

User-Generated Content (UGC) and News Production: The Evolution from Citizen Journalism to the New Media Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

With the evolution of media technologies and the rise in civic engagement awareness, the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) has profoundly driven systemic transformation in the field of news production. This paper focuses on the interactive evolution between UGC and news production, tracing its conceptual origins from the nascent stage of "citizen journalism," early practices, and presentation characteristics, while outlining the initial forms of UGC's integration into the news domain. Building upon this foundation, this paper focuses on analyzing the multidimensional impact of UGC on traditional news production models, thereby elucidating the diverse roles UGC plays within the new media ecosystem. At the same time, this paper directly addresses the practical challenges faced by UGC participation in news production and proposes corresponding solutions. This will assist researchers in identifying and exploring relevant research topics in future journalism studies, as well as selecting scientific research methods and approaches.

KEYWORDS

User-Generated Content (UGC); News production; Citizen journalists; New media ecosystem

1 Introduction: the rise of UGC and the era of news production transformation

User-generated content (UGC) is an emerging model for creating and organizing online information resources within the Web 2.0 environment ^[1]. Driven by the rapid iteration of information technology and the deepening digital revolution, social media has rapidly gained widespread adoption due to its convenience, broad reach, and diverse information dissemination channels. Ordinary users have transformed into active "content creators," making UGC the core force driving the evolution of the media ecosystem. This shift has had a particularly profound impact on the field of journalism: from the rise of citizen journalists to the present day, where UGC has become an indispensable part of breaking news coverage, its role has evolved into a key variable reshaping industry norms.

Although UGC has only been around for a few short years, it has already become a new hotspot for rapid growth in the future digital content industry ^[2]. It has broken away from the traditional linear news workflow, propelling news production toward "mass participation." This transformation has significantly enhanced the timeliness and diversity of news, but it has also given rise to severe challenges such as the proliferation of misinformation, disputes over copyright ownership, and breaches of journalistic ethics, which continue to undermine the credibility of the news industry.

Existing research has largely focused on the singular impact of UGC on news production (such as shifts in news sources or roles), lacking a systematic examination of its complete evolutionary trajectory from "citizen journalism" to the new media ecosystem. It also fails to develop a structured approach to addressing the challenges arising from this transformation. Based on this, this paper takes "UGC and News Production: From Citizen Journalism to the Evolution of the New Media Ecosystem" as its central theme. It aims to trace the initial forms of UGC's entry into the news field; analyze its multidimensional impact on traditional news production models; elucidate its diverse roles within the new media ecosystem; confront core challenges such as authenticity, copyright, and ethics; and propose corresponding solutions. This study seeks to clarify the interactive nature between user-generated content (UGC) and news production, aiming to provide theoretical insights into the transformative logic of the news industry in the new media era and offer recommendations for building a more dynamic and credible news ecosystem.

2 From citizen journalism's emergence: UGC's initial forays into journalism

2.1 The origin of the concept of citizen journalism

Citizen journalists refer to individuals who engage in journalism without being employed as news professionals ^[3]. They assume the role of reporters in covering and disseminating news events, though they are by no means professional journalists. Citizen journalism originated from the American civic movement of the 1990s and was introduced to China in the early 21st century, evolving into a significant form of news reporting through self-media platforms. Its core essence lies in the general public breaking through the barriers of professional media organizations and independently gathering, recording, disseminating, and commenting on news information through mass media and communication tools, thereby becoming non-professional participants in the news production and dissemination chain.

2.2 Presentation forms and characteristics of early UGC in news production

Early UGC primarily relied on text and static images as its core presentation formats due to technological limitations: Blogs serve as primary outlets, blending personal perspectives with journalistic attributes; online forums and comment sections function as hubs for gathering leads, forming collective information mosaics; simple videos and photography rely on platforms for dissemination, offering strong visual impact but often featuring crude production values. Early UGC exhibited distinct nascent characteristics: its on-the-ground and timely nature filled information gaps left by professional media; fragmented yet multi-perspective content broke away from single narratives; dissemination relied on mainstream media, positioning it as a “supplementary presence”; and its simplified production process without review raised concerns about authenticity.

3 The Impact and transformation of UGC on traditional news production models

The widespread penetration of user-generated content (UGC) has fundamentally disrupted its inherent patterns, triggering comprehensive and profound transformations across all dimensions—from news sources and production processes to the roles of practitioners.

3.1 Diversifying news sources

3.1.1 User-generated content has become a significant source of news leads

In the age of social media, the first point of contact for news stories is often no longer the hotline of news organizations, but rather user-generated reports on platforms like Weibo, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter). Sudden events such as natural disasters, accident scenes, and social incidents often see eyewitnesses at the scene emerge as the earliest content creators. Their first tweet, their first short video, often becomes a goldmine of news leads for media outlets.

3.1.2 Enhancing the diversity and timeliness of news content

UGC not only provides leads but also constitutes an extremely rich and vibrant source of news material. Traditional media, constrained by manpower, time, and geographical limitations, cannot capture every corner of the world. User-generated content (UGC) offers a ubiquitous lens: UGC materials encompass content from diverse regions, social strata, and perspectives, significantly enriching the dimensions and depth of reporting. During breaking events, UGC far surpasses professional media in timeliness. On-site users can capture and upload footage in real time. This “zero-delay” footage significantly enhances the speed and on-site impact of news reporting, achieving a shift from ‘TNT’ (Today's News Today) to “NNN” (Now News Now).

3.2 Reshaping the news production process

3.2.1 Breaking the traditional linear production process

UGC has disrupted the linear “gathering-editing-publishing” workflow, evolving into a cyclical “clue-publish-supplement-iterate” model. This process is no longer unidirectional but brims with feedback and interaction.

3.2.2 The dynamic impact of real-time interaction on news production

UGC has transformed news production from a one-time process into a continuous iteration. Following the release of news reports, user feedback is provided to media outlets in real time, prompting them to continuously update coverage, correct errors, and deepen their perspectives. This dynamic interactive relationship transforms news from a “static finished product” into a “dynamic process,” with the public participating in the co-creation process.

3.3 The transformation of journalists' roles

3.3.1 From information gatherers to content integrators and reviewers

Journalists have transitioned from information gatherers to content integrators and reviewers, with their core competencies shifting toward the identification, verification, and integration of user-generated content (UGC). Journalists are no longer the sole producers of content; they must integrate and curate fragmented information generated by internet users through a professional lens to produce comprehensive, in-depth reporting.

3.3.2 New professional competency requirements in the face of user-generated content

The evolving role of journalists demands new professional competencies: mastering digital verification tools like reverse image search, video metadata analysis, and geolocation verification to authenticate UGC and counter misinformation challenges; Engaging with UGC raises numerous ethical dilemmas, such as balancing reporting needs with subject privacy, securing and using permissions, and preventing secondary harm, demanding stronger ethical decision-making capabilities; journalists must also adeptly interact with sources and readers on social media to build trust, stimulate valuable UGC contributions, and integrate them into news production workflows.

4 The diverse roles of UGC in the new media ecosystem

4.1 Participants and drivers of news communication

Traditional news dissemination is constrained by limited speed and reach. User-generated content (UGC), characterized by universal participation, has reshaped communication logic. It transforms passive recipients into active disseminators, becoming the core driver of news diffusion. Through decentralization, high transmission speeds, diverse voices, varied media formats, and multi-channel dissemination methods, UGC delivers a high-quality user experience to modern audiences^[4].

4.1.1 Accelerating the speed and reach of news dissemination

UGC leverages the advantages of “instant production + social virality” to completely break down the temporal and spatial barriers of traditional news dissemination, enabling the “zero-delay, cross-regional” diffusion of news information. In sudden public incidents, this speed advantage is particularly pronounced. In terms of dissemination breadth, UGC leverages the “weak ties” networks of social media to achieve cross-circle penetration, while mainstream media also actively harnesses UGC to accelerate dissemination.

4.1.2 Stimulate public discussion on news events

UGC endows news dissemination with an “interactive dimension,” transforming one-way information delivery into multifaceted public discourse. This propels news events from being “media topics” to becoming “public issues.” Within the dissemination chain, users are not only producers of UGC but also initiators and participants in discussions. Moreover, the “secondary creation” nature of UGC further amplifies discussion intensity. This cycle of “UGC production—discussion fermentation—topic deepening” enables news dissemination to genuinely achieve public participation.

4.2 Innovative contributors to news content

Traditional news content, constrained by the agenda-setting and expressive paradigms of professional media, tends to exhibit homogenization and elitism. User-generated content (UGC), with its diverse perspectives and flexible expression, injects fresh vitality into news content, driving the transformation of content formats from standardized production to personalized innovation.

4.2.1 Bringing novel perspectives and unique forms of expression

UGC enriches content dimensions through “firsthand perspectives, niche viewpoints, and everyday angles,” while simultaneously creating more compelling modes of expression. In terms of perspective innovation, UGC brings “marginal voices” into the public eye: During the 2023 coverage of “rural revitalization,” traditional media primarily focused on policy implementation and industrial achievements. Meanwhile, rural teachers shared “daily vlogs of teaching in remote areas” on Bilibili, and returning youth documented their “live-streaming ventures selling agricultural products” on Douyin. These personal narratives revealed micro-level transformations in rural communities, resonating more emotionally than macro-level reporting. In terms of expression, UGC has broken through the traditional framework of “text plus images,” giving rise to diverse forms of news content.

4.2.2 Catering to the personalized needs of different audience segments

In the new media era, audience demands have shifted from mass information acquisition to personalized content consumption^[5]. While browsing websites, users engage in asking questions, providing answers, and bookmarking topics that interest them. UGC, with its segmented and refined production characteristics, can precisely capture users' behavioral paths and preference intentions. This enables it to anticipate user actions and deliver more tailored content, achieving personalized content for every individual. This approach fills the content gaps left by traditional news. For niche interest groups, UGC delivers specialized vertical content that precisely meets the information needs of specific audiences. For diverse age and identity groups, UGC also enables tailored content provision. This personalized content delivery elevates news from mass coverage to individualized service, enhancing the vitality of content within the new media ecosystem.

4.3 Oversight and counterbalancing forces in the media ecosystem

In the traditional media ecosystem, professional institutions hold gatekeeping authority over information dissemination, making them susceptible to incomplete or inaccurate reporting due to vested interests and agenda bias. UGC, with its decentralized nature, has become a vital force in monitoring media conduct and supplementing reporting perspectives, driving the ecosystem toward greater transparency and fairness.

4.3.1 Supplementing and overseeing mainstream media news coverage

UGC can both fill the “coverage gaps” of mainstream media and correct their reporting biases. In terms of content

supplementation, mainstream media face limitations in interview resources and geographical reach, making it difficult to cover grassroots or niche areas. User-generated content (UGC), however, can achieve “precise supplementation.” In terms of oversight and correction, UGC enables fact-checking. Additionally, UGC can serve as a watchdog for the media. When mainstream outlets focus their coverage on entertainment scandals, users can redirect public attention toward issues of greater societal importance by publishing UGC content such as “explanations of livelihood policies” and “updates on public incidents.”

4.3.2 Promoting transparency and fairness in the news industry

The widespread participation of UGC has compelled the news industry to standardize production processes and disclose source information. Simultaneously, it has exposed industry malpractices, driving the establishment of a more equitable communication order. In advancing industry transparency, UGC has exposed the “black box” aspects of news production to public scrutiny. Addressing persistent industry issues like clickbait headlines, users have collectively exposed such practices, driving the implementation of relevant regulatory measures. This cycle of “UGC oversight—industry rectification—ecosystem optimization” enables the news industry to continually improve through public participation, thereby enhancing its overall credibility.

5 Challenges and countermeasures in UGC participation in news production

5.1 Issues of content authenticity and credibility

5.1.1 Risks of misinformation dissemination and challenges in identification

The risks of misinformation in UGC manifest in multiple forms: First, deliberately fabricated rumors created to attract traffic or serve specific agendas; Second, unintentional misinformation spread by users due to incomplete information or misjudgment; Third, products of technical manipulation, such as deceptively convincing fake audio and video content created using deepfake technology. Its identification faces significant challenges: First, verification lags behind, with false information often spreading widely before it can be verified, creating a situation where “clarifications cannot outrun rumors.” Second, the ambiguity of information sources makes tracing the origin extremely difficult due to anonymous or semi-anonymous online accounts. Third, emotion takes precedence over facts. Information that aligns with preexisting public positions or sentiments—even when riddled with flaws—is more readily believed and disseminated, fueling the “post-truth” phenomenon.

5.1.2 Establish an effective content review and verification mechanism

To address the authenticity crisis, a multi-tiered, multidimensional review and verification mechanism must be established. First, social media platforms should increase their investment in leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and big data technologies to automatically identify and flag blatantly non-compliant, repeatedly appearing false content, thereby reducing its spread at the source. Second, professional media outlets must make the verification of UGC a mandatory step in news production. Journalists should master “digital forensics” skills to ensure every piece of UGC used undergoes rigorous verification. Finally, the power of the broader online community should be encouraged and harnessed by opening platforms to gather leads and collectively discern the authenticity of information. At the same time, we collaborate with professional third-party fact-checking organizations to promptly release verification reports.

5.2 Copyright and ethical dilemmas

5.2.1 UGC copyright ownership and usage disputes

When media outlets use user-generated photos or videos without explicit authorization, it often leads to copyright disputes. Do users implicitly relinquish their copyright? How should media outlets properly obtain authorization and provide reasonable compensation? These issues often remain ambiguous in practice. Countermeasures include: First, establishing clear authorization agreements, whereby media outlets must obtain user consent through standardized, electronic processes before utilizing UGC. Second, exploring reasonable compensation mechanisms—such as paid usage, source attribution, and traffic revenue sharing—to respect users' intellectual property rights.

5.2.2 New challenges for journalism ethics in the new media environment

UGC has introduced numerous new issues that traditional ethical frameworks struggle to address:

Unedited dissemination of on-site videos containing information such as passersby's faces and license plates may infringe upon personal privacy;

Excessive dissemination of graphic, violent disaster scenes may inflict secondary psychological trauma on victims and their families;

In emergency situations, it is difficult or even impossible for videographers to obtain consent from those being filmed.

To address these challenges, media organizations must develop specialized ethical guidelines for user-generated

content (UGC), adhere to the principle of “minimum harm,” apply technical processing (such as pixelation or blurring) to potentially harmful content, and carefully balance public interest with individual rights.

5.3 Pathways to enhancing the quality of user-generated content news production

5.3.1 Strengthen training and education for citizen journalists

Governments, schools, media outlets, and social organizations should collaborate to implement nationwide media literacy education. Through diverse formats, the public should be taught how to: identify misinformation; responsibly produce and share content; understand fundamental journalistic ethics and legal standards; and master basic content production skills. Upholding the principle that “content is king” and cultivating more responsible citizen journalists to produce high-quality content represents a long-term strategy for purifying the UGC ecosystem at its source.

5.3.2 Exploring collaborative models between media and the public

Media organizations should proactively open their production processes. Potential models to explore include:

Solicit news leads, public topics, and reporting angles online to engage the public in news planning ;

For large-scale investigative reports or data journalism projects, subcontract portions of information gathering and data organization to the broader online community, harnessing collective effort to accomplish tasks beyond the capacity of individual media outlets ;

Establish long-term relationships with seasoned enthusiasts across regions and fields, developing them into semi-professional correspondents who provide high-quality, credible localized and specialized information.

6 Conclusion

The rise of UGC represents a profound structural transformation that has reshaped the production logic, dissemination pathways, and industry ecosystem of news. In the new media landscape of an information society where everyone is a media outlet, the news ecosystem is not about UGC replacing traditional journalism or the latter rejecting the former, but rather a “convergence ecosystem” where the two complement each other's strengths. This trend manifests in workflow processes, where the discovery, verification, integration, and distribution of UGC will become institutionalized and professionalized as core editorial functions. AI tools will be widely deployed for UGC screening and authenticity verification to enhance efficiency. In terms of roles, professional media will focus on core functions like investigative reporting and in-depth analysis, while UGC leverages its strengths in on-the-ground eyewitness accounts and diverse perspectives. This will form a collaborative model where “UGC provides raw material and professional media performs deep processing,” resulting in news products that take on a multi-dimensional, integrated form. Building this ecosystem requires multi-stakeholder collaboration: professional media must uphold verification standards and maintain open production processes; platforms should refine their review mechanisms; the public should transition from “impulsive sharers” to rational participants through media literacy education; and the industry must establish appropriate norms and regulations, clarifying standards for UGC copyright and ethics while providing institutional safeguards. Ultimately, the healthy development of journalism in the UGC era will depend on a mutual convergence: professional journalism moving toward openness and integration, while citizen journalism evolves toward rationality and responsibility. Only in this way can we collaboratively build a truly more dynamic, inclusive, and credible new media news ecosystem, enabling the technology-empowered journalism industry to better fulfill its sacred mission of serving the public interest.

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