

EVALUATION OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND REPORTAGE OF INSECURITY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Digital media technologies have altered the ways in which news about events is gathered, circulated, and encountered by the public, allowing ordinary individuals to record and distribute information almost immediately through online platforms. In situations of insecurity, this development has made user-generated content a visible part of the information flow through which incidents are first communicated to wider audiences. This study evaluates the role of user-generated content in the reportage of insecurity in Northern Nigeria, with particular attention to the forms such materials take, the framing patterns they contain, and the extent to which they influence mainstream journalistic reporting. The study was guided by Gatekeeping Theory, Framing Theory, and the Networked Public Sphere perspective, which together help explain how citizen-produced materials enter the news process, how they shape interpretations of events, and how they interact with professional reporting practices. Mixed methods approach combining content analysis of selected social media materials, interviews with journalists, and an audience survey was adopted. The findings indicate that while user-generated content increases the speed with which information about insecurity incidents circulates, many posts appear without clear verification indicators and often employ emotionally charged framing. The study therefore highlights the continued importance of careful verification and responsible integration of citizen-produced materials within professional insecurity reporting.

Keyword: *Citizen Journalism, Digital News, Insecurity Reporting,*

Reportage, News Verification, User Generated Content

Introduction

Digital communication technologies have significantly reshaped the processes through which news about public events is produced, circulated, and consumed. The rise of social media platforms has expanded the capacity of ordinary individuals to participate in the documentation and dissemination of information beyond traditional newsroom structures. One notable outcome of this transformation is the growing prominence of user-generated content in breaking news situations. Videos, images, and eyewitness updates produced by ordinary citizens frequently appear online within minutes of unfolding events, sometimes long before journalists reach the scene. While this development expands the availability of information, it also introduces new challenges for journalism. User-generated content often circulates without the editorial filtering processes traditionally associated with professional reporting (Tolmie, Procter, Randall, Rounce field, Burger, Wong, Zubiaga and Liakata, 2017). As a result, questions emerge regarding the credibility, framing patterns, and influence of such materials on the narratives that shape public understanding of crisis events.

These concerns become particularly significant in contexts where insecurity disrupts normal reporting routines. Northern Nigeria represents one such environments. Over the past decade, the region has experienced persistent insecurity characterised by insurgency linked to Boko Haram, widespread banditry across rural communities, and increasing incidents of kidnapping for ransom (Okhueleigbe & Hundu, 2026).

In many situations, journalists cannot immediately reach affected areas due to security operations, damaged infrastructure, or the geographical remoteness of attack sites. Consequently, early information about violent incidents often emerges through eyewitness recordings and locally generated materials circulated through social media platforms.

Recent analyses further indicate that insecurity dynamics in Northern Nigeria continue to evolve through the spread of armed banditry and rural violence across several states. The International Crisis Group (2022) reports that attacks on villages, highways, and local communities often occur in areas with limited communication infrastructure and delayed institutional reporting mechanisms. In such environments, residents frequently document events using mobile phones and share them through digital platforms, allowing information about attacks to circulate widely before formal reports appear.

Taken together, these conditions create a communication environment in which user-generated content becomes a prominent source of early information about insecurity incidents. However, the rapid circulation of such materials raises important concerns about accuracy, framing, and the ways in which early narratives about violent events become established in public discourse. Although citizen-produced materials can provide valuable visual evidence and eyewitness perspectives, they may also circulate without adequate verification or contextual explanation.

Statement of the problem

For many years now, people living in Northern Nigeria have continued to face serious insecurity. There are frequent reports of bandit attacks, kidnappings, killings and the destruction of villages. Many communities now live in fear because they do not know when the next attack will happen. Because of this situation, information about these attacks spreads very quickly on social media. People who witness the attacks often record videos, take pictures or write what they saw and share it online. These materials, which are known as user-generated content, sometimes reach the public before journalists or security agencies can confirm what really happened. While these materials can help people know what is happening in different places, they can also create confusion when the information is not verified. Despite how common these materials have become in reporting

insecurity, there is still little clear understanding of how user-generated content is shaping the way insecurity is reported in Northern Nigeria. It therefore becomes necessary to examine the role that such content plays in the reportage of insecurity in the region.

Objectives of the study

The general objectives of this study is to examine the role of user-generated content in the reportage of insecurity in Northern Nigeria.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Assess the different forms of user-generated content used in reporting insecurity in Northern Nigeria.
2. Examine how user-generated content influences the way insecurity is reported in the media.
3. Determine the challenges associated with the use of user-generated content in reporting insecurity.

Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What forms of user-generated content are used in reporting insecurity in Northern Nigeria?
2. How does user-generated content influence the reportage of insecurity in Northern Nigeria?
3. What challenges are associated with the use of user-generated content in reporting insecurity?

The Literature review

User-generated content in reporting insecurity

User-generated content has become a visible feature of contemporary digital communication environments. Rather than functioning solely as audiences, social media users increasingly participate in documenting events through videos, photographs, and written updates shared online. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as participatory platforms that enable users to produce and circulate content

without relying on traditional institutional gatekeepers. According to the authors, social media can be understood as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Within journalism studies, Bruns (2018) further argues that such developments have altered the boundaries between producers and consumers of news, creating hybrid information environments in which citizen contributions frequently intersect with professional reporting practices.

The implications of this shift extend beyond simple participation. Hermida (2010) suggests that user-generated content contributes to what and where fragments of information produced by multiple individuals collectively shape public awareness of unfolding events. He explains that social media streams function as environments in which “journalism becomes ambient, a system of awareness providing diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information” (Hermida, 2010, p. 301). Rather than replacing professional journalism entirely, citizen-produced materials often function as early signals of events that journalists later investigate and contextualize. This dynamic indicates that user-generated content operates not only as a communication practice but also as an informational layer within contemporary news ecosystems.

However, while these studies explain the participatory and networked nature of user-generated content, they pay limited attention to how such content specifically influences insecurity reporting in fragile democratic environments such as Nigeria. Much of the existing literature is also largely theoretical and Western-oriented, leaving insufficient empirical attention to the operational realities of Nigerian digital journalism during periods of violent conflict and insecurity.

Citizen journalism and reportage of insecurity in Nigeria

“Citizen journalism is a term that reflects the growing influence of ordinary individuals in news creation and dissemination” (Okhueigbe,

2025, p.223). Allan and Thorsen (2009) describe citizen journalism as the involvement of ordinary individuals in gathering, documenting, and sharing information about public events. Their analysis suggests that digital technologies have expanded opportunities for individuals to record events as they occur, thereby contributing to the public documentation of crises, disasters, and political developments. As the authors observe, citizen journalism reflects the growing capacity of ordinary individuals to participate in the communication process by producing information that may circulate widely across digital platforms.

However, scholarly discussions of citizen journalism do not present a unified perspective Okhueigbe (2025, p.224) argues that “the impact of citizen journalism extends beyond mere content creation; it also influences the dynamics of media consumption and public engagement”. According to Allan, citizen witnesses often produce visual or narrative evidence that “testifies to events in ways that challenge official or institutional accounts” (Allan, 2013, p. 11). At the same time, concerns persist regarding the reliability and editorial accountability of such materials. This tension highlights the dual character of citizen journalism: it can enhance the visibility of events while simultaneously raising questions about accuracy and verification.

Reporting on conflict and insecurity presents distinct challenges for journalists. Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle (2012) emphasize that crisis reporting environments are often marked by uncertainty, limited access to reliable information, and rapidly evolving events. In such contexts, journalists must balance the need for speed with the obligation to verify claims before publication. The authors note that disaster and conflict reporting frequently unfolds under conditions where “journalists are forced to interpret incomplete and rapidly changing information” (Pantti 2012, p. 7).

Within the Nigerian context, Pate (2011) observes that insecurity reporting has become increasingly complex due to the volatile nature of insurgent violence and armed attacks. Journalists covering such events frequently operate under conditions of risk, limited access to affected areas, and restricted communication channels. These conditions create an environment where alternative information sources including eyewitness materials circulated online may influence early news narratives. Consequently, the interaction between professional journalism and citizen-generated materials has become an important dimension of contemporary insecurity reporting.

Nevertheless, most existing studies on citizen journalism and insecurity reporting in Nigeria focus broadly on terrorism, conflict communication, or media performance without sufficiently examining how journalists integrate, verify, and reproduce user-generated content sourced from digital platforms. There is also inadequate scholarly attention to the editorial tensions between speed, verification, and misinformation within Nigerian newsroom practices during insecurity reportage.

Digital media news reproduction: verification and misinformation

The circulation of information through digital platforms has intensified scholarly attention to issues of verification and misinformation. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) argue that digital media environments facilitate the rapid spread of unverified or misleading content, particularly when audiences prioritize immediacy over confirmation. The authors define fake news broadly as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Tandoc 2018, p. 138). This characteristic of digital communication environments increases the likelihood that inaccurate materials may circulate widely before verification occurs.

Similarly, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe contemporary information ecosystems as vulnerable to multiple forms of information

disorder. According to their analysis, misinformation can emerge through inaccurate reporting, misleading contextual framing, or deliberate manipulation of content. In digital environments where user-generated materials circulate rapidly, such dynamics create challenges for journalists seeking to confirm the authenticity of eyewitness materials before incorporating them into formal reporting.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the literature concentrates on misinformation as a global digital phenomenon rather than examining how verification challenges specifically affect the reproduction of insecurity-related news in Nigeria. Existing studies rarely investigate the extent to which Nigerian journalists rely on user-generated materials during crisis situations or the professional mechanisms employed to authenticate such content before dissemination

Digital media and news production

Digital platforms have reshaped the structure of news production by expanding the range of actors involved in the circulation of information. Beckett (2010) avers that contemporary journalism increasingly operates within networked environments where professional reporters interact with audiences, experts, and citizen witnesses in the process of gathering information. He notes that journalism is evolving into a “networked practice where professionals collaborate with citizens and other information sources” (Beckett, 2010, p. 6). This shift reflects the growing role of digital networks in facilitating the flow of information across diverse participants.

Castells (2012) similarly describes digital communication spaces as networked systems in which information flows across interconnected actors rather than through hierarchical media institutions alone. Within such networked environments, user-generated content often enters the news process before formal editorial assessment occurs. Rather than functioning outside journalism, citizen-produced materials may become part of a broader networked information system in which journalists evaluate,

contextualize, and redistribute content generated by the public.

However, while these studies explain the transformation of news production globally, they provide limited insight into how these networked practices operate within developing media systems characterized by insecurity, infrastructural limitations, and weak institutional trust. Consequently, there remains a gap in empirical knowledge regarding how Nigerian journalists negotiate the use of user-generated content in the reporting and reproduction of insecurity-related news.

Knowledge gaps

From the foregoing review, it is evident that existing scholarship has extensively examined user-generated content, citizen journalism, digital news production, and misinformation within contemporary media environments. However, there is limited empirical attention to how Nigerian journalists utilize, verify, and reproduce user-generated content in the reportage of insecurity. Previous studies have largely focused on broader issues of participatory journalism, terrorism coverage, or digital misinformation without specifically interrogating the interaction between user-generated content and professional newsroom practices during insecurity reporting in Nigeria. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining the role, verification processes, and implications of user-generated content in digital media reportage of insecurity within the Nigerian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored primarily on Framing Theory, while drawing supportive insights from aspects of Gatekeeping Theory and the Networked Public Sphere perspective. Framing Theory, advanced by Erving Goffman, Robert Entman, and Stephen Reese, explains how communication actors select, organize, and emphasize certain aspects of reality in ways that shape audience understanding and interpretation of events. The theory is

particularly relevant to this study because the research focused on the framing patterns present in user-generated content circulated during insecurity incidents in Northern Nigeria. Through emotional, informational, interpretive, and descriptive framing, citizen-generated materials construct meanings around violence, fear, panic, destruction, and public safety. The theory therefore provides a direct analytical foundation for understanding how eyewitness content may influence public perception of insecurity even before professional media organizations intervene with formal reporting and editorial contextualization.

The study also drew limited explanatory support from Gatekeeping Theory, originally developed by Kurt Lewin and later adapted to journalism by David Manning White, with further refinements by Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos. Traditionally, the theory explains how editors and journalists filter information before dissemination to the public. However, within contemporary digital environments, the study acknowledges a visible transformation in gatekeeping processes, where information increasingly circulates online before institutional media intervention occurs. Since this study did not investigate newsroom editorial decisions or conduct interviews with journalists and editors, Gatekeeping Theory was not applied in its classical institutional sense. Rather, it was used only to explain the broader shift in information control from centralized newsroom gatekeeping to decentralized digital circulation in which journalists increasingly perform secondary verification and contextualization functions after eyewitness materials have already entered public discourse.

Finally, the study adopted aspects of the Networked Public Sphere perspective advanced by Yochai Benkler and Manuel Castells. The perspective explains how digital communication technologies create decentralized spaces where information flows rapidly across interconnected users rather than exclusively through hierarchical media institutions. In

relation to this study, the theory helps explain why eyewitness reports, videos, and images from insecurity incidents spread quickly across platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp. Nevertheless, the study did not conduct formal network analysis or examine interaction patterns between users, nodes, or digital communities. Consequently, the Networked Public Sphere was employed only as a contextual perspective for understanding the broader communication environment within which user-generated content circulates during insecurity situations in Northern Nigeria.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Table 1: Platform Distribution of User-Generated Content (2022–2024)

Platform	Frequency	Percentage
X (Twitter)	78	39%
Facebook	64	32%
TikTok	38	19%
WhatsApp	20	10%
Total	200	100%

The dataset shows that 39% of the sampled posts originated from X, making it the most active platform for the circulation of eyewitness materials during insecurity incidents. Facebook accounted for 32%, while TikTok and WhatsApp contributed 19% and 10% respectively. The concentration of posts on platforms designed for rapid communication indicates that eyewitness documentation of attacks frequently appears in spaces where real-time sharing is common.

Table 2: Framing Patterns in User-Generated Content

Frame Type	Frequency	Percentage
Emotional / Alarm Framing	82	41%
Informational Framing	66	33%
Interpretive / Opinion Framing	30	15%
Neutral / Descriptive	22	11%
Total	200	100%

The coding results show that 41% of the posts contained emotionally charged framing, often emphasizing distress, panic, or dramatic scenes. Informational framing appeared in 33% of the posts, where users attempted to describe events by providing details such as location or eyewitness observations. Interpretive framing occurred in 15% of the materials, while neutral descriptions accounted for 11% of the dataset.

Table 3
Credibility Indicators in User-Generated Content

Verification Category	Frequency	Percentage
Verified Sources	56	28%
Partially Verifiable	20	10%
Unverified Content	124	62%
Total	200	100%

The credibility analysis shows that 62% of the analyzed posts lacked verifiable sources. Only 28% contained identifiable evidence such as location markers, time stamps, or source attribution. A smaller portion (10%) contained partial indicators that could potentially assist verification. These results indicate that a significant portion of early information about insecurity incidents circulates without clear confirmation.

Table 4: Presence of Misleading or Incomplete Context

Content Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Accurate contextual information	164	82%
Misleading or incomplete context	36	18%
Total	200	100%

The coding results further indicate that 18% of the posts contained misleading or incomplete contextual information. In many of these cases, images or videos were circulated without clear explanation of location, date, or event background, increasing the possibility of misinterpretation by audiences.

Table 5: Content analysis coding summary

Coding Variable	Description
Emotional Framing	Content emphasizing fear, panic, destruction, or dramatic reactions
Informational Framing	Posts providing event details such as location, time, or eyewitness description
Interpretive Framing	Posts expressing opinions, blame attribution, or speculation
Graphic Imagery	Visual materials showing injury, destruction, or violent scenes
Misinformation Indicators	Content lacking verifiable sources or containing misleading context
Source Attribution	Presence of identifiable source, location markers, or timestamp

This coding framework was applied to the 200 sampled posts in order to systematically evaluate narrative structure, credibility signals, and contextual information present within user-generated materials circulating during insecurity incidents.

Correlation analysis

Table 6: Relationship between Emotional Framing and Verification Status

Variables	Correlation (r)
Emotional framing vs unverified content	0.61

The correlation analysis indicates a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.61$) between emotional framing and the presence of unverified content. Posts emphasizing dramatic imagery or emotionally charged descriptions were more likely to circulate without verifiable sources.

Empirical interpretation

The statistical patterns show that user-generated materials often appear rapidly during insecurity incidents but frequently circulate without verification. Emotional framing dominates many of the posts, and a measurable portion of the dataset contains incomplete or misleading contextual information. These patterns highlight the tension between the speed of digital communication and the verification practices traditionally

associated with professional journalism.

Discussion of findings

The findings on platform distribution reveal that X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook constituted the dominant spaces for the circulation of eyewitness materials during insecurity incidents in Northern Nigeria, accounting for 39% and 32% of the sampled content respectively. This aligns strongly with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) argument that social media platforms function as participatory environments where users can independently create and disseminate information outside traditional institutional structures. The findings further support Bruns' (2018) position that contemporary journalism now operates within hybrid information ecologies where citizen contributions increasingly intersect with professional news production. The prominence of X particularly reflects the platform's architecture of immediacy, brevity, and rapid information circulation, making it suitable for real-time reporting during emergencies. Hermida's (2010) concept of "ambient journalism" is equally validated here, as the study demonstrates that fragments of eyewitness information shared by ordinary users collectively shape awareness of unfolding insecurity events before professional journalists arrive at the scene. From the perspective of the Networked Public Sphere theory advanced by Benkler and Castells, the findings illustrate how digital communication environments decentralize information flows by enabling eyewitnesses in conflict zones to become active participants in public discourse. Rather than depending solely on institutional media gatekeepers, information about attacks now circulates rapidly through interconnected digital networks where audiences, witnesses, and journalists simultaneously interact. This finding also confirms Beckett's (2010) assertion that journalism increasingly functions as a "networked practice" in which reporters rely on citizen-generated materials as part of the broader news production ecosystem.

The findings on framing patterns indicate that emotional or alarm framing constituted the dominant narrative structure within user-generated content, accounting for 41% of the analyzed posts. Informational framing followed with 33%, while interpretive and neutral framing appeared less frequently. These findings strongly corroborate Framing Theory as advanced by Goffman, Entman, and Reese, which argues that communication actors select and emphasize particular aspects of reality in ways that shape audience interpretation. The dominance of emotional framing suggests that citizen witnesses often communicate insecurity experiences through expressions of fear, panic, urgency, and trauma rather than detached reportage. This aligns with Allan's (2013) argument that citizen witnesses frequently produce emotionally compelling testimonies capable of challenging official narratives and drawing immediate public attention to crises. The findings also resonate with Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle's (2012) observation that conflict reporting environments are characterized by uncertainty, emotional intensity, and rapidly changing realities, conditions that naturally encourage dramatic and affective storytelling. Within the Nigerian context, the prevalence of emotionally charged framing may further be explained by the nature of insecurity itself, particularly in regions where insurgency, communal violence, and armed attacks create deep psychological anxieties among civilians. However, the relatively high percentage of informational framing demonstrates that many users also attempted to function as informal correspondents by providing locations, eyewitness observations, and situational updates. This supports Okhueigbe's (2025) position that citizen journalism extends beyond participation into active influence on public engagement and news consumption patterns. The findings therefore reveal that user-generated content simultaneously functions as emotional testimony, public alert system, and preliminary information source within contemporary insecurity reporting.

The findings on credibility indicators and misleading contextual information reveal a major tension within digital insecurity reporting. Although user-generated content provides rapid eyewitness access to unfolding crises, 62% of the analyzed posts lacked verifiable sources, while 18% contained misleading or incomplete contextual information. These findings strongly support Tandoc, Lim, and Ling's (2018) argument that digital communication environments facilitate the rapid circulation of unverified information, especially in situations where immediacy is prioritized over confirmation. Similarly, Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) concept of "information disorder" becomes particularly relevant here, as many of the analyzed materials circulated without clear timestamps, identifiable locations, or contextual explanation, thereby increasing the possibility of misinterpretation, panic, and misinformation. The findings further validate Gatekeeping Theory by demonstrating the continuing relevance of journalistic verification despite the decentralization of information production. While traditional gatekeeping structures have weakened in digital environments, professional journalists still function as secondary filters responsible for verifying, contextualizing, and interpreting already-circulating eyewitness materials before broader dissemination. This explains why user-generated content cannot entirely replace professional journalism despite its speed and accessibility. The findings equally reflect Castells' (2012) characterization of digital communication as a networked system where information travels horizontally across interconnected actors before formal institutional assessment occurs. Consequently, the study reveals a paradox within digital insecurity reporting: the same participatory structures that enhance immediacy, visibility, and democratic information flow also increase vulnerability to misinformation, incomplete narratives, and verification crises.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine how user-generated content shapes the reportage of insecurity in Northern Nigeria, particularly within an environment where violent incidents often occur in locations that journalists cannot immediately access. In such circumstances, eyewitness recordings shared on social media frequently become the earliest public accounts of attacks, kidnappings, and banditry events. The analysis of social media posts circulated between 2022 and 2024 shows that digital platforms now play a central role in the early stages of information flow surrounding insecurity incidents. However, the findings also reveal significant credibility concerns, with a majority of posts circulating without verifiable sources and a substantial portion containing emotionally framed narratives that can influence public interpretation before professional reporting appears.

These patterns carry important implications for communication practices within Northern Nigeria. The region's insecurity environment often produces information gaps during attacks, allowing citizen-produced materials to dominate the early stages of event reporting. While such materials can provide valuable visual evidence and immediate documentation, their rapid circulation also increases the risk that incomplete or misleading information becomes embedded within public discourse. The interaction between eyewitness materials and professional journalism therefore shapes how communities, authorities, and national audiences interpret insecurity incidents.

The findings also point to the need for clearer newsroom strategies for handling user-generated materials. News organizations covering insecurity events should strengthen verification procedures for social media content before integrating it into formal reporting. Journalists working in conflict reporting environments may also benefit from specialized training in digital verification techniques, including the identification of visual clues, geolocation indicators, and source authentication practices. In addition,

media organizations should develop internal guidelines that define how citizen-produced materials can be responsibly incorporated into security reporting.

Overall, the study highlights how contemporary insecurity reporting increasingly unfolds within a hybrid communication environment where citizen witnesses, digital platforms, and professional journalists interact in the production of public information. Strengthening verification practices and establishing clearer newsroom policies for the use of user-generated materials will therefore be essential for improving the credibility and reliability of insecurity reporting in Northern Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Media organizations should strengthen internal verification procedures before incorporating user-generated content into insecurity reports, especially where eyewitness materials originate from unverified social media accounts.
2. Since the study found that user-generated content often appears before official confirmation during insecurity situations, journalists should continue to rely on multiple independent sources to validate online materials prior to publication.
3. Digital news platforms should adopt clearer editorial guidelines regarding the use of photographs, videos, and eyewitness accounts obtained from social media during crisis reporting.
4. Government information agencies and security communication channels should improve the timely release of verified information during insecurity situations in order to reduce overdependence on unverified online narratives.

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