

From Gatekeeping to Forensic Truth-Seeking: User-Generated Content and the Verification Crisis in the Age of Synthetic Media

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Abstract

The spread of digital technologies has effectively altered the news-production ecosystem, as it turns traditional audiences into so-called produsers who not only consume but also create and share content that is no longer limited to the boundaries between the realms of formal work and study. Whereas other fields like Marketing have embraced with ease the use of User-Generated Content (UGC) as part of sustainable business models, journalism has been caught in an endless dilemma between commercial demands and professional ethics. This paper critically reviews the history of UGC, which began as an early techno-utopian pattern of positioning UGC as a global electronic agora, but soon transitions into the present-day state of an epistemic crisis created by platformization and synthetic media. The paper conceptualizes UGC using a multidimensional model that classifies the practices of the newsrooms into four main typologies: unsolicited, solicited, expeditious, and audience-watchdog content. It is clear in the analysis that algorithmic gatekeeping in combination with the resulting emergent newsfluencer economy has undermined the editorial discretion traditionally part of journalism, putting metrics of engagement ahead of civic quality. Moreover, generative AI and deepfakes have created a Liar Dividend of reality, in which the ontological integrity of reality is challenged in a systematic manner. The paper argues that journalistic legitimacy requires paradigm shift whereby traditional gatekeeping should be changed with forensic truth-seeking. The newsrooms can combat infocide and the flood of fake news by employing Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) methodologies and forensic re-creation. Lastly, the paper emphasizes the necessity of the trauma-informed newsroom policy to protect the psychological health of the journalists in the context of the raw, graphic UGC that has become a hallmark of the Wild West of information production today.

Key words: User-generated Content (UGC), Forensic Journalism, Produsage, Verification, Synthetic Media, Digital Transformation, Trauma-Informed Journalism.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution of the late 20th-century brought about a paradigm shift in the world news media where the production cycle of news turned into a so-called superhighway of information and dissolved into a collaborative circuit. User-

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Generated Content (UGC) is the core of this transformation that has disrupted the conventional roles in the relationship between media producers and consumers. Although other disciplines like marketing and computer science have easily adopted UGC due to its economic capabilities, its role in the field of journalism has been a location of high professional and epistemological conflict. Journalism is also not the same industry as it operates with a dual mandate: the need to make money and the need to serve the public good, and the operationalization of UGC is a complicated issue to both academic and practitioners. The definition of UGC in journalistic terms has been elusive to date, as it is frequently obscured by a wide variety of terms that can be used to describe it such as produsage, part participatory journalism, as well as audience material and crowdsourcing. Although the Organization Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides a base definition of creative effort and publication beyond professional routines, the factual situation in newsrooms is more specific. The locus of control of the information is shifting as social media posts, live streams, and unsolicited eyewitness footage are becoming the primary information sources that the news organizations need to make their decision making. This transformation has spawned such techno-utopian concepts as a democratized, worldly electronic agora, but it has also brought with it the challenge of techno-populism about the real extent of empowering the citizen. This paper analyzes the conceptual and procedural implications of UGC within contemporary news production. It goes beyond the history of audience contribution like the blank page of the 18th century to comment on the reading and discusses the use of contemporary digital technologies to support a culture of produsage that dismantles the producer/consumer dichotomy. Nevertheless, the emergence of the so-called active consumer also has some serious threats, namely when it comes to the discipline of verification. Since truth and accuracy are the god terms of the profession, when unverified content is integrated into the news cycle, the demand for speed collides directly with the foundational ethics of journalism. Through the operationalization of UGC using a multidimensional prism, the present study aims to discern how the incorporation of the user voices is transforming the power, practices, and the democratic promise of journalism in a world of unparalleled connectivity. By nature, the current paper is a conceptual paper based on a theoretical synthesis. Rather than presenting empirical or statistical information, it takes the form of a critical narrative review of the interdisciplinary literature that has been produced in classical journalism studies, platformization, generative AI, and forensic verification practices. The paper aims to offer some answers to two fundamental research questions: (1) how does the emergence of synthetic media structure the idea of a mainstream newsroom's gatekeeping authority, and (2) what conceptual mechanisms

are at play in the shift from a passive to a forensic, active production of truth in the digital public square?

2. Methodological Orientation and Scope

To map the paradigm shift from editorial gatekeeping to forensic journalism, this paper utilizes an integrative conceptual review approach. Because the landscape of synthetic media and generative AI is evolving rapidly, traditional empirical methodologies often lag behind the conceptual crises facing modern newsrooms. Therefore, this study synthesizes foundational media communication frameworks with contemporary technological developments to construct a new theoretical baseline. The scope of the literature and case materials reviewed covers the evolutionary arc of user-generated content (UGC) over two distinct decades: the "participatory media era" (mid-2000s to late 2010s) characterized by text-and-image-based citizen journalism, and the "synthetic media era" (2020 to present day) defined by deepfakes, large language models, and algorithmic amplification. Literature was selected based on its relevance to three interconnected domains: institutional gatekeeping theories, computational propaganda, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) verification methodologies.

3. Operationalization of the term UGC

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the definition of user-generated content (UGC). In other words, what does UGC mean in the context of journalism? In other disciplines, such as marketing, advertising, computer science, information science, and tourism management, UGC is being widely utilized, and its potential is being explored in search of new business models.¹ In Bruns's words:

UGC is now widely used and accepted across virtually all areas of the creative industries, and has also led to the emergence of a range of new business models both for hosting the content, and for enabling users themselves to monetize their content.²

However, unlike other professions, journalism is, ideally, not exclusively slanted towards business. The researcher is not disregarding the fact that some form of monetizing journalism is crucial for its continuing existence; however, in order to understand journalistic practice in relation to UGC, it is essential to operationalize a definition of UGC from the context of news making, which is the central focus of the

¹ Terry Daugherty, Matthew S. Eastin, and Laura Bright, "Exploring Consumer Motivations for Creating User-generated Content," *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 8(2), 2008, pp. 16-25, doi:10.1080/15252019.2008.10722139.

² Axel Bruns, "User-generated Content," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, eds. K. B. Jensen and R. T. Craig (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), pp. 1-5.

current pcedaper. Due to the great diversity and wide usability of the created content, a crystalized definition for UGC has yet to be agreed upon by journalism scholars and practitioners. Moreover, the epistemological position of the different fields makes the term ambiguous, or in some cases, even indecipherable. However, there exists a notable amount of previous attempts in the field of communication and journalism that can be traced to assist in a more comprehensible demarcation of the concept and practice of UGC. A decade ago, Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger considered, “UGC is something that must fit into the routines and rhythms of newsrooms and traditional professional journalism”.³ This definition does not offer much insight into the nature of UGC, but rather reflects the power and the control journalists have historically held over news content. One of the first scholarly attempts at defining UGC is found in the efforts of Axel Burns, who later extended his idea by coining the term “produsage,” a portmanteau of production and usage. By his definition:

UGC is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially co-created by “users” that is, by contributors working outside of conventional professional environments. (Burns, 2016, p. 2).⁴

From Burns’s definition, UGC can be understood as the efforts of amateurs who involve themselves in the content making process. Moreover, the definition offers an insight into the environment where UGC is being produced. However, Wardle and William (2010) have expressed dissatisfaction with the term UGC, believing that it is not an appropriate term for encompassing the practices of the citizen in the news making process. Rather, they instead proposed the term ‘audience materials’ to describe the range of activities that audiences perform in the field of journalism. To support their proposition, they reasoned that the concept of the “user” better aligns with online media, and that in the case of broadcast media, which produces contents for television and radio, “user” is not an accurate term. Similarly, generating an independent video clip or image and distributing it via social media does not convey the same meaning as commenting on or tweeting about current news and events. Finally, they raised a question about what they perceive to be a problematic interpretation of the idea of ‘content’. In their view, there are some materials, such as collaborative journalism, and expert comments on the blogosphere that do not fully resonate with the idea of ‘content’.⁵ Because they have only examined the case of

³ World Editor Forum, *Trends in Newsroom 2008: Innovative Ideas for Newspaper in the Digital Age* (World Association of Newspapers, 2008).

⁴ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁵ Claire Wardle and Andrew Williams, “Beyond User-generated Content: A Production Study Examining the Ways in Which UGC is Used at the BBC,” *Media, Culture &*

BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), and defined UGC through the lens of BBC's news production strategy, the proposed term 'audience material' might not be applicable to other media platforms, or for other media markets, and this a major drawback of their proposition. However, to put a label on citizens' activities in relation to journalism, recent literature shows that the majority of scholars have affirmed themselves with the term UGC, and it is currently being used to cover a variety of meanings.⁶ For instance, citizen journalism, participatory journalism, crowdsourcing, and produsage.⁷ By examining the news production process Harrison (2010) found four forms of UGC primarily used in current newsrooms.⁸ These are: a) UGC as a form of unsolicited news story, where UGC helps to break or create news story; b) UGC as a form of solicited content where journalists seek information to extend the depth of the existing story; c) UGC as a form of expeditious content for specific items and features which help the journalist for planning stories; and d) UGC as a form of audience watchdog content which can be referred to the audience's reaction on the news contents (p. 244). Aside from these scholarly efforts, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also attempted to define UGC on the basis of three indicators: UGC must be made publicly available over the Internet, UGC must reflect a certain amount of creative effort, and UGC must be created outside of professional routines and practices.⁹

Trying to reduce the degree of ambiguity intrinsic in these overlapping terms, this paper is carried out using a synthesized analytic system. Combining the structural sources of the OECD (i.e. publicly available content), the creative effort of the author and non-professional creation) with the functional types of contributions as Harrison presents them (unsolicited, solicited, expeditious, watchdog) we map the boundaries of user-generated content not as a block, but as a spectrum of the types of contributions, who contributes, and to which the intensity of verification is aimed. In order to systematically categorize these emerging shifts, this paper synthesizes and applies Harrison's (2010) four-fold conceptual typology to the

Society, Vol. 32(5), 2010, pp. 781-799, doi: 10.1177/0163443710373953.

- 6 Teresa K. Naab and Annika Sehl, "Studies of User-generated Content: A Systematic Review", *Journalism*, Vol. 18(10), 2016, pp. 1256-1273, doi:10.1177/1464884916673557.
- 7 Axel Bruns, "Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework for User-led Content Creation," *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity & Cognition*, 2007, pp. 99-106, doi:10.1145/1254960.1254975.
- 8 Jackie Harrison, "User-generated Content and Gatekeeping at the BBC Hub", *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 11(2), 2010, pp. 243-256, doi:10.1080/14616700903290593.
- 9 Seth C. Lewis, "The Tension Between Professional Control and Open Participation", *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 15(6), 2012, pp. 836-866, doi:10.1080/1369118x.2012.674150.

modern, decentralized forensic environment, mapping out the verification intensity required for each category.

Table 1: Analytical Framework of the Four-Fold UGC Typology.

UGC Typology Category	Functional Description (Harrison, 2010)	Modern Verification Focus & Intensity Required
Unsolicited Content	Spontaneous eyewitness material that breaks or creates a news story.	Maximum (Forensic): Requires deepfake auditing, chronolocation, and satellite triangulation.
Solicited Content	Material intentionally sought out by journalists to extend the depth of an existing story.	High (Corroborative): Focuses on source identity verification and digital metadata analysis.
Expeditious Content	Specific items or crowdsourced features that help journalists plan future stories.	Moderate (Analytical): Focuses on parsing algorithmic trends and filtering out bot-driven propaganda.
Audience Watchdog	Public reactions, corrections, and meta-commentary regarding published news content.	Collaborative (Open-Source): Focuses on post-publication fact-checking networks.

While an empirical validation of these shifting audience dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, the conceptual framework proposed here lays the groundwork for future empirical research. Future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative clickstream data with qualitative audience interviews to measure how users navigate the tension between trust and skepticism when encountering synthetic media.¹⁰

4. The Evolutionary Arc of Audience Participation

4.1 Theorizing the Participatory Turn: From Techno-Utopianism to Global Producersage

The rise of UGC facilitated by the internet has put forward a plethora of questions regarding the role of the users and the effects of UGC on mainstream journalism. One such question is asking how users are taking part in the news creation process. Another asks about precisising the properties and natures of produced contents. Is the emergence and integration of UGC blurring the lines between media (consumer) and media (producer)? Is it a real paradigm shift of authoritativeness away from the mainstream media blocks, or is it just a way of gathering content for their news

¹⁰ OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), *Participative Web: User-created Content*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.oecd.org/internet/ieconomy/38393115.pdf>.

outlets without investing money? The above question perhaps highlights the inevitable uncertainty regarding the inevitable presence of UGC in the media landscape, and particularly, that of the west. At the same time, they serve as a reminder for the importance of extending journalism scholarship that has a specific emphasis on emerging market perspectives in places where the expansion and proliferation of the internet and the use of UGC are growing hand in hand. Although the bulk of the modern literature on the subject would lead us to predict the Western form of institution, one represented by the BBC or The Guardian, it is our responsibility to recognize that, in fact, the so-called epistemic crisis is a global phenomenon. This transformation of the newsroom into networked journalism is particularly acute in the developing markets, where the spread of the internet is systematically surpassing the parallel establishment of established media regulatory structures. Hence, any serious theoretical critique should include these diverse geopolitical attributes such that the constructions of the democratized electronic agoras move beyond their western digital privilege source pools and become veritable in the global information superhighway.

The last quarter of the 20th century has experienced some significant shifts in the modes of news production, dissemination and access due to the appearance and maturation of digital technologies that have led to critical changes in the journalism industry. If we analyze the pedigrees of digital technological evolution, we can find that the diffusion of the internet triggered the potential of content making possibility from the users' end, a testament for the ubiquitous presence of the users. These new possibilities expedited the birth of techno-utopian theories with the ethos of bolstering access to information for all; overcoming the constraints time and space.¹¹ These theories cemented the notion that digital communications allow for an information "superhighway," which is a term popularized by Al Gore. Other terms to describe this techno- utopian ideology include McLuhan's "global village" and the Castells's concept of "global electronic agora".¹² According to Carpentier (2011), the prerequisite to such techno-utopian theories was an intrinsic access to information and interaction and, thus, the digital divide or the inability of accessing information emerged as a counter-discourse from the critical circuits of these theories.¹³ The nature of interaction and the practice of interactivity has become a buzzword since the onset of the 21st century, and therefore multiple intellectual efforts were undertaken to characterize the patterns and nature of interactions to trace their impact on the media industry as well as on the audience. However, the techno-utopian theories could not

11 Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 26

12 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

13 Nico Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Theoretical Framework out of the Laboratory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

emancipate themselves from the accusation of “technopopulism”, as the critics argued that regarding the strengthening democracy, these interactions or engagements were futile attempts to empower the citizens.¹⁴

The close of the 1990s is another turning point in the discourse of interactivity with the entrance of web 2.0, as it made, remade, or unmade the theories connected with audiences’ participation. Web 2.0 enables audiences to take part in the content creation process, the responsibility and privilege of which was once exclusively allocated to journalists. Continuous modification of web technologies eased the collaborative production process among users and helped leap towards a participatory culture that gave birth to “produsage”, a novel characteristic of the news making process. According to Burns (2007), produsage can be referred as “the production of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge”(P. 101).¹⁵ The essence of produsage lies in the practice of making content with a certain degree of creative effort and breaking the banal relationship of producer-consumer, which was before based on binary opposition.

4.2 The Evolution of Audience Participation: From Passive Consumers to Networked Producers

Audience’s participation in the process of news making is a growing body of research in the field of Journalism and Mass Communication. To a certain extent, earlier attempts at viewing audiences’ participation were primarily based on the emancipatory and democratic potential of the technology.¹⁶ However, recent literature on audience’s participation suggest that it should rather be understood “in a broader cultural sense” that goes beyond a “purely political meaning of democratic participation”.¹⁷ In this connection, authors such as Hermes (2006) argue that the concept of ‘citizenship’ is more relevant in understanding the participatory nature of the audience in the context of rapidly changing media ecology. He further claims that the internet may or may not produce a so-called ‘new’ citizen, though goes on to say that it certainly does help citizens to produce new practices.¹⁸ The nature of these

14 Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

15 Burns, *Produsage: Towards a broader framework for user-led content creation*, p. 101

16 Denis McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000).

17 Steve Paulussen, Ari Heinonen, David Domingo, and Thorsten Quandt, “Doing it Together: Citizen Participation in the Professional News Making Process,” *Observatorio Journal*, Vol. 1(3), 2007, pp. 131-154.

18 Joke Hermes, “Citizenship in the Age of the Internet,” *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 21(3), 2006, pp. 295-309, doi: 10.1177/0267323106066634.

practices is more inclined towards social rather than political participation. Furthermore, their appearances are incidental rather than structural which is evident in crisis reporting.¹⁹ Deuze also identifies some traits in this venture. For him, the underlying tone of these participatory practices is “voluntarist, incoherent, and perhaps solely fueled by private interests” (2006, p. 68).²⁰ Similarly, Jenkins who typifies citizens as consumers, points out some features of the contemporary user; in his words:

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumer is active. If old consumers were predictable and stationary, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or even media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, then new consumers are more socially connected. If old consumers were seen as compliant, then new consumers are resistant, taking media into their own hands. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, they are now noisy and public (2004, p.37).²¹

The fundamental differences between these two paradigms are summarized in the table below, which contrasts the operational logic of traditional journalism with the new networked environment as it moves from centralized verification toward decentralized, collaborative accountability.

Table 2: From Gatekeeping to Gatewatching (Paradigm Comparison).

Feature	Traditional Journalism (The "Old Consumer")	Networked Journalism (The "Produser")
Role of Audience	Passive, predictable, stationary	Active, migratory, socially connected
Information Flow	Linear, controlled by gatekeepers	Collaborative circuit, multi-directional
Verification	Pre-publication (Internal)	Post-publication (Open/Collaborative)
Primary Value	Exclusivity and Authority	Immediacy and Connectivity
Main Risk	Lack of access/diversity	Techno-populism and inaccuracy

Audience participation in journalistic activities is not a recent phenomenon and it cannot just be attributed as an outcome of the techno boom. Indeed, the timeline of media history shows that the presence of audiences' participation is rooted in the

19 Jane Johnston, “Social News = Journalism Evolution?,” *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 4(7), 2016, pp. 899–909, doi:10.1080/21670811.2016.1168709

20 Mark Deuze, “Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture,” *The Information Society*, Vol. 22(2), 2006, pp. 63-75, doi: 10.1080/01972240600567170.

21 Henry Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7(1), 2004, pp. 33-43.

18th-century British press, where putting a blank page for readers comment was a common practice.²² Compared with the past, there is no doubt to the assertion that digital technologies offer an extensive and diversified space for audiences. According to Nielson (2014), “readers have always had the ability to give journalists feedback, but the new technology made possible instant, global access that could be seen by all users and designers” (p. 473).²³ These technological advancements have not only the ability to bring about change in journalism practices, but also the capability of extending the journalism vocabulary by adding new terms such as citizen journalism, participatory journalism, grassroots journalism, meta-journalism, crowdsourcing, network journalism, reciprocal journalism, social journalism, amateur footage and many more. However, while these terms are slightly different in terms of their practices, all of them try to redefine the conventional relationship between media and audience. Also, at one common junction, these (para) journalistic mission meet with the dream of a digital world where the accomplishment of the project of democratization of journalism is realized. This is envisioned as a world where anyone, at any time, from any place, can freely publish their contents without intermediaries. As the United States is the harbinger of many journalistic innovations, it comes as no surprise that the concept of public journalism emerged there in the 1990s with the mission of connecting journalists and communities to encourage public dialogue to solve community problems that were aborted by mainstream journalists. Eksterowicz (2000) anatomizes the core concept of public journalism and viewed that, “public journalism emphasizes citizen participation as a virtue that eventually enhances representative government. It is a democratic and participatory movement” (p. 17).²⁴ The proponents of public journalism surmise that the audiences’ participation is essential in the news making process in order to strengthen the democratic culture of the country. Numerous attempts at theorizing and executing this practice paved the way for integrating peoples’ engagement in making news. This also helps to shape the path forward for developing public journalism with the brands of citizen journalism, participatory journalism, civic journalism, grassroots journalism, social journalism, reciprocal journalism, and so forth.

22 Alfred Hermida, “Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism,” *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 4(3), 2010, pp. 297-308, doi:10.1080/17512781003640703.

23 Carolyn E. Nielsen, “Coproduction or Cohabitation: Are Anonymous Online Comments on Newspaper Websites Shaping News Content?,” *New Media & Society*, Vol. 16(3), 2014, pp. 470-487, doi:10.1177/1461444813487958.

24 Anthony J. Eksterowicz, “The History and Development of Public Journalism,” in *Public Journalism and Political Knowledge*, eds. Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp. 3-20.

In recent times, the news environment has changed in such a way where the exclusivity of the control of news making has somehow shifted away from the professional journalistic end.²⁵ The reasons for this shift resonates in Russell's words, "members of various publics make journalism material that intersects, mixes and is distributed to a new heightened degree" (2011, p. 1).²⁶ Similarly, Picard (2010) argues that the 'locus of control' over news content has changed due to the emergence of citizen involvement in the practice of journalism (i.e., news making).²⁷ However, Schudson's (1998) view contradicts Picard's position in this line of discussion, arguing that in the process of the democratization of journalism, there have been historical attempts at the creation of some form of citizen journalism, public journalism with a high aspiration of users' engagement is news making but at long last, those attempts were proven ineffectual and the professional journalistic control over news making remains constant.²⁸ Interestingly, some media scholars have positioned themselves in between Picard and Schudson's views. For instance, according to Nip (2006), there is a certain association between the emergence of the internet and the idea of users' engagement in the act of journalism.²⁹ However, that association merely pushes the idea of users' engagement into another phase where authoritative control over the content becomes much more harmonious between users and the producers.³⁰ Several studies have tried to understand the role of the UGC in the context of crisis reporting because the nature of the information produced by users creates significant information verification challenges for mainstream media. Vis. F (2011) pointed out that content should be handled very delicately in situations where news organizations have no choice but to gather information from citizen reporters due to the embargo on live coverage, or in cases

25 Ike Picone, Cédric Courtois, and Steve Paulussen, "When News is Everywhere: Understanding Participation, Cross-mediality and Mobility in Journalism from a Radical User Perspective," *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 9(1), 2014, pp. 35-49, doi: 10.1080/17512786.2014.928464.

26 Adrienne Russell, *Networked: A Contemporary History of News in Transition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

27 Robert G. Picard, *Value Creation and the Future of News Organizations: Why and How Journalism Must Change to Remain Relevant in the Twenty-First Century* (Lisbon: Editora Media XXI, 2010).

28 Michael Schudson, "The Public Journalism Movement and Its Problems," in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics*, eds. Doris Graber, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1998), pp. 132-149.

29 Joyce Y. M. Nip, "Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 7(2), 2006, pp. 212-236, doi:10.1080/14616700500533528.

30 Paulussen et al., "Doing it Together," p. 131.

of breaking news that demands instant coverage.³¹ While user generated content is showing some opportunities for traditional journalism, it is simultaneously the source of some potential risks. Lee's study (2016), found that for news organizations the most concerning factor relating to the use of user-generated content is accuracy. The dangers of sourcing or distributing fake information on social media without proper fact checking became the most widespread issued of concern.³² Zelizer describes (2004), facts, truth and reality are the "god terms" in journalism. As professionals, journalists have established their jurisdictional authority to claim themselves as the legitimate producer of news.³³ The discipline of verification as the core power of this claim clearly distinguishes journalism from other forms of communication. Through the discipline of verification, journalists determine the truth, accuracy, or validity of news events, establishing their jurisdiction over the ability to objectively parse reality, thus also claiming a special kind of authority and status.³⁴ Users' participation in the news making process through the instant, online dissemination of video clips, photos or tweets challenges the ideology of traditional journalism.³⁵ The development of social networks for real-time news and information sharing, and the integration of user-generated content in the news media creates tensions for a profession based on a discipline of verification.³⁶ Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) outline the traits or values that contribute to the professional self-definition, declaring the discipline of verification as the essence of journalism.³⁷ Discussing professional identity, Singer (2003) emphasizes that one of the most widely recognized codes of journalism ethics in the United States urges journalists to

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- 31 Farida Vis, "Twitter as a Reporting Tool for Breaking News: Journalists Tweeting the 2011 UK Riots," *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 1(1), 2013, pp. 27-47, doi:10.1080/21670811.2012.741316.
 - 32 Jayeon Lee, "Opportunity or Risk? How News Organizations Frame Social Media in Their Guidelines for Journalists," *The Communication Review*, Vol. 19(2), 2016, pp. 106-127, doi:10.1080/10714421.2016.1161328.
 - 33 Barbie Zelizer, "When Facts, Truth, and Reality are God-terms: On Journalism's Uneasy Place in Cultural Studies," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1(1), 2004, pp. 100-119, doi:10.1080/1479142042000180953.
 - 34 Alfred Hermida and Neil Thurman, "Comments Please: How the British News Media is Struggling with User Generated Content," paper presented at the 8th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, USA, April 30-31, 2007, <http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2007/papers/Hermida.pdf>.
 - 35 Mark Deuze, "Professional Identity in a Participatory Media Culture," in *Journalism Online—Partizipation oder Profession?*, eds. Thorsten Quandt and Wolfgang Schweiger (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2008), pp. 21-34.
 - 36 Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 4(3), 2012, pp. 297-308, doi:10.1080/17512781003640703.
 - 37 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

strive to report the truth fairly and honestly.³⁸ It is then hardly surprising that journalism has a preoccupation with something called ‘truth’, with a duty to collect and certify the accuracy of information.³⁹ The practice of verification bestows journalistic communication with its credibility and believability. The acceleration of the news cycle and the growing proliferation of news and information has raised concerns about the erosion of the discipline of verification, and by implication, the professional legitimacy of journalism. This macro level change from traditional to networked communication is then assessed in terms of its far-reaching systemic impact on public trust in the context of platformization.

5. Journalism in the Age of Synthetic Media and Platformization

Although the paradigms of the participatory journalism and produsage have been predominant in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, the media ecosystem of the 2020s has significantly undergone a radical metamorphosis that has necessitated a theoretical recalibration on a scale unprecedented before. The modern newsroom is no longer characterized by the presence of an active audience, desiring civic involvement, rather, it is the product of three converging forces, the platformization of news, the rise of the creator economy, and the development of synthetic media produced by generative artificial intelligence. These forces have moved the point of the verification crisis ceasing to be a question of accuracy but an epistemic crisis, whereby even the ontological status of reality itself is now a point of contention.

5.1 From Produsage to Algorithmic Gatekeeping

The positive perspective of a global electronic agora has been confounded with the phenomenon of platformization - the integration of platform infrastructures and economic activities into the news industry.⁴⁰ Existing platforms (e.g., Tik Tok, Instagram, X) are not a neutral system like the pipes used in the first web, but rather, their services serve as an active, but still an automated, filter. The visibility of user-generated content (UGC) is now dictated by algorithms designed to maximize the engagement metrics instead of being based on the concept of newsworthiness. This effectively defies editorial discretion, since the journalists and users are forced to strike a deal with blackbox recommender systems, which prioritize shareability over

38 Jane B. Singer, “Who are these Guys? The Online Challenge to the Notion of Journalistic Professionalism,” *Journalism*, Vol. 4(2), 2003, pp. 139-163, doi: 10.1177/ 1464884903004002001.

39 Zelizer, “When Facts, Truth, and Reality are God-terms”, p. 105.

40 Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

civic quality.⁴¹ As a result, the previously independent agent of open participation has been replaced by an algorithmic isomorphism, to the effect that the content is being adjusted to fit the platform logic instead of a general audience interest.⁴²

5.2 The Shift to the Creator Economy and "Newsfluencers"

The Web 2.0 citizen journalist version, which is typically marked with amateurism and accidental witnessing, is slowly being replaced with the professional version of the Newsfluencer. These types of independent content developers combine journalistic processes with influencer tactics to develop direct and parasocial relationships with fans⁴³. Contrary to traditional journalists, news influencers are also based in the Creator Economy, an environment that is highly monetized and results in so-called aspirational labor, unpaid or underpaid work in the hope of attaining future social and economic benefit.⁴⁴ The new ethical hazards generated by this economic precarity are that the compulsion to go viral combats the so-called discipline of verification, thus initiating the rapid propagation of unproven or embellished UGC in times of crisis.⁴⁵

5.3 The Epistemic Threat of Synthetic Media

However, the most disruptive has been the ending of the binary system of differentiation between real and fake content brought on by the accelerated growth of Generative AI. The traditional meaning of user-generated content (UGC) should hence be extended to include synthetic media -content produced by autonomous agents in its entirety or through partial means. This development has led to what experts are terming as an epistemic crisis of journalism that goes beyond correcting misinformation to requiring the absolute validation of reality itself.⁴⁶ This threat

41 Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Sarah Anne Ganter, *The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

42 Robyn Caplan and Tarleton Gillespie, "Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy," *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 6(2), 2020, pp. 1-13, doi: 10.1177/2056305120936636.

43 Errol Salamon, Valérie Bélair-Gagnon, and Monica Crawford, "Journalism and Social Media in Creator Economies: Evolving Structures and Labor," *New Media & Society*, 2025, doi: 10.1177/14614448251407336.

44 Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

45 Ceren Sözeri, "Ethical Challenges for User-Generated Content Publishing: Comparing Public Service Media and Commercial Media," in *Online Credibility and Digital Ethos: Evaluating Computer-Mediated Communication*, eds. Shawn Moe and James J. G. Moe (Hershey: IGI Global, 2013).

46 Gregory P. Perreault, Seth C. Lewis, and Maxwell Ely, "ChatGPT, Generative AI, and an Epistemic Opportunity for Journalistic Authority," *Digital Journalism*, 2025, doi: 10.1080/21670811.2025.2510967.

becomes acute according to recent events. In 2024, a video-conference call that consisted entirely of video tape recording re-creations of colleagues demonstrated a multinational engineering firm, Arup, to have lost 25 million dollars in a fraud scheme involving an employee who was misled by the video-conference.⁴⁷ Similarly, in the 2024 United States primaries, citizens were sent a robocall that utilized AI-generated voices of political figures thus alienating their confidence in audio evidence.⁴⁸ These technologies develop a so-called Liar's Dividend and allow bad actors to deny real incriminating footage on the ground that it was generated by AI, and destabilizes the trust of people in visual evidence.⁴⁹

5.4 Verification in the "Wild West": Conflict and Trauma

The weaponization of user-generated content (UGC), as well as synthetic media, has reached the critical peak in modern geopolitical battles. Telegram, one of the messaging platforms, plays the primary role of supplying untested, raw battlefield footage in the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. As a consequence, researchers term this as infocide, the destruction of the truthful facts, in which the flood of shallow fakes and artificial intelligence arguments, the notorious case of the burnt baby, is the one that overwhelms existing verification systems. Media organizations in response have organized Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) modes of operation. Other departments like BBC Verify and the New York Times Visual Investigations have gone further than the simple fact-checking as they have developed forensic reconstruction methods using satellite imagery, metadata analysis to verify the authenticity of UGC. This change marks a radical change of the custodial relations of gatekeeping to the empirically based forensic relations of seeking the truth.

To better understand how the traditional "gatekeeping" approach has been replaced by forensic truth-seeking by modern verification teams, it may be helpful to look at how the open-source intelligence (OSINT) approach is employed. These teams often deal with large amounts of raw and unverified user-generated content (UGC) coming from conflict zones. They don't just pick and choose which information they want to release, but they review and check the information of which they want to release. Their task involves a series of steps that are described below :

47 National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE), *Deepfakes and Fraud: Real-World Examples of AI Misuse*, Research Report (Omaha: University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2025), https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ncite_research/.

48 Matthew Groh, Aruna Sankaranarayanan, Nikhil Singh, *et al.*, "Human Detection of Political Speech Deepfakes Across Transcripts, Audio, and Video," *Nature Communications*, Vol. 15, No. 7629, 2024, doi: 10.1038/s41467-024-51998-z.

49 Bart van der Sloot and Yvette Wagenveld, "Deepfakes: Regulatory Challenges for the Synthetic Society," *Computer Law & Security Review*, Vol. 46, 2022, doi: 10.1016/j.clsr.2022.105716.

Phase 1: Chronolocation and Metadata Extraction

Investigators will immediately try to remove the original exchangeable image file format (EXIF) metadata from a video when an event is scraped from a decentralized platform such as Telegram. When the platform has removed such information, the journalist uses clues in the film (like the angle of the shadows, the position of the sun, the weather conditions) and compares them with the astronomical and meteorological history to determine the exact time of day the footage was taken.

Phase 2: Satellite Triangulation and Geolocation

Newsroom maps physical features seen in the video that the user has created, such as special building facades, roadways, tree lines, topography, etc. These features are mathematically triangulated to high-resolution commercial satellite imagery (such as Maxar, Google Earth Pro). This empirical matching verifies if the event really took place at the reported geographic coordinates or if it is a "shallow fake" from another time and/or location. Phase

Phase 3: Deepfake and Synthetic Media Auditing

Lastly, the digital assets are fed into expert deepfake detection software and audio-frequency spectrogram analyzers. This step will identify anomalies in voice cloning and/or in artificial frame generations, thus revealing the actions of bad actors to exploit what has been called the "Liar's Dividend". This case workflow, which contains multiple layers, reveals that today's newsrooms are not just weeding out bad content, they are actively employing scientific and computational forensic techniques to recover and demonstrate objective reality.

Unlike the traditional approach to fact-checking, where, often, verbal corroboration is the central element, the forensic paradigm triangulates reality with the help of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT).⁵⁰ Through a carefully guided cross-reference of unsolicited eyewitness footage with satellite data, chronological metadata evidence, and data on geolocation, newsrooms can begin breaking down the so-called Liar Dividend of malign actors trying to legitimize their arguments as being AI-supported content. Such methodological rigor is reclaiming journalism as an authoritative figure once more and transforming the practitioner from an arbiter of institutional rhetoric into a digital detective who proves truth through technical examination. However, this undertaking has a great human price. The persons responsible for screening UGC face the unrelenting flood of visually graphic content, and such content is associated

50 Md, Sazibur Rahman, "The Art of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT): Addressing Cybercrime, Opportunities, and Challenges," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, May 1, 2025, doi:10.2139/ssrn.5281845.

with increased cases of vicarious traumas. Research carried out by the Dart Center demonstrates that 40% of journalists who are exposed to distressing material suffer harmful effects in their personal lives, therefore representing a strong argument in favor of the introduction of the so-called trauma-informed newsroom policies. In order to have a meaningful effect, the trauma-informed policies would have to go beyond just theoretical promotion and finding real protection in the newsroom. The suggestions that flow out of this discussion would also suggest the introduction of overall viewing policies, including the methodical gray scaling of the graphic footage, the careful muting of audio when conducting an initial chronological evaluation, and the mandatory rotating of the employees who have become habitual in viewing large quantities of disturbing user-generated videos. The media enterprises can maintain the very high standards of the verification cohorts by protecting their mental health, which is imperative in combating the flood of the fake media, thus reducing the risk of professional burnout in the most valuable cogs of the human filter maze.

6. Conclusion

User-Generated Content (UGC) is not just a technical change in the production of news but a reconfiguration of the relationship between professional journalists and the audience on a more fundamental level. The shift of the passive audience to an active produser, conceptualized throughout this study, dismantles the traditional binary producer/consumer dichotomy. Although techno-utopian discourses hail it as the final democratization of the electronic agora world-wide, the modern newsroom is typified by an extremely intricate game of power play where the traditional practices are not able to adapt the dynamics of the new information world that is akin to de-centralization. This is an indication of the industry in flux as the term is conceptually vague as far as the audience material, produsage, or citizen journalism call it. This study suggests that to make a definition of UGC operational, it is necessary to go beyond the marketing-focused business model and take into consideration specifics of journalistic work. The four-fold typology of UGC with the unsolicited breaking news on one extreme to audience watchdog on the other highlights the fact that despite the fact that the point of control has perhaps moved, the role of curator and gatekeeper by the professional journalist has not been removed though there is much pressure on it. Finally, the involvement of the UGC also promises the nature of journalism, which is the art of verification. The very essence of truth and accuracy has never been more endangered in the age in which eyewitness videos and social-media video feeds can circumvent the established channels. Accelerated news cycle is a direct threat to professional legitimacy when speed is put above fact-checking. The future of journalism, therefore, depends on a

balanced framework where the imaginative power and immediacy of the citizen are stabilized by the moral standards and professional jurisdiction of institutional journalism. Instead of replacing traditional journalism, UGC works towards a catalyst of a new model of collaborative journalism that is networked, which when approached sensitively can also strengthen the democratic signature of society.

Finally, incorporation of user-generated content has ceased being a professional modification but an issue of epistemic continuum. With the borders between genuine human evidence and technologically fabricated artificially growing more blurred, modern day journalism has to switch to a paradigm of forensic truth-seeking, as opposed to the previous one of gatekeeping and filtering. The future of the profession will depend on its ability to negotiate algorithmic logics incorporated on platforms and address the illusory possibilities of artificial intelligence, which, as well as adhering to the factual integrity of reportage, will guarantee the psychological health of the journalists who testify to the unfolding narrative.