

Research Article

News Censorship and the Practice of Citizen Journalism

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Abstract

This study delves into the relationship between news censorship and citizen journalism within the contemporary media landscape. It scrutinizes how news censorship, encompassing government intervention and self-censorship by media entities, impacts transparency and freedom of expression. In response to these constraints, citizen journalism emerges as a vital alternative platform for information dissemination, especially in authoritarian contexts. However, citizen journalism encounters hurdles such as the absence of formal training and the inherent risks associated with independent reporting. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, citizen journalism serves as a potent counterforce to censorship, empowering individuals to share suppressed information and shape public discourse. Through comprehensive analysis, the study underscores the pivotal role of citizen journalism in circumventing censorship and offering diverse perspectives. Yet, it also brings to light the imperative need for enhanced training and support mechanisms to bolster the quality and credibility of citizen journalism. Ultimately, the study concludes that safeguarding freedom of expression and fostering support for citizen journalism are indispensable for nurturing transparency and democratic discourse. To this end, the study advocates for comprehensive initiatives aimed at bolstering citizen journalism. These include not only providing ample training resources to equip citizen journalists with the necessary skills and knowledge but also facilitating robust collaboration between them and traditional media outlets. Such collaboration can foster mutual understanding, enhance the exchange of information, and strengthen the overall quality of reporting.

Keywords

News, Censorship, News Censorship, Journalism, Citizen Journalism

1. Introduction

The contemporary media landscape is in the midst of a profound transformation driven by the rapid evolution of digital technologies and the democratization of information dissemination [3]. This study embarks on a comprehensive examination of the intricate relationship between news censorship and the practice of citizen journalism. News censorship, a persistent and multifaceted issue, presents significant challenges to the fundamental principles of transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression within the media

landscape [50]. It encompasses various forms, including government censorship, self-censorship by media organizations, and the manipulation of information by powerful actors, each with distinct implications for the flow of information and the vitality of democratic discourse [27].

In authoritarian regimes, government censorship tactics include content blocking, website takedowns, and the imprisonment of journalists who expose government wrongdoings [18]. These overt measures are explicitly designed to

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stifle free speech and maintain the control of those in power. Citizen journalists operating in these contexts play a pivotal role by navigating the treacherous terrain of reporting on issues considered sensitive by authoritarian governments [21]. The citizen journalist becomes a beacon of light in the shadows of censorship, revealing truths that the state apparatus seeks to suppress [37].

Beyond overt government censorship, self-censorship within traditional media organizations presents a substantial challenge to the authenticity and diversity of news reporting [9]. The need for media outlets to protect their financial interests, maintain relationships with advertisers, and succumb to political pressures often results in a constrained and biased presentation of news [49]. Citizen journalism endeavors to counteract this phenomenon by providing alternative viewpoints and reporting on issues that mainstream media might avoid due to fear of repercussions [52]. This practice enriches the information ecosystem, fostering a more pluralistic and vibrant news landscape.

The rise of citizen journalism, however, is not without its complexities and challenges. Citizen journalists, often operating independently or within small collectives, may lack formal journalistic training and adherence to ethical standards [1]. The absence of editorial oversight can result in misinformation, sensationalism, or biased reporting [48]. The lack of gatekeepers can be both a strength and a vulnerability, granting unfiltered access to diverse voices while potentially compromising the quality and accuracy of the information presented [28].

This duality underscores the necessity for a critical appraisal of the role and impact of citizen journalism in the face of news censorship. As information continues to flow across digital networks at an unprecedented pace, it becomes increasingly vital to understand how citizen journalism fits into this evolving landscape, the challenges it poses, and the opportunities it offers [15].

This study, rooted in the belief that a nuanced understanding of the interplay between news censorship and citizen journalism is essential, seeks to explore these multifaceted dynamics. Drawing on a variety of research methods, including literature reviews, case studies, the study aims to critically appraise the implications of citizen journalism in the face of news censorship. The core objective is to shed light on the potential pitfalls and benefits of citizen journalism as an antidote to news censorship while emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that considers issues of credibility, accountability, and the broader implications for democratic discourse and free speech. In recent years, the lines between censorship and free speech have become increasingly blurred, and the role of citizen journalists becomes increasingly crucial in safeguarding the principles that underpin a democratic and informed society [45]. In the chapters that follow, we will delve into the challenges and opportunities presented by citizen journalism, uncovering the potential pathways to a more transparent, democratic,

and inclusive media landscape.

2. News Censorship in the Digital Age

The digital age has ushered in a profound shift in the landscape of news censorship, with traditional mechanisms of control being augmented and transformed by the advent of digital technologies and the widespread availability of online platforms [14].

Governments around the world employ various tactics to censor or control the flow of information, particularly on the internet [11]. These tactics may include content blocking, website takedowns, and the arrest of individuals who expose government wrongdoings. The role of citizen journalists in exposing these censorship attempts is crucial, as they often report on issues that mainstream media might avoid due to government pressure. Government censorship is a critical issue that affects the free flow of information and the freedom of the press in various countries, including Nigeria [24]. The followings are the various forms of government censorship, including its forms, motivations in Nigeria.

Content blocking refers to the practice of filtering or restricting access to certain online content or websites. It can be carried out by governments, internet service providers (ISPs), or other entities with the goal of controlling or limiting the information available to users. Content blocking can take various forms, including website blocking, DNS filtering, keyword filtering, IP blocking, and deep packet inspection [26]. These techniques are often employed to prevent the dissemination of certain types of content, such as political dissent, adult or explicit material, extremist ideologies, or content that the authorities deem harmful or illegal. Government censorship is often characterized by the blocking and filtering of online content and websites. In Nigeria, notable instances of content blocking occurred during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020. The Nigerian government imposed restrictions on social media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram, in response to the widespread dissemination of protest-related information [16]. This action temporarily limited the ability of citizens to share information and organize protests, underscoring the use of content blocking to control the narrative.

Surveillance and monitoring of internet activities represent another prevalent form of government censorship in Nigeria. The government has been known to engage in surveillance and monitoring of online communications, aiming to identify individuals critical of the regime. This monitoring creates a frightening effect on free expression, as individuals fear potential repercussions. A prominent example is the arrest of Nigerian journalist Omoyele Sowore in August 2019 for planning protests critical of the government, highlighting the use of surveillance and intimidation to stifle dissent [23].

Nigerian authorities have implemented legal restrictions to limit free speech and press freedom. The Cybercrimes Act

of 2015, for instance, contains provisions that can be used to suppress online activities and expressions critical of the government [43]. These legal restrictions provide a legal basis for censorship, hampering free expression and press freedom.

Violence and persecution directed at journalists and activists who challenge the official narrative are not uncommon in Nigeria. Journalists covering sensitive issues, such as corruption or human rights abuses, have faced threats, physical harm, and even death [44]. For instance, Dapo Olorunyomi, the publisher of Premium Times, faced physical assault in 2017 after publishing a report critical of the Nigerian Army [39]. This case exemplifies the violence and intimidation used to silence dissenting voices.

2.1. Motivations for Government Censorship

The preservation of political power is a primary motivation for government censorship in Nigeria. Governments aim to control the narrative to maintain their authority and suppress opposition [40]. During the 2019 general elections, allegations of media censorship and restrictions on opposition voices in Nigeria were reported [49]. The government's goal was to maintain political control and suppress dissenting voices.

At times, the Nigerian government has justified censorship as a means to maintain social stability and prevent the spread of ideas that could lead to civil unrest or instability [33]. During periods of civil unrest or protests, authorities have resorted to content blocking and social media restrictions to maintain stability and prevent the spread of dissenting views [62].

Government censorship in Nigeria is also employed to protect and promote a particular ideology, religious beliefs, or nationalist sentiment. Restrictions on content that contradicts the official narrative, especially in Nigeria's religiously and ethnically diverse context, are aimed at maintaining ideological purity and preventing the spread of dissenting ideas [32]. Economic and financial interests play a significant role in government censorship in Nigeria, particularly when media outlets are closely tied to the ruling elite or powerful business interests. The Nigerian media landscape often witnesses self-censorship, where media companies withhold or modify stories that could jeopardize their financial relationships or interests [35].

Impact of Government Censorship

Government censorship in Nigeria significantly restricts the ability of citizens to express their opinions, critique government policies, and engage in open political discourse. This suppression of dissenting voices limits accountability and transparency [58].

Censorship erodes press freedom and impedes the ability of journalists to report truthfully and independently. Journalists in Nigeria often face constraints in their reporting and may be subject to harassment or legal consequences if they challenge

the official narrative. This curtailment of press freedom hinders the media's role as a watchdog and source of information [34]. The fear of government surveillance and censorship has a frightening effect on free expression in Nigeria. Journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens become hesitant to engage in open discussions and express their views, reducing the diversity of voices in the public discourse [6].

Government censorship in Nigeria undermines democratic values such as freedom of expression and access to information, particularly in a democratic setting. It can hinder the functioning of democratic institutions and the ability of citizens to make informed decisions, thereby undermining the democratic process [38].

2.2. Self-Censorship in Traditional Media

In addition to government censorship, many traditional media organizations practice self-censorship to maintain their relationships with powerful entities, advertisers, and political figures. This self-censorship can result in a limited or biased presentation of news, which citizen journalists often attempt to counteract by providing alternative perspectives [18]. Self-censorship in traditional media manifests in several ways, including the omission or modification of content to avoid backlash or repercussions. Journalists and media organizations may choose to engage in self-censorship to protect themselves or their outlets.

One common form of self-censorship is the avoidance of sensitive topics, especially those that could potentially upset powerful figures or government authorities. Journalists may refrain from reporting on issues like government corruption, human rights abuses, or critical investigative pieces for fear of reprisals [7]. Journalists might tone down criticism of the government or influential individuals in their reporting. They may use less confrontational language, omit certain details, or frame stories in a more neutral or less critical manner to avoid provoking a negative response [19]. In some cases, journalists and media organizations may withhold certain information that they believe could have adverse consequences. This could include not publishing certain stories or delaying their release to minimize the impact on stakeholders or advertisers [52].

2.3. Motivations for Government Censorship

2.3.1. Motivations for Self-Censorship in Traditional Media

Self-censorship in traditional media is often motivated by concerns related to security, financial interests, and the desire to avoid backlash.

In Nigeria, concerns for the safety and security of journalists and media organizations are significant drivers of self-censorship. Journalists who cover dangerous topics, such as terrorism or political corruption, may face threats, violence, or even death. To protect themselves and their colleagues,

they may choose to self-censor [55].

Media outlets in Nigeria often depend on advertising revenue, which can make them susceptible to self-censorship. They may avoid stories that could alienate advertisers or powerful business interests, thereby protecting their financial stability [41].

Journalists and media organizations may engage in self-censorship to avoid legal repercussions. Nigeria has laws that can be used to silence the press, such as the Cybercrimes Act of 2015. To prevent legal troubles or defamation suits, journalists may opt for self-censorship [59].

2.3.2. Instances of Self-Censorship in Nigeria

The extremist group Boko Haram has been responsible for numerous violent attacks in Nigeria. Journalists covering Boko Haram often self-censor to avoid potential retaliation. Reporting on the group's activities and ideology can lead to threats, abductions, and even killings of journalists. This self-censorship hampers the public's access to crucial information about security and terrorism [43]. Nigeria has struggled with issues of political corruption, and media outlets often tread cautiously when covering these matters. Journalists may avoid in-depth investigations or critical reporting on corrupt politicians, as such stories can lead to threats, legal actions, or loss of advertising revenue [10]. Election periods in Nigeria have seen instances of self-censorship. Journalists and media organizations may tone down criticism or avoid critical investigative reporting to maintain a harmonious relationship with political figures. They may also withhold or delay information that could be politically sensitive to avoid destabilizing the political environment during elections [57].

2.3.3. Impact of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship in traditional media can lead to diminished accountability of public figures and institutions. When critical stories are omitted or toned down, the public is denied the opportunity to hold those in power accountable for their actions (Lee, Tang & Chan, 2023). Self-censorship contributes to the erosion of press freedom in Nigeria. Journalists and media organizations may not be able to fulfill their vital role as watchdogs in a democracy when they self-censor out of fear or economic interests [54].

The public's right to information is compromised when journalists self-censor. This can result in a skewed information landscape where the public is not fully informed about critical issues affecting their lives and their country [55]. Self-censorship ultimately undermines the democratic principles of free expression and access to information. A self-censoring media environment can hinder the functioning of democratic institutions and the ability of citizens to make informed decisions, which is vital to the democratic process [61].

2.4. The Rise of Citizen Journalism

The rise of citizen journalism has significantly transformed

the media landscape, empowering ordinary individuals to become active participants in news reporting and dissemination. Citizen journalism, which involves non-professional individuals capturing, reporting, and sharing news events, has gained momentum worldwide, including in Nigeria [47].

2.4.1. Impact of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has had a profound impact on traditional news media and society as a whole. It has democratized information sharing and news reporting, offering several advantages:

Citizen journalism diversifies the range of voices and perspectives in the news ecosystem. Ordinary citizens can report on topics and issues that may be overlooked by traditional media outlets, resulting in more comprehensive and diverse coverage [29]. Citizen journalists often provide real-time updates from the scene of an event. This immediacy enables the public to stay informed about breaking news as it unfolds [56].

The rise of smartphones and internet connectivity has made it easier for individuals to document and share news events. This accessibility ensures that news reaches a broader audience, transcending geographical and logistical constraints [23]. Citizen journalism can serve as a check on power and promote transparency and accountability. Individuals can expose corruption, human rights abuses, and other critical issues that might have otherwise remained hidden [20].

2.4.2. Motivations for Citizen Journalism

The motivations behind citizen journalism are diverse and often rooted in a desire for truth, justice, or social change. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, individuals engage in citizen journalism for several reasons:

Many citizen journalists are driven by a passion for social justice and advocacy. They use their reporting to draw attention to issues such as political corruption, environmental concerns, and human rights abuses [53]. In Nigeria, where traditional media may have limitations or biases, citizen journalists play a crucial role in filling information gaps. They report on issues affecting local communities that are underreported in mainstream media [14]. Citizen journalists are often motivated by safety concerns, particularly in regions marked by conflict or political repression. Reporting anonymously or from behind the scenes can protect them from potential harm [21].

2.4.3. Instances of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria

The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020 were a significant moment for citizen journalism. Ordinary Nigerians used social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to document police brutality and misconduct, bringing international attention to the issue. Their posts, images, and videos were shared globally, providing firsthand accounts of the protests and the violence that ensued [39].

Citizen journalists in Nigeria have been instrumental in exposing corruption at various levels of government. They have reported on embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, and other corrupt practices, leading to investigations and legal action [11].

In rural and remote areas of Nigeria, where mainstream media coverage may be limited, citizen journalists have filled the void. They report on community issues, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, raising awareness and pressing for improvements [36].

2.4.4. Challenges Faced by Citizen Journalists

Citizen journalism has emerged as a powerful force in the media landscape, but it is not without its share of challenges. These challenges often stem from the lack of professional training, limited access to resources, and the risks involved in independent reporting.

Citizen journalists typically lack formal training in journalism ethics, standards, and fact-checking. Without this guidance, they may inadvertently spread false information or sensationalize stories. For example, during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, unverified reports and misinformation were widely circulated on social media, causing panic and [8]. Citizen journalists often operate in regions marked by conflict, political instability, or where reporting on certain issues can be perilous. In Nigeria, for instance, reporting on Boko Haram activities or government corruption can put citizen journalists at significant risk. They may face threats, harassment, or violence for their reporting [13].

Citizen journalists may not be aware of the legal intricacies of journalism. In Nigeria, laws such as the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 can be used to silence journalists and citizens who express critical views about the government. This can result in legal consequences that they may not be prepared to face [24]. Citizen journalists often lack access to the same resources available to traditional media outlets. They may struggle with obtaining credible sources, conducting in-depth investigations, and having access to professional editing and fact-checking. This limitation can hinder the quality and accuracy of their reporting.

The immediacy of citizen journalism, particularly on social media, can lead to the rapid spread of unverified or sensationalized information. In Nigeria, this challenge was evident during the outbreak of COVID-19, where unverified remedies and conspiracy theories were widely disseminated, causing confusion and potentially putting public health at risk [2].

Citizen journalists often face ethical dilemmas, such as privacy concerns or conflicts of interest. They may not have the ethical frameworks or editorial guidance to navigate these issues effectively. Verifying the accuracy of information and fact-checking can be challenging for citizen journalists. In situations of breaking news or crisis, there's often pressure to report quickly, which can lead to errors or incomplete information. In Nigeria, during incidents like communal clashes or protests, the rapid spread of unverified information can con-

tribute to social tensions [60].

Citizen journalists typically engage in reporting alongside their regular occupations. This can make sustaining long-term investigative reporting challenging. The financial burden of maintaining journalistic activities may not be sustainable in the absence of external support.

Access to technology and the internet is not uniform across society. Many individuals, particularly in rural or underserved areas, may lack the necessary equipment and connectivity to engage in citizen journalism effectively. This digital divide limits the reach and impact of citizen journalists. Citizen journalists may not receive the recognition or protection afforded to professional journalists. They often work in the shadows, without formal accreditation or institutional support. This lack of recognition can deter individuals from engaging in citizen journalism.

2.4.5. Citizen Journalism and News Censorship

Citizen journalism and news censorship represent two contrasting forces in the modern media landscape. While citizen journalism empowers individuals to become active participants in news reporting and dissemination, news censorship seeks to control or restrict the flow of information, often under the guise of safeguarding national interests or maintaining political control.

2.4.6. Citizen Journalism as a Counterforce to News Censorship

Citizen journalism, often facilitated by the widespread availability of smartphones and the internet, has emerged as a potent counterforce to news censorship. In environments where censorship is pervasive, citizens often take it upon themselves to bypass official channels and disseminate information that might otherwise be suppressed. This phenomenon is particularly notable in authoritarian regimes or countries with restrictive media laws. For instance, during the Arab Spring uprisings in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, citizen journalists played a critical role in circumventing government censorship. They used social media platforms to share real-time updates, images, and videos, providing an alternative source of information that challenged the official narratives and allowed the world to witness unfolding events [21].

In Nigeria, citizen journalism has become a vital tool for bypassing censorship and reporting on issues that the government may want to suppress. During the #EndSARS protests in 2020, citizen journalists extensively documented police brutality and the government's response, providing firsthand accounts and testimonies that countered the government's attempts to control the narrative [4].

2.4.7. Impact on the Flow of Information

The interplay between citizen journalism and news censorship profoundly influences the flow of information. Citizen journalism enables the dissemination of alternative view-

points and independent reporting, challenging the narratives pushed by censors. This, in turn, provides a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of events and issues, as was evident during the Arab Spring and #EndSARS protests.

However, the effectiveness of citizen journalism in countering censorship is not without limitations. The lack of professional training can lead to the spread of misinformation, and censorship measures can hinder the reach of citizen journalism. Additionally, the risks to safety and legal repercussions often discourage many potential citizen journalists from engaging in reporting.

The dynamic between citizen journalism and news censorship highlights the critical role of individuals in challenging the control of information by governments and authoritative regimes. While citizen journalism serves as a counterforce to censorship, the risks and challenges it entails underscore the need for protections, legal reforms, and international support to safeguard the freedom of expression and the right to information. In a world where information is power, the relationship between citizen journalists and news censorship plays a pivotal role in shaping the media landscape and influencing public awareness.

3. Results

The results of the study indicate that news censorship, whether imposed by governments or practiced through self-censorship by traditional media outlets, presents significant challenges to transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression within the media landscape. Despite these challenges, citizen journalism emerges as a vital counterforce, providing alternative viewpoints and reporting on issues that mainstream media might avoid. However, citizen journalism faces its own set of challenges, including lack of formal training, risks associated with independent reporting, and potential for misinformation. In Summary, study underscores the importance of safeguarding freedom of expression and supporting citizen journalism as essential components of promoting transparency and democratic discourse in the modern media environment. Recommendations include providing training and resources for citizen journalists, fostering collaboration between citizen journalists and traditional media outlets, and advocating for policies that protect freedom of expression.

4. Conclusion

The interplay between news censorship and citizen journalism is complex and multifaceted. While citizen journalism has emerged as a critical response to censorship in various forms, it also faces challenges related to credibility and accountability. As the digital information landscape continues to evolve, the practice of citizen journalism will likely play a significant role in shaping the future of news dissemination

and its impact on democratic discourse and free speech. Balancing the responsibilities and rights of citizen journalists with the necessity to counteract censorship remains an ongoing challenge for media scholars and practitioners.

This article has provided a critical appraisal of the relationship between news censorship and the practice of citizen journalism, highlighting the importance of this dynamic for our contemporary media environment. As citizen journalism continues to grow in influence, further research and reflection will be essential to understand its impact on democracy and information access.

Abbreviations

IPS	Internet Service Providers
DNS	Domain Name System

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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