
Assessment of the Use of Eyewitness Reports by *Channels Television*

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Abstract

Ethical concerns surrounding eyewitness materials from citizens often necessitate structured guidelines for integrating them into television productions. This study assessed Channels Television's use of eyewitness reports in the Eyewitness Report programme. The objectives the study sought to achieve were to identify reasons for Channels Television's Eyewitness Report; to examine the mode of sourcing and utilising eyewitness reports; to examine procedures for making eyewitness reports conform to the station's policies/ethical guidelines and to examine the mode of authenticating eyewitness materials from audience members. This was premised on the gatekeeping theory. The study adopted a qualitative research design, with the key informant interview method to garner insights from News and Current Affairs department personnel involved with the Eyewitness Report programme. A purposive sampling technique was used to select four key informants based on access, availability and knowledge of the subject. Data from the interviews were analysed thematically. The study found reasons behind the use of eyewitness reports to include that of addressing gaps in news coverage. In sourcing and utilising eyewitness reports, the programme actively engaged with the public through various platforms, emphasising credibility and quality checks. Furthermore, the study uncovered that meticulous verification processes, follow-up and collaborative decision-making were employed in utilising citizen eyewitness reports. The study concluded that adherence to journalistic guidelines in the context of the Eyewitness Report demonstrates a commendable approach to incorporating citizen voices into the news agenda. The study therefore recommended that Channels Television

provide clear guidelines for citizen contributors and communicate the same to the public in addition to its message soliciting eyewitness contributions.

Keywords: *Eyewitness reports, assessment, Channels Television, participatory journalism, Eyewitness Report*

Introduction

Television stations, in performing the Lasswellian functions of societal surveillance and correlation, rely on a repertoire of news sources, key among which is the field journalist's first-hand witnessing of events as they occur. No doubt, journalists, reporters in this case, are regarded as the first gatekeepers in journalism practice (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), as in most cases, they are practically present on the field or at events. They, therefore, have the opportunity to report both the event and the atmosphere of the event. Through video footage taken from the scene of an event, the claim of journalists to be unbiased observers is validated (Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). These actualities are central to the norms of accuracy and objectivity. More so, these actualities undergo verification procedures, which further authenticate journalists' profession-based claim of authority (Hermida, 2012).

Though broadcast media's presence is everywhere given the ubiquitous nature of the electromagnetic spectrum, journalists are not 'omnipresent' beings. Hence, their dependence on other sources for newsworthy information; One of these is the eyewitness account. Eyewitness reports have become a significant component of modern broadcasting, offering unique perspectives and immediate insights into unfolding events. Technological advancement in contemporary society has made available a plethora of digital, interactive and accessible information and communication technology tools, thereby empowering members of the public, who were once referred to as the audience and were at the receiving end of one-way mass media messages to become active content providers (Taibi & Na, 2020). The availability of new communication technologies presents individuals with opportunities for documenting and distributing information across the globe, thereby enabling ordinary people to be actively involved in the act of bearing witness, especially to newsworthy events (Serban, 2019).

This phenomenon has continued to be the subject of communication research globally, particularly in the areas of citizens' involvement in news production via websites, blogs, and social media (Odi, 2013; Onyango, 2013; Udende, et al., 2016; Apeh & Didugwu, 2017; Apuke, 2019; Taibi & Na, 2020). This trend has thrown up debates among both professionals and scholars who

seek to understand what implications it has on the practice of journalism, which is based on established professional norms and standards. The prevalence of members of the public participating in journalistic endeavours has challenged the age-long journalistic prerogative of gathering, analysing, interpreting and disseminating information to the mass audience or receivers. These hitherto exclusive responsibilities of professional journalists have changed (Udende, et al., 2016), and opened doors for scholarly debates in sociology and news production in the 21st Century.

Television stations often rely on eyewitness reports for various reasons, ranging from covering breaking news to enriching their storytelling with firsthand accounts. These reports serve as valuable tools for providing timely information, especially in situations where professional journalists are unable to reach the scene quickly (Harcup, 2020). The *BBC* is often credited with airing the most widely recognised eyewitness image of the 7/7 London bombings (Hänska & Bode, 2018). *Aljazeera* Television station in Qatar also solicits contributions from members of the public through its 'Sharek' portal. In Nigeria, *Channels Television* has embraced the use of eyewitness reports contributed by members of the public. However, the motivations behind the reliance on eyewitness reports from citizens go beyond immediacy, including cost-efficiency and the desire to enhance audience engagement (Bruno, 2011). Thus, identifying the specific reasons for television's use of eyewitness reports forms the foundation for understanding their role in contemporary news production.

Though the inclusion of eyewitness materials in broadcast media content furnishes stations with immediate and real-time content which their staff do not have access to, it has its drawbacks. For instance, during the EndSARS protest in 2020, eyewitness materials provided real-time images and videos of the protests. Usman and Oghuvbu (2021) posit that the EndSARS protest was heightened by the activities of non-professional, amateurish presentation of fake, unverified information through social media platforms. According to Agbola and Abati (2020), several television stations made use of some information and video clips shared by eyewitnesses at the scenes of the protests. The rise of manipulated content, fake news, and misinformation poses significant challenges to the credibility of broadcast journalism. Television stations must employ robust mechanisms for verifying the authenticity of materials sourced from audience members before they are broadcast (Nolan, 2019). This raises questions about the procedures used by television stations to integrate eyewitness reports from members of the public into their programming.

Another crucial aspect of using eyewitness reports involves ensuring that they align with the station's policies and ethical guidelines. Broadcasting unverified or misleading content can damage a station's credibility and violate journalistic principles. Consequently, procedures for making citizen eyewitness reports conform to a station's editorial standards, legal considerations, and ethical frameworks are central to maintaining professionalism and audience trust (White, 2015). Ethical concerns surrounding eyewitness materials from citizens often include issues such as invasion of privacy, sensationalism, and potential bias, all of which necessitate structured guidelines for integrating user-generated content (Silverman, 2014). Despite these concerns, television stations still incorporate eyewitness materials in their professional offering.

Channels Television, a leading station in Nigeria, has a dedicated news programme *Eyewitness Report*, where it receives images and video footage from private citizens for inclusion in its news reports (Apuke, 2019). The station, through this programme, encourages members of the public to report happenings around them by themselves. This they do by either sending emails, or tweets or by uploading videos and pictures directly using a mobile application the station developed with an eyewitness feature embedded in it (www.channelstv.com). It is against this background that this study sought to investigate *Channels Television's Eyewitness Report* programme.

Studies investigating the nuances of eyewitness reports in broadcast news production have been conducted. For instance, Ashong and Nwanyanwu (2018) investigated the attitudes of Nigerian journalists towards the adoption of citizen-sourced information in their newscasts and Nwanyanwu (2019) investigated Nigerian television viewers' perception of citizen journalism reports. Bello (2019) studied *Channels Television* and *Television Continental* (TVC) gatekeeping practices in their use of user-generated content. However, *Channels Television's* use of eyewitness reports remains unclear. Therefore, this study sought to assess the reasons, processes, and ethical considerations surrounding the use of eyewitness reports by *Channels Television*. By doing so, it aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how broadcast media leverage eyewitness reports by citizens to enhance news coverage while adhering to journalistic standards.

The study sought to achieve four objectives, which were:

1. To identify reasons for *Channels Television's* use of eyewitness reports.
2. To examine the mode of sourcing eyewitness reports used by *Channels Television*.

3. To examine procedures for making eyewitness reports conform to the station's policies and ethical guidelines.
4. To examine the mode of authenticating eyewitness materials from audience members.

The significance of the study extends to various stakeholders involved in the realm of journalism, media, and civic engagement. First, media houses can benefit from the insights provided by this study to enhance their utilisation of citizen eyewitness reporters as a valuable source of news content. In addition, Media houses can use the findings to adapt to changing media landscapes characterised by the rise of participatory journalism, social media and user-generated content. Finally, the study highlights the potential for citizen eyewitness reporters to contribute to the news reporting process and amplify their voices on issues of public concern. The audience and public, therefore, can leverage this empowerment to actively participate in civic discourse and advocate for positive change in their communities.

Literature Review

Eyewitness Report

Eyewitness reports refer to the first-hand, reportorial contribution of non-professionals that are shared with traditional media organisations. They are media content generated by audience members who are not members of staff of the mainstream television news media they share such content with. Eyewitness reports are also regarded as user-generated content or citizen journalism (Cummings, 2018; Danso, 2019) though, user-generated content is a broader and all-encompassing term covering all forms of audio, visual and textual content such as blog posts, comments, emails and online bulletin board posts. Mortensen (2015) aptly defines eyewitness reports as “photos or videos taken on location by onlookers, participants, and others not employed by a media institution or organization” (p.11). These are visual, still or moving images captured by individuals equipped with miniaturised digital technologies that enable them to record and disseminate happenings around them perceived to be newsworthy. Dubberley (2016) typifies eyewitness media as videos, photographs and audio clips captured by individuals at the scene of a news event. These contents are the outcome of the audience assuming more active roles and contributing to the information flow by blurring the traditional boundaries between users and producers, professionals and amateurs, experts and laymen (Mortensen & Kristensen, 2013; Mortensen, 2015).

Reasons for use of Eyewitness Reports by Television Stations

Broadcast stations' reliance on eyewitness testimony is not a new phenomenon; journalists, in packaging news, carefully select the eyewitnesses' accounts that will feature in the news to represent a collective experience and to fit the conventions of news narratives. In this regard, decisions on who or what to include to bear witness to the news event rests solely on the broadcast journalist. This is done to validate the journalist's claim to the truth and also a major way for journalists to lay claim to knowing what they know, conferring on them autonomy to such knowledge claims. But, in the present-day media landscape, individuals outside the institutionalised media have increasingly assumed the role of witnesses (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009, cited in Pantti, 2015). The proliferation of digital technologies and access to information super highway – the Internet which is a converged medium, enables witnesses to package and distribute on-the-minute testimonies themselves as information purveyors. Rather than the traditional model of inviting professional journalists to cover an unfolding event, ordinary citizens are assuming the role of bearing witness all by themselves. This has given rise to the phenomenon of citizen witnessing. The products of citizen witnessing are the eyewitness images, videos and audio. In the present media landscape, 'eyewitness' is a popular lexicon that is expressed in different formats such as 'Eyewitness News', 'Eyewitness reports', 'Eyewitness photography', 'Eyewitness accounts', 'Eyewitness sport', 'You witness news', and 'Citizen eyewitness', especially in non-fiction genres of news, documentary, sports (Mortensen, 2015; Allan & Peters, 2015).

Television stations incorporate eyewitness reports primarily to enhance the immediacy and authenticity of news coverage. Eyewitness footage provides raw, unfiltered perspectives (Mortensen & Kristensen, 2013) that can engage audiences effectively, especially in crisis reporting (Ahva & Hellman, 2015; Wall and Zared, 2015). A study by Mortensen (2015) highlights that user-generated content (UGC) offers unique viewpoints and real-time information, which are invaluable during breaking news events. Additionally, the proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms has increased the availability of UGC, making it a convenient resource for news outlets. Bello (2019) aptly surmises that some major events may have gone unnoticed and unreported, if not for the presence of citizens at the scenes, equipped with digital media devices.

Alsaeedi (2021) investigated the integration of user-generated content into the news of two Arab channels, Al-Arabiya and Al-Hadath. The research adopted

methodological triangulations of semistructured interviews and content analysis of two selected programmes; I see on Al-Hadath and Your Interaction on Al-Arabiya. The study found that UGC initially, were used as supplements in breaking the news and in situations where there were no available sources, especially during crisis reporting where there were potential risks to journalists' safety or media censorship.

Source of Eyewitness Report

Broadcast stations source eyewitness content through various channels, including social media platforms, direct submissions, and collaborations with citizen journalists. Wardle and Williams (2010) note that journalists often monitor platforms like *X* (formerly *Twitter*), *Facebook*, and *YouTube* to identify and acquire relevant footage.

Procedures for Aligning Eyewitness Reports with Station Policies and Ethical Guidelines

Journalists, by their training and experience, work within ethical boundaries, as provided in the guidelines for ethical standards. These principles and practices guide the conduct of journalists in reportorial positions. As enunciated by the Nigerian Press Council, the ethics of journalism include; truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, fair play, decency, independence, courage, incorruptibility, and confidentiality (Ganiyu, 2010). To ensure that eyewitness reports conform to editorial standards, broadcast stations need to implement procedures that address accuracy, fairness, and ethical considerations. Fact-checking and verification as one of the long-standing principles of journalism must be upheld, even within the digital media environment. Thus, citizen-generated reports that are used in mainstream media productions should be taken through various verification processes.

A study conducted in Ghana by Danso (2019) reported measures put in place to gatekeep user-generated content to include; verification, training, moderation and message reconstruction. Verification mechanisms put in place for UGC in Ghana's mainstream media were that of fact-checking with multiple sources, sending their reporters to confirm the location of the story contributed by citizens and using accessible software such as Grammarly, Adobe Photoshop, Google Maps etc. In addition, citizen journalists were engaged in formal/informal training by Ghanaian media from time to time. Solicited contents were usually reconstructed to conform to the media organisation's ethical standards. Reconstruction of materials from the audience is not only done for textual

audience inputs but also for visual materials to avoid litigations. For example, informants in the study explained that mug shots of crime suspects contributed by the public were usually replaced with illustrations and cartoons of the suspects. The study found that the gatekeeping practices employed by Ghanaian news organisations were influenced and facilitated by factors of ethical/professional standards, organisational standards, cultural and legal implications. However, unlike broadcast stations in Ghana, Bello's study in 2019 found that the television stations in Nigeria did not put in place any definite or formal vetting procedures for the use of citizen eyewitness materials but mostly, common sense judgments were employed in the evaluation process.

Modes of Authenticating Eyewitness Reports

Verifying the authenticity of eyewitness reports is crucial to prevent the dissemination of false or misleading information. But, Hänska and Bode (2018) aver that there is usually a tradeoff between mainstream media's use of eyewitness materials and their professional values of truth and accuracy. Television stations thrive on the currency of information, and most of their story forms are visually driven. So, the immediacy of information and availability of footage offered by citizen-witnesses lead to compromises to either use before verification to ascertain their authenticity or for the mainstream media to distance themselves from any inaccuracies arising from the materials. For instance, CNN labels unverified eyewitness contributions as "Not vetted by CNN" and later changed to "Not verified by CNN" (Hellmueller & Li (2014, p.7). According to Singer (2014), the main concern for newsroom journalists and editors in the use of these citizen contributions is that of the identity of news contributors. Unlike traditional news sources with whom journalists have maintained contacts over time and have gained their trust in providing credible information, citizen contributors are mostly not known. Verifying their identity and determining the veracity of information may be daunting for mainstream organisations who lack the requisite technology to do so.

Theoretical Framework

The study was premised on the gatekeeping theory, which is a foundational concept in communication and media studies. The theory explains how information is selected, filtered, and presented to audiences. Developed initially by Kurt Lewin (1947) and later expanded upon by scholars such as David Manning White (1950), the gatekeeping theory focuses on the decision-making processes of "gatekeepers" such as journalists, editors, or producers who

determine what content reaches the public. The basic assumptions of the theory are that not all information can be communicated due to constraints such as time, space, and audience capacity to process information. Gatekeepers therefore act as filters, deciding which information is disseminated (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009); individuals or groups, such as journalists, editors, or producers, act as decision-makers who control the flow of information. These gatekeepers use their judgment and professional values to determine what is included or excluded from media content; decisions made by gatekeepers are not solely individual but are influenced by organizational policies, institutional norms, and the broader cultural context.

This theory is particularly relevant to this study assessing *Channels Television*'s use of eyewitness reports, as it helps explain the rationale behind the inclusion of such reports in the *Eyewitness Report* programme. Hinging this study on the gatekeeping theory provides a nuanced analysis of how *Channels Television* navigates the complexities of incorporating eyewitness reports into its news programme, *Eyewitness Report*.

Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative research design with Key Informant Interview (KII) as the research method used, which provided deep insights from information-rich sources. A purposive sampling technique was used to select key informants from the staff of the News and Current Affairs department who were involved in the *Eyewitness Report* programme. They were purposefully selected for their knowledge and depth of information on the phenomenon investigated. Four key informants were selected based on their affiliation with the programme, availability and on their willingness to participate in the study. This was in line with Leavy's (2017) submission that one of the practical parameters to consider in sampling for qualitative research is access to and availability of information-rich sources. Ethical considerations of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were taken, as well as permission to be placed on record to aid recall. The interviews were conducted between 22nd December 2023 and 5th February 2023. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the interview data.

Findings

The section provided the results based on interviews conducted with key staff of the *Eyewitness Report* Programme. This was encapsulated in four themes which were; reasons behind the programme; how eyewitness reports were sourced and objective 3 used. The procedures for making these reports conform

to ethical standards were also investigated, as well as their mode of authentication.

Reasons Behind *Channels Television's* Eyewitness Report

The findings on the reasons behind *Channels Television's* Eyewitness Report programme were described in various ways by the informants.

Addressing Coverage Gaps

Despite running a 24-hour news cycle, there were limitations in covering all these reports within regular bulletins. According to Informant 2, Eyewitness Report was conceived as a platform to fill the gap in news coverage by providing a space for reports that could not be accommodated in regular bulletins. "Some of the reports we could not cover in major and minor bulletins, we now created a platform where it can be accommodated. We look at the reports and that... where we have eyewitnesses in bulk" (informant 1).

Amplifying Eyewitness Perspectives

Informant 2 underscored the programme's purpose as a platform for presenting news stories from the perspective of eyewitnesses. "One of the reasons why we brought up the eyewitness report is that you see, when you report something in your community, what you've witnessed and you follow up, and... the story is told holistically, and those that are in one or two ways involved in it anyhow, they get to get the full story" (informant 2).

Combating Falsehoods and Verifying Claims

An informant added another layer to the reasons behind the programme by emphasising its role in combating misinformation: "...along the line, falsehood was also a major problem, you know. That was why beyond the news at 10 where we use this, we now decided to go further by creating a programme that would verify these claims. But once we had contact in any of these places, we reached out and we went to cover those stories (informant 1). This suggests the station is dedicated to ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the stories presented, which are hallmarks of journalism.

Promotion of Citizen Journalism

Additionally, Informant 3 provided insight into the deliberate strategy behind incorporating citizen eyewitness accounts into the program, emphasizing its commitment to participatory journalism and enriching news content with diverse perspectives. "The integration of citizen-eye witness accounts is a deliberate

strategy within our programme *Eyewitness Report*, enriching our news content and reflecting our commitment to participatory journalism” (Informant 3).

Overall, these findings illustrate how the *Eyewitness Report* programme on *Channels Television* serves as a conduit for citizen participation in news production, facilitates the dissemination of diverse perspectives and aims to effect positive. This reflects a dedication to ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the stories presented by societal change through storytelling and advocacy.

Mode of sourcing and using citizen eyewitness reports

The findings from the interviews shed light on the mode of sourcing and utilising citizen-eye-witness reports within the context of the *Eyewitness Report* programme.

Direct Eyewitness Testimonies/ Public Participation

Informant 2 elucidated the programme's ethos by emphasising the significance of allowing eyewitness reporters to directly narrate their experiences, thus enhancing the credibility of the stories shared: "So in eyewitness Report, we allow the eyewitness reporter, to tell the story, what he has seen, and the account of what he has witnessed on ground anywhere at any time” (informant 2). This highlights a fundamental aspect of the program's methodology, which prioritises firsthand accounts and grassroots perspectives over traditional journalistic intermediaries.

Furthermore, informant 2 elaborated on the programme's interactive platform, which encourages public participation through the submission of multimedia content captured via mobile devices: "We created a platform on a TV app where there's a session called eyewitness, where we advertise to let the public know that when you have or capture anything with your mobile phone or mobile devices, you can upload those pictures or videos to that platform." This demonstrates the programme's proactive engagement with digital technologies to facilitate the democratisation of media production and dissemination

Additionally, informant 3 underscored the programme's strategic utilisation of diverse digital platforms to actively source citizen-eye witness accounts: "We actively source citizen-eye witness accounts through diverse digital platforms, encouraging submissions via our website and mobile applications" (informant 3). This reflected a multifaceted approach to audience engagement, which leverages the ubiquity of digital technologies to foster inclusivity and accessibility.

Verification and Follow-up

Informant 1 underscored the programme's commitment to authenticity and credibility by highlighting the rigorous verification processes employed: "When we receive pictures or videos from members of the public, we examine them closely and acknowledge their submission on the news by stating, 'an eyewitness sent this picture regarding such and such'" (informant 1). This emphasis on verification serves to uphold journalistic integrity and mitigate the risks associated with misinformation and manipulation in citizen-generated content. One crucial aspect highlighted was the emphasis on follow-up, as elucidated by informant 2. According to this informant, "We can ask the person to... when we're calling that person we can ask the person to do a live video... and then show us something like a signboard to show that you're in so so community and all that." This indicated a proactive approach involving direct engagement with eyewitnesses, requesting live video footage to verify their claims and establish their location.

The qualitative analysis of the processes involved in using citizen-eye witness reports within the programme *Eyewitness Report* revealed a meticulous approach characterised by thorough verification, proactive follow-up, and collaborative decision-making. Informant 2 highlighted the initial filtering process, wherein uploaded content is scrutinised based on provided details such as location and contact information: "But we had to filter this programme or these reports... when you upload pictures and videos, you tell us where these pictures are coming from, a brief description of it and then include your contact" (informant 2). This step serves as a crucial foundation for subsequent investigative efforts.

Moreover, informant 2 and informant 1 elaborated on the extensive follow-up procedures undertaken to corroborate the authenticity of reported incidents: "We follow up on those stories to see how true those stories are" (informant 2); "We reach out to them and we connect to them and then follow up on those stories to see how true those stories are" (informant 1). In another development, the same informant further explained "Then, but if we have to follow up on those pictures, we further make enquiries, we further make research, we find out, we go further, we send people ahead to help us verify. Our correspondents that are spread across, we call them; they will help us to call people in these areas to find out." This commitment to verification underscored

the programme's dedication to ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the information presented to the audience.

Furthermore, informant 1 emphasised the importance of providing a comprehensive perspective by soliciting input from all relevant parties: "We get all sides of the story." This inclusive approach helps to contextualise reported events and foster a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Informant 3 provided insights into the decision-making process behind incorporating eyewitness reports into news coverage, emphasising the importance of verification protocols, collaboration with citizen journalists, and editorial discussions: "We have established verification protocols," "We foster collaborative relationships with citizen journalists," and "The decision to incorporate eyewitness reports undergoes discussion in editorial meetings" (informant 3).

Overall, the findings underscored a rigorous and multifaceted approach to sourcing and utilising citizen-eye witness reports within the programme *Eyewitness Report*. Through systematic verification processes, proactive follow-up measures, and collaborative decision-making, the data suggests that *Channels Television*, through its *Eyewitness Report* programme, strives to uphold journalistic integrity while amplifying the voices of ordinary citizens in the news narrative.

Procedures for making citizen eyewitness reports conform to the station's policies and ethical guidelines.

The findings on the procedures for making citizen eyewitness reports conform to the station's policies and ethical guidelines within the programme *Eyewitness Report* revealed a robust framework characterised by adherence to journalistic ethics, meticulous verification processes and proactive engagement with all relevant parties. For instance, informant 2 emphasised commitment to journalistic ethics on the programme, stating that:

We make sure that we, as much as possible, are being guided by journalistic ethics, yes, so that the regulators, too, will not call us to order regarding the use of certain language and abusive words... we make sure that the report is balanced, improved, well investigated...whatever we are covering as eyewitness report, we take consideration of the things I've mentioned (informant 2).

In another instance, the same informant stressed that "No matter what the eye witness is bringing up, anything that does not conform to our standards with the ethics of journalism, we try to remove it... we verify before we do follow up"

and “when you send a picture to us if we know that the pictures are not too gory, we use them, and then we'll tell it the way that it was sent by the eyewitness reporter so that we can also exonerate ourselves from reporting falsehood”.

Similarly, informant 1 shed more light on adherence to ethical guidelines on the *Eyewitness Report*: “We also go to verify some of those claims. We get clarity before we eventually take it to town. That’s why we don't really have much cases of litigation. You can’t ... you barely will hear people say ‘*Channels* published wrong stories’, because quality is very, sacrosanct”.

These statements highlight the programme's proactive approach to fact-checking and ensuring the reliability of reported incidents. Moreover, informant 3 outlined the multifaceted approach employed by the programme in ensuring conformity: “When considering the inclusion of eyewitness reports, our editorial team conducts a thorough evaluation. We assess the credibility of the source, the quality of the information, and its alignment with journalistic standards. This step ensures that the content meets the criteria for accuracy, fairness, and relevance” (informant 3). In another instance, informant 3 elucidated further on the programme’s reliance on editorial guidance for conformity:

At our station, we prioritise ethical and legal considerations when handling citizen-witnessed reports... we navigate potential ethical dilemmas by making informed decisions that align with our ethical standards. To mitigate legal risks, we follow a stringent legal compliance process, collaborating with experts to ensure adherence to regulations and copyright laws.”

This comprehensive framework suggests that each citizen eyewitness report undergoes rigorous scrutiny to meet journalistic standards and ethical obligations. In conclusion, the findings illuminate the procedures and ethical considerations involved in making eyewitness reports from members of the public conform to the station's policies within the *Eyewitness Report* programme.

Mode of Authenticating Eyewitness materials from audience members

The findings provided insights into the mode of authenticating materials from audience members within the programme, as delineated by the interviewees. Informant 2 clarified that submitted materials undergo verification processes to ensure authenticity: “We don't just use it immediately; we try to verify... so that it will not sound like those videos that are evidence are just make-up or pranks.” This approach enhances transparency and credibility by preventing the dissemination of false or misleading content. In addition, the same informant emphasised on eyewitness input in the authentication process:

The beauty of that eyewitness report is when you send in videos, not just pictures, and the video captures you, the eyewitness in the situation-that is true. We always rate those videos very high, where the eyewitness reporter is inside to credit capturing. So that's as much as we go to verify (informant 2).

Similarly, informant 1 underscored the place of verification in authenticating citizen eyewitness reports: "We now follow up on those things. You know, once we see some that are really catchy that we feel might be true, we even call, we make calls, you know, just to make sure they are true."

Informant 1 further expounded on the mode of authentication for citizen eyewitness reports thus:

For pictures and videos sent in, we make sure that the eyewitness team follow up, or even our correspondents in some of these states. We eventually tell them, 'okay, there is this story that came in from this person. Follow up on that story. Let's be sure that those stories are true' (informant 1).

Additionally, informant 3 outlined the programme's commitment to ensuring authenticity and accuracy through various verification practices: "Our rigorous verification process begins with source authentication, meticulously evaluating the identity and reliability of contributors. The editorial team then engages in thorough cross-referencing, fact-checking, and geo-location verification to validate the reported details."

In summary, *Channels Television*, within the context of the *Eyewitness Report*, employs a multi-faceted approach to authenticate materials from audience members, including verification through correspondents and eyewitness teams, utilisation of specialised tools for verification, adherence to ethical considerations and transparency. These processes collectively contribute to the station's efforts to ensure the authenticity and reliability of audience-contributed materials for their *Eyewitness Report* programme.

Discussion of Findings

The study, which was to assess *Channels Television's* use of citizen eyewitness reports was discussed in line with four objectives, from which sub-themes were generated. These provided rich insights into how *Channels Television* utilised eyewitness reports in the *Eyewitness Report* programme. The key findings were presented as follows:

Reasons behind Channels Television Eyewitness Reports: the findings from the interviews indicated that *Eyewitness Report* serves to fill the gap in news coverage by providing space for reports that could not be accommodated in regular news bulletins. The findings revealed that the programme aimed to present news stories from the perspective of eyewitnesses, empowering citizens to share their own stories firsthand, thereby effecting positive societal change. This suggests *Channels Television* has embraced participatory news culture which, Engelke (2023) argues, is the most significant innovation in broadcast newsrooms.

Mode of sourcing and using citizen eyewitness reports: The study findings indicated eyewitness reporters were encouraged and given a platform to narrate their accounts, ensuring credibility and grassroots perspectives. The programme actively engages with the public through various platforms, while prioritising quality control and credibility checks. This finding resonates with Alsaedi (2021), who found that there was an increased value being placed on audience participation in the news hence, television stations are expanding their news productions to accommodate citizen-generated content. This strategy of soliciting and coopting citizen materials into the *Eyewitness Report* could boost audience trust in the news programme, as scholars opine that collaborating with the audience was germane to improving public trust in news media (Nelson & Schimdt, 2022).

Also, the findings revealed the programme followed meticulous verification processes, proactive follow-up measures, and collaborative decision-making to ensure the authenticity and reliability of reported incidents. The study findings suggest eyewitness materials undergo thorough scrutiny before being incorporated into the news programme by *Channels Television*. The finding is consistent with that of Danso (2019) and Wongrujira (2020) where broadcast newsrooms in Ghana and Thailand subject citizen-contributed content to various journalistic procedures. This indicates broadcast stations are taking cognisance of their post-production accountability to whatever they put out to their audience, particularly, content produced by persons without journalistic training and ideals. Thus, pre-broadcast vetting procedures are used to mitigate obvious limitations of citizen eyewitness reports.

Procedures for making eyewitness reports conform to the station's policies and ethical guidelines: Moreover, the findings revealed a consensus on the station's commitment to upholding journalistic ethics and ensuring fairness, transparency

and accuracy in news coverage. The programme emphasises adherence to ethical guidelines in the utilisation of citizen eyewitness reports through meticulous verification and active engagement with all relevant parties to ensure balance in reported eyewitness accounts. This indicated that *Channels Television*, being one of the oldest private television stations in Nigeria, was maintaining the core values of journalism in its inclusion of citizen eyewitness reports. This finding is in tandem with Buchman (2014). The study reported that television stations' news directors subject citizen-generated content to different vetting procedures before using them.

Mode of authenticating materials from audience members: Finally, the findings suggest that submitted materials undergo verification processes to ensure authenticity, with citizen contributors playing a significant role in authentication. From the findings, the programme prioritises videos where the eyewitness is inside the situation, lending greater credibility to the content. Overall, these findings demonstrate a comprehensive approach to the station's integration of citizen eyewitness reports into the programme *Eyewitness Report*. These findings are in line with that of Hellmueller and Li (2014), which reported that Cable News Network subjected contributions from their 'ireporters' to gatekeeping processes where only vetted materials were incorporated into the station's main newscasts. Also, these findings align with Wongrujira (2020) where Thai broadcast stations' procedures for authenticating citizen-witnessed materials revolved around the citizen contributors themselves.

Conclusion

This study sought to assess *Channels Television's* use of citizen eyewitness reports. The findings from the key informant interviews shed light on Channels Television's meticulous approach to incorporating citizen eyewitness reports into its news programming. The reasons for the station's use of eyewitness contributions ranged from filling news coverage gaps to embracing innovation. In addition, the study unveiled that *Eyewitness Report* facilitates audience engagement by encouraging participation through diverse platforms while emphasising credibility and quality checks. Thus, the programme reflects a commitment to authenticity, credibility, and adherence to ethical standards through rigorous verification processes, proactive engagement with contributors, and adherence to journalistic guidelines. The study concluded that adherence to journalistic guidelines in the context of the *Eyewitness Report* demonstrates a commendable approach to incorporating citizen voices into the news agenda.

The study therefore recommended that *Channels Television* provide clear guidelines for citizen contributors and communicate the same to the public in addition to its message soliciting eyewitness contributions. Also, the station should communicate the verification process to audiences. This will further bolster public trust in the programme.

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