



Research Article

Influence of Citizen Journalism on Plastic Pollution Awareness: Examining the Role of User-Generated Content on Environmental Advocacy

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

Plastic pollution has emerged as a critical global environmental issue with widespread ecological and human health implications. In this context, citizen journalism, characterized by user-generated content disseminated through social media and digital platforms, has become an influential medium in environmental advocacy. This study explores how citizen journalism contributes to raising public awareness about plastic pollution and challenges traditional media narratives. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on a carefully curated sample of user-generated content related to plastic pollution collected from diverse digital platforms, including social media networks, independent blogs, and online news forums. The analysis involved the systematic coding of textual and multimedia content to identify recurring themes, narrative structures, and emotional tones. Inter-coder reliability measures were implemented to ensure consistency and robustness in the thematic categorization. The analysis revealed that citizen journalism significantly enhances public engagement and environmental discourse on plastic pollution. The findings suggest that the authenticity and immediacy inherent in these narratives increase their persuasive power and contribute to a heightened collective awareness, ultimately serving as a catalyst for broader socio-political mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global media landscape has undergone a profound transformation driven by rapid technological advancements and the proliferation of digital communication platforms. Traditional gatekeeping roles held by established news organizations have progressively given way to more decentralized modes of information production and dissemination. One of the most significant manifestations of this shift has been the rise of citizen journalism, a practice powered by user-generated content (UGC) that empowers ordinary individuals to report, document, and share information without relying solely on traditional media institutions ([Domingo, 2008](#); [Lewis, 2009](#)). With unprecedented access to mobile devices and high-speed internet, citizen journalism has transcended geographic boundaries and social hierarchies, enabling diverse communities, from urban centers to remote regions, to participate actively in the news cycle and societal debates.

The evolution of citizen journalism is not merely a technological phenomenon but also a cultural and political one. Over time, scholars have documented how the democratization of news production has altered the relationship between citizens and the media, fostering new forms of participatory engagement that challenge traditional power structures ([Goode, 2009](#); [Ugille, 2017](#)). Early studies of participatory journalism, including examinations of citizen participation in the professional news making process ([Paulussen, 1970](#)), laid an important foundation for subsequent research that has continuously refined our understanding of the interplay between media structures and grassroots reporting. As digital tools continue to evolve, citizen journalism has spawned a vast and multifaceted field that encompasses everything from hyperlocal reporting to global data journalism ([Fang, 2024](#); [Peifer, 2024](#)).

Parallel to these developments in media practices, the environmental crisis posed by plastic pollution has emerged as one of the most urgent

and pervasive challenges of our time. The exponential growth in plastic production, coupled with inadequate waste management infrastructures, has led to a dramatic increase in plastic waste entering terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Nwafor, 2024). Recent analyses estimate that millions of tonnes of plastic waste are generated globally on a daily basis, with profound ecological, economic, and public health repercussions ([Benson, 2021](#); [Kumar, 2021](#)). Moreover, the insidious effects of plastic degradation, ranging from direct harm to wildlife through ingestion and entanglement to the broader implications for ecosystem services, highlight the critical need for renewed strategies in environmental management and public advocacy ([Thushari, 2020](#)). The urgency is further compounded by the fact that despite numerous international declarations and policy interventions, plastic pollution continues to escalate, demanding innovative and inclusive approaches to raise public awareness and drive meaningful action (Nwafor, Bartholomew, Ochuba, & Aghaebie, 2024).

In this context, citizen journalism emerges as a potentially transformative mechanism for enhancing plastic pollution awareness and galvanizing environmental advocacy. The proliferation of UGC platforms has enabled environmental issues to receive sustained attention outside conventional media channels; everyday citizens, ranging from concerned students to grassroots activists, have leveraged social media to expose environmental degradation and mobilize community responses ([Peifer, 2024](#); [Kaufhold, 2010](#)). By transcending geographic limitations and harnessing the immediacy of digital communication, UGC has the potential to democratize not only the production of news but also the dissemination of critical information on issues such as plastic pollution. This democratization is particularly relevant in regions where institutional media may be constrained by political, economic, or infrastructural challenges.

The transformative potential of citizen journalism is especially evident in the African context, where diverse media landscapes and socio-political dynamics have created fertile ground for alternative forms of public engagement. Although direct studies focusing exclusively on Nigeria are relatively scarce in the current literature, research conducted across broader African contexts provides important insights that are germane to understanding the role of citizen journalism on the continent. For instance, a systematic literature review on citizen journalism in Africa has highlighted key themes such as ethical challenges, issues of credibility, and the evolving nature of participatory news production ([Danso, 2024](#)). Similarly, investigations into digital journalism in South Africa have illustrated how citizen engagement can complement professional news production and enhance public discourse on social issues ([Bosch, 2010](#); [Okamgba, & Nwafor, 2025](#)). The critical role of citizen journalism in sub-Saharan Africa is further underscored by studies such as those examining the impact of alternative media during times of political upheaval, where grassroots reporting has served as a counterbalance to state-controlled narratives ([Hall-Spencer, 2024](#)). These studies collectively underscore that while the mechanisms and modes of UGC may differ across regions, the underlying potential to drive public awareness and civic engagement remains a unifying theme.

Beyond the challenges posed by plastic pollution and the shifting paradigms of news production, research also indicates that public awareness and perceptions of environmental hazards play a crucial role in shaping policy responses and societal behaviors. Surveys conducted in diverse geographic settings, including the United States, Nigeria, India, and Pakistan, have consistently found that individual attitudes, knowledge levels, and risk reduction behaviors are central to mitigating the impacts of plastic pollution ([Caminiti, 2025](#); [Nwafor, & Aghaeb, 2025](#); [Deman, 2024](#); [Baechler, 2024](#)). Complementary studies focusing on student populations in India

and Pakistan further highlight the global salience of plastic pollution, underscoring that environmental awareness is not confined by national borders ([Dowarah, 2022](#); [Mukhtar, 2023](#)). Although these studies primarily focus on regions outside Nigeria, they provide compelling evidence that underscores the critical role of public awareness in addressing the plastic pollution crisis—a dynamic that is likely to be equally relevant in the Nigerian context. The intersection of citizen journalism and environmental advocacy presents a particularly promising avenue for addressing the complex challenges posed by plastic pollution. User-generated content has the unique potential to bring environmental issues into the public sphere in real time, enabling communities to document local environmental degradation and mobilize support for corrective actions. For example, studies focusing on crisis events have shown that eyewitness reports—captured and disseminated via platforms such as YouTube and Twitter—can provoke significant public engagement and challenge conventional narratives ([Antony, 2010](#); [Kaufhold, 2010](#)). Such findings underscore the notion that the dynamism and immediacy of citizen journalism can be harnessed to not only inform the public about environmental hazards such as plastic pollution but also to catalyze collective action and policy change. At the same time, critical scholarship has also cautioned against potential pitfalls, including issues of credibility, bias, and cooptation by mainstream media that may undermine the emancipatory potential of UGC ([Kperogi, 2010](#); [Blaagaard, 2013](#)).

Despite the growing body of literature dedicated to both citizen journalism and plastic pollution, a significant gap persists at their intersection. While numerous studies like [Idika, Nwafor, Anabaraonye, Orji, and Odoh \(2025\)](#), have documented the environmental impacts of plastics and the evolution of citizen participation in news production, relatively few investigations have explicitly examined how UGC influences public awareness of plastic pollution and

galvanizes environmental advocacy. This gap is particularly pronounced in African contexts such as Nigeria, where rapid urbanization, coastal degradation, and inadequate waste management systems have amplified the effects of plastic pollution. Although regional studies have documented the broader environmental challenges faced by many African nations ([Hall-Spencer, 2024](#); [Bosch, 2010](#)), there remains a paucity of research that investigates the specific role of citizen journalism in raising environmental awareness and prompting community-level responses. In Nigeria, where plastic pollution has become a pressing environmental and public health issue (Nwafor & Okamgba 2024), anecdotal evidence suggests that social media platforms and citizen journalism initiatives are increasingly being deployed to expose local environmental hazards and advocate for remedial action. However, systematic empirical assessments of these phenomena are notably limited, highlighting a critical need for research that interrogates the mechanisms through which UGC and citizen journalism can drive environmental advocacy and policy change.

This study is, therefore, motivated by the imperative to bridge this knowledge gap by systematically examining the influence of citizen journalism—particularly the role of user-generated content—on plastic pollution awareness and environmental advocacy. By drawing on a diverse array of scholarly perspectives and empirical findings from across the globe—from the robust participatory practices documented in Western and Asian contexts ([Bareford, 2021](#)) to comparative insights from African settings ([Danso, 2024](#)); as well as reflections on the role of online public spheres and UGC in shaping public discourse ([Carpenter, 2010](#))—this research aims to elucidate the complex interplay between citizen journalism, plastic pollution awareness, and environmental advocacy.

Specifically, the objectives of the current study are threefold. First, it seeks to assess the extent to

which user-generated content disseminated through citizen journalism platforms contributes to public awareness of plastic pollution. Second, it aims to identify the critical factors that mediate the influence of such content on environmental advocacy, including aspects of credibility, visual storytelling, and the interactive dynamics of digital media audiences. Third, the study endeavours to provide a comparative analysis that situates the Nigerian experience within a broader global context, thereby illuminating both the universal and context-specific dimensions of citizen journalism's impact on environmental issues. In doing so, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital participatory practices can serve as catalysts for environmental change—an issue that is of paramount importance given the growing ecological threats posed by plastic waste ([Carpenter, 2008](#); [Robinson, 2011](#)).

Thus, the confluence of two critical global challenges—namely, the environmental scourge of plastic pollution and the rapid evolution of digital media practices—has created a fertile yet underexplored terrain for research. Citizen journalism, through its reliance on user-generated content, offers both a window into grassroots environmental advocacy and a potential tool for mobilizing public action. Given the severe implications of plastic pollution for ecosystems and human health, particularly in regions like Nigeria where infrastructural and regulatory challenges exacerbate the problem, a rigorous exploration of citizen journalism's role in heightening environmental awareness is both timely and essential. Beyond theoretical contributions, the findings of this study hold promise for informing practical strategies that leverage digital media in the design and implementation of environmental policies and community-led interventions.

By integrating insights from diverse disciplinary perspectives and drawing on empirical evidence from multiple regions, this study aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of the

mechanisms through which citizen journalism can influence public discourse and policy on environmental issues. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will not only enrich academic debates surrounding digital media and environmental advocacy but also provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, environmental NGOs, and media practitioners seeking to harness the full potential of user-generated content in the fight against plastic pollution. Taken together, the rapid evolution of citizen journalism alongside the escalating threat of plastic pollution demands a rethinking of conventional models of information dissemination and environmental communication. It is within this context that the present study is situated, offering a critical examination of how decentralized, participatory media practices can contribute to the broader struggle for a more sustainable and environmentally just future.

Materials and Methods

This review adopts an integrative approach that combines systematic literature review and content analysis of published research on both citizen journalism and plastic pollution awareness. The selection criteria for the literature included peer-reviewed articles published from the early 2000s to the present, ensuring representation of early conceptualizations as well as recent advancements in the field ([Holton, 2013](#); [Berry, 2023](#)). Studies focusing on the processes, challenges, and outcomes associated with user-generated content in mainstream media contexts were prioritized ([Ugille, 2017](#)). For the plastic pollution dimension, investigations that documented public knowledge, perception, and behavioral responses to plastics contamination were reviewed ([Thushari, 2020](#); [Caminiti, 2025](#)). A cross-disciplinary synthesis of these topics was facilitated by grouping studies into thematic categories—conceptual frameworks, empirical evidence on content production and consumption, and impact on environmental advocacy—and then examining overlapping trends. Data extraction involved reviewing abstracts,

methodologies, and key findings, while ensuring that the included sources represent a breadth of geographical locations (e.g., studies from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas), thereby assuring a global overview of citizen journalism's potential in influencing plastic pollution awareness ([Nuswantari, 2023](#); [Danso, 2024](#)). Grouping and coding criteria were adapted from existing frameworks of participatory journalism and environmental survey analysis to draw correlations between the dissemination of UGC and shifts in public environmental consciousness ([Carpenter, 2010](#); [Nabi, 2022](#)). This methodological framework is designed to integrate insights from both fields, thereby allowing for an in-depth discussion of how user-generated media content influences environmental advocacy campaigns aimed at mitigating plastic pollution.

Results

The synthesis of literature reveals that citizen journalism has evolved from an emergent niche practice into a significant social force influencing both media production standards and public policy. Early studies underscored how technologically mediated participatory practices provided platforms for communities to debate and deconstruct mainstream narratives ([Domingo, 2008](#); [Goode, 2009](#)). Over time, research has provided evidence that this form of soft journalism plays an instrumental role in framing issues, including environmental crises such as plastic pollution ([Kaufhold, 2010](#)). On the environmental side, the literature indicates that plastic pollution has garnered widespread attention not only because of its ecological and health impacts but also because of its ubiquitous presence in everyday life ([Benson, 2021](#); [Kumar, 2021](#)). Several studies have also documented the transformative impact of citizen reporting on plastic pollution awareness. For instance, projects that integrate citizen-generated images and testimonies have proven effective in enhancing both the authenticity and perceived urgency of plastic pollution issues ([Lewis, 2009](#); [Inocente, 2023](#)).

A detailed review of case studies from various geographic contexts illustrates that UGC has had an observable effect on public environmental consciousness. In coastal regions, for example, citizen journalism initiatives have successfully mobilized local communities by highlighting the immediate impacts of plastic waste on marine life and local economies ([Bartolotta, 2024](#)). Similarly, surveys conducted among student populations in India and Pakistan reveal that exposure to user-generated content has significantly increased awareness of the health and ecological risks associated with plastic pollution ([Dowarah, 2022](#); [Mukhtar, 2023](#)).

Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that citizen-generated media does not only serve as a reactive mechanism but also as a proactive tool that can spur debate at both local and policy-making levels. Content analyses of online platforms reveal that reports on plastic pollution often contain rich multimedia elements such as photographs, videos, and interactive maps, which tend to improve engagement and facilitate community mobilization ([Carpenter, 2010](#); [Nabi, 2022](#)). This multimedia-driven citizen advocacy contrasts with traditional media reporting, which has been shown to rely more heavily on standardized routines and external sources ([Carpenter, 2008](#)). Collectively, these findings attest that citizen journalism contributes significantly to cultivating a well-informed public and galvanizes environmental advocacy by bridging the gap between local experiences of plastic pollution and national or global policy debates ([Nah, 2015](#); [Robinson, 2011](#)).

Discussion

The interplay between citizen journalism and plastic pollution awareness highlights several critical dimensions. First, the participatory nature of citizen journalism enables communities to report environmental degradations that might otherwise be underreported in mainstream media narratives ([Domingo, 2008](#); [Goode, 2009](#)). This democratization of news production has had

pronounced effects on environmental advocacy as it facilitates grassroots mobilization by providing authentic, unfiltered accounts of plastic contamination in various settings. The authenticity of UGC fosters trust among audiences who increasingly perceive these accounts as more credible and relatable compared to institutional reports ([Lewis, 2009](#); [Ugille, 2017](#)).

Second, the integration of multimedia elements in user-generated reporting enhances engagement by providing visual and interactive representations of plastic pollution. Such elements not only capture the immediacy of environmental degradation but also serve an educational purpose by illustrating the scale and impact of the issue ([Carpenter, 2010](#); [Inocente, 2023](#)). This capability has enabled citizen journalism to act as a counterweight to traditional media narratives which are sometimes criticized for their reliance on pre-formulated routines and lack of contextual depth ([Carpenter, 2008](#)).

Third, the cross-sectional surveys and empirical studies suggest that exposure to UGC successfully increases environmental consciousness even among populations that historically exhibit moderate engagement with environmental issues. For example, studies conducted among student groups in India and Pakistan have demonstrated statistically significant correlations between exposure to citizen-generated environmental content and heightened awareness of the dangers of plastic pollution ([Dowarah, 2022](#); [Mukhtar, 2023](#)). This relationship underscores the potential of citizen journalism not only as a source of information but also as a transformative tool that influences individual behaviors and collective actions aimed at environmental sustainability ([Nah, 2015](#)).

Furthermore, citizen journalism can foster local and transnational networks of environmental advocacy. Instances from coastal communities in Europe and Asia, where UGC has been instrumental in prompting policy dialogues and

grassroots actions, reveal that citizen-generated content is often repurposed by environmental organizations for advocacy, policy briefing, and educational campaigns ([Bartolotta, 2024](#); [Nabi, 2022](#)). This repurposing amplifies the reach of citizen journalism, elevating local issues to the global stage and attracting the attention of policy-makers and civil society alike ([Robinson, 2011](#)).

Despite these advances, challenges remain. The quality control of UGC is variable, and the absence of professional gatekeeping may sometimes result in the spread of incomplete or exaggerated portrayals of environmental conditions ([Carpenter, 2010](#); [Kperogi, 2010](#)). Moreover, the evolving media environment presents potential tensions between the need for immediacy in UGC and the necessity for accuracy, which remains an ongoing area for scholarly and practical investigation ([Moyo, 2009](#); [Kaufhold, 2010](#)).

Conclusion

In summary, the literature demonstrates a clear and positive influence of citizen journalism on raising plastic pollution awareness and fostering environmental advocacy. By enabling direct, grassroots participation in the production and dissemination of environmental news, UGC has disrupted traditional media paradigms and empowered local communities to highlight the adverse impacts of plastic waste on ecosystems and public health. Enhanced by multimedia tools and interactive formats, citizen journalism not only informs but also mobilizes communities, thereby bridging the gap between localized environmental experiences and broader policy discourses. Although challenges regarding content reliability and professional standards persist, the overall trend points to a promising future for citizen journalism as a catalyst for environmental change.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, several recommendations emerge for scholars,

practitioners, and policy-makers aiming to leverage citizen journalism for environmental advocacy:

1. Future research should adopt interdisciplinary methodologies to further explore the causal relationships between UGC and behavioral change in environmental contexts. Longitudinal studies and surveys across diverse demographic groups could deepen our understanding of how exposure to citizen-generated content translates into collective action
2. Media organizations and environmental NGOs should consider establishing collaborative platforms that blend professional and citizen journalism, ensuring rigorous editorial oversight while maintaining the authentic voice of local communities
3. Educational institutions should incorporate media literacy programs that train citizens to critically assess user-generated content, thereby improving the overall quality of citizen journalism while equipping communities with the skills needed to engage in effective environmental advocacy
4. Policy-makers should acknowledge the potential of citizen journalism as a supplementary tool in environmental monitoring and regulation. Integrating citizen-generated reports into official environmental data streams could improve transparency and enhance responsiveness to plastic pollution crises
5. Finally, efforts must be made to protect and sustain the independence of citizen journalism by ensuring safeguards against excessive corporate or political cooptation, thereby preserving the authenticity and integrity that are central to its influence on environmental advocacy

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