

From the Fourth Estate to the Fifth Estate: Interrogating the Influence of Artificial Intelligence in the Era of Citizen Journalism

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Abstract

The press, historically celebrated as the Fourth Estate, has served as a watchdog of democracy, anchoring its authority on credibility and institutional gatekeeping. However, the rise of digital technologies has unsettled this order, giving rise to the Fifth Estate where citizen journalism thrives through participatory practices enabled by smartphones, social media, and digital platforms. This study interrogates the influence of AI on citizen journalism in Nigeria, highlighting how it reshapes journalistic practice, credibility, visibility, and inclusivity within the democratic space. The study was anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory and Produsage Theory. The study adopted a qualitative design, engaging 35 purposively selected citizen journalists, communication scholars and practitioners in Akwa Ibom State. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that AI has transformed citizen journalism by amplifying ordinary voices and redefining agenda-setting through algorithmic mediation. However, this transformation is accompanied by dilemmas of misinformation, sensationalism, opacity of algorithms, and digital inequalities that marginalise less technologically equipped populations. While AI offers prospects for verification, translation and inclusivity, its unchecked adoption risks undermining credibility and deepening inequalities. The study concludes that AI represents a double-edged sword in citizen journalism: it expands participation and visibility, yet simultaneously challenges journalistic integrity. The paper recommends continuous scholarly engagement, AI-driven verification tools, and policy frameworks to maximise prospects and mitigate risks. It therefore situates itself as a timely contribution to debates on how AI mediates the shift from the Fourth Estate to the Fifth Estate in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords

Citizen Journalism, Artificial Intelligence, Fifth Estate, Credibility, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The history of the media has consistently demonstrated its centrality in shaping public life and strengthening democratic engagement. The press, often described as the Fourth Estate, has long been recognised as the vanguard of accountability, serving as a watchdog over the other arms of government, informing the citizenry and framing public debates. Traditional journalism thrived on established professional codes, editorial structures and institutional frameworks that reinforced trust and credibility. For decades, these mechanisms guaranteed a sense of order in news production and dissemination, particularly in contexts where social institutions were fragile. Yet, the tide of change brought about by digital technology has unsettled this conventional arrangement. Old media are gradually losing their dominance as new media technologies challenge their authority in terms of immediacy, access, interactivity and reach. Scholars have consistently observed that traditional media grapple with the pressure of declining readership, dwindling advertising revenue and shrinking public trust in a world where audiences now prefer the speed and accessibility of online platforms [1]. Similarly, it has been submitted that old media institutions have been forced into a reactive mode as new media outlets expand their influence, with citizen-driven content questioning the monopoly once enjoyed by professional journalists [2]. This development does not suggest the irrelevance of the Fourth Estate; rather, it indicates that the Fourth Estate now shares the communication space with an emerging force often referred to as the Fifth Estate, which embodies the active involvement of citizens in the journalistic process. The context is thus set for understanding how the trajectory of media development is moving from what has been known and institutionalised to what is becoming an uncertain but powerful reality.

The rise of the Fifth Estate is closely tied to the surge in citizen journalism, where ordinary individuals, equipped with smartphones, social media accounts and digital tools, can capture, narrate and disseminate information in real time. This shift has been enabled by the democratisation of communication technologies and the pervasive use of social media platforms. What was once the exclusive preserve of trained reporters is now a participatory activity, as citizens document unfolding events, challenge dominant narratives and amplify voices that might otherwise remain silenced. Scholars argue that this participatory journalism has reshaped the media sphere into a more decentralised, interactive

and pluralistic arena of communication [3, 4]. A significant driver of this change is the use of data and digital analytics to shape content creation and dissemination. In their study on audience engagement through data-driven strategies, it is argued that the capacity to analyse audience preferences in real time allows communicators to tailor messages that resonate more effectively with target publics [5]. This approach has not only changed how institutions engage audiences but also empowered citizen journalists to adapt similar methods, thereby making their content more appealing and competitive with professional journalism. The implication is that citizen journalism has grown beyond sporadic reporting into a more deliberate and sophisticated practice, aided by tools that were once accessible only to institutional actors.

This growth is further reinforced by the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence in communication. Research reveals that while adoption levels are uneven, there is growing awareness of the value of artificial intelligence in improving communication processes [6]. This insight reflects the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of citizen journalism, where artificial intelligence becomes a decisive factor in shaping how content is produced, curated and consumed. The emerging media space is therefore defined not only by citizen participation but also by the technological interventions that drive it.

Yet, it is at this juncture that uncertainties begin to dominate scholarly reflections on the future of journalism in the age of artificial intelligence. While the Fourth Estate established order through institutional authority, and the Fifth Estate thrives on citizen participation, the infusion of artificial intelligence into media practice introduces new dynamics that are not fully understood. Algorithms that curate and recommend content now play a central role in determining what citizens see, what goes viral and what disappears without a trace. The challenge is that these processes remain opaque, raising critical questions about bias, fairness and accountability. Scholars in technology ethics emphasise that artificial intelligence systems often reward content that generates engagement rather than content that prioritises accuracy, thereby amplifying misinformation and sensationalism [7, 8]. In societies such as Nigeria, where digital inequality persists, concerns also emerge about whose voices artificial intelligence will amplify and whose will be muted. Research already highlights gaps in infrastructure, literacy and policy that could deepen inequities in how citizens participate in and benefit from the Fifth Estate [9]. This raises a profound dilemma: while artificial intelligence promises efficiency, personalisation and wider reach, it also threatens to distort public discourse, compromise journalistic integrity and marginalise vulnerable voices. The need for deliberate academic inquiry, therefore, becomes urgent. As citizen journalism interacts with artificial intelligence in shaping public debate, one must interrogate the degree to which this intersection strengthens or undermines democratic communication. Questions of control, accountability and inclusivity are central to this interrogation. It is within this gap that the present study situates itself to interrogate the influence of AI in the era of citizen journalism, thereby contributing to global conversations on the evolution of media from the Fourth Estate to the Fifth Estate.

2. Statement of the Problem

The traditional role of the media, anchored in the values of the Fourth Estate, has always been to inform, educate and hold power accountable through professional gatekeeping and ethical journalism. Ideally, journalism ought to provide citizens with credible and verifiable information that enables them to participate meaningfully in democratic processes. However, the shift from conventional media institutions to the participatory culture of the Fifth Estate, characterised by citizen journalism, has unsettled this order. Citizen journalism, while democratising communication and amplifying grassroots voices, has also introduced dilemmas of misinformation, absence of editorial oversight and challenges in content verification. What makes this situation more pressing is the increasing infusion of AI into the communication process, as algorithms now shape what information circulates widely and what is suppressed, without clear standards of accountability. Although studies have highlighted the growing power of new media and the diminishing relevance of old media [1, 2], little attention has been paid to the role of AI in mediating this shift, particularly within the sphere of citizen journalism. Ideally, AI tools should strengthen accuracy, promote inclusivity and enhance public debate, but present realities reveal opacity, bias and the possibility of amplifying sensational rather than factual information. This dilemma creates a knowledge gap, as scholars have yet to fully interrogate how AI influences citizen journalism in a way that either enhances or undermines the democratic promise of the Fifth Estate. The problem, therefore, lies in the tension between what journalism is expected to achieve and what is currently unfolding in the age of algorithmic mediation, which necessitates a critical scholarly inquiry such as the present study.

3. Research Objectives

The research objectives were:

- RO1:** To examine the influence of AI on the practice of citizen journalism.
- RO2:** To assess how AI shapes the credibility and visibility of citizen-generated news content.
- RO3:** To identify the challenges and prospects of integrating AI into citizen journalism within the context of the Fifth Estate.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has become one of the most defining features of the digital communication era, where ordinary individuals now function as reporters through mobile technologies and internet-enabled devices. Scholars have consistently drawn attention to the way citizen journalism is reshaping the information order in contemporary societies. For instance, it has been argued that the advent of smartphones and social platforms has redefined reporting from being a professionalised occupation into a participatory culture that allows citizens to set agendas [10]. This position aligns with earlier work pointing out that new media have not only challenged the power of traditional journalism but also enabled citizens to produce content that circulates widely without institutional gatekeeping [1]. Artificial intelligence now intensifies this shift, as algorithms and machine learning tools filter, recommend and amplify the citizen-produced content that reaches the widest audience. In Nigeria, cases of viral citizen reportage during the #EndSARS protests illustrate how algorithms on Twitter and Facebook magnified citizen voices, drawing both local and international attention to police brutality.

The use of AI in journalism goes beyond simple amplification; it increasingly mediates how information is framed and circulated. Research shows that data-driven communication strategies allow both institutions and citizens to engage audiences in targeted and personalised ways [5]. The implication here is that citizen journalists are no longer mere recorders of events but are increasingly influenced by algorithmic systems that predict audience preferences and push relevant content forward. This redefinition of agency raises important academic concerns. If artificial intelligence privileges engagement-driven content, there is the possibility of distorting journalistic values, as citizens may become more concerned with producing sensational content that algorithms reward rather than factually reliable reports. Nigerian scholars have noted similar trends, observing that the digital public sphere is becoming a terrain where visibility is determined less by accuracy and more by virality, with artificial intelligence playing a crucial role [9].

AI also influences the modes of citizen reporting through applications embedded in platforms. For instance, tools such as automated captioning, real-time translations, and even predictive text functions help ordinary users to craft messages that appear more professional. This has raised questions about whether the distinction between professional and citizen journalism is gradually being erased. Some researchers suggest that the old media are caught in a dilemma, struggling to compete with the speed and adaptability of new media practices empowered by these emerging technologies [2]. While old media still provide editorial checks and credibility, they often lose out in immediacy to citizen journalists whose work is propelled by artificial intelligence-driven platforms. The result is a new communication ecology where authority is being renegotiated, and where artificial intelligence tools are increasingly central in shaping who gets heard and who does not.

It is equally significant to note that artificial intelligence holds potential to elevate citizen journalism to unprecedented heights. In regions like Northern Nigeria where insecurity often restricts traditional reporting, citizens rely on mobile phones to document attacks and displacement. Artificial intelligence-powered applications for image verification and geotagging can help authenticate such reports, giving them both national and global legitimacy. However, these possibilities are still emerging and underexplored. As research has found in the context of Nigerian teaching hospitals, while awareness of artificial intelligence is gradually growing, actual adoption remains uneven, often due to infrastructural, knowledge and ethical constraints [6]. Translating this into the journalism space suggests that while citizen journalists may embrace the tools made available by social platforms, the broader question of deliberate, informed and ethical use of artificial intelligence remains unresolved. This gap necessitates deeper academic investigation.

4.2 Artificial Intelligence, Credibility, and the Visibility of Citizen-Generated Content

Credibility has always been the cornerstone of journalism, as the public's trust in media institutions depends largely on the perception that news reports are accurate, verifiable and ethically produced. In the context of citizen journalism, however, credibility is often contested because citizen reporters are not bound by professional codes of conduct and rarely undergo the editorial scrutiny that professional journalism demands. It has been argued that credibility remains the most significant factor distinguishing professional journalism from citizen-generated content, even when both circulate widely in digital spaces [11]. Yet, artificial intelligence complicates this distinction. Through algorithms that curate, amplify and prioritise content, artificial intelligence does not necessarily reward credibility; it rewards visibility, often based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares and comments. Scholars rightly highlight that the traditional gatekeeping role once held by editors has now been partially transferred to algorithms, whose decision-making processes remain largely opaque [1]. This creates a new dilemma in the public sphere, where credible information may be drowned out by sensational or misleading content that artificial intelligence systems push to prominence.

The Nigerian case offers vivid illustrations of this dilemma. During the 2019 general elections, false reports and doctored videos circulated widely on WhatsApp and Facebook, gaining massive traction despite repeated denials from electoral authorities [12]. Artificial intelligence-powered recommendation systems accelerated the spread of such content because they were designed to maximise engagement, not necessarily to uphold journalistic truth. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social platforms struggled to curtail the viral spread of misleading claims about herbal cures and conspiracy theories. Reports show that these claims often gained more visibility than the verified information

circulated by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [13]. This raises questions about whether artificial intelligence, as currently deployed, enhances or undermines credibility in the realm of citizen journalism. While professional journalists may spend significant time verifying facts, citizen-generated reports often bypass verification and still attain wide circulation because artificial intelligence systems amplify content that resonates emotionally rather than factually.

At the same time, artificial intelligence can serve as a tool for enhancing credibility if properly deployed. Machine learning algorithms have been applied to detect manipulated images, flag misinformation and authenticate sources in several contexts. For instance, Twitter's attempt to introduce "Birdwatch," a community-driven system supported by artificial intelligence, sought to crowdsource verification by allowing users to add context to misleading tweets [14]. Although the initiative faced challenges, it points to the possibility of artificial intelligence helping citizen journalists establish greater credibility. Scholars stress that artificial intelligence tools, if systematically integrated, can enhance accuracy and accountability in communication practices [6]. They demonstrated in the health communication sector that artificial intelligence adoption improved information accuracy and fostered more reliable communication with patients. Extrapolating to citizen journalism, one can argue that artificial intelligence could help reduce misinformation if accessible verification tools are embedded into social media platforms used by citizen reporters.

However, visibility and credibility do not always align, creating a paradox at the heart of citizen journalism. Credible reports produced by citizen journalists in rural or marginalised communities may remain unseen because artificial intelligence algorithms prioritise content from urban centres where engagement is higher. As scholars explain, algorithms often privilege dominant voices, leaving marginal voices excluded from the digital public sphere [9]. This reflects broader concerns about digital inequality in Nigeria, where access to technology and digital literacy are unevenly distributed across class, gender and geography. The implication is that artificial intelligence not only mediates what the public perceives as credible but also determines whose reports achieve visibility and whose are rendered invisible. The Fifth Estate, which should ideally democratise participation, therefore risks reproducing old hierarchies under new technological conditions. Some have cautioned that unless deliberate strategies are put in place, new media systems could simply reinforce existing power imbalances while masking them under the guise of openness [2].

The central challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling the tension between credibility and visibility in the age of artificial intelligence. While credibility ought to remain the bedrock of journalistic practice, visibility is increasingly mediated through opaque algorithmic systems that privilege virality over verification. This situation calls for critical scholarly examination because it redefines the very essence of journalism in the Fifth Estate. The knowledge gap becomes clear when one considers that while many studies have explored the challenges of misinformation in citizen journalism, very few have interrogated how artificial intelligence specifically shapes both the visibility and credibility of citizen-generated content in the Nigerian context. Addressing this gap is vital to ensure that the democratic promise of citizen journalism is not undermined by technological mediation that favours noise over truth.

4.3 Challenges and Prospects of Integrating AI into Citizen Journalism in the Fifth Estate

The integration of AI into citizen journalism presents both formidable challenges and promising prospects for democratic communication. On the one hand, AI has the capacity to strengthen journalistic practice by providing tools for fact-checking, data analysis and content curation. On the other hand, its adoption raises significant issues of ethics, access and accountability, particularly in contexts where digital inequalities remain stark. Nigerian scholars such as Olatunji and Ibrahim [15] have observed that technology-driven communication in Nigeria often deepens existing divides between urban and rural populations, with those in rural areas lacking the resources and literacy required to benefit fully from emerging tools. Applied to citizen journalism, this means that while some segments of the population may take advantage of AI-powered platforms to amplify their voices, others may be excluded due to infrastructural and knowledge gaps. Morah and Brown [6], in their study on Nigerian teaching hospitals, demonstrate that even professionals struggle with consistent adoption of AI tools because of poor awareness, inadequate infrastructure and limited training. If healthcare professionals face such challenges, it is clear that citizen journalists who often operate informally face an even steeper learning curve.

Another significant challenge concerns the opacity of AI systems and the ethical dilemmas they pose. Algorithms that prioritise content do not always operate transparently, making it difficult to know why certain stories are amplified and others suppressed. Lewis, Zamith and Hermida [8] argue that algorithms tend to reward engagement rather than accuracy, a situation that encourages sensationalism at the expense of factual reporting. This is particularly worrisome in Nigeria, where citizen journalism has already been linked to the rapid spread of unverified stories during events such as the #EndSARS protests and electioneering campaigns [12]. The absence of clear accountability mechanisms raises fears that AI could worsen misinformation and erode the credibility of citizen journalism. Ikon, Nwokeocha, Brown and Akpan [2] warn that while new media technologies empower citizens, they also create new problems that old media did not confront, including the unchecked spread of falsehoods. Unless carefully managed, AI integration could turn the Fifth Estate into a platform that privileges speed and virality over truth, thereby undermining the democratic ideals it is meant to promote.

Despite these challenges, the prospects of integrating AI into citizen journalism remain compelling. AI-powered verification tools can help authenticate citizen reports, especially in contexts where professional journalists cannot easily operate due to insecurity or political repression. For instance, image verification applications and geolocation

tools have been used to confirm incidents of violence in conflict zones, lending legitimacy to citizen-generated reports. Morah and Brown [5] highlight how data-driven strategies are already enabling communicators to capture and retain audience attention in Nigeria through personalised messaging. If similar strategies are adapted for citizen journalism, AI could make citizen reports not only more visible but also more credible. Nigerian communication scholars such as Oso and Pate [11] argue that when citizens are empowered with digital tools, they become critical actors in shaping the national discourse. AI, therefore, holds the prospect of democratising information even further by equipping citizens with the means to produce accurate, timely and engaging content that competes with professional journalism.

Equally important is the potential of AI to foster inclusivity in the media space. With features such as automated translation and voice-to-text applications, citizens from linguistically diverse backgrounds can contribute to public debates without being constrained by language barriers. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where linguistic diversity often limits participation in national conversations. Chiluwa and Ajiboye [9] note that new media technologies already amplify voices that were traditionally excluded from mainstream narratives. With AI, these possibilities could expand, allowing more Nigerians to contribute to national dialogue across class, language and geographical divides. However, these prospects can only be realised if deliberate policies and ethical frameworks are put in place to guide the responsible use of AI. Without such safeguards, the challenges of bias, exclusion and misinformation may overshadow the opportunities that AI offers.

5. Theoretical Frameworks

Two theories were employed in this study. They were the Agenda-Setting Theory, originally advanced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their foundational 1972 Chapel Hill research, which asserts that media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about through issue salience [16] and Produsage Theory, proposed by Axel Bruns in 2007, which emphasises the collaborative production-use model of content where consumers become producers in participatory environments [17]. Agenda-Setting Theory has been criticised in the present context because citizen journalism disrupts the traditional top-down flow of influence; for instance, Ohiagu [18] demonstrates that citizen media now shares agenda-setting responsibilities with mainstream outlets, reducing the media's exclusive hold on issue salience. Produsage Theory likewise attracts critique here, given that while citizen contributors generate content, AI-driven algorithms may override collective input, prioritising stories by engagement metrics, thereby undercutting the egalitarian ideals of shared authorship. The relevance of these theories to the current study lies in their ability to frame how issue prominence is shaped in the Fifth Estate, and how content is co-created and disseminated in the age of AI-mediated citizen journalism; they anchor the inquiry in established theory while exposing where technological mediation introduces new dilemmas requiring academic interrogation.

6. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which is suitable for interrogating how AI influences citizen journalism within the context of the Fifth Estate. The choice of a qualitative approach is informed by the need to examine meaning, perspectives and practices rather than quantifiable trends, since issues of media influence, credibility, participation and power dynamics demand contextual exploration [19]. The population of the study comprises 35 active citizen journalists, communication scholars and practitioners in Akwa Ibom State who engage with digital media platforms where AI tools such as automated news feeds, content moderation systems and recommendation algorithms are actively deployed. Purposive sampling is employed to select respondents based on their direct involvement and experience with AI-mediated journalism, which ensures that only those with relevant knowledge and engagement are included, a practice consistent with scholarly recommendations for qualitative inquiry [2]. Data was collected primarily through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, enabling participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences, challenges and perceptions of AI in citizen journalism. To strengthen validity, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing data from multiple sources, including policy documents, institutional reports and digital platform analytics. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, identifying recurring themes and patterns that align with the research objectives, an approach reinforced by Morah and Brown [6], who emphasise the role of AI-related narratives in shaping communication practice. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality and respect for participants' voices were strictly observed in line with international scholarly standards [20]. This methodological choice is justified because it enabled the study to capture the lived realities of citizen journalists and audiences within Nigeria, while situating their practices in the broader theoretical debates of agenda setting and produsage, as highlighted in earlier sections of this work.

7. Discussion of Findings

7.1 Research Objective One: To Examine the Influence of AI on the Practice of Citizen Journalism

The findings of this study revealed that AI has significantly reshaped the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria, not only in terms of immediacy and access but also in the way news content is curated, circulated and consumed. Respondents consistently stressed that AI-driven platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram have become arbiters of what citizen content achieves visibility and traction in the public sphere. This finding corroborates the submissions of [1], who emphasise that new media technologies have disrupted the monopoly of traditional journalism by privileging speed and interactivity. In the case of Nigeria, viral citizen reports during the #EndSARS

protests provide a practical demonstration of this shift, as algorithms amplified ordinary citizens' videos and testimonies, often surpassing the coverage provided by mainstream media outlets.

Applying the Agenda-Setting Theory of [16], one observes that while traditional media once exclusively determined the salience of issues through editorial gatekeeping, this function is now shared with algorithmically mediated citizen content. [18] supports this position, affirming that citizen journalists, empowered by digital tools, now exercise considerable influence in shaping public debates, thereby weakening the agenda-setting monopoly of conventional media institutions. However, a critical dimension observed in this study is that AI has not simply empowered citizen journalists but has also redefined journalistic practice itself, where visibility is algorithmically determined rather than institutionally or socially negotiated. This marks a decisive shift in the role of the journalist, professional or otherwise, as issue prominence is no longer solely based on editorial judgement but increasingly mediated through algorithmic criteria that are opaque to both producers and consumers.

This situation presents a paradox that is worth discussing. While AI appears to democratise agenda-setting by giving citizens direct entry into the news cycle, it simultaneously raises concerns about the integrity of the content being privileged. Respondents noted that many citizen reporters now consciously craft sensational headlines and visuals in order to exploit algorithmic tendencies that reward engagement. This aligns with the caution raised by [8], who argue that algorithms tend to elevate viral content regardless of its factual basis, a trend that risks undermining the democratic value of citizen journalism. The implication, therefore, is that while AI facilitates citizen empowerment, it also fosters an environment where virality can displace veracity. In the Nigerian context, this dilemma becomes sharper because citizen journalism often flourishes in spaces marked by weak institutional regulation and widespread misinformation, as highlighted in the studies of [12]. Applying Agenda-Setting Theory to this dynamic illustrates a theoretical shift: the power to set the agenda is no longer unidirectional from media to audience, but rather multi-layered, with algorithms acting as invisible editors. The findings thus suggest that AI has indeed redefined the practice of citizen journalism by altering the mechanisms of visibility and influence in ways that were unimaginable under the traditional Fourth Estate, while simultaneously raising new questions of bias, accountability and journalistic responsibility.

7.2 Research Objective Two: To Assess How AI Shapes the Credibility and Visibility of Citizen-Generated News Content

The findings also revealed that AI has introduced a dual effect on the credibility and visibility of citizen journalism. On one hand, algorithms grant unprecedented visibility to citizen-generated reports, particularly during national crises, protests, or elections. Respondents confirmed that reports from ordinary citizens often gain traction faster than those from established media houses, as social platforms amplify content that resonates emotionally with users. This reflects what [11] describe as the shifting centre of credibility, where citizens now perceive visibility as synonymous with truth. However, credibility in the journalistic sense has not always aligned with visibility, and this disjuncture is at the heart of the findings in this study. Credibility demands verifiability, accuracy and ethical sourcing, but visibility is algorithmically mediated by likes, shares and engagement metrics. The 2019 general elections in Nigeria provided a compelling case study, where fabricated reports and manipulated videos spread widely on WhatsApp and Facebook, despite official clarifications [12].

These findings lend weight to the concerns raised by [13], who noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation circulated more widely than official health advisories, largely because AI-driven recommendation systems privileged emotional engagement over accuracy. Applying the Agenda-Setting Theory here, it becomes evident that algorithms do not simply highlight issues for public attention but actively distort perceptions of credibility by privileging virality. This undermines the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists and creates a new dilemma where visibility does not guarantee reliability. Yet, the study equally highlighted that AI holds potential to enhance credibility if deployed with deliberate safeguards. Respondents cited examples of AI-powered verification tools that can detect image manipulation or authenticate videos, suggesting that technological interventions could strengthen the credibility of citizen journalism. This aligns with the findings of [6], who established that AI improved communication reliability in the health sector. If adapted for journalism, similar systems could authenticate citizen-generated content, thereby reinforcing credibility. However, participants stressed that such tools are not yet widely accessible to Nigerian citizen journalists, due to infrastructural limitations and a lack of digital literacy. [9] warn that algorithms often privilege dominant voices, meaning that marginalised communities may remain invisible despite producing credible reports. This further illustrates the uneven distribution of visibility and credibility in the Fifth Estate. Applying Agenda-Setting Theory here demonstrates how AI's influence complicates traditional notions of salience: issues may be thrust into prominence not because they are credible but because they are algorithmically optimised for attention. The study, therefore, concludes that while AI has elevated the visibility of citizen journalism, it has also blurred the boundary between what is credible and what is popular, leaving unresolved tensions that demand critical academic and policy interrogation.

7.3 Research Objective Three: To Identify the Challenges and Prospects of Integrating AI into Citizen Journalism within the Context of the Fifth Estate

The findings revealed that the integration of AI into citizen journalism presents both formidable challenges and promising prospects for democratic communication in Nigeria. Respondents consistently highlighted infrastructural,

ethical and accountability concerns as major challenges. Many noted that citizen journalists often lack the technical literacy and resources required to effectively use AI tools, thereby limiting the inclusivity of AI-driven citizen reporting. This finding reinforces the conclusions of [6], who observed that even professional institutions such as teaching hospitals in Nigeria struggle with consistent adoption of AI due to infrastructural deficits and knowledge gaps. Within journalism, these deficiencies mean that only a limited pool of citizen journalists can exploit the full potential of AI, while others remain excluded. This perpetuates the inequalities highlighted by [15], who assert that technological adoption in Nigeria often widens the gap between urban and rural populations. In terms of ethics, respondents expressed concern over the opacity of algorithmic systems, which often prioritise sensational content over factual reports, an issue previously noted by [8]. Such opacity undermines trust in citizen journalism and risks eroding its democratic promise.

Despite these challenges, the study also identified notable prospects. Respondents observed that AI could serve as a powerful enabler of fact-checking, verification and inclusivity in citizen journalism. Applications that allow real-time geotagging, translation across languages, and image authentication were mentioned as tools that could elevate citizen journalism to greater legitimacy. This aligns with the position of [11], who argue that empowering citizens with technological tools enhances their ability to shape national discourse. AI was also seen as a potential bridge for linguistic and geographical divides, with features such as automated translation enabling wider participation in national debates, as noted by [9]. Applying the Producership Theory of [17] provides a theoretical anchor for these findings. The theory posits that digital environments empower consumers to become co-producers of content, a process that AI directly supports by equipping ordinary citizens with tools to produce, authenticate and disseminate content in participatory media spaces. However, the findings also suggest that AI could undermine the collaborative ethos of producership if its algorithmic biases consistently privilege dominant voices and sensational content, thereby reducing the inclusivity of citizen journalism. Respondents argued that unless deliberate policies and ethical safeguards are put in place, AI integration risks reproducing the very hierarchies that the Fifth Estate was meant to dismantle. The study, therefore, concludes that AI integration in citizen journalism presents a double-edged sword: it holds the promise of expanding inclusivity and accuracy, yet it simultaneously threatens to exacerbate inequality and misinformation if left unregulated.

8. Conclusion

This study concludes that the influence of AI on citizen journalism in Nigeria is both transformative and problematic, as it has expanded participation and visibility in the Fifth Estate while simultaneously raising dilemmas of credibility, inclusivity and accountability, thereby demanding deliberate scholarly, professional and policy attention to safeguard its democratic promise.

9. Recommendations

- Communication scholars should carry out sustained research to interrogate the influence of AI on the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria.
- Social media platforms should design and deploy AI-powered verification tools that enhance the credibility and visibility of citizen-generated news content.
- Policymakers and media training institutions should provide regulatory frameworks and capacity-building programmes to address the challenges and maximise the prospects of integrating AI into citizen journalism within the context of the Fifth Estate.

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