

Cybercrimes Law and Citizen Journalism Clampdown During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Tanzania



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Abstract This chapter explores citizens' use of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania against the backdrop of the restrictive Cybercrimes Act 2015. Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory and through Grounded Theory as a method of inquiry for data collection and data analysis, the study found that, of the 60 citizens interviewed, 75 per cent supported the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as a relevant law but acknowledged that the same Act limits the construction and dissemination of their Covid-19 messages. Only 18.4 per cent of respondents trusted information posted by ordinary citizens while 81.6 per cent trusted information from verifiable sources. Data analysis further reveals a weak citizen journalism practice occasioned mainly by six factors: limited freedom of expression, poor knowledge of Cybercrimes Law, citizen journalism values underutilisation, poor social media literacy skills, and limited message construction and dissemination. Nonetheless, respondents revealed that social media remained the most popular platform on which citizens discuss Covid-19 preventive measures amidst reduced social interactions. Equipping citizens with social media literacy skills was found to be important to reduce misinformation and disinformation. The chapter calls for a review of Section 20 of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 to enable citizens, especially during pandemics, to seek and impart information more effectively, devoid of fear of repercussions.

Keywords Social media · Regulation · Covid-19 · Tanzania

Introduction

As social media serve as tools of information during the Covid-19 pandemic that requires maintaining social distancing, communication has emerged as being as crucial as medical interventions (Lima et al. 2020). Thus, a focus on treating the

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pandemic should also ensure citizens communicate accurately and effectively. In the recent past, the world has witnessed the H1N1 swine flu in 2009, the Ebola virus in 2014 and the Zika virus in 2015, which have provided a framework for heightened use of social media in the information blitz (Duraisamy et al. 2020). With the WHO classification of Covid-19 as a severe global threat, citizens have embraced social media to satisfy their need to inform themselves and others about this pandemic.

Globally, research on citizens' use of social media in seeking and imparting information on Covid-19 has revealed some issues and challenges associated with citizens' reportage. These include fake news, misinformation, infodemic, information pollution, stigma, inaccuracies, untruths, crisis communication, government accountability, press freedom, and information democracy (Lima et al. 2020; Mirbabaie et al. 2020; Cinelli et al. 2020; Das and Wasim 2020; PAHO 2020; Sahni and Hunny 2020). Nevertheless, social media in citizen journalism practice during the Covid-19 pandemic remains exploratory as little is known about the situation, particularly in a developing country context like that of Tanzania, and against the backdrop of the infamous Cybercrimes Act 2015. In the context of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this chapter therefore seeks to fill this yawning knowledge gap in the country.

Using the Grounded Theory method, this study explores citizens' use of social media in informing others and being informed on the Covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania against the backdrop of the restrictive Cybercrimes Act 2015. The chapter underscores the value and relevance of citizen journalism in contemporary times globally and in Tanzania in particular. In fact, citizen journalism provides an alternative media for ordinary citizens by giving them an opportunity to inform and be informed on issues that otherwise might be skipped by professional or mainstream journalists (Noor 2016). Generally, social media have become useful and important sites for news, public discussion and understanding of Covid-19, thus satisfying users' quest for information and understanding of the pandemic. For instance, citizens in Italy circulated news on Covid-19 via social media long before becoming headlines in the mainstream media (Das and Wasim 2020).

Despite an increase in social media research globally, challenges remain on how ordinary citizens in developing countries use social media and satisfy their need to seek and impart information on pandemics in a situation of not just limited journalistic skills but more significantly censorship and heightened control of health information. The context of Tanzania provides such an opportunity to study public discussion and understanding of Covid-19 through social media despite such limitations.

Background to the Study

Citizens' reporting of Covid-19 on social media in Tanzania was massive at the beginning of the pandemic, but when the Cybercrimes Law came into force, the circulation of Covid-19 information ebbed. In fact, Tanzania reported its first case of Covid-19 on social and mainstream media on 15 March 2020 when a woman who

had travelled from Tanzania to Belgium on 3 March 2020 had just returned and was diagnosed positive for Coronavirus on arrival in Arusha. She was treated in isolation and fully recovered. Through social media, her information and pictures were posted and she felt stigmatised.

By April 2020, four people were charged under the Cybercrimes Law and arrested for allegedly spreading false information on Covid-19 via social media (Xinhuanet 2020; Citizen 2020). By 29 April 2020, there were 509 Covid-19 cases, with 21 deaths reported officially (BBC 2020). The Tanzania government closed all schools and higher learning institutions, banned public mass gatherings (except congregations in churches, mosques and other houses of worship) and encouraged citizens to stay at home. Fearing the risks of starvation and economic consequences, the restriction of these public activities lasted only for three months (March, April and May). Unlike its neighbouring states, Tanzania imposed no travel restrictions and all her borders remained open. In June 2020, the late President John Magufuli declared that there were no new cases of Covid-19 in Tanzania and those recuperating in hospitals had been released. Even special centres established to either treat or hold suspected cases for observation were empty. Consequently, all public activities resumed within the same month.

In a nation of about 60 million people, 25 million are connected to Internet services largely via their handsets, which enables citizens, some as citizen journalists, to access information through social media platforms. Like the rest of the world, citizen journalism in Tanzania owes its origins to the introduction of social media platforms on the Internet. Currently, Internet access is no longer an urban phenomenon because of mobile phones, particularly smartphones, which have helped it penetrate both peri-urban and rural areas.

Free public discussions through citizen journalism have encountered their share of government backlash. Trained as a civil engineer, Maxcence Melo started a citizen journalism and whistle-blowing social media platform, *JamiiForums*, in 2003 to engage citizens in free discussion on various issues facing the country. *JamiiForums* became popular but also ruffled the feathers of the government, which led to the enactment of the Cybercrimes Act 2015, endorsed by the country's parliament on 1 April 2015. In addition, this law seeks to address issues of child pornography, cyber bullying, online impersonation, electronic production of racist and xenophobic content, unsolicited messages, illegal interception of communications, and publication of false information (Tanzania 2015).

It is against this background that an exploratory study was conducted to highlight citizens' use of social media through the practice of citizen journalism in Tanzania during Covid-19 amidst the challenges posed by the Cybercrimes Law 2015.

Theoretical Literature

Citizen journalism refers to journalistic activities of ordinary people, for example citizens themselves reporting on issues confronting them. Simply put, in today's nomenclature these are citizen journalists, a new breed of scribes (Noor 2016). These non-professionals, ordinary citizens, play an active role in collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information at the grassroots level (Choubey 2020).

Based on arguments advanced by scholars (Skjerdal 2012; Ocwich 2010; Bala and Domatob 2007; Mwesige 2004; Pieter 2008; Clifford et al. 2009; Banda 2007), there is a strong similarity in values among the following types of journalism practices: citizen journalism, civic/public journalism, advocacy journalism, development journalism and an African *Ubuntu* philosophy on journalism (Solomon 2014). These types of journalistic practices challenge the principles of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality, values at the core of Western/traditional journalism training and practice. Instead, they focus on accuracy, truth, fairness, timeliness, and proximity. They treat citizens as active participants and not passive consumers of information, focus on grassroots/ordinary people, render a voice for the voiceless, aim to improve ordinary people's lives, serve as a forum of discussion for various community issues, and emphasise participatory techniques. These values have varyingly come to shape and define citizen journalism practice. It is partly against this background of citizen journalism values that the chapter explores the reportage of Covid-19 in Tanzania by citizens through social media against the restrictive Cybercrimes Act 2015.

The success of citizen journalism practice owes much to the rise and unparalleled influence of digital social media platforms. It is closely related to the rise of the Internet as a medium of news, public information and social communication. With the rapid growth of the Internet in the 1990s, citizen journalism became globally popular from the 2000s (Palmer and Jérémie 2012). This advancement in digital social media has shifted citizens' dependency on mainstream media for receiving information to a dependency on social media for also constructing and disseminating information. The introduction of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp and other mobile apps for social collection and dissemination of information contributes to promoting and emboldening citizen journalism practice.

There are three reasons that account for social media ascendancy as a citizen journalism platform. Firstly, they are user-friendly as they can be applied with minimum and/or no training. Secondly, the massive, scattered and heterogeneous numbers of social media users spread citizen journalism content to massive and wider audiences than traditional media outlets. Thirdly, continuous development of communication technologies and increasing Internet penetration has increased Internet users, enhancing content generation and dissemination (Jalli 2020). Though citizen journalism has become the most common concept, there are other phrases or coinages in use albeit with less frequency. These include participatory journalism, user generated content, new media, digital journalism, crowd-sourcing and social

networking, which primarily refer to the technology citizens apply in constructing, disseminating and receiving information (Moeller 2009). With social media, the process of receiving, constructing and disseminating information has thus far been participatory and democratic, enhancing citizens' satisfaction of their social and psychological needs concerning information.

The UGT has therefore become increasingly important with the rise of communication technologies and hence relevant to this study. Although the theory has been used in media research since the 1940s to explain how people use mainstream mass media to fulfil their needs, the theory has recently been used to explore why people use social media and to identify the needs people wish to satisfy by using them (Taskiran 2019; Picazo-Vela and Cruz-Sandoval 2013; Mehrad and Pegah 2016; Ruggiero 2018). It is regarded as the most influential theory in communication, focusing on the user as it argues that the most important role of the media is to fulfil the needs of the audience (Mehrad and Pegah 2016). It views users not as passive receivers of messages but as active users who consciously consume media messages to satisfy their social and psychological needs. As an audience/user-centred theory, the UGT is therefore an ideal theory to guide the exploration of citizens' use of social media in informing and being informed on the Covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania. The suitability of the UGT in this study lies in the fact that the list of gratifications people obtain when using social media, interaction, seeking and sharing information, socialisation, education, communication and expression of opinions (Picazo-Vela and Cruz-Sandoval 2013; Musa et al. 2016; Taskiran 2019), partly contribute to the key factors in the exploration of people's use of social media in informing themselves and others about Covid-19.

Grounded Theory Data Collection and Analysis Method

Grounded theory as a method of data collection and analysis originated from Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s when they were conducting a field study of dying hospital patients (Musa et al. 2016). It is defined as a theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and the eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Initially, the Grounded Theory was mainly used in medical research but it has since been extended to many fields of study including journalism and mass communication (Jinghong et al. 2019; Martin et al. 2018).

Data Collection

This study involved 60 respondents (initial sampling), which led to another four respondents (theoretical sampling). The 60 respondents were obtained from Makumbusho Bus Stand area in Kinondoni municipality of Dar es Salaam City.

Table 1 Respondents (initial sampling)

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18–40	55	91.7
41–60	2	3.3
>61	3	5.0
Gender		
Male	33	55.0
Female	27	45.0
Education		
Primary	13	21.7
Secondary	37	61.7
Higher learning	10	16.7
Occupation		
Self-employed (traders)	26	43.3
Employees in private sector	5	8.3
Government employees	6	10.0
Hairdressers, bar attendants, college students, housewives	23	38.3

The figure 60 was the point at which the study reached an information saturation point. This area, being a city bus stand, connects to almost all the suburbs in the city, and is also the country's business hub. The selection of respondents was purposive, in the sense that only respondents who access social media platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic and are not journalists by profession participated in the study. All the respondents accessed social media platforms on their mobile phones. Their level of education was mostly secondary education (61.7 per cent); a few had higher learning education and much fewer primary education. The ages of the majority (91.7 per cent) ranged from 18 to 40. Their occupations were diverse: bar attendants, hairdressers, motorbike riders, shopkeepers, vendors, and government and private sector employees. There were also housewives and college students, such as medical and business students. With regard to gender, there were 55 per cent males and 45 per cent females. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Based on the Grounded Theory method, the study employed semi-structured face-to-face interviews to gather information from the respondents in a period of four weeks (20 July to 14 August 2020). On average, three respondents were interviewed per day. In-depth and extensive interviews were held with those respondents who had constructed and disseminated messages or had practised some form of citizen journalism. Interviews were appropriate for the nature of sample involved in the study. Although they were purposively selected, the researcher met the participants by chance at the busy Makumbusho bus stand before requesting an interview. Most questions were open-ended, which generated qualitative data; a few were closed-ended and generated quantitative data on a limited scale. Thus, the study is

largely qualitative. The interviews were recorded and noted down in summary form. They were then manually transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed and categorised according to the constant comparative method of data analysis of the Grounded Theory. Data collected during interviews were summarised in different categories, which were confirmed and modified throughout the analyses. The data analysis started immediately after the first interview and consisted of open, axial and selective coding. Open coding included repeated readings of the interviews and an in-depth, line-by-line analysis of the transcribed data. By means of open coding, data were coded under various headings according to their content with the purpose of opening the data up, as well as achieving a constant comparison of incidents and categories that emerged from subsequent interviews. At this stage the researcher identified many categories. The data were then divided into similar groupings and formed preliminary categories of information about the phenomenon being examined. In the axial coding, categories were linked, related and put together. In the final stage, selective coding, the categories were linked together, resulting in a core category. As a process of integrating and refining theory, categories were reduced and organised into themes to articulate a coherent understanding or theory of the phenomenon under study. Under the Grounded Theory, a number of categories grouped together form the foundation of a theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

On the other hand, the quantitative data arising during the study were subjected to statistical analysis. The Grounded Theory is a very flexible data collection and analysis method that accommodates both qualitative and quantitative data (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Chun et al. 2019). Just like in qualitative data, the quantitative data was also separated and compared across the various categories, which also contributed to theoretical sampling.

After this analysis of the first round of data, the ordinary citizens (initial sampling), data from the initial sampling directed the researcher to content developers of *JamiiForums* information on Covid-19 (theoretical sampling). Based on the theoretical sampling principle of the Grounded Theory, sampling depends on the concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory. Therefore, theoretical sampling can be fully planned when the study begins following the initial sampling. In other words, the initial categories that were developed by the initial sampling guided the remaining part of the field study. This made the process of data collection (with the theoretical sampling) more focused. Following the constant comparative analysis method, data obtained from theoretical sampling were compared with those of the initial sampling. After no further new ideas and insights emerged from the data, the study reached a 'theoretical saturation', a point in category development at which nothing new emerges during analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998)

Findings

The data analysis gave rise to a process leading to a core category, which explained the factors that influence the practice of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Six different but interrelated categories were identified as contributors to the practice of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania. These were freedom of expression, knowledge, skills, values, construction and dissemination. The findings revealed limited freedom of expression: the respondents demonstrated fear to engage freely in citizen journalism practice during Covid-19, especially in constructing and disseminating messages due to the restrictive Cybercrimes Law. Whereas knowledge implies the understanding of the Cybercrimes Law, the study found that it was generally lacking among citizens. The lack of enough knowledge on Cybercrimes Law results in fear, limiting freedom of expression of citizens to engage freely in citizen journalism practice.

A few respondents (18.4 per cent) demonstrated higher levels of social media literacy skills while engaging in social media to be informed on Covid-19. The skills demonstrated by these respondents enabled the researcher to identify citizen journalism values. These categories (limited freedom of expression, poor knowledge of Cybercrimes Law, underutilisation of citizen journalism values and poor application of social media literacy skills) resulted in 88 per cent of the respondents' reluctance to construct and disseminate messages on social media and 81.6 per cent of the participants' reluctance to trust information on social media which had no verifiable or official sources. These categories negatively influenced the citizens' reportage of Covid-19 on social media as they resulted in the poor practice of citizen journalism, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic in Tanzania (Fig. 1).

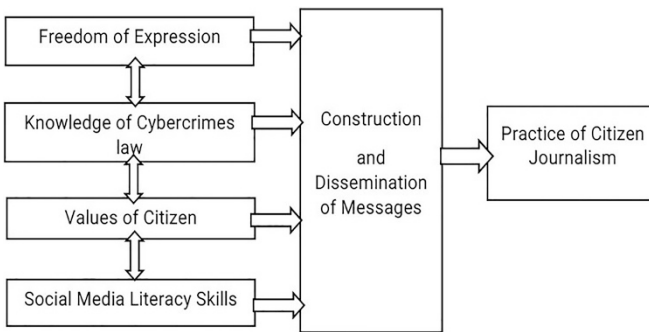


Fig. 1 Factors influencing citizens' use of social media in seeking and imparting information on Covid-19 in Tanzania

Core Category: Practice of Citizen Journalism

The findings show that six factors account for the downward trend of citizens' reportage of Covid-19 in Tanzania. These have been clustered into limited freedom of expression, poor knowledge of Cybercrimes law, poor application of citizen journalism values, and poor social media literacy skills, which led to limited construction and dissemination of Covid-19 content, and hence the inevitable poor practice of citizen journalism during the pandemic.

Freedom of Expression

Although the findings show that 75 per cent of the respondents support the Cybercrimes Act 2015 as a relevant law, the same Act curtails their freedom of expression in constructing and disseminating messages on Covid-19 due to widespread fear of the law. Their support of the law is based on the argument that it enhances information accuracy and protects people from unnecessary defamation and slander. In their view, the law also minimised stories that occasioned and spread fear in the community.

A handful of respondents (5 per cent) who were overtly against this piece of legislation firmly attested to how it limits people's freedom of expression. As explained by an online content developer: "Because of deep-seated fear of the law, people are not free enough to communicate, hence undermining their creativity in online content". Some 18.3 per cent of the respondents even reported fearing sharing the messages on Covid-19 they had received as they dreaded the consequences of doing so under this law.

Knowledge of Cybercrimes Law

Some 80 per cent of the respondents were aware of the law, although 75 per cent of those who supported the law admitted that they did not have enough information about it. They only knew that the law requires people not to spread lies, disseminate pornographic content or invade people's privacy. The little knowledge they had of the law amounted to fear of the law, increasing dread of its robbing them of freedom of expression.

Social Media Literacy Skills

Of the respondents, 81.6 per cent were doubtful about the information on Covid-19 posted on social media. They used several skills to confirm the accuracy of the messages. For example, 43.3 per cent of these respondents mainly trusted information on social media only if it was from official sources such as the Ministry of Health, or trusted social media platforms such as *JamiiForums*, WHO and blogs known for posting official information, such as the *Millard Ayo* and *Michuzi*. Another technique these respondents used to crosscheck the accuracy of the information was verifying the information on social media from mainstream news media, as revealed by 38.3 per cent of the respondents. To these respondents, the source of information was crucial in determining its accuracy. Implicitly, these respondents distrusted the information from mere ordinary citizens. These respondents explained that when the official sources stopped providing information on Covid-19, a few citizens started disseminating information from their own sources and this led to confusion.

On the other hand, 18.4 per cent of the respondents trusted information on social media as posted by mere ordinary citizens. These respondents demonstrated a higher level of social media literacy skills, as one of them noted: “If there is no official source, then I turn to the comments section. The comments contained there will give me some hints to determine whether the message is true or not”. Another respondent said: “The message can be doubtful when reported differently by various social networks. There are huge possibilities that it might be flawed or contain errors. Moreover, depending on what I already know, I can determine whether the message is true or not”. These respondents also used the context of the story to check its accuracy. The more familiar the environment, the more likely the story was accurate, as explained in the proximity value below.

Values of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism values are important in determining the presence and strength of the practice. Four types of values emerged strongly from the respondents during the study. These values are accuracy and truth; proximity; and forum of discussion and understanding.

Regarding accuracy and truth, a respondent explained: “In my neighbourhood someone died and there were rumours that it was because of Covid-19. Later the doctor’s report showed that the cause was not Covid-19 but the family of the deceased had already been affected by the misinformation from the neighbours”. Another respondent offered this view: “On social media platforms everyone has something to say. Different social media platforms presented different statistics on Corona-related deaths. This really confused me”. In such circumstances, the respondents saw the relevance of the Cybercrimes Law, especially Section 16 which

prohibits the publication of false or falsified information. As they explained: “The Law is relevant because I don’t want to be threatened by false or concocted stories concerning the pandemic, especially stories on the death count and how people were buried”. “The Law is good as it reduces misinformation in the society”, narrated another respondent, who added, “Not every death was caused by Covid-19. So, only authoritative sources can provide accurate information”.

In the quest for accuracy and truth, the *JamiiForums* platform demands that citizens produce evidence-based information. This is a major guideline for posting information on the *JamiiForums* platform. As Maxcence Melo, the founder of *JamiiForums*, explained in an interview, “The *JamiiForums* content moderators check for accuracy before allowing the message to feature on the platform”. This is a safeguard that has allowed *JamiiForums* to enjoy a reputation as a high-profile and reliable social media platform.

Proximity: Related to the values of accuracy and truth is proximity. In this regard, 18.4 per cent of the respondents who demonstrated social media literacy skills also explained that they highly trusted information on social media regardless of its source. One of them explained how they depend on the environment (proximity) to determine the accuracy of the information:

I trust these messages because they are in the context that I can relate to. For example, someone posted a video of someone who collapsed on a busy street at Kariakoo [in Dar es Salaam city] and you can see City Council trucks picking the person up. Also, the City Council ambulances moving in streets that I could recognise, to collect ailing people suspected to have contracted Corona.

On the other hand, such respondents said they doubted messages on Covid-19 sourced from distant areas they were unable to relate to and authenticate the information communicated. For these respondents, proximity was an important value for verifying the accuracy of the story.

Forum of discussion and understanding: Despite the limitations imposed by legislations such as Cybercrimes Law, the respondents revealed that social media remained the most popular platform that satisfied citizens’ various issues amidst reduced social interactions, for example sharing of information on Covid-19 preventive measures, working from home facilitated by online technology (i.e. Zoom, Webex meetings), arranging for marriage and burial ceremonies through WhatsApp, buying and selling of products through Instagram, and live streaming of music concerts. Implicitly, social media platforms are relevant in acquiring new life skills during Covid-19. Skills gained include doing business online, gardening, cooking different dishes, creating environmentally friendly carrier bags, animation and online learning. This finding is consistent with the UGT theory in terms of satisfying the needs of users.

Construction and Dissemination of Messages by Citizens

People were not willing to construct and disseminate messages on Covid-19. Of all the respondents, only 12 per cent admitted to having constructed and disseminated information. These happened to be all males. The messages constructed mainly focused on preventive measures, messages that were already placed on social media. Observations made during the interviews were that in fear of the Cybercrimes Law, respondents were also reluctant to answer questions on the construction and dissemination of messages. As one respondent remarked: “Why are you asking me that question? Do you want me to be jailed?” Finally, she categorically denied having constructed any message, largely out of fear of the repercussions of such an admission. This limits users’ satisfaction from using social media for Covid-19 information. In this regard, a respondent attested: “The Cybercrimes Law makes citizens fear admitting that they constructed and disseminated messages on Covid-19 via social media, but actually they did”. This scenario provides a glimpse of the citizen journalism practice during the pandemic in the context of Tanzania. Some respondents might have denied having constructed messages for fear of feeling the wrath of the Cybercrimes Act. The same tendency emerged on the *JamiiForums* platform where some message authors remain anonymous to the public.

JamiiForums insists on guiding citizens on social media use to avoid negative consequences. As Melo affirmed: “*JamiiForums* draws the attention of 83% of internet users in Tanzania, mostly the youths aged between 25 and 45 years. About 500,000 people visit the platform every day. To avoid civil unrest these citizens need to be guided in processing information, and therefore a need for the *JamiiForums* community engagement guidelines to stimulate respectful dialogue, creative thinking and a fully participatory approach”. Melo mentioned some of the rules set out for all *JamiiForums* participants, including: (i) correct spelling, grammar and style in writing, (ii) proper citing of sources, (iii) not impersonating a public figure or forum member, or accessing or using someone else’s account, (iv) questionable content: any material that is knowingly false and/or defamatory, misleading, inaccurate, abusive, vulgar, hateful, harassing, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, drugs, drugs, racist, threatening, invasive of a person’s privacy, that otherwise violates any law, or encourages criminal offence.

The findings reveal that 53.3 per cent of the respondents relied on the *JamiiForums* platform for Covid-19 information.

Discussion

In the context of the UGT, this study explored how citizens use social media in reporting Covid-19 against the backdrop of the newly enacted Cybercrimes Law 2015 in Tanzania. The findings show that the respondents need freedom of expression, knowledge of the Cybercrimes Law, application of citizen journalism values,

and social media literacy skills to construct and disseminate useful messages on Covid-19 and, hence, satisfy their need for knowledge concerning Covid-19. These factors are important for an effective practice of citizen journalism.

Review of the literature shows that the concept of freedom of expression regarding citizens' use of social media in receiving, constructing and disseminating information has been debatable based on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Pearson 2013). The article states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression in seeking, receiving and imparting information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers, if one respects the rights and reputations of others, protection of national security, public order, public health and morals. These limitations to freedom of expression call for responsible reporting, especially during a pandemic. However, worries persist on the ever-increasing government regulations of social media suppressing freedom of expression in countries around the world, for example China and the Asia-Pacific region (Pearson 2013)

Governments in different parts of the world have enacted laws aimed to curb emerging social and technological situations such as the Cybercrimes Law of Tanzania that curtails citizens' freedom of expression. Consequently, citizen journalists have to be educated on the implications of their truth-seeking and truth-telling as a routine part of the process of constructing, disseminating and receiving information (Pearson 2013). There is an implicit need for a mindful use of freedom of expression achievable through the acquisition of social media literacy skills and adherence to the *JamiiForums* community engagement guidelines.

Scholarly discussions have been questioning four main issues concerning citizen journalism values (Jalli 2020). Firstly, credibility: citizen journalism has attracted criticism pertaining to its ability to produce reliable news and how audiences determine whether the news from these citizens is reliable or not. In this study, for instance, 81.6 per cent of the respondents only trusted information on social media if it was from credible sources. Secondly, accountability: Internet users can hide behind pseudonyms and remain anonymous, hence limiting their accountability. This is likely to foster negativity. On its positive side, anonymity provides an opportunity for whistle-blowers to share confidential content with the public without jeopardising their own safety. For instance, citizen journalists in India and Bangladesh risk being attacked or even murdered when revealing sensitive information (Choubey 2020). This argument concurs with the current study as some respondents dreaded admitting that they constructed and disseminated messages on Covid-19. Likewise, some citizens on the *JamiiForums* platform prefer to remain anonymous, fearing for their safety. Thirdly, objectivity: in the absence of gatekeeping and the rush to be the first to break the news (competing with fellow citizen journalists and the mainstream media), information reported by citizen journalists is arguably not objective; it tends to be heavily influenced by opinion and bias. Fourthly, authenticity: citizen journalism bloggers have been accused of reproducing and recycling news instead of reporting fresh and original copy. Often, bloggers take content from traditional media or other sources and republish it on their sites on a

copy-and-paste basis with few adjustments. Sometimes it is just translation from one language to another.

Media literacy skills foster an active inquiry, critical thinking and interpretation of the messages people receive and create (Bulger and Patrick 2018), similar to the findings of the current study. Specifically, social/digital media literacy refers to a set of skills that helps users to improve their engagement with digital media and information sources in a participatory manner (Reineck and Lublinski 2015). The ability of citizens to co-ordinate, construct and disseminate information and actions is where social/digital media literacy differs from traditional media literacy. Social media literacy can help to nurture watchful, sceptical and well-informed citizens. Similarly, in the current study some respondents demonstrated impeccable levels of social media literacy skills, such as confirming the truth through familiarity with the environment. And in line with the UGT, these respondents satisfied their social and psychological needs concerning Covid-19 information.

Based on the literature review, the findings and the subsequent discussion show that citizen journalism practice in Tanzania by using social media during the Covid-19 pandemic offers various opportunities. Firstly, there is an upsurge in Internet access via mobile phones, particularly for those using smartphones. As noted earlier, 25 million people have access to the Internet through their mobile phones. This expanded usage also bolsters the practice of citizen journalism. Secondly, the Cybercrimes Law, particularly its Section 16, warns any person who publishes false or falsified information on social media that could defame, threaten, abuse, insult, deceive or mislead the public. Such a person is committing an offence and is liable to receive a fine of not less than five million shillings or imprisonment for a term of not less than three years, or both, once convicted.

The punitive action embedded in this section compels citizens to crosscheck and validate the information they disseminate, especially on sensitive issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In essence, abiding by the provision of this section requires citizen journalism to demonstrate values of accuracy, fairness and truth. And this is important on social media due to its immediacy and ability to reach a multitude of people within a short time. In fact, having many people spreading information carries the risk of sensationalism, rumour mongering, misinformation and disinformation. Thus, it is crucial for governments to fight both the pandemic and infodemic (Duraismy et al. 2020). In Tanzania, the Cybercrimes Law helps to enforce compliance and make people desist from deliberate manipulation of fact, mudslinging and falsification of news. Nevertheless, as the findings indicate, citizens do check and even counter-check the accuracy of stories circulating on social media. The *JamiiForums* is also using its community engagement guidelines and content moderators to ensure that posts and associated comments are accurate and devoid of untruths before allowing them onto the platform for dissemination.

Thirdly, regarding social media literacy skills, the respondents were interested in the sources of information on social media, a crucial precautionary measure during a pandemic. Some respondents verified the information in mainstream media whereas others had recourse to their common sense. Further analysis shows that these respondents were well-informed and had a significant sense of information

management. They continued with their daily routines while adhering to directives from health experts. Perhaps this alertness could explain why Tanzanians have remained calm and courageous during the Covid-19 pandemic. In essence, this study confirms the UGT theory on the level of satisfaction respondents obtained from social media on Covid-19 information. Fourthly, *JamiiForums* community engagement guidelines provide a basis for disseminating accurate information from citizens as it underscores respecting all values of citizen journalism and beyond, such as accuracy, truthfulness, forum for discussion, proximity, moral decency, honesty and clarity.

On the other hand, the challenges to enhancing citizens' capacity to construct, disseminate and receive accurate information include, firstly, Section 20 of the Cybercrimes Law that a person shall not transmit or receive unsolicited messages. Doing so amounts to committing an offence and is liable to a fine of not less than three million shillings or to imprisonment for a term of not less than one year, or both, upon conviction. The pertinent question that arises here, as also asked by Ndumbaro (2019), is: What if the message is critical to survival but the receiver did not solicit it? This question is especially pertinent now during Covid-19 when citizens need immediate and current information to protect themselves. This section of the law therefore needs a review to reflect the Covid-19 scenario.

Secondly, an increase in Internet penetration via smartphones has transformed Internet access so much that it is no longer an urban phenomenon. It is also a rural phenomenon. Thus, citizens need to acquire social media literacy skills for them to practise citizen journalism effectively, especially during a pandemic. As the study findings reveal, only 18.4 per cent of the respondents used their social media skills to analyse information produced by non-professionals. The majority (81.6 per cent) relied on official sources or the mainstream media to crosscheck information they found on social media. Social media literacy skills among citizens are essential in the digital age because when people are stressed and uncertain, they can easily be swayed by disinformation, resulting in an infodemic.

Thirdly, there is the financial ability concern as those who cannot afford smartphones miss out on the accruing benefits reaped from social media platforms and citizen journalism. Also, financial challenges in accessing the Internet persist, especially for low-income earners.

Future Trends and Conclusion

This chapter has outlined six different but interrelated categories based on the study findings, namely, freedom of expression, knowledge of the Cybercrimes Law, application of citizen journalism values, social media literacy skills, and construction and dissemination of messages, as relevant for an effective practice of citizen journalism. This theory can serve as a guide for citizen journalism practice, especially during a pandemic. The theory can also serve as a precursor for further investigation of this phenomenon and related issues since it provides crucial

direction. Despite a weakened practice of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic as respondents revealed, citizen journalism through social media in Tanzania has a bright future characterised by a heightened Internet penetration in both urban and rural spaces, coupled with an increase in Internet access engendered by smartphones. In line with the UGT, the study demonstrates that social media have been crucial tools in satiating social and psychological needs of socialisation, information, education and discussion on Covid-19 during the partial lockdown. After all, the UGT's key element in social media is that users are active and interactive.

Moreover, Section 16 of the Cybercrimes Law, which seeks to curb misinformation, ought to be seen in a positive light as it can bring freedom and responsibility to citizen journalists. Additionally, the *JamiiForums* platform has set standards in ensuring information accuracy from citizens through its community engagement guidelines. This is an aspect that citizen journalists in Tanzania can integrate in their practice during such crises.

For future research, there is an interesting trend following a different approach to Covid-19 from the new President, Samia Suluhu Hassan, from March 2021, where authorities have been more open about the presence of the pandemic in Tanzania. In June 2021, the President warned of the third wave of Covid-19 where the country recorded 100 cases. She directed all Covid-19 precautions to be taken and urged Tanzanians to get vaccinated. This trend indicates a sharp turn from her predecessor, thus necessitating research concerning Tanzanian citizens and their reception, construction and dissemination of Covid-19 messages on social media platforms.

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