

**PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM:  
A Study of Residents in Owerri Municipal**

ANYANWU, B.J.C, Ph.D<sup>1</sup>  
ALUKA, Cynthia N.N<sup>2</sup>  
OKOLI, Angela Maria (Rev. Sr)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Department of Mass Communication  
Imo State University, Owerri<sup>1</sup>  
Imo State Polytechnic, Umuagwo<sup>2</sup>  
Correspondence email: [alukacy8@gmail.com](mailto:alukacy8@gmail.com),  
[angelmariae2@gmail.com](mailto:angelmariae2@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*The study examined the public acceptability of citizen journalism in Owerri municipal. The objectives were to find out the knowledge level of the residents in Owerri Municipal on citizen journalism practice, examine how the residents in Owerri Municipal perceive citizen journalism viz a viz mainstream journalism, ascertain the extent the residents in Owerri Municipal accept news from citizen journalist. The study was anchored on Democratic participant theory and Public sphere model. The mixed method research design was adopted. The population of Owerri Municipal residents comprised of 172,600 residents and the Taro Yamani's formula was used to determine the sample size of 399. Questionnaire and Interview guide was used as the instruments for data collection. The purposive sampling technique was adopted. Findings revealed that majority of the respondents 51% confirmed that they have high level of knowledge on citizen journalism practice in Owerri municipal. Finding also revealed that 66% of respondents have positive perception/attitude towards citizen journalism hence they indicated that citizen journalism is a good effort by individuals and that 53% of respondents accept news from citizen journalism in Owerri municipality to a large extent. The researchers recommended that given the high level of knowledge of citizen journalism by the people, those who are involved in it should thread with caution so as not to mislead good number of people who are exposed to news coming from citizen journalism. Given the fact that the public accept citizen journalism to a large extent it should be sustained. However, the proponents of the practice should not abuse it by flooding it with unverified news.*

**Keywords:** *Citizen journalism, journalists, public acceptability, Owerri Municipal*

**Introduction**

Citizen journalism is a concept in media that refers to journalistic activities of ordinary people using new media devices (Noor, 2017). It means citizens themselves report the issues confronting them. Citizen journalism has enabled people to raise their voice on what they feel need attention. These people are, thus, termed as citizen journalists.

Citizen journalism is a tag that gained enormous popularity in the first decade of the 21st

century as an amateur modality of the profession called to address the generalized mistrust generated by the media in society. With the inclusion of citizens in the informational process, a greater aperture in the configuration of the public agenda was fostered, the contribution to wider plurality of sources before the entrepreneurial monopolies and journalism became renewed to a large extent in virtue of the possibilities opened by the new digital technologies (Suárez-Villegas, 2017).

In citizen journalism anyone can be a journalist, any citizen with a cellular phone or a camera can be a witness of an event, record and disseminate that material for the rest of society to consume. Not only videos and photographs, but also stories from the place of the events by means of which fill in for the professional journalists. Supporting this argument Adogla (2006) as cited in Sibanda (2019) posits that adoption of mobile phones transcends the class and economic strata granting access to even the poorest and marginalized to become a journalist. Participants also noted that citizen journalism monitors the activities and behaviours of people; it has the ability to tell people what is wrong or right. With access to a camera and a smart phone one can be a citizen journalist. But then someone parading himself as journalist without training can be disastrous as Sibanda (2019) opines citizen journalism is done by people who are not professional journalists. People who are seeing events through their own eyes and experiences. Smart phones and social media are revolutionizing the understanding of journalism. The participants postulated that the fact that anyone can be a journalist through upholding the new forms of communication poses a threat to the practice and profession of journalism where ethics and legal issues are questionable.

Willson (2012) postulated that citizen journalism is a source of news that lacks credibility. Lara (2013) accused citizen journalists for disseminating obscene material and spreading violence through videos and pictorial presentations. Journalists cited that they are inhibited in terms of what to report and what not to report in their publication and this is through stringent laws enacted to guide the operation of media houses.

In other cases, citizen journalists were not even welcome on the playground. Instead, their content was dismissed or roundly criticized, viewed as unethical, untrustworthy, too subjective and emotional, said to be of poor technical quality or simply of no real news value (Niekamp 2011; Pantti & Bakker 2009). Sometimes citizen journalism is described as simply too incomplete to provide a coherent picture of crucial news events (Nip 2009). Another line of research shows that non-professionals may not produce much “real” news, as they are interested mainly in soft or non-news items (Holt & Karlsson 2014; Jonsson & Ornebring, 2011). Even in cases of crisis coverage, which is said to be citizen journalism's key area of contribution, citizen content often has been more focused on sharing emotions than providing helpful facts or information (Nip 2009). But the citizen–professional conflict was not simply about quality or resources.

At the present moment in which information professionals and citizens have hold more horizontal positions in the public debate, the preponderance of the professional as a gatekeeper of information has been broken, as it can be disseminated over different channels (Dahlgren, 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Citizen journalism has attracted mixed reactions. While the proponents say that it is good for

the society, the opponents hold that it is injurious to the peace existence and governance of the society, reason being that some of their reports can be misleading. Also, considering the fact that, most of them lack professionally training. In this technological age that everyone seems to be a citizen journalist even without proper training. But the question is how do the public see the news coming from citizen journalism? Do they see their news as objective enough? This critical questions form the problem this study sought to investigate. This study, therefore, aimed to examine public acceptability of citizen journalism practice in Imo State.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine public acceptability of citizen journalism. Other specific objectives were to:

- I. Find out the knowledge level of the residents in Owerri Municipal on citizen journalism practice.
- ii. Examine how the residents in Owerri Municipal perceive Citizen journalism
- iii. Ascertain the extent the residents in Owerri Municipal accept news from citizen journalist

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions form the basis of this study.

1. What is the knowledge level of the residents in Owerri Municipal on citizen journalism practice?
2. How do the residents in Owerri Municipal perceive citizen journalism
3. To what extent do the residents in Owerri Municipal accept news from citizen journalists?

### **The Status of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria**

Citizen journalism is now a popular brand of journalism in Nigeria. This development is attributable to the overwhelming use of the social media in the country. Both the political leaders and the electorate in Nigeria use the social media for various reasons. In his study of the rise for citizen journalism in Nigeria – a case study of Sahara Reporters, Dare (2011, p.44) stated that “National recognition came for social media when on June 28, 2010, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, launched his Facebook fans page to reach out to the youth and Nigerians with a view to getting feedback on electoral reform and other national issues.” He reported that Nigerian politicians employed the social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and SMS messaging to advance their campaigns and deliver their manifestos to boost their followership during the country's 2011 general elections.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Webster (2010), cited in UNDP (2010, p.67) observed that “President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria was said to have “more Facebook fans than the combined tally of British Prime Minister, David Cameron, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and South African head of state, Jacob Zuma” As a result of the ubiquitous

adoption of social media for public communication in Nigeria, citizen journalism has gained currency in the country. Nigerian citizen journalists report events in their localities and comment on national issues, using the social networking sites.

Today, there are popular citizen journalism websites in Nigeria. The Sahara Reporters, one of such websites, is noted for its timely reports on issues and events. In a study conducted by Dare (2011, p.44), 86 of the 120 respondents surveyed cited the Sahara reporters as a source of breaking news.

By its interactivity and ability to deliver news in split seconds, citizen journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria. Before press time, citizen journalists in Nigeria had reported the Dana airline crash of June 3, 2012, which claimed the lives of over 150 passengers on board. Not only did the social media give timely report of the plane crash, they also gave the audience the opportunity to ask questions and exchange views on the national calamity.

This challenge posed by citizen journalism appears to have forced the traditional media in Nigeria to embrace citizen brand of journalism. However, experts have called the genre of citizen journalism practiced by the mainstream media in Nigeria to question.

In his study of citizen journalism off-line, with a focus on the Nigerian punch model, Salawu (2011, p.192) found that, “despite the newspaper's claim of creating an opportunity for readers to create their own news, the punch's model of citizen journalism was still with some limitations”. According to him, “compared with online citizen journalism, especially one that is done through blogs, the punch model is with inadequacies. In the model, the professionals in charge of the page would still play the role of gatekeepers.” He explained that the professionals would “determine what stories to go public and what should not go. Even, for those that would go public, some editing would have been done on the stories, thereby robbing them of their originality, and in a way distorting the actual reports of the contributors.”

The above picture painted by Salawu is different from CNN'S brand of citizen journalism tagged “ireport”. In the “ireport”, stories retain their originality; there is no sort of distortion. As a result, credit or blame goes to the contributor of a story in “ireport”.

### **Criticisms of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria**

Citizen journalism has been criticized by its opponents in Nigeria. Some of the critics believe that citizen journalism lacks veracity. Dare (2011, p.44) found that only 33 respondents of the 120 surveyed trusted Sahara reporters. This, according to him, shows that most Nigerians do not believe stories from citizen journalists. It is believed in some quarters that they spread false hood.

Other critics argue that citizen journalism fuels civil unrest, political instability and ethno-religious crisis. This angle of criticism peaked during the nationwide protests that greeted the removal of fuel subsidy in January 2012. It was believed in some quarters that citizen journalists misinformed the activists, making them to now gang up against the government. However, that was perceived, the aim of the protest was partially achieved as there was a huge reduction in the pump price of fuel (Nnanyelugo, Diri & Odi, 2013).

Again, citizen journalism has also been criticized for trivializing issues of national interest, including national calamities. There was an outcry; especially by national leaders against the conduct of citizen journalists during the Dana Airline crash of June 03, 2012. It

was said that while rescue operators were sweating profusely to see if there could be any survivors, citizen journalists were busy taking and uploading gory pictures to their friends (Lara, 2013).

### **Empirical Review**

Nnanyelugo, Diri and Odii (2013) in their study on Possibilities and Challenges of citizen journalism, evaluated the possibilities and challenges of citizen journalism in Nigeria and discovered that Citizen Journalism is emerging as a powerful phenomenon across Nigeria as showcased by popular citizen journalism websites. Apeh, Andrew C. and Didiuwu, Ifeanyi (2017) in their work, examined the implications of Citizen journalism on the main stream journalism and discovered that Citizen Journalism is emerging as a powerful phenomenon across Nigeria as showcased by popular citizen journalism websites.

Dare (2011) did a study on citizen journalism and it was revealed that in as much as citizen journalism in Nigeria has broadened people's access to a variety of news, its interactivity and ability to deliver news in split seconds, citizen journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria.

Suárez-Villegas (2017) carried out a study on the opinions of journalists on citizen journalism. It was found out that one of the most significant changes in journalism over the last decade has been the participation of citizens in the information process, establishing various forms of interaction with professional journalists and the media. This development has established a new journalistic culture based on dynamic interaction with the audience that improved information processes in various ways. However, this active role of the audience can not substantiate the so called citizen journalism, because it lacks the necessary conditions to ensure quality information that secures constructive and civilized public debate.

Hood (2011) conducted a study on the ethical standard of citizen journalism and professional journalism. It was found that news consumers do not see professional journalists as more credible than citizen journalists, although news consumers do see traditional journalists' content as more professional.

Noor (2017) did a study on citizen journalism vs. mainstream journalism and it was revealed that citizen journalism is a rapidly evolving form of journalism, which has enabled ordinary people to report newsworthy situations around them and that citizen journalism does not pose any imminent threat to mainstream journalism since it is just in its formative years. In fact, citizen journalism holds potential benefits as a source of news. It proves to be useful to bring to fore the stories that are inaccessible to professional journalists.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on the public sphere theory. The theory was propounded by Jurgen Habermas in 1962. According to the World Bank (n.d), the notion of the public sphere is at the center of participatory approaches to democracy. The public sphere is the arena where citizens come together, exchange opinions regarding public affairs, discuss, deliberate, and eventually form public opinion (Wessler & Freudenthaler, 2018). This arena can be a specific place where citizens gather (for example, a town hall meeting), but it can also be a communication infrastructure through which citizens send and receive information and opinions. This theory is relevant to this study based on the fact that it gives room to citizen



journalists to participate in public affairs through their electronic gadgets thereby bringing how they feel about a particular event in form of news to the public.

### Methodology

The researcher adopted the survey method and the In-depth interview method in carrying out the research. These methods were considered appropriate because the study was an audience research that involved ascertaining opinions, perception attitudes and knowledge of the respondents on the subject matter.

Population of this study comprises of residents in Owerri municipal that are 172,600 according to Citypopulation, (2016). In selecting the sample size for this study the researcher used the Taro Yamani's formula to determine the sample size of 399 with the confidence level of 95% 0.5 error limits. While five (5) persons formed the sample size for the qualitative study.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select 80 respondents each from the five communities in Owerri Municipal namely Umuoyima, Amawom, Umuonyeche, Umuodu and Umuororonjo. For the qualitative angle, one person (1) was selected from each of the communities. The instrument for data collection was questionnaire and interview guide and they were face validated by two research experts in the field of Mass Communication. As regards the technique of data analysis the researcher used simple percentages and tabulations for the quantitative analysis while for the qualitative analysis the explanation building technique was used.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

The questionnaire which serves as the instrument of data collection in this study was administered to 399 respondents in Owerri municipal. However, 17(4%) copies of questionnaire lost and 382 (96%) returned, data presentation was based on 382 respondents.

**Table 1 Citizen journalism has to do with citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information through new media platforms**

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	87	23%
Agree	146	38%
Disagree	80	21%
Strongly disagree	69	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field survey, 2019

Analysis of data from table 1 showed that 38% of respondents agreed that citizen journalism has to do with citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information through new media platforms. This simply means that the respondents are knowledgeable about what citizen journalism mean.

**Table 2: Assessing the knowledge level of respondents**

Items	Frequency	Percentage
High	242	63
Moderate	145	30
Low	25	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field survey, 2019.

Analysis of data from the above table 2 showed that 63% of respondents have high level of knowledge on citizen journalism practice in Owerri municipal. This implies that the residents in Owerri municipal have high knowledge of citizen journalism practice.

**Table 2: Respondents perception towards Citizen Journalism**

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Good effort by individuals	252	66%
Junk journalism	109	29%
Indifferent	21	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field survey, 2019

Analysis of data revealed that 66% of respondents have positive perception/attitude towards citizen journalism hence they indicated that citizen journalism is a good effort by individuals. This implies that majority of the respondents see citizen journalism as a good effort by individuals.

**Table 3: Respondents Acceptance of News from Citizen Journalism**

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Large extent	202	53%
Moderate	115	30%
Low extent	50	13%
Can't say	15	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: field survey, 2019.s

Analysis of data from the above table 3 revealed that 53%of respondents accept news from citizen journalism in Owerri municipality. By implication of this analysis the residents of Owerri municipality extent of acceptance of citizen journalism is high.

### **Interview Data**

#### **A summary of in-depth interview conducted in the five Communities in Owerri Municipal.**

The researcher interviewed five community members selected purposively from each of the communities because they have smart phones and are literate. The interview was necessary to gather adequate data for answering the research questions and meeting the objectives of the study.

The first question was what is the knowledge level of the residents in Owerri Municipal on citizen journalism practice? According to the first interviewee “I have smart phone and most times I read a lot of stuff by citizen journalists. Sometimes I write some stories myself and post on my Facebook wall for people to read”. Other interviewees confirmed that their knowledge level is high.

Another question that bordered on the how do the residents in Owerri municipal perceive citizen journalism viz a viz mainstream journalism was posed. Interviewees noted that they see citizen journalism as a welcome development and that it gives room for people to participate in the news process. Though, two interviewees were of the views that citizen journalism has been abused by people hence giving rise to junk journalism but then they still accept some verifiable news coming from citizen journalists especially, if they share similarities with news from the mainstream journalism.

Concerning the extent residents in Owerri accept news from citizen journalist, in the words of Interviewees from Umuoyima and Umuronronjo “of course yes, I accept news from citizen journalists, they make you know the trending things” another confirmed that “I accept news from citizen journalism because they keep you up to date... I see nothing wrong with citizen journalism because myself in some occasions is involved in it”

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **The knowledge level of the residents in Owerri Municipal on citizen journalism practice**

From the data gathered and presented in table 1 and 2 it can be deduce that about an average of 51% of the respondents confirmed that they have high level of knowledge on citizen journalism practice in Owerri municipal. In line with Noor (2017) findings, the knowledge level of citizen journalism has induced a rapidly evolving form of journalism, which has enabled ordinary people to report newsworthy situations around them. Nowadays mainstream media do not serve as the only source of news. Qualitative findings equally revealed that the knowledge level is on the high side, this could explain the reason why in citizen journalism anyone can be a journalist, any citizen with a cellular phone or a camera can be a witness of an event, record and disseminate that material for the rest of society to consume. This support the assumption of the public sphere model this study was anchored on.

#### **The residents in Owerri Municipal perception of citizen journalism**

Analysis of data revealed that 66% of respondents have positive perception/attitude towards citizen journalism hence they indicated that citizen journalism is a good effort by individuals 29% confirmed that it is junk journalism, while 5% of respondents where indifferent.



Qualitative findings on the other hand, revealed that citizen journalism is a welcome development and that it gives room for people to participate in the news process. Though, two interviewees were of the views that citizen journalism has been abused by people hence giving rise to junk journalism but then they still accept some verifiable news coming from citizen journalists especially, if they share similarities with news from the mainstream journalism. Suárez-Villegas (2017) in his study argues that this development has established a new journalistic culture based on dynamic interaction with the audience that improved information processes in various ways. However, this active role of the audience can not substantiate the so called citizen journalism, because it lacks the necessary conditions to ensure quality information that secures constructive and civilized public debate.

### **The Extent Residents in Owerri Municipal Accept News from Citizen Journalist**

Analysis of data from table 3 further revealed that 53% of respondents accept news from citizen journalism in Owerri municipality. From the analysis it is obvious that the residents in Owerri municipal embrace citizen journalism practice to a large extent. Qualitative findings also showed that they accept the practice. Supporting this finding, Hood (2011) found out that because of the advent of the internet, traditional journalism is changing. Advanced technology includes the tools for everyone to publish their thoughts, feelings, photos, and videos, allowing individuals to be citizen journalists. The public sphere theory as reviewed in this study gives serious backing to this finding; essentially, the theory assumes that as citizens embrace citizen journalism for communication purpose it will give way for public discourse in public sphere which the theory postulates.

### **Conclusion**

In this digital age everyone strives to be journalists so as to make contributions to the news process for the public to appreciate and from the findings of this study one can see the extent the practice of citizen journalism is accepted. Based on the findings we can therefore conclude that the level of acceptance of the practice of citizen journalism by the public is on the high side.

### **Recommendations**

Base on the findings the following recommendations are hereby made

1. Given the high level of knowledge of citizen journalism by the people, those who are involved in it should thread with caution so as not to mislead good number of people who are exposed to news coming from citizen journalism.
2. Considering the fact that 29% of respondents confirming that it is a junk journalism, efforts need to be made by those who practice it to give in their best so as to meet the set standard of mainstream journalism.
3. Given the fact that the public accept citizen journalism to a large extent it should be sustained. However, the proponents of the practice should not abuse it by flooding it with unverified news.

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