement: Citizen journalism has impacted how professional journalists interact with their audiences, shifting from linear to more participatory, dialogue-based relationships. Immediate audience responses guide story updates and enhancements with direct engagement, fostering trust and credibility with audiences. As one interviewee said: "If we post a story on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter (now called X), our followers comment right away. They point out errors or provide additional details, and we often incorporate that feedback" (J12).

The above outcome aligns with the literature, which indicates that citizen journalism has resulted in a more direct and interactive relationship between citizens and the media, fostering a sense of community and public conversation (Horoub, 2023; Noor, 2016). Moreover, the interactive nature of citizen journalism, facilitated by platform features like comments, social media sharing, and user-generated content, has allowed audiences to provide direct feedback and shape the news agenda (John & Johnson, 2020; Harcup, 2015).

Technological Adaptation and Multi-platform Distribution: Citizen journalism has catalysed a paradigm shift in the Rivers State media landscape, driving the widespread adoption of digital platforms, verification tools, and specialised software. This has prompted professional journalists to embrace emerging technologies and innovate within their practices. In addition, journalists are diversifying their content formats to effectively engage diverse audiences in the state and remain competitive in a media environment increasingly shaped by user-generated content. These formats include short-form videos, infographics, and interactive tools, such as polls and live engagement features, which enhance audience interactivity and accessibility.

Furthermore, professional journalists are implementing strategic multiplatform distribution strategies to optimise their reach across varied digital spaces, including social media, web portals, and mobile applications. This approach allows them to transcend institutional constraints that once defined and limited their audience reach and content dissemination. The integration of these technologies and strategies reflects an adaptive response to the evolving demands of contemporary journalism, where immediacy, interactivity, and audience participation are central to sustained relevance and impact. As two interviewees put it:

We started integrating short Instagram reels and YouTube shorts to get the audience's attention and reach a wider audience. We learned this from ordinary people who use these platforms effectively and seem to be making much money by incorporating short videos in their content strategy (J4).

I have now learnt how to use online tools for verification. I remember a picture I obtained from *Elanhub* - a popular blog in Port Harcourt. Before using the image, I reached out to seek their permission but still had to analyse its metadata before using it. This is all part of the process now for credibility. It never used to be this way (J10).

The increasing integration of citizen journalism within professional media spaces has further driven the development and utilisation of technological tools and interactive features. Innovations such as crowdsourcing, live-streaming, and interactive storytelling have become integral to journalism practices in the region, enabling greater collaboration and responsiveness (Oliveira & Cunha, 2021; Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Leyshon & Rogers, 2020).

These advancements have contributed to the transformation of traditional reporting approaches, where the boundaries between professional journalists and citizen journalists are increasingly blurred. This dynamic has fostered a more participatory media environment in Rivers State, reflecting a shift toward hybridised, community-centred journalism that responds to local needs and narratives (Howard et al., 2011; Nusantara, 2024; Panagiotidis et al., 2020).

Training and Policy Realignment: Legacy media organisations in Rivers State are increasingly adapting their internal policies, training programmes, and editorial frameworks to respond to the challenges and opportunities posed by the rise of citizen journalism. A key focus has been the implementation of stricter verification protocols, ethical guidelines for using citizen-generated content, and greater transparency in reporting processes. These measures aim to maintain journalistic credibility and curb

misinformation while integrating user-generated content effectively (Abimbode et al., 2022).

To equip journalists with the skills needed to navigate the evolving citizen-professional media ecosystem, organisations are prioritising capacity-building initiatives. Journalists now dedicate significant time to workshops, webinars, and in-house training programmes to instil best practices for content verification, collaborative storytelling, and audience engagement. These efforts underscore a commitment to fostering a media environment where professional journalism standards can coexist and thrive alongside contributions from citizen journalists, enhancing both the quality and inclusivity of news production.

An interviewee said, "The management is investing heavily in skills development so we can do our jobs better...on the one hand collaborate with citizen journalists but on the other hand remain relevant in the highly competitive Rivers State media ecosystem" (J14).

As Howard et al. (2011) noted, citizen journalism's emergence has prompted mainstream media organisations to realign their policies, practices, and protocols. This entails introducing new guidelines and procedures for verifying and incorporating user-generated content and adopting more collaborative and responsive approaches to news production and distribution. The training is also designed to address the critical concerns associated with user-generated content.

In line with the research questions for this study, which sought to explore the dynamics of citizen and professional journalism in the sociocultural and political context of Rivers State, Nigeria, these findings reveal a significant transformation in the operational logic of traditional media platforms. This shift is reflected in the modified understanding of the composition of news values and the gatekeeping responsibilities traditionally designated to editors. Influenced by the proliferation of advanced digital technologies and the active participation of audiences, the competitive media landscape necessitates a collaborative engagement between professional journalists and citizen journalists.

In the context of Rivers State, the intersection of legacy media and participatory journalism highlights the critical need for media organisations to adopt advanced digital tools, develop specialised technical skills, and implement multiplatform distribution strategies to maintain relevance in the current media ecosystem. To address these issues, media organisations in the region are pursuing capacity-building programs that aim to equip their personnel with the competencies required to navigate the complexities introduced by user-generated content. Additionally, institutional policies are being restructured to align with the realities of an audience-driven, digitally mediated environment.

This shift redefines journalistic boundaries, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and flexible approach to news production and distribution. By leveraging the collaborative benefits of citizen journalism, state media organisations are strategically positioned to take advantage of the opportunities presented by an increasingly democratised and dynamic media landscape.

The findings of this study resonate with extant literature on hybridised news environments and align with theoretical discussions in media studies about participatory culture and its impact on journalistic authority. The themes highlight a complex interplay where traditional and emergent journalistic practices coexist and evolve in response to citizen contributions, albeit within the specific context of Rivers State, Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to understand the dynamics of citizen journalism and professional media within the context of Rivers State, Nigeria. To achieve this, three research questions were formulated: How has the rise of citizen journalism influenced journalism practice in Rivers State? What are citizen journalism's perceived advantages and disadvantages among professional journalists in the state? What strategies have professional journalists adopted to adapt to or compete with citizen journalists? The qualitative research, based on interviews with 14 professional journalists, revealed six themes: reconceptualisation of news values, disruptions to editorial functions, redefinition of professional identity and roles, enhanced audience engagement, technological adaptation and multi-platform distribution, and training and policy realignment.

Citizen journalism in Rivers State has greatly influenced professional journalists' roles, particularly by redefining what is considered newsworthy and disrupting traditional editorial processes. The results indicate that news values are increasingly shaped by the priorities and viewpoints of ordinary citizens, rather than being determined exclusively by editors. Narratives driven by the public, shared through social media platforms, have highlighted previously overlooked issues such as infrastructure problems and local crises, broadening journalism's thematic focus. These changes have increased the demands on professional journalists to verify and integrate user-generated content into their reporting. The study also revealed that the participatory nature of citizen journalism has fostered more interactive relationships between journalists and their audiences, improving engagement and transforming the boundaries of professional practice.

While journalists identified advantages such as increased visibility for marginalised voices, enhanced audience interaction, and real-time updates, they also noted challenges, including verification difficulties, diminished professional authority, and disrupted editorial control. To navigate these changes, journalists emphasised adopting advanced technologies, capacity-building initiatives, policy realignment, strengthened audience engagement, and strategic multiplatform distribution as critical strategies for leveraging the benefits and addressing the challenges that citizen journalism presents.

This study contributes to existing theories and frameworks by highlighting the transformative impact of citizen journalism on traditional media practices in Rivers State, Nigeria. It supports and expands Harcup and O'Neil's (2017) taxonomy of news values by emphasising shareability as a key factor in shaping contemporary newsworthiness, demonstrating how grassroots narratives achieve virality and influence public discourse. The findings also extend gatekeeping theory, illustrating the diminishing editorial control of professional journalists in the face of user-generated content that now shapes media agendas. Moreover, the study enriches convergence theory, showcasing the hybridisation of journalism, as professional journalists adopt citizen journalism techniques while citizen reporters engage in investigative practices

traditionally reserved for professionals. This interplay blurs traditional boundaries, offering insights into the localised dynamics of participatory culture and audience engagement, shifting journalism from a linear model to a more dialogic and inclusive approach.

This research enhances theories regarding professional identity and digital disruption by exploring how journalists manage new roles that demand advanced digital skills, multiplatform approaches, and stronger audience engagement. It frames these changes within the specific challenges media ecosystems face in developing areas, notably in Africa, where citizen journalism expands access to information without strong community media. By documenting the adaptations of media organisations in Rivers State through technological advancements, skill development, and policy adjustments, the results connect with broader concepts of organisational sustainability and media responses to digital disruptions. In summary, this research deepens the field of African media studies by providing localized perspectives on the changing dynamics between citizen and professional journalism, enriching theoretical discussions surrounding participatory culture and the democratization of media landscapes.

This study is highly relevant for journalists, policymakers, community leaders, and media organisations. For journalists, it emphasises the importance of utilising advanced digital tools, effective verification methods, and diverse distribution channels to navigate the changing media environment without losing credibility. Media organisations are urged to prioritise training and capacity-building efforts to incorporate user-generated content successfully while upholding professional standards. Policymakers should use these insights to create frameworks that promote media diversity, enhance digital literacy, and encourage ethical practices, ensuring the responsible handling of citizen-driven stories. Community leaders and advocacy groups can harness citizen journalism to elevate marginalised voices, highlight urgent issues, and stimulate government responses. By nurturing a participatory and inclusive media landscape, these stakeholders can collaboratively tackle the challenges posed by digital disruption, maximising opportunities for accountability, civic participation, and social change in Rivers State.

Future research should broaden this study's focus by examining citizen and professional journalism interactions in different areas or settings, facilitating comparative analyses and enhancing generalisability. Including a wider range of participants, such as citizen journalists, policymakers, and media consumers, would yield a deeper insight into the relationships among these groups. Longitudinal research could further elucidate how digital media practices evolve and their long-term effects on journalism. Moreover, understanding audience viewpoints could clarify how citizen journalism affects trust, engagement, and media consumption trends. Investigating the regulatory and policy structures that oversee media practices and their effects on the incorporation of user-generated content would also add depth to the field. Lastly, research on the influence of emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence and blockchain, on journalism practices could shed light on the evolving media landscape.

This research offers important insights into the changing relationship between citizen journalism and professional media practices, especially in the distinct sociocultural and political environment of Rivers State, Nigeria. By revealing how citizen journalism transforms traditional ideas of newsworthiness, editorial methods, and professional identity, the study emphasises the critical necessity for adaptive strategies in an increasingly participatory and digitally driven media landscape.

Its wider significance reaches beyond local settings, providing a framework to comprehend how grassroots narratives and digital platforms are transforming

journalism on a global scale. The results enrich theoretical debates regarding media democratisation and participatory culture while offering practical insights for journalists, policymakers, and media entities aiming to succeed in a hybrid media environment. By tackling essential gaps in both research and practice, this study highlights the powerful role of citizen journalism in promoting inclusivity, accountability, and innovation within contemporary journalism.

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