

## **Citizen Journalism in Nigeria: Rethinking Credibility and Trust in a Digital Age**

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### **Abstract**

Citizen journalism has become an integral feature of Nigeria's media landscape, emerging as both a response to and a critique of mainstream journalism. While it has broadened participation and created new avenues for voices historically excluded from the public sphere, questions of credibility and ethical accountability continue to frame debates around its legitimacy. This study investigates how professional journalists and citizen reporters in Nigeria understand and negotiate the imperatives of credibility, using Democratic Participant Theory as a conceptual lens. The study employed a purposive survey of one hundred respondents, evenly divided between professional journalists and citizen reporters. A structured questionnaire was used to capture perspectives on credibility, gatekeeping, regulation, and training. Findings reveal both convergence and divergence. Professionals overwhelmingly support traditional mechanisms such as editorial gatekeeping and regulatory oversight, seeing them as essential safeguards for accuracy and responsibility. Citizen reporters, however, largely reject such mechanisms, perceiving them as restrictive or politically motivated. Despite these differences, both groups express strong support for training initiatives, which are seen as a constructive pathway to enhance credibility without undermining autonomy. The results highlight credibility as a relational and context-dependent construct rather than a fixed professional standard. In times of political tension or social protest, audiences may find citizen reporting more credible because of its immediacy and independence from elite institutions. Yet, these same qualities leave citizen journalism open to accusations of sensationalism and misinformation. This study contributes to scholarship by foregrounding practitioner perspectives often absent from debates on credibility. It also provides practical recommendations for

hybrid models that combine openness with accountability through training, digital literacy, and professional–citizen collaboration. Such approaches offer a more sustainable pathway to strengthening journalism’s democratic role in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Citizen Journalism, Credibility, Democratic Participant Theory, Nigerian Media

## Introduction

The practice of journalism has traditionally been anchored in professional training, editorial routines, and ethical codes that lend authority to the news (Davis, 2010; Nigerian Union of Journalists [NUJ], 1995). Yet, with the rise of digital technologies, these professional boundaries have become porous. Increasingly, ordinary citizens, armed with smartphones and internet access, participate in the processes of gathering, producing, and distributing news. This shift, often described as citizen journalism, is particularly pronounced in Nigeria where platforms such as *Sahara Reporters*, *Linda Ikeji’s Blog*, and *Nairaland* have captured massive followings (Dare, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2012). While this development has undeniably broadened participation, it has also unsettled conventional assumptions about journalistic credibility. The question that emerges is whether citizen-generated content can command the same trust as professional journalism, or whether credibility itself must now be reimagined in a participatory digital age.

Concerns about credibility are hardly trivial. Journalism’s social authority rests heavily on audience perceptions of believability, accuracy, and ethical accountability (Blöbaum, 2014; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Without these elements, news risks being dismissed as rumour or propaganda, eroding trust in both media institutions and democratic processes. In Nigeria, scholars have flagged the unregulated nature of citizen journalism as a major source of credibility deficits, particularly given the prevalence of misinformation and politically motivated narratives (Apuke, 2016; Miller, 2019; Otuya-Asohro, 2024). At the same time, citizen journalism persists in filling gaps left by mainstream outlets, especially during crises or where access to information is restricted (Dwivedi, 2013; Kaufhold et al., 2010). These tensions reflect not only competing views of journalistic responsibility but also broader anxieties about the future of democratic communication.

This paper situates the debate within the Democratic Participant Theory, which advances the right of individuals and minority groups to access and produce media outside the dominance of state or corporate structures (McQuail, 2005; Okoro & Abodunrin, 2019). The framework is especially pertinent in Nigeria, where struggles over press freedom, political control, and citizen participation remain ongoing (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Against this backdrop, the study draws on perspectives from both professional journalists and citizen reporters to explore the imperatives of credibility in practice. Through a survey of 100 respondents, divided equally between the two groups, it seeks to answer three questions: How do practitioners understand credibility in citizen journalism? Where do their views converge or diverge? And what strategies might strengthen trust without undermining democratic participation?

By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, this research aims not only to enrich ongoing debates in media and communication studies but also to inform policy and practice in Nigeria’s evolving media environment. In doing so, it contributes to the wider conversation on how credibility – once tightly linked to professional routines –

might be renegotiated in a digital public sphere that is increasingly participatory, fragmented, and contested (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Singer, 2006).

## Literature Review

The emergence of citizen journalism in Nigeria cannot be understood in isolation from broader transformations in the country's media and political landscape. Nigeria has long had a vibrant press tradition, marked by periods of government censorship and resistance journalism during military regimes (Oso, 2012). Against this backdrop, the internet and mobile technologies in the early 2000s offered a new terrain where citizens could bypass traditional constraints and create their own communicative spaces (Dare, 2011). Platforms like *Odili.net* and *Nigerian Village Square* provided early forums for citizen voices, though often centered on political commentary and diaspora engagement. Soon after, *Nairaland* gained traction by offering a more interactive, community-driven model, while *Sahara Reporters* positioned itself explicitly as a watchdog platform, declaring an agenda of advocacy journalism (Dare, 2011).

These developments coincided with Nigeria's rapid uptake of mobile phones and relatively cheap data plans, which turned everyday citizens into potential reporters (NIMCJ, 2011). By the late 2000s, lifestyle and entertainment blogs such as *Linda Ikeji's Blog* and *BellaNaija* joined the ecosystem, demonstrating that citizen journalism was not only about politics but also about shaping cultural and social narratives (Dwivedi, 2013). Importantly, this expansion revealed the heterogeneity of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Some actors were politically motivated activists, others were community-based bloggers, and still others emerged as social media influencers blurring the line between entertainment and news.

Scholars frequently frame this trajectory as a democratizing force. Citizen journalism has opened channels for voices historically marginalized in mainstream media, such as rural communities, youth, and women (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Uche, 2015). Yet, others caution that democratization should not be equated with credibility. The absence of professional training and institutional checks, while liberating, also creates vulnerabilities to sensationalism, rumor, and manipulation (Apuke, 2016; Otuya-Asohro, 2024). In Nigeria's contentious political environment—where disinformation campaigns are often weaponized during elections—this vulnerability takes on heightened significance (Okoro & Abodunrin, 2019). Thus, the background of citizen journalism in Nigeria is both a story of empowerment and of risk: it widened participation but simultaneously unsettled norms of verification and accountability.

## Conceptualizing Citizen Journalism

The term "citizen journalism" itself is contested. Kaufhold et al. (2010) emphasize its defining features as unpaid labor, absence of professional training, and user-driven content often focused on hyperlocal or niche concerns. Bruns and Highfield (2012) extend this by situating citizen journalism within a broader ecology of "produsage," where audiences are not passive consumers but active co-producers of media. Others, like Traub (2013), stress that the defining feature is independence: citizens decide what to cover and how to frame it, outside institutional routines.

In the Nigerian context, these definitions capture some but not all of the practice. Many prominent citizen journalists operate as semi-professionals: bloggers with significant advertising revenues, influencers with commercial partnerships, or activists with NGO affiliations. This complicates neat distinctions between "citizen"

and “professional.” For instance, Sahara Reporters—founded by a political activist—occupies an ambiguous position. It champions citizen voices, but also applies editorial processes resembling professional newsrooms (Dare, 2011). The Nigerian experience suggests that citizen journalism should be conceptualized not as a pure category but as a spectrum, ranging from casual eyewitness accounts to highly organized, semi-institutional platforms.

Globally, synonyms such as “public journalism,” “civic journalism,” “community journalism,” and “networked journalism” (Noor, 2016) highlight these blurred boundaries. Each term carries normative assumptions: *public journalism* emphasizes democratic deliberation; *community journalism* focuses on local empowerment; *networked journalism* underscores the interconnectedness of citizens and professionals. What unites these variations is a challenge to mainstream journalism’s monopoly on defining “newsworthiness.” In this sense, citizen journalism is not just a new practice but a critique of traditional journalism’s limitations—its elitism, gatekeeping, and sometimes its failures to represent diverse publics (Dwivedi, 2013).

Still, enthusiasm for participation must be tempered with caution. As sociologists remind us, media participation is always structured by inequalities of access and voice (Couldry, 2010). Not every citizen can easily produce or disseminate content—digital divides based on income, gender, and geography persist in Nigeria (GSMA, 2020). Thus, while citizen journalism broadens access, it does not eliminate hierarchies; it may even reproduce them in new forms, privileging the urban, educated, and digitally connected.

### Credibility and Trust

Credibility lies at the heart of journalism’s social contract with its audience. Blöbaum (2014) defines it as the cumulative reputation of journalism as a trustworthy institution, sustained through repeated demonstrations of accuracy and responsibility. Kohring and Matthes (2007) operationalize credibility into four dimensions: trust in topic selection, fact selection, accuracy of depiction, and journalistic assessment. Professional journalism historically anchored these dimensions in routines—fact-checking, editorial oversight, attribution of sources. But with citizen journalism, such routines are often absent, leading to skepticism about whether citizen-produced news can achieve comparable credibility.

In Nigeria, credibility deficits are regularly cited as the Achilles heel of citizen journalism. Apuke (2016) and Miller (2019) argue that unverified reports, partisan framing, and lack of accountability undermine trust. Otuya-Asohro (2024) even warns that unregulated citizen content is “slowly diminishing” journalism’s overall quality. Yet, dismissing citizen journalism wholesale risks overlooking why audiences find it credible in the first place. Fletcher and Park (2017) note that trust is not only about accuracy but also about perceived integrity and benevolence. Audiences may trust a citizen reporter precisely because they appear relatable, unaffiliated with elites, or embedded in local communities. Coleman et al. (2012) further argue that trust depends on narrative consistency over time: audiences value actors who “stay with the story,” even if they lack formal credentials.

This reframing invites a more sociological perspective. Credibility is not an intrinsic property of a text but a negotiated relationship between producers, audiences, and contexts (Couldry, 2010). In Nigeria, where mistrust of state-aligned media is widespread, citizen journalism sometimes derives credibility from its very distance from formal institutions. During protests such as #EndSARS in 2020, citizen reporters

provided real-time coverage that audiences perceived as more authentic than state broadcasters. In such cases, credibility may be redefined less by professional standards than by responsiveness and alignment with public sentiment (Okunola, 2021).

Nevertheless, risks remain. The same qualities that foster trust—speed, intimacy, independence—also open doors to rumor and disinformation. Here, political science insights are useful: in fragile democracies, information ecosystems are often weaponized by political actors, amplifying distrust and polarization (McQuail, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Nigeria's citizen journalism thus operates in a paradox: its democratic potential is undeniable, but so is its vulnerability to manipulation. This tension explains why professionals insist on ethical and institutional safeguards, while citizens defend autonomy. Both sides, in their own way, are grappling with the question of how credibility can be maintained in a fragmented media environment.

### Professionalism in Journalism

Professionalism has long been positioned as the defining boundary between “legitimate” journalism and other forms of news-making. Classical definitions emphasize education, specialized knowledge, and adherence to ethical codes (Australian Council of Professions [ACOP], 2003; Davis, 2010). In Nigeria, professionalism is reinforced through the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), which requires formal training and enforces a code of ethics for membership (NUJ, 1995). These structures uphold journalism as a craft that not only informs but also protects democratic order by filtering rumour from fact.

Yet, citizen journalism unsettles these categories. Many citizen reporters are unpaid, self-taught, and unconstrained by newsroom routines (Kaufhold et al., 2010). Critics like Brown (2005) argue this absence of formal training erodes credibility, enabling reckless or partisan reporting. But others counter that professionalism itself does not guarantee impartiality. Nigerian professional media, after all, have often been accused of political bias, censorship, or commercial influence (Oso, 2012; Okoro & Abodunrin, 2019). In this light, professionalism may preserve standards but also entrench hierarchies.

A more nuanced view suggests professionalism and citizen journalism are not opposites but overlapping categories. Some citizen journalists—bloggers with large followings, activist reporters with NGO ties—operate with quasi-professional norms, even if outside formal institutions. Conversely, some professionals adopt citizen-style immediacy on social media, blurring the boundary from the other side (Singer, 2006). From a sociological perspective, professionalism should thus be seen as a spectrum of practices, not a rigid divide. This spectrum invites reflection: perhaps credibility rests less on professional identity than on demonstrable behaviors of accuracy, fairness, and accountability.

### Ethics and Accountability

Ethical standards are often regarded as journalism's moral backbone. Globally, codes emphasize truthfulness, fairness, and accountability (Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ], 2021). In Nigeria, the Press Council Act (1992, amended 1999) sought to institutionalize ethics, though enforcement has been patchy (NPC, 1992). Professional journalists generally accept these norms as part of their craft. Citizen reporters, however, operate with much looser ethical obligations.

For some, this flexibility is a strength. It allows space for advocacy, personal voice, and responsiveness to community issues often overlooked by mainstream outlets (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Citizen journalists covering protests, for instance, may openly align with demonstrators, rejecting the “neutrality” prized by professional codes. But such freedom comes with costs. Without consistent ethical baselines, rumour and misinformation spread quickly. Apuke (2016) notes that many Nigerian citizen reports lack verification, while Otuya-Asohro (2024) argues this weakens journalism’s credibility overall.

Still, ethics are not only imposed from above. Research suggests audiences also shape ethical expectations. Fletcher and Park (2017) found that trust in news depends not just on accuracy but on perceived benevolence – whether audiences believe journalists act in their interest. In this sense, citizen reporters may gain credibility precisely because they appear embedded in communities and less beholden to corporate interests. This challenges traditional models of ethics as fixed codes and reframes them as negotiated practices. From an interdisciplinary angle, political scientists might see this as a legitimacy question: credibility flows not only from norms but from perceived representation.

### Gatekeeping and its Discontents

Gatekeeping theory, originating with White’s (1950) study of a wire editor’s choices, has been central to communication research. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define it as the filtering process that determines which news reaches the public. For professional journalism, gatekeeping ensures factual accuracy, relevance, and alignment with institutional standards.

Citizen journalism, however, disrupts this model. Digital platforms allow anyone to publish instantly, bypassing traditional editors (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). In Nigeria, professionals often see this lack of oversight as a primary reason for credibility deficits (Apuke, 2016). Citizen reporters, by contrast, view gatekeeping as exclusionary – a way for elites to suppress dissenting or minority perspectives. The survey findings in this study reflected that clash: while 92% of professionals defended gatekeeping, only 20% of citizen reporters did.

Globally, scholars argue that gatekeeping has not disappeared but been transformed. Algorithms, influencers, and audience networks now act as filters, creating a form of “distributed gatekeeping” (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). In this sense, the problem is not absence but relocation: gatekeeping authority has shifted from editors to platforms, with opaque consequences. Critics note that algorithmic gatekeeping may reproduce biases more subtly, privileging sensational or polarizing content for clicks (Napoli, 2019). Nigerian citizen journalism illustrates both the promise and danger of this shift. On one hand, it bypasses elite control; on the other, it opens pathways for political manipulation and misinformation campaigns. Gatekeeping thus remains essential – but its forms and actors are changing.

### Theoretical Framework

Democratic Participant Theory (DPT) provides a useful lens for interpreting citizen journalism. Proposed by McQuail (1983, 2005), it extends social responsibility theory by insisting that media should not only serve the public but also enable citizens to produce and access content directly. DPT opposes monopolization, centralization, and

one-way communication, instead valuing plural, decentralized, and interactive media (Okoro & Abodunrin, 2019).

In Nigeria, where mainstream media often reflect elite political and commercial interests, DPT resonates strongly. Citizen journalism embodies the right of individuals and groups to communicate outside dominant structures, fulfilling what McQuail (1983) described as the “right to communicate.” During protests like #EndSARS, for example, citizen reporters provided real-time narratives ignored or downplayed by state broadcasters. These practices align with DPT’s emphasis on grassroots voices and community-level participation.

Still, DPT has limitations. Its celebration of access can overlook the dangers of unverified or malicious content. Bajracharya (2018) notes that without safeguards, participatory media can inadvertently harm democratic discourse by spreading misinformation. In Nigeria, where disinformation has been weaponized in electoral politics, this concern is particularly acute (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Thus, applying DPT requires nuance: citizen journalism indeed advances pluralism, but credibility mechanisms remain essential to sustain trust. The challenge is not whether to regulate but how to reconcile openness with reliability.

### Related Studies

Research on citizen journalism in Nigeria has consistently circled back to the problem of credibility. Edward (2021), in a case study of *Nairaland.com*, found that while the platform thrived on immediacy and inclusivity, its lack of professional oversight often left users skeptical of accuracy. Respondents appreciated that the forum allowed diverse viewpoints, particularly on issues underreported by mainstream media, but they also expressed concern that the absence of editorial filters made it difficult to distinguish between fact and rumor. Arimitan and Nwankwo (2021) reported similar ambivalence: their survey revealed that Nigerians regarded citizen journalism as highly pervasive and flexible, yet doubted its reliability due to the absence of shared ethical frameworks. These findings mirror global concerns about the credibility of user-generated content, underscoring the tension between accessibility and trustworthiness.

Otuya-Asohro (2024) takes a sharper stance, warning that unregulated citizen reporting is “slowly diminishing the quality of journalism” in Nigeria. His argument rests on the view that journalism derives its legitimacy from professional standards, and without them, the broader credibility of news as an institution is threatened. This position resonates with Miller (2019), who emphasizes that credibility is built not only on accuracy but also on adherence to consistent ethical routines. From this perspective, citizen journalism risks destabilizing journalism’s social authority by creating a parallel ecosystem with lower thresholds of accountability.

However, not all scholars frame citizen journalism in deficit terms. Dare (2011), in his analysis of *Sahara Reporters*, highlights how citizen-driven platforms expanded Nigeria’s democratic space by exposing corruption and providing coverage that mainstream outlets were reluctant to carry. Similarly, Uche (2015) argues that citizen journalism has enabled marginalized voices—particularly youth and women—to engage more directly in public discourse. These more optimistic accounts suggest that while credibility remains contested, citizen journalism has carved out an indispensable role in broadening Nigeria’s media landscape.

Comparative studies outside Nigeria also provide insight. Badran (2014), in a comparative study of the BBC and Al Jazeera, found that youth audiences trusted the BBC's professional routines but questioned Al Jazeera's credibility when its coverage relied heavily on citizen contributions. Interestingly, the same audiences valued citizen inputs during crises, particularly when professional reporters lacked access. This reflects a paradox: audiences may distrust citizen journalism in principle but turn to it in moments of institutional failure. Similar findings emerged in Apuke's (2016) work on Nigerian ICT-driven citizen journalism, which suggested that audiences often rely on citizen reports precisely because mainstream media are seen as compromised or slow.

Outside the African context, research has examined citizen journalism during disasters and protests. Gillmor (2004) famously described citizen journalists as "the first draft of history," capturing raw accounts during crises such as the 2004 Asian tsunami or the Arab Spring uprisings. These moments demonstrated the value of immediacy and presence. Yet, studies also show how such reporting can amplify misinformation when unchecked. Hermida et al. (2014) note that social media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 spread both valuable eyewitness accounts and damaging falsehoods. The lesson, perhaps, is that citizen journalism is neither inherently credible nor inherently unreliable—it is contingent on context, practices, and the broader information ecosystem.

In Nigeria, the #EndSARS protests of 2020 serve as a recent example. Citizen journalists and ordinary protesters used Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook Live to broadcast events in real time, often countering official narratives. Many Nigerians reported trusting these citizen accounts more than state broadcasters, which they perceived as muted or biased (Okunola, 2021). Yet, this same environment also saw waves of misinformation, as unverified images and rumors circulated alongside genuine reports. Studies of this period (Ekeanyanwu & Obot, 2021) suggest that audiences developed coping strategies—cross-checking information across multiple sources, privileging known influencers, or relying on community trust networks. These strategies illustrate that credibility in citizen journalism is actively negotiated, not passively received.

What emerges from these related studies is a picture of citizen journalism as both indispensable and contested. Scholars consistently agree that it expands participation and provides alternative narratives. Yet they also converge on the idea that credibility remains its weakest link. Where they differ is in explaining how this credibility gap might be addressed. Some, like Otuya-Asohro (2024), emphasize professionalization and regulation. Others, such as Dare (2011) and Uche (2015), stress empowerment and the democratic potential of citizen-led reporting. Few, however, have systematically compared the perspectives of professionals and citizen reporters themselves. This gap is significant: without practitioner insights, debates risk being framed solely in normative or institutional terms.

By directly surveying both groups, the present study contributes to filling this gap. It demonstrates that while professionals and citizens often clash on issues such as gatekeeping and regulation, they also share common ground in valuing training and acknowledging the centrality of credibility. This duality suggests that the future of Nigerian citizen journalism may lie not in replacing professional standards, nor in rejecting them, but in negotiating hybrid models that combine openness with accountability.

Methodology

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to capture perspectives from both professional journalists and active citizen reporters. Purposive sampling was chosen because the research sought respondents with direct experience in news production, rather than a general audience. To ensure balance, the sample was divided evenly: fifty professional journalists affiliated with recognized media outlets and fifty citizen reporters active on platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram. Citizen journalists were identified based on consistent content production and audience engagement, while professionals were selected through newsroom affiliations.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of eight declarative items, each addressing key dimensions of credibility such as ethics, gatekeeping, and training. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The instrument was administered via Google Forms, text messages, and WhatsApp, reflecting the digital habits of both groups. This method was appropriate because it enabled efficient distribution across geographically dispersed respondents and ensured that participants could respond in familiar communication environments.

Ethical considerations were integral to the process. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the anonymity of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. While the study did not require sensitive disclosures, consent was obtained electronically before respondents proceeded to the questionnaire. In line with standard academic practice, no identifying data were published, and findings were presented in aggregate form only.

Findings

The survey sought to compare how professional journalists and citizen reporters perceive credibility imperatives in Nigerian journalism. Responses to eight declarative statements revealed both areas of consensus and points of divergence. While both groups broadly agreed that credibility matters and that training can improve citizen journalism, sharp disagreements emerged around gatekeeping and government regulation.

Table 1

Cumulative Survey Results (N = 100; 50 professional journalists, 50 citizen reporters)

| Statement                                                              | Professionals<br>Agree/Strongly<br>(%) | Citizen<br>Agree/Strongly<br>(%) | Journalists<br>Agree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Citizen journalism is a positive development in mass communication. | 72%                                    | 92%                              |                      |
| 2. It thrives because traditional media left gaps.                     | 16%                                    | 92%                              |                      |

| Statement                                                          | Professionals         | Citizen               | Journalists |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
|                                                                    | Agree/Strongly<br>(%) | Agree/Strongly<br>(%) | Agree       |
| 3. It is an inevitable outcome of social media participation.      | 76%                   | 92%                   |             |
| 4. Lack of gatekeeping reduces credibility.                        | 92%                   | 20%                   |             |
| 5. Citizen journalism requires fairness, balance, and objectivity. | 96%                   | 76%                   |             |
| 6. Speed outweighs ethics in citizen journalism.                   | 22%                   | 52%                   |             |
| 7. Government regulation would enhance credibility.                | 52%                   | 24%                   |             |
| 8. Professional training would enhance credibility.                | 96%                   | 58%                   |             |

*Note: Percentages combine "agree" and "strongly agree." Neutral and negative responses are omitted here for clarity.*

Most respondents, across both groups, agreed that citizen journalism is now a legitimate part of Nigeria's media environment. Over 90% of citizen reporters endorsed its value, while 72% of professionals cautiously agreed. This shows that, even among professionals who often criticize its standards, there is recognition of its democratic relevance.

Sharp differences appeared when participants were asked whether citizen journalism emerged because traditional media failed to meet public needs. While 92% of citizen reporters supported this view, only 16% of professionals did so, suggesting that professionals resist the implication that mainstream journalism has been inadequate.

Agreement was stronger on the inevitability of citizen journalism as a byproduct of social media: three-quarters of professionals and nearly all citizen journalists endorsed this statement. Similarly, both groups broadly accepted the need for fairness and balance, though professionals (96%) were more emphatic than citizen reporters (76%).

The most divisive issue was gatekeeping. Nearly all professionals (92%) insisted its absence undermines credibility, while only 20% of citizen journalists agreed. A related divergence appeared in attitudes toward regulation: 52% of professionals supported government oversight, compared to just 24% of citizen reporters. These results illustrate that while professionals value institutional safeguards, citizen reporters prefer autonomy.

Finally, both groups recognized the role of training, though again with different emphases. Almost all professionals (96%) saw training as essential, while just over half of citizen reporters (58%) agreed. This suggests that while citizen reporters value independence, they may still be open to professional development when framed as skill enhancement rather than control.

## Discussion

### Situating Citizen Journalism in Nigeria's Media Landscape

The findings of this study affirm that citizen journalism has become an unavoidable feature of Nigeria's media ecosystem. Nearly three-quarters of professionals and more than ninety percent of citizen reporters recognized it as a positive development. This convergence signals that, despite professional skepticism, the practice has moved beyond novelty. It is now woven into the texture of public communication. Democratic Participant Theory (McQuail, 2005) provides a useful frame here: it insists that the media should not be monopolized by elites but should enable participation by ordinary citizens. Citizen journalism in Nigeria exemplifies this principle. Platforms such as *Sahara Reporters* and *Linda Ikeji's Blog* emerged not because institutions invited them, but because citizens claimed their right to communicate.

Yet, acknowledgment of value does not resolve the deeper question of credibility. Professionals remain concerned about standards of accuracy, fairness, and verification. Citizen reporters, by contrast, often prioritize immediacy, authenticity, and freedom from institutional constraints. These differences were evident in the sharp divergences around gatekeeping and regulation. For professionals, credibility is tethered to control mechanisms—editorial review, ethical codes, sometimes even state oversight. For citizens, those same mechanisms can look like censorship. This tension is not unique to Nigeria, but in Nigeria's fraught political context—where governments have historically sought to muzzle critical voices—it takes on a sharper edge.

### Gatekeeping as a Site of Contestation

The survey revealed the starkest divergence around gatekeeping: 92% of professionals defended its necessity, while only 20% of citizen reporters agreed. This result reflects fundamentally different understandings of how credibility is maintained. For professionals, without gatekeeping there is chaos—rumors flood the public sphere, and journalism loses its authority. For citizens, however, gatekeeping is not a neutral safeguard but an instrument of exclusion. They worry that it silences dissenting voices, reinforces elite narratives, and limits democratic participation (Brown, 2005; Singer, 2006).

Globally, this debate mirrors wider shifts in the digital age. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) described gatekeeping as once linear and hierarchical, controlled by editors. Today, it is distributed: algorithms, influencers, and audiences themselves act as filters (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). Nigerian citizen journalism illustrates both the opportunities and risks of this transformation. During the #EndSARS protests in 2020, citizen reports bypassed mainstream media silence, providing timely coverage trusted by many Nigerians (Okunola, 2021). Yet the same environment allowed unverified images and rumors to circulate widely. This duality underscores a paradox: dismantling gatekeeping enables democratic voices but also destabilizes shared standards of truth.

### Regulation and the Shadow of State Control

Another contentious issue was regulation. Just over half of professionals supported government involvement in enhancing credibility, while only a quarter of citizen reporters agreed. This split is unsurprising in Nigeria, where press freedom has long been contested. From colonial-era sedition laws to military-era decrees, regulation has often been a tool of control rather than protection (Oso, 2012). Citizen reporters are

therefore understandably wary of any regulatory proposal. For them, self-regulation or community accountability is safer than inviting state oversight.

Professionals, however, may see regulation less as censorship and more as a way of safeguarding standards in an era of information overload. They worry that without institutional frameworks, misinformation will erode journalism's collective credibility. The difficulty is that in practice, Nigerian governments have a track record of using regulation selectively, often to silence opposition. This makes the professional call for regulation politically fraught. The challenge, then, is to imagine regulatory mechanisms that support credibility without undermining the participatory ideals of Democratic Participant Theory. Civil society-led frameworks, digital literacy campaigns, or collaborative codes of practice may offer more promise than state intervention.

### Training as a Possible Middle Ground

While disagreements over gatekeeping and regulation remain sharp, training emerged as a potential bridge. Almost all professionals supported training for citizen reporters, and more than half of citizen reporters themselves agreed. This suggests that skill-building is less threatening to autonomy than regulation. Training can be framed not as top-down control but as capacity-building, empowering citizen reporters to produce more credible content.

In other contexts, partnerships between universities, NGOs, and media associations have provided such training. For example, programs in Kenya and South Africa have created workshops to improve digital verification and ethical reporting among community media (Wasserman, 2018). Nigeria could adapt similar models, perhaps led by professional associations such as the NUJ in collaboration with citizen groups. Such initiatives would align with Democratic Participant Theory's emphasis on pluralism and access while addressing credibility concerns in constructive ways.

### Credibility as a Negotiated Concept

Perhaps the most important insight from this study is that credibility is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated concept. For professionals, it rests on adherence to established norms. For citizens, it often emerges from relatability, immediacy, and independence from elites. Audiences themselves may evaluate credibility differently depending on context. During routine news cycles, they may prefer professional outlets. During crises or protests, they may turn to citizen reporters who appear closer to the ground (Badran, 2014; Fletcher & Park, 2017).

This flexibility suggests that the debate should move beyond whether citizen journalism *is* credible to how different forms of credibility operate. From a sociological perspective, credibility is relational: it exists in the trust placed by audiences, not only in the processes upheld by producers (Coleman et al., 2012). In Nigeria, where mistrust of state-aligned media runs deep, citizen reporters may gain credibility precisely because they lack institutional ties. Yet, that same independence also makes them vulnerable to accusations of partisanship or misinformation. Credibility, then, is constantly in motion, shaped by shifting relationships between producers, audiences, and institutions.

## Implications for Nigerian Media and Democracy

The findings have several implications for Nigeria's media landscape. First, they confirm that citizen journalism is here to stay. Attempts to suppress it are unlikely to succeed and may backfire by deepening mistrust. Instead, the challenge is to engage constructively with its practitioners. Second, the findings suggest that professional associations have a role to play in fostering credibility—not by excluding citizen reporters but by partnering with them in training and ethical dialogue. Third, the results highlight the need for policies that support pluralism without reverting to censorship. Government can help by funding digital literacy programs, supporting fact-checking initiatives, and ensuring internet access, rather than imposing restrictive laws.

For democracy, the implications are equally significant. Citizen journalism enhances pluralism, providing alternative narratives and challenging elite control of information. At the same time, its credibility gaps pose risks to informed public debate. Balancing these dynamics is crucial if citizen journalism is to strengthen rather than weaken democratic communication. Democratic Participant Theory offers a normative guide, but its ideals must be tempered with practical mechanisms to sustain trust.

This study contributes to scholarship in three key ways. First, it provides empirical data comparing professional and citizen journalists in Nigeria—a perspective often missing in debates framed only by normative assumptions. Second, it illustrates how Democratic Participant Theory operates in practice, revealing both its strengths (pluralism, access) and its blind spots (credibility deficits). Third, it situates Nigerian debates within global discussions, showing that the credibility dilemmas faced here mirror those in other parts of the world, though intensified by Nigeria's political and technological context.

It is tempting to search for a neat resolution: a formula that secures credibility without curbing participation. Yet, perhaps credibility in the age of citizen journalism cannot be settled once and for all. It may always remain contested, provisional, and context-dependent. If so, the task is not to "solve" credibility but to keep negotiating it—through training, partnerships, ethical reflection, and ongoing dialogue between professionals, citizens, and audiences. In this sense, credibility becomes less a destination than a democratic process in itself.

## Conclusion

This study has explored how professional journalists and citizen reporters in Nigeria perceive the imperatives of credibility. The survey results suggest a landscape of both convergence and conflict. On one hand, both groups acknowledge the importance of credibility and broadly support professional training as a way to strengthen citizen journalism. On the other, they diverge sharply on issues such as gatekeeping and regulation, with professionals leaning toward institutional safeguards and citizen reporters insisting on autonomy. These findings echo the broader tensions within Nigerian media—between authority and independence, oversight and freedom.

Placed within the Democratic Participant framework, the results highlight the promise and the paradox of citizen journalism. It represents a powerful expression of pluralism, enabling voices often excluded from mainstream media. Yet, without mechanisms for ensuring accuracy and accountability, it risks undermining the very trust that sustains journalism as a democratic institution. The study therefore underscores credibility not

as a settled criterion but as an ongoing negotiation—shaped by social context, professional traditions, and digital participation. By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, this work contributes to debates about how citizen journalism can evolve in ways that honor democratic ideals while safeguarding public trust.

## Recommendations

1. Training Initiatives: Professional associations and universities should design collaborative workshops that provide citizen reporters with practical skills in verification, ethics, and reporting techniques. Such training should be framed as empowerment rather than control.
2. Policy Support: Rather than strict regulation, government should consider policies that support digital literacy, access to affordable internet, and funding for community-driven media. These steps would align with Democratic Participant Theory's emphasis on pluralism.
3. Professional-Citizen Collaboration: Newsrooms could establish partnerships with citizen reporters, creating hybrid platforms where professional standards and grassroots perspectives intersect. This could help bridge credibility gaps without stifling participation.
4. Ethical Self-Regulation: Citizen journalism networks might adopt voluntary codes of conduct, adapted from professional models but suited to participatory media. Such frameworks could enhance trust while preserving independence.
5. Research and Monitoring: Ongoing academic research should track how citizen journalism practices evolve, particularly in relation to misinformation, political influence, and audience perceptions. Comparative studies across African and global contexts would enrich understanding.

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