

# Citizen Journalism and Health Communication in Pandemics' Prevention and Control



Gregory Obinna Ugbo, Chinonye Faith Chinedu-Okeke,  
and Jude Nwakpoke Ogbodo

**Abstract** Citizen journalism has introduced new ways of communicating and engaging the public. It has further created a shift in technology that enabled individuals to create and access more news faster than before. Thus, communicating health crisis no longer depends on the use of conventional media. The disruption in the communication landscape means that more people are now more conversant with the use of social media to create or access news. Citizen journalism has unlocked the information gateway and made pandemic reporting more viral and instantaneous, although with some shortcomings. Thus, news about the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic is readily available on the Internet and social media. This chapter, therefore, examines the impact of citizen journalism and health communication in pandemics' prevention and control. Underpinned by the Health Belief Model and Theory of Reasoned Action, the chapter offers an insight into how citizen journalism could be effectively employed to communicate the prevention and control of pandemics. Relevant literature was systematically reviewed, and it shows that access to pandemic messages no longer follows the conventional process of news making and consumption as many people now actively albeit, unprofessionally, participate in these processes. However, the dangers of such unprofessional practice are admitted.

**Keywords** Citizen journalism · Health communication · Pandemics · Prevention · Control · COVID-19

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G. O. Ugbo (✉)

Department of Mass Communication, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria  
e-mail: [gregory.ugbo@fuoye.edu.ng](mailto:gregory.ugbo@fuoye.edu.ng)

C. F. Chinedu-Okeke

Mass Communication Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria  
e-mail: [cf.chinedu-okeke@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cf.chinedu-okeke@unizik.edu.ng)

J. N. Ogbodo

Mass Communication Department, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria  
e-mail: [jude.ogbodo@ebisu.edu.ng](mailto:jude.ogbodo@ebisu.edu.ng)

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## Introduction

Communication plays critical roles during crises situations. The Internet and technology being the key enablers of communication in this digital age have opened up the communication space and by extension, decentralised, and democratised the space for more citizens' engagements and interactions. The advancements in the Internet and communication technologies in particular have empowered people to become information vendors. At disease onsets, there are usually high levels of uncertainties and vagueness around the facts about the outbreak (Allgaier and Svalastog 2015). In such situations, people naturally seek information that will ameliorate their anxieties and clear confusion on the severity of the disease or otherwise and to devise the best possible survival strategies. Consequently, examining the nexus of Citizen Journalism and Health Communication during pandemics such as the COVID-19 is very expedient in today's information proliferation and pervasiveness. This chapter, therefore, attempts to examine the roles of citizen journalism in communicating health messages that are appropriate in reducing hysteria and increasing the opportunities for possible control and prevention of pandemics. The chapter is designed to raise important discourses on journalism, health communication, and disease control; the interface of Citizen Journalism and Health Communication, and recognise the relationship as both functional and dysfunctional; the interplay of Citizen Journalism and communication during pandemics within some theoretical and practical contexts; and the importance of effectively applying the tenets of Citizen Journalism in managing health crises.

### *The Concept of Citizen Journalism: What Is Journalism?*

There is no generally acceptable definition of the term "journalism". However, as Ugbo (2020) explains, "despite the lexical differences in definition, journalism as a concept cannot be said to be fluid because there is a convergence in the meaning ascribed to it" (61). From the etymological perspective, the word 'journalism' is derived from the Latin word "diurnalis" which means "daily register or a diary"—a book that documents daily events. Ugbo (2020) further opines that journalism could be likened to the daily bookkeeping practice undertaken by individuals in businesses. Each daily transaction is carefully recorded, and this is the same way the business of journalism as a profession operates. Therefore, journalism is the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information using the mass media (Chinedu-Okeke and Uzochukwu 2020). "As a profession, daily events are deliberately sourced, processed, and disseminated to the general public to cater to their informational needs or serve other purposes as may be intended or otherwise" (Ugbo 2020, p. 61). In the words of Chandler and Munday (2019), journalism is an occupation or the process of gathering, writing, editing, reporting, photographing or broadcasting of current events on a particular subject to a wider audience through the

print, broadcast, or digital media. Thus, there is journalism for the print (newspaper, magazine), broadcast (radio, television, and cinema), or new media (Internet-based websites, blogs, phones, and now, social media).

Journalism can be distinguished from other reporting activities through different characteristics and principles. Whether broadcast or print, the journalist follows the same principles (timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, oddity, and human interest) and is guided by the same determinants/values (objectivity, accuracy, balance, currency, brevity, conciseness, and clarity) in gathering news materials. What makes one form of journalism different from another is determined by their adaptation of the principles to reflect the specific features of a particular medium in the reporting of an event (Subin 2015).

In recent times, the proliferation of the Internet and smartphones has revolutionised and redefined the scope and practice of journalism all over the world (Gilardi 2016). This change has created a shift in the creation and consumption of media messages, as people increasingly create and consume news through e-readers, smartphones, and other personal information technological devices, as opposed to the traditional forms via the newspapers, magazines, radios, or television.

## ***Forms of Journalism***

Journalism in this context is classified according to the media of communication. They are:

*Print journalism:* This is the form of journalism that is presented in print format. It could be a news report in form of written text or photograph that has been edited, packaged, and published in newspapers and magazines. The publication could be daily, weekly, bi-weekly, or periodical. According to the normative theories of the press, print journalism is meant to offer objective news and pluralistic opinions related to current social events. However, the significant decrease in the circulation of hard copies of newspapers and magazines evidently shows that people presently read the print version of newspapers and magazines less than in the past (Zeng et al. 2019).

*Broadcast journalism:* It is the field of news that disseminates its messages through the broadcast or electronic media like radio, television, and the World Wide Web using on-air, cable, and Internet devices. Such media disperse pictures (static and moving), visual text, and sounds. Broadcast journalism is the gathering and reporting of news events to the public via radio or television. The advent of the Internet has irrevocably changed the broadcast journalism practice all over the world (Taylor 2014).

*Online journalism:* Online journalism also known as digital journalism is a trendy form of journalism where news stories are disseminated via news websites and other Internet-enabled platforms. The essential contents of online journalism are presented in the form of text, audio, video, or interactive form, and disseminated through information and communication technologies (Jemielniak and Przegalinska 2020).

Using the new media has become a part of daily life especially for teenagers and youths. This recent form of journalism has democratised the process of journalism which was previously controlled by the traditional mass media (Wall 2015). News content of online journalism is mostly contributed by citizens on user-generated content sites, thus the emergence of citizen journalism that encourages the active participation of people who are not trained journalists or professionals in the process of creating and disseminating information.

### ***Citizen Journalism Defined***

The widespread and frequent use of social media has drastically changed the nature of journalistic reporting, resulting in the emergence of a new form of journalism known as “citizen journalism”. Citizen journalism, also referred to as participatory journalism, is an “alternative and activist” (Radsch 2013, p. 2) form of journalism where citizens or general public play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news or information (Wall 2015).

The underlying principle of citizen journalism is that ordinary people, who are not professionals, can be the main creators and distributors of news contents (Seong-Jae 2016). The advent of new media, such as online news websites and social networking sites, in addition to the increasing popularity of smartphones, has made citizen journalism more viable across the globe (Gilardi 2016). Citizen journalism, which introduced new ways of communicating and engaging the public, has created a shift in technology that enables individuals to create and access more news than before and at a faster rate (Zeng et al. 2019). Citizens frequently report breaking news more quickly than professional reporters. Citizen journalists may be activists within the communities they write about, but there are some criticisms (as would be discussed in subsequent sections of this paper) from professional journalists that accused proponents of citizen journalism of abandoning the primary goals of objectivity and accuracy in reporting thereby lacking in quality and content (Seong-Jae 2016).

### ***Enablers of Citizen Journalism***

As stated earlier, the advent of the Internet and rapid advancement in technologies stirred up a paradigm shift in the conventional journalistic styles of news sourcing, reporting, and general content creation. These shifts expanded the available information production and flow channels and empowered citizens with the slightest knowledge of technology to create their own content. Thus, the Internet and the associated media are the primary enablers of citizen journalism. Specifically, social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Blogs, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WeChat, and WhatsApp encourage and facilitate citizens’ engagements with other citizens who participate in creating news content through writing,

commenting, liking, linking, and sharing of such information. The widespread and frequent use of social media in recent years has created a number of opportunities and challenges for *health* and *risk communication*. There are many ways to use social media in healthcare, including promoting awareness, encouraging patient engagement, and sharing accurate health messages. Some of these enablers are discussed below:

*Facebook* as a social network site has proved a critical enabler of citizen journalism in all ramifications. It is among the most popular social networking sites (Miller 2019; Facebook Reports First Quarter 2021 Results; Hu 2016) with unlimited flexibility for content creation and dissemination of different forms of communication text (audio-visual and written texts). All it takes is access to the Internet and Internet-enabled devices for citizens to create profiles and begin an unfettered use of the platform as desired. The flexible feature of Facebook has empowered people to build a community and bring the world closer together. However, the unlimited access that Facebook provides offers functional and dysfunctional opportunities especially in moments of uncertainties such as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the positive side, people get to report “on-the-spot” happenings and most often set agenda for reportage for the mainstream media. On the flip side, the swiftness of information dissemination and the gateless nature of the platform has made it one of the conduits for fake news and misinformation flow as most information circulated is uncensored and/or unverified. In recent times, Facebook launched certain algorithms to detect and filter out false or misleading content (Bakshy et al. 2015).

*YouTube* is another key enabler of citizen journalism. It is a social networking site that supports the sharing of videos (Allgaier 2019). The popularity of YouTube is explained by the active engagement of citizens on the platform. According to BBC News (2016), YouTube content creators globally upload over 100 h of content per minute and its users watch more than one billion hours of videos each day. Like Facebook, YouTube offers unfettered access to citizens to disseminate and consume video content within the privacy policy and terms of service regulating the platform. The enormous popularity of *YouTube* makes it a choice tool for nearly every healthcare marketing plan (Gilliland 2018). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, YouTube has remained a veritable platform where health professionals share information and citizens' access authoritative health and news information relevant to the pandemic.

*Weblogs* commonly referred to as “blog” is an online information website. It is a personal online space where citizens discuss subjects of common interest (Blood 2000). It is also an important enabler of citizen journalism. The emergence and growth of blogs in the late 1990s coincided with the advent of web publishing tools that facilitated the posting of content by non-technical or professional users who may not necessarily be computer or technologically savvy (Mutum and Wang 2010). Blogs are valuable platforms that serve a range of surveillance functions through the activities of ordinary citizens. As such, people rely on blogs for a range of information including disease outbreaks as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to being used to follow illness outbreaks in real-time, blogs and microblogs

have offered a means for understanding public perceptions of health and risk-related issues including medical controversies (Stephen 2017).

*Twitter* is a popular social networking site that allows users to disseminate information in 140 characters of text called tweets (Kim and Valente 2021). Its primary purpose is to connect and allow people share their thoughts with a large audience. However, the nature of Twitter provides the public with a way to ask questions directly, allowing public health professionals to provide information on a certain health issue.

*Instagram* is a free mobile check-in application for online photo-sharing and social networking. Instagram allows users to edit and upload photos and short videos through a mobile app. The number of SNS posts in photo form has been dramatically increased (Kim and Kim 2020). Public health authorities are not the exception, and this study explored the interaction of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), one of the representative public health authorities in Nigeria, with the public through photos on Instagram.

### ***The Concept of Health Communication***

The term “health communication” combines two concepts, “health” and “communication”. On the one hand, “Health” in its simplest form is the general state of well-being of the body. “Communication” on the other hand, is the exchange of information, ideas, opinions, values, etc. between individuals or groups. Health communication, going by the definitions, connotes the idea of exchanging information, ideas, opinions, values, etc. that are relevant to health (Schiavo 2014; The Rural Health Information Hub 2018). In other words, it involves producing, packaging, and disseminating health information that will enable individuals, groups, and communities to develop the requisite knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and behaviours for a positive healthy living. The Rural Health Information Hub (2018) explains that health communication is a domain of communication and health care processes that are designed to guide, mold, and influence individuals or communities to make informed health decisions that improve their health and living conditions. As a communicative act, health communication employs the various conventional channels of communication to reach out to the intended audience. Health communication in essence is enabled by the channels of mass communication. Thus, it could be delivered through print or written channels such as posters, newspapers, magazines, billboards, pamphlets, handbills, brochures, etc. It could also be delivered through oral/verbal means including oral face-to-face contact, radio and television campaigns or jingles and via other electronic means including the Internet and social media and, or a combination of community-based approach and social marketing (Holmes 2008). The fundamental intent of health communication is to design health messages that empower and inspire people to make choices rooted in sound knowledge and result in positive changes in health behaviours and attitudes. The Rural Health Information Hub (2018) explains that health communication instills the

desired changes in individual and community health by creating such knowledge and awareness that increase people's risk perception; reinforce acceptable positive behaviours; influence social norms; increase the level of available support and health services; and empower individuals to adopt health behaviours that improve their health conditions.

Health communication reinforces the link between Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of behavioural change communication. In other words, individuals, through such communication, are made more knowledgeable about certain health conditions and risk behaviours that must be watched for their safety and the safety of the entire community. Such knowledge building inspires and motivates individuals to develop positive attitudes that translate into the desired health practices for their wellbeing. Hence, Schiavo (2014, p. 5) explains that health communication aims to "engage, empower, and influence individuals and communities" to adopt a positive attitude to health. It is vital in communicating issues around disease prevention, control, and general wellbeing. To this end, health communication has generally and majorly focused on areas of disease prevention and control through health promotion. It predominantly aims at awareness creation for the adoption of healthy behavioural practices and to engender possible positive attitudinal changes. It is important to note that health communication is all encompassing as it touches on all concerned critical stakeholders in the health venture. As such, it is a two-way symmetrical approach to communication where all stakeholders are equal partners in the communicative acts leading to health. Schiavo (2014) maintains that health communication programme assumes a cyclical dimension when involving the people (target group), policymakers and professionals, and the healthcare providers. While it places responsibility on the people to adopt and sustain healthy behaviours, it behooves the policymakers and professionals to make and implement new policies and practices according to the exigencies of the moment, and health care providers to become more sensitive and develop the cultural competence needed in the culturally variant health service delivery systems.

### ***Health Communication in Disease Outbreak and Prevention***

Risk perception and general attitudes towards disease outbreak are largely influenced by belief systems and some local dynamics (Infanti et al. 2013; Schiavo 2014), especially in African settings (Ali 2020). As hinted earlier, these belief systems interfere with any planned health intervention programmes towards controlling or preventing outbreaks. Unarguably, emerging infectious diseases bring about critical dynamics in health behaviours and practices. At the stage of disease outbreak, there is usually an alteration in the status quo around the interpersonal relationship and certain cultural practices such as was experienced in the COVID-19 "new normal". In such circumstances, there is a heightened tension, hysteria, and confusion as was witnessed during the Ebola outbreaks particularly in Nigeria (Allgaier and Svalastog 2015). Part of the measures often deployed towards controlling and preventing the

infectious disease is communication that helps to provide clear information about the disease. However, as noted by Holmes (2008), communication experts and health care providers largely focus on one-way transmission of information relating to the disease without necessarily taking into cognizance the group and individual dynamics that at the same time influence individual's or groups' risk perception. Significantly, scholars have noted that individuals that make up the communities are not homogenous and must be approached as such (Kreuter and McClure 2004; Allgaier and Svalastog 2015). Each individual approaches the communicated messages with their unique characteristics from a personal cultural background, experiences, and disposition. These constitute what Allgaier and Svalastog (2015) described as "local context". Culture in particular goes a long way in shaping individual's and group's health behaviour and practices (Kreuter and McClure 2004). Hence, health communication must be tailored to factor in these contextual nuances. It must be target-oriented and designed in a way that it would respond to local contexts.

Effective health communication, therefore, needs to consider the nuances that touch on the implicit assumptions about the nature of the disease (which usually emanate from individual personal characteristics) and the best strategies towards addressing them. Although conspiracy theorists come up with many unscientific claims about the sources of emerging infections such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Banko 2020), the ability of the public to accept or reject such claims can be significantly shaped by the dominant narratives across various media channels. As many people surf the Internet for news, citizen journalism can capitalise on the dwindling fortunes of the legacy media to establish itself as the preferred destination by churning out only the real news that promotes public's belief in health systems. This would be further explained theoretically in the next section. Using the Nigerian example within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are public assumptions that are embedded in culture, politics, and religion. One of such assumptions is that the virus is not harmful to Africans as it cannot thrive under the African hot weather. Others perceived it as a "whiteman's" invention—Bioweapon (Banko 2020)—to control the teeming Nigerian/Black population, and in other instances, for economic gains—that is, to market vaccines that have already been produced as an antidote to the "laboratory invention". These assumptions implicitly blurred the line of accurate epidemiological knowledge that could unmask the mystery of the virus for a more effective treatment, prevention, and control. The assumptions at the same time diminished the people's risk perceptions and limited the level of compliance to the recommended safety measures. Situations like this could offer a better explanation for cases of defiance and resistance from the public like the low-vaccine uptake (Abraham 2011). The attitude of the Muslim-dominated Northern Nigerians towards polio and general vaccinations, for instance, exemplifies this point. However, the allegations of criminal conspiracies between politicians, health agencies, and the pharmaceutical companies to create and sustain disease outbreak and spread for economic gains could also be clear indications or signs of communication gaps or failures (Abraham 2011).

The most effective application of health communication in disease prevention and control adopts the community-centred prevention approach undertaken at the



individual, group, organisational, community, and multiple levels (Schiavo 2014; Infanti et al. 2013). Such disease preventive and control measures that are emphasised for health promotion include: adequate health hygiene (regular hand washing), regular physical exercise, maintaining healthy weight, good nutrition, responsible sexual behaviour, etc. To effectively communicate these measures requires good communication skills (Schiavo 2014). This is expedient because effective health communication bridges the gap between expected and achieved quality in health care with the concerned stakeholders including the government, health caregivers, patients and their families, and health care organisations.

## **Theories of Health Communication: A Focus on the Health Belief Model and Theory of Reasoned Action**

There are several relevant theories that have been postulated to interpret health communication scenarios. They include, but are not limited to the Health Belief Model (HBM), Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), Diffusion of Innovations, Social Cognitive, and Social Learning theories (Jones et al. 2015; Marco 2010). For the purpose of this chapter, we are focusing on HBM and TRA which were considered more appropriate to this discourse. The HBM postulates that individuals are more likely

to take action to prevent illness if they regard themselves as susceptible to a condition (perceived susceptibility), if they believe it would have potentially serious consequences (perceived severity), if they believe that a particular course of action available to them would reduce the susceptibility or severity or lead to other positive outcomes (perceived benefits), and if they perceive few negative attributes related to the health action (perceived barriers). (Jones et al. 2015, p. 566)

Health Belief Model also posits that certain cues, such as a person's unique local dynamics, can influence the final action such a person takes (Champion and Skinner 2008). The cues that call one to action can be situated within one's internal or external environment, and they can range from experiencing symptoms of the illness (virus) to an individual's exposure to awareness campaigns aimed at managing it (Bish and Michie 2010).

Due to some traces of ambiguity that tend to interrogate its applicability, scholars have called for variable ordering of the HBM (Jones et al. 2015). In the first instance, the variables might have comparable impacts on health outcomes. Through the HBM constructs, messages are assumed to shape human behaviour through one or more channels. In the context of this discourse, these channels represent the Internet and social media platforms through which citizen journalists communicate health crises. The HBM has also been referred to as parallel mediation (Jones et al. 2015) which can be conceptualised in terms of how the independent variable such as exposure to COVID-19 campaign impacts on the dependent variable (e.g., people's behaviour towards vaccines/facemasks/sanitiser/handwashing/social distancing).

The second variable ordering assumes that the HBM might function as a causal chain or what Hayes (2012) described as serial mediation. Expanding this, Jones et al. (2015) noted for instance, that exposure to a campaign may possibly raise self-efficacy, while self-efficacy can influence the perceived barriers to the success of such campaign. In turn, the perceived barriers may likely predict people's behaviour or attitude towards the campaign. That is, *campaign exposure* → *self-efficacy* → *perceived barriers* → *behaviour* (Hayes 2012; Jones et al. 2015).

The third variable is the moderated mediation model which posits that an aspect of the HBM constructs serves as a moderator influencing others (Hayes 2012). In line with this, Champion and Skinner (2008) contend that the supposed threat and perceived severity could actually moderate the effects of other variables. Specifically, Champion and Skinner (2008) argued that increased severity is needed before susceptibility can significantly predict human behaviour. They further proposed that “perceived benefits” and “perceived barriers” might better predict behaviour when threat perception is higher. The foregoing has demonstrated the relevance of HBM to this discourse. As such this chapter draws on what works, by extending this discourse to assessing the critical roles of citizen journalism in the COVID-19 health crisis and what this portends for communicating health crisis in the future.

Indeed, a theoretical enquiry into this subject matter (see Nah et al. 2017) has found that citizen journalism has positive impacts on people's civic participation, which in the instance of this discourse can be measured via their adherence to health and safety protocols put in place to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This understanding can be interpreted by behavioural change models, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) which suggests that “improvements to attitudes and perceptions, in this case through the use of . . . citizen journalism, will result in a change of behaviour” (Nah et al. 2017, p. 65).

The main aim of TRA is to clarify the connections between attitude and behavioural intention. Elaborating on the significance of this theory, Marco (2010) insisted that behavioural intention is associated with beliefs. Put more succinctly, Marco argues that behavioural changes may likely emerge due to changes in attitude and/or subjective norms about such mannerism. In health communication milieu, citizen journalism can intervene in mobilising the citizenry into taking more precautionary measures against pandemic. Modifying human behaviours, especially those that stem from cultural norms and belief systems can be a herculean task. Nonetheless, citizen journalism can constructively contribute to making the people more conscious of their health and how to protect others by ensuring that scientifically-proven facts about the pandemic dominate the narratives.

### ***Impacts of Citizen Journalism on Pandemic Control and Prevention***

For emphasis, the concept of citizen journalism simply describes how ordinary people play “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and

disseminating news and information” through, especially, the social media platforms (Bowman and Willis 2003, p. 9). In social media platforms, information sharing and opinions are democratised. This democratisation of the communication platforms gives voices to the voiceless and creates an avenue for freedom of expression; something that is missing in the mainstream media where only those with privileged affordances dominate the communication space.

Studies into the relationship between citizen journalism and health communication are by all indications sparse; however, they make strong contribution to scholarship. For instance, Bella (2011) extensively explored citizen journalism practice aimed at increasing citizens' response to humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of the Sudan peninsula. The study established a strong correlation for the use of citizen journalism for creating awareness and promoting people's response to humanitarian crisis that engulfed the region. Nah et al. (2017) also found that citizen journalism has a direct effect on civic participation and people's behavioural intentions using the theory of reasoned action. In the context of this discourse, citizen journalism is considered as a mobilisation tool for the masses to be aware of the dangers of health crisis and to take action in order to protect themselves and others. This is because citizen journalism can influence people's attitudes and perceptions.

Critics would quickly point at the negative impacts of citizen journalism in spreading falsehood during health crises which often result in unintended negative health impacts (Chou et al. 2009). Unarguably, false information peddled by citizen journalists could create more hysteria, cause panic purchases, and induce the gullible public to undertake unprescribed and undiagnosed medical regimens (Liu et al. 2020). In fact, such “informational virus” as Allgaier and Svalastog (2015, p. 497) described it, keep “mutating, multiplying, and adapting to new contexts” and interferes with the fight against the actual “biological viruses”. Indeed, during the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Director-General of WHO, Tedros Ghebreyesus warned that “we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic”—a new concept that describes the excessive spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about the virus (Ogbodo et al. 2020). Moyo (2009) elaborates on this fact by maintaining that “in a [health] crisis situation. . . , citizen journalism could worsen things by spreading untruths and half-truths which could lead to panic and disorder” (p. 12). This was particularly the case during the Ebola health crisis in 2014 when fake news peddlers pushed many to drink and/or bathe with salt as a preventive measure against the virus in Nigeria. This resulted in some health complications for many before they realised it was fake news. The same has been the case since the COVID-19 outbreak which has seen a spike in online fake news. There were instances of fake news in Nigeria such as the one that linked COVID-19 to a Western creation with the sinister intention to downsize the African population. This was also the general assumption about HIV/AIDS as was propagated in social media. Social media was also used to impress it upon Nigerians in particular that COVID-19 could not survive under hot weather like the African weather or that Africans have stronger body immunity that is resistant to such viruses. This largely accounted for the general belief by some top politicians and ordinary Nigerians that there is no COVID-19 in Nigeria, and by the time of this research, there was limited

opportunity and support for COVID-19 testing in Nigerian states like Benue, Cross-River, and Kogi (Onyeji 2020). While fake news is created or promoted mainly by bloggers in order to generate traffic on their sites, the effects can be incalculable in the long run if citizen journalists fail to use their channels more constructively.

However, about the functional impact of citizen journalism, useful warning signs were propagated by citizen journalists through social media and the Internet; here lies the forewarning function of citizen journalists (Liu et al. 2020). This forewarning function plays a critical role in raising an alert about dangers before they are even reported by the mainstream media. As noted by scholars (Allgaier and Svalastog 2015; Liu et al. 2020), there is usually a time lag between event development and the actual reporting arising from the inherent journalistic bureaucracy (including the gatekeeping processes) which requires the journalists and the media at large to decide a newsworthy event to be reported, investigate the event, source all the relevant information, authenticate for accuracy before finally reporting (Liu et al. 2020). The gateless nature of the Internet and social media has made citizen journalism spontaneous and has particularly enabled the widespread preventive measures against emerging infectious diseases including the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, during the Ebola outbreak in parts of Africa in 2014, news about the virus spread on social media through the help of citizen journalists, leaving many with useful tips about how to protect themselves against the pandemic. User-Generated-Content (UGC) emerged from such online debates/campaigns about the virus and this equally served as a platform for monitoring audience feedback. According to Mano and Milton (2016), audience feedback is a critical component of citizen journalism and all are equal participants in the communication contracts.

When COVID-19 emerged, a large proportion of Internet users resorted to citizen journalism, educating the citizenry and warning about the dangers of contracting the virus. Sometimes, most of the information made available on the Internet and social media platforms was derived from mainstream media. Nonetheless, social media, at the same time, perform the dual roles of mainstream media for many people who have little to do with radio, television, and newspapers because of the growing disenchantment over the politicisation of the pandemic and inherent sycophancy that polluted the outlets especially in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Thus, the Internet increasingly opened up new frontiers for everyone including the citizen journalists who shared relevant information such as the preventive measures or new trends during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of what appeared like slow growth in the number of Internet users in parts of Africa, “a rather small minority of these Internet users has the capability to use it in ways that are creative and that augment their ability to participate effectively in today’s knowledge societies” (Mansell 2004, p. 179). Through the Internet, citizen journalists also loosely referred to as *netizens* can easily package multimedia and interactive messages that can be accessible in various parts of the world. Contributing to this claim, Moyo (2009, p. 12) argues that through the Internet, “the non-professional journalists are not accountable to anyone but themselves, and their ‘journalism’ is not guided or constrained by any ethical norms or principles but rather by gut feeling and common sense”.

## ***Constructive Use of Citizen Journalism in Managing Health Crises***

The easy access to a plethora of news production technologies has made many people not just consumers but producers of information in the twenty-first century. Technologies have increased the swiftness and ease with which people share information in text, picture, audio, and video forms (Gillette et al. 2007). The transformation hitherto of content consumers to media content producers is a vital development that has implications during a period of (health) crisis. In *We the Media*, Gillmor (2004), recalled that the 9/11 event, for instance, offered a foretaste into the future of news. Gillmor explained that “Another kind of reporting emerged during those appalling hours and days. Via email, mailing lists, chat groups, personal web journals—all nonstandard news sources—we received valuable context that the major American media couldn’t or wouldn’t provide” (p. 15). Periods of humanitarian crisis such as the 9/11 events and the outbreak of Coronavirus in 2020 exemplify how, irrespective of its shortcomings, citizen journalism thrived in providing real-time reports, a development that has transformed today’s media landscape (Lule 2006).

Similarly, when crisis unfolds, communication interruptions happen and news can be both erroneous and incomplete (Gillette et al. 2007). In such a fearful atmosphere, media consumers may struggle to get the accurate and complete picture of what is happening from one media outlet. This is the time that citizen journalists step up the co-production of news on the Internet in order to provide instant, first-hand/exclusive information about the latest that often go beyond the conventional forms of news gathering and dissemination often criticised for its unidirectional nature and its overreliance on a small pool of sources (Siegl and Foot 2004).

By its nature, citizen journalism thrives under conditions of confusion, distrust, or panic. This is largely due to the pattern of message creation, context, structure, and dissemination. The message originates from the ordinary citizen who often packages such message within the context of affinity and identification with the ordinary citizens and is usually expressed in the citizen’s everyday language. Thus, Würz et al. (2013) explains that citizen journalism thrived due to certain demographic similarities including background, group membership, structural similarity, and status consistency. These increase the likeness and trust of source thereby increasing the opportunities for persuasion and behaviour change to succeed as espoused by the TRA. For Chou et al. (2009), Internet-based social networks have a tendency to increase perceived social support and interconnectivity among individuals because some sense of identity and belonging are established. Health-related information sharing at this level is more democratic and patient/citizen/consumer-controlled. Citizen journalism via social media tends to be effective because people tend to believe the information from those they know and can readily identify with (Allgaier and Svalastog 2015).

Today’s media ecology has further necessitated media convergence, and the pattern of news gathering and reporting has become even more diverse. As one of

the additions to the changing mediascape, citizen journalism is transforming news production and consumption. The implication is that news has become even more localised and prompt, but dangers of inaccuracy and deception are admitted. The mainstream media outfits have responded by restructuring media convergence and re-evaluating the relationships between them and the people once regarded as audiences. People who were once famed as audiences have become active newsmakers, albeit in an unprofessional manner. Through citizen journalism, constructive civic actions aimed at ameliorating the spread of the pandemic were enhanced. Health crisis is hard to manage, but citizen journalists can be more constructive and prioritise accuracy in place of half-truth while engaging in their alternative journalism.

## Conclusion

Citizen journalism via the Internet and social media, from the discourses so far proved a viable platform for health communication targeted at disease control and prevention. While health communication should be community-oriented, citizen journalism is community-controlled. By implication, this suggests the imperative of harnessing the opportunities offered by citizen journalists who at the same time double as an integral part of target communities in delivering community-centred health messages. As already established from the discourses, a sense of kinship, cultural context, are built through citizen journalism which makes persuasion most probable especially for the public with hitherto low risk perceptions, although some dysfunctional roles are often inevitable as a result of false information, poor contextualisation, and interpretation of confounding health conditions. Again, the challenges of digital divide could be further accentuated due to lack of access to the Internet and gadgets for active engagement in message consumption and production for the majority of the grassroots citizens in developing countries like Nigeria.

In addition, this paper presents a distinctive contribution to health communication and citizen journalism. In doing so, it lends theoretical support to the idea of harnessing citizen journalism for mobilising the people to take responsibility during pandemics for optimal safety and protection for all. Enablers of citizen journalism should, therefore, be able to play unique roles in promoting only the scientifically proven measures while playing down those that pollute the sphere. During *periods of health crises as witnessed then across the globe, citizen journalists were expected to rejig their pattern of news reporting by motivating more and mobilising the masses than stoking fears and spreading falsehoods. This is especially important as people ditch legacy media for the Internet and social media for news and other engagements. Thus, communicating health crises across different citizen journalism platforms requires restructuring in order to achieve the desired result without misinforming the public.* Based on the foregoing, it was recommended that:

1. Adequate legislation could be put in place not only to regulate social media use but to increase citizen's media literacy on how to spot false information and to readily recognise the dangers and implications of false information dissemination.
2. There should be a deliberate synergy between the government, health professionals, and other stakeholders in partnering with ordinary citizens especially those who have proved to be influential on social media, otherwise known as "social media influencers". These citizens should be seen as critical stakeholders/partners and part of the solution and not the problem in the prevention and control of disease outbreaks such as COVID-19.

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