

*The Ethical Dimension of Citizen Journalism Practice: A Case Study of 2015
Presidential Election in Nigeria*

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Abstract

Media can set agenda which can positively or negatively affect the society. Beyond the setting of agenda the media can and do act as agents of checks and balances of the other powers in the society. Social media have greatly increased the power of the media and have produced what may be called the 'fifth estate' which may be termed citizen journalism; whose power have produced events that were responsible for the creation and propagation of Arab spring, terrorism, and the unprecedented active participation of citizens in politics of world democracies. Citizen journalism is now a great phenomenon in Nigeria. This is a welcome development considering the way citizen journalists have democratized the media. Consequently, Nigerians no longer depend only on the mainstream media for information and news. Citizen journalists through the platforms of Facebook and twitter have played great roles in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. As good as this may sound, there is an ethical dimension regarding the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria. There is the fear that most citizen journalists do not play by the rules or the ethical principles of journalism. This paper will therefore investigate the ethical dimension in citizen journalism practice during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media, Power, Citizen Journalism

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Introduction

Journalists have the inherent ability to set agenda that can affect the society positively or negatively. Beyond the setting of agenda, journalists can act as agents of checks and balances of other powers in the society. "An extension of the information function of political journalism in a democracy is the role of critical scrutiny over the powerful, be they in government, business or other influential spheres of society. This is the *watchdog* role of the journalist, who in this context becomes part of what Edmund Burke called the Fourth Estate" (McNair, 2009, p.239). The media have become so powerful that they have been regarded as the *fourth estate of the realm*. However, recent developments in new media technology and journalism have brought about what has been termed as *citizen journalism*.

According to Banda (2010), Citizen Journalism is a: "rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community" (p. 26). In defining Citizen Journalists, Banda (2010) says that they are, "... independent, freelancing citizen reporters. They are not constrained by conventional journalistic processes or methodologies, and they usually function without editorial oversight. Citizen journalists gather, process, research, report, analyse and publish news and information, most often utilising a variety of technologies made possible by the internet "(p. 26). Citizen journalism with its several branches, which include the social media, blogs, online newspaper forums and the likes have not only gained prominence but have also become so powerful that it may be right to call them the *fifth estate of the realm*.

Citizen Journalism now has a great impact in Nigeria. For one thing, it has helped in democratizing the media in the sense that citizens are free to be involved in the practice of journalism even without going through the basic trainings of professional journalism. Citizen journalists through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs played great roles in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The downside, however, is that there were ethical dimensions to the way that citizen journalists carried out this role. This paper interrogates this ethical dimension.

Statement of problem

Before the emergence of citizen journalism in Nigeria, mainstream media used to set the agenda and direct the minds of the Nigerian people during electioneering, a privilege that was often thought to have been abused by local journalists who openly displayed political, economic, religious and ethnic biases. Although Citizen Journalists intervened in the process to challenge the mainstream media and offer the people greater choice of what to read and view, it cannot be said that the misguidance of the people did not continue through pre-election and post-election reports of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. There are suggestions that citizen journalism fell far short of the required professional and ethical standards. This paper interrogates the ethical standards maintained by citizen journalists during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the ethical dimension in citizen journalism practice during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria
2. Identify the ethical principles at play during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria
3. Identify how citizen journalists applied the social responsibility theory of media in practicing citizen journalism during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria

Research questions

Originating from the objectives of study are corresponding sets of research questions:

1. What was the ethical dimension in citizen journalism practice during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?
2. What were the ethical principles used by citizen journalists during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?
3. To what extent did citizen journalists apply the social responsibility theory of the media in their practice during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria?

Significance of the study

The result of the study will be useful to all journalists both professional and non-professional, Nigerian citizens who need to understand the nature of citizen journalism, political parties and politicians, researchers on citizen journalism in Nigeria, Nigerian Union of Journalists and other professional bodies.

Review of related literature

Citizen Journalism and the 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: Citizen Journalists through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter played great roles in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria. As Adeola (2015) reports, "Either by phone calls, social media, radio or TV, the connected Nigerians remained conscious and active towards their social responsibilities than ever. Across the nation, people stood in the rain and under the sun to ensure they play their part." (para.10). Another example of this can be seen in Fagorusi (2015), "Channels Television asked Nigerians to send in pictures showing them watching updates cum analysis of the election and also that of them celebrating when eventually the All Progressive Congress (APC) presidential candidate won." (para.2). Fagorusi (2015) went on to note that, "While the election count was in progress, there was literally no one in Nigeria who was in the dark as to how things were turning out. Phone calls, tweets, Facebook updates, emails, instant messages and other forms of new media engagements were happening" (para. 6).

Ethics of Journalism defined and the code of ethics for journalists

Ward (2009) in his chapter on *Journalism Ethics* in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* gives a broad view of the definition of Journalism Ethics as, "A species of applied ethics that examines what journalists and news organizations should do, given their role in society." (p. 295). The International Federation of Journalists gives twenty-six (26) codes of ethics for journalists which may have influenced the code of

ethics of Nigerian Press Council. In order to maintain a high level of standard for the media profession in Nigeria, the Nigerian Press Council gives a comprehensive code of ethics for the Nigerian journalists and these are the highlights:

editorial independence; accuracy and fairness; privacy; privileged/non-disclosure by observing and not disclosing the source of information obtained in confidence; decency; avoid discrimination; journalists should not receive reward and gratification to suppress or publish information; journalists should not report acts of violence and crime in a manner that glorifies such acts; the names and pictures of children and minors involved in cases concerning sexual offences, crimes and rituals or witchcraft either as victims, witnesses or defendants and these children should also not be interviewed should not be identified; journalists should employ open and honest means in sourcing for their information (except in cases that the interest of the public is at stake); reportage should be in the public interest; social responsibility; avoid plagiarism; and should enhance press freedom at all times

(Nigerian Press Council, 2009 cited in Ogwezzy-Ndisika, 2015. pp.82-83)

Ethical issues of Citizen Journalists during the 2015 presidential election: There were ethical issues associated with the citizen journalism practice during the 2015 presidential elections. One was that too much importance was placed on personal accounts, undermining ethical standards and eventually reducing the significance of professional journalism during the elections. Not all contributions from citizen journalists adhered to ethical standards that can be expected of professional journalists. The situation whereby certain citizen journalists are anonymous could make them not responsible to the information they disseminate. They tended to spread rumours, calumny, detractions and information that were unauthenticated. There were issues with the ethics of exposing some of the images they spread. Untrained citizen journalists were used as propaganda tools by major political parties.

Other ethical issues in the role played by the citizen journalists in the 2015 presidential elections were: deliberate misrepresentation of opponent's positions, tactics and strategies; anonymous messages and rumours intended to arouse fear, cause panic, suppress voter turnout and so on; defamation and irresponsible attack comments; use of off-limits issues as campaign strategy: health, age, direct attacks on personal character, family circumstances, distortion of political communication and selfish interests by the social media by citizen journalists.

Perception of Citizen Journalism

Bowman and Willis (2003) defined citizen journalism as an “act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information, in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information”. (p. 9). This definition by Bowman and Willis has not in any way done justice to the definition of citizen journalism as several citizen journalists do not in any way provide, 'reliable and accurate information'. Some even go to the extent of providing diluted information just to appeal to the emotions of some particular set of audience.

A clearer picture of citizen journalism is given by Barnes (2012) as he states that, “Blogs, forums, uploading of photographs or videos to the Internet, are now being labelled ‘citizen journalism’ as distinct from traditional, mainstream or professional

journalism. The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional or formal training in journalism have an opportunity to use the tools of modern technology and the almost limitless reach of the Internet in order to create content that would otherwise not be revealed, as this kind of journalism goes far beyond the reach of professional journalism” (p. 16).

Attributes of Citizen Journalism

The difficulty involved in determining who a citizen journalist is makes it imperative to state the attributes of citizen journalists. Some of the following are attributes of citizen journalists:

- They are usually unpaid for the journalism work they try to do
- They are not employed by the mainstream media outfit
- They are not professionally trained
- They publish unedited contents
- They use informal language
- They could be biased in their story selection and news judgment
- They could be called, 'open source journalists'
- They are too quick to report stories or bring out issues

Benefits of Citizen Journalism

There are several benefits of citizen journalism:

Watches the watchdog (a case of check and balance); reduces influence of ownership of main stream media houses advertisers, government interference in the news professional journalists disseminate; and provides eye-witness account as they are usually very close to news sources.

Gates came down; gate-keeping functions of the media provide reason for editors to pick and choose news that is important to them, but citizen journalists can provide the information the editors do not want to provide. Citizen journalism democratized the media, anybody with internet connection and a smart phone becomes a citizen journalist.

The Alternative: The lack of engagement in mainstream journalism is supporting the growth of citizen journalism and there is a belief that “independent community journalists are in an ideal position to offer audiences a real alternative by applying a more appropriate framework for making sense of the world” (Meadows, 2013, p. 55). It is an opportunity to improve journalism, making it more transparent and democratic as the audience can check the facts presented and easily correct or add to the original article.

Eye witness reports from ordinary people provide a variety of personal points of view, at times contradicting official statements. In repressive countries, eye witness reports and images taken by ordinary citizens are often the only testimony available and can help influence international politics. Citizen journalism is a more transparent and democratic form of journalism (Jurrat, 2011).

Pipers without tunes: The case of *he who pays the piper dictates the tune* does not come into play with citizen journalists.

Theoretical framework

This work is hinged on the social responsibility theory of the media which was propounded by the Hutchins Commission of 1947. As seen from the social responsibility theory of the media, journalists have certain obligations to the society. Journalists must be truthful, accurate, objective, and they must give balanced views in

their reports. The journalism practice should be free but regulated in line with the codes of conduct and ethics guiding the profession. Media ownership should be a public trust. Journalists have a moral obligation to consider the overall needs of society when making journalistic decisions in order to produce the common good. The journalists should support state security, support democracy, support the rights and freedoms of individuals, provide diversity of content as part of the cultural and political pluralism of society and improve the quality of content as part of raising the cultural level of citizens. The social responsibility theory clearly captures the style and nature of citizen journalism. Citizen journalists should do their duties with the social responsibility theory of the media in mind so that they can do their job in an ethical way.

Research methodology

This is a descriptive research design study. We adopted the content analysis method to study and analyze online reports and comments by Nigerian citizen journalists during the 2015 general elections. The variables of measurement were the same as the principles of social responsibility – truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity and balance in the reports. As the most obvious sources of data appropriate for content analysis are texts to which meanings are conventionally attributed, we assigned a number of ethical issues observed in citizen journalism reports during the election to these four variables to measure the social responsibility performance of the journalists. According to Keyton (2001), the unit of analysis is the unit of measurement which provides a standard way of studying and classifying texts into elements to be analysed. Consequently, our unit of analysis were news reports and commentaries on the two leading candidates and their political parties. Our keyword search on the blogs and using Google Search included “President Jonathan, General Buhari, the PDP, the APC and the 2015 general elections.” We analysed four issues in the campaigns published in the sample social media channels between January 1 and February 28, 2015, a period of two months. The content categories derived from the purpose of the study were as follows:

- Newspaper ‘death’ scare advert
- TV personality documentaries
- Publication of unofficial results
- Educational qualifications and certificate forgery

Our unit of analysis was selected from three of the most popular Nigerian social media genres in Nigeria –twonews blogs(lindaiekeji.blogspot.com and LadunLiadi’s Blog), one twitter handle (@henryokelue) and several commentaries by author’s Facebook friends onthe issues of study.

The blogs and tweeter handle were chosen based on the fact that their owners were not journalists but have chosen to “dabble” into news reporting and political commentary and have hundreds of thousands of followers and avid readers. The unit of analysis and the content categories were coded, counted and further subjected to analyses using simple percentages and charts. We analysed a total of 242 reports from the three social media channels. A coding sheet containing the four categories of content was used to collect the date and assigned unit numbers against the report of its category. This was done for each channel being studied. The operational meanings assigned to the research data were summarized using frequency distribution with corresponding percentages and charts.

Presentation, analysis and discussion of results

News and analysis on 'Check and balance' role of citizen journalists with focus on the 'Buhari' documentary shown by AIT (a media house in Nigeria)

The tweets of prominent Nigerian youth leaders that have numerous followers were analyzed. The basis of this selection is on the fact that the tweets of non-professional journalists are accepted as authentic news and their tweets spread across their numerous followers.

Blog on the 'check and balance' role of citizen journalists was also analyzed. One of such instances was the documentary showed by African Independent Television (AIT) about Major General Muhammadu Buhari, the APC presidential candidate. Below are some of the tweets and blog that showed how citizen journalists tried to balance the reportage of the mainstream media.

Henry Okelue (@4eyedmonk) and Abu's (a blogger) rebuttal



Henry Okelue's tweets on the 2015 Nigerian presidential elections that have been picked for this research were the ones where he responded to the AIT documentary on the APC Presidential candidate, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari.

In Abu's blog, he notes that, "The AIT has been airing a sponsored programme called 'The Real Buhari' in which attempts were made to discredit General Buhari and thereby weaken the candidacy of the General in the forthcoming elections. Being a good citizen, I decided to issue this rebuttal before they mislead those who are too young to know or not fortunate to have read about these issues from authentic sources" (2015, para.1). Abu (2015) gives a thirty (30) facts rebuttal to the issues raised by AIT on his blog.



HENRY Okelue
@4eyedmonk

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1. The documentary on GMB started lying as early as 18 secs in when it claimed the picture of him and Yar Adua was from "elementary school"

2:20 PM - 29 Jan 2015

247 15



HENRY Okelue
@4eyedmonk

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2. The only quote backed with a voice over was that of Humphrey Nwosu. The rest were paraphrased quotes, many from living individuals.

2:22 PM - 29 Jan 2015

192 9



HENRY Okelue
@4eyedmonk

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3. They managed to link Shehu Musa YarAdua's death to GMB. GMB was chairman of PTF under Abacha. That way killing Yar Adua by association :D

2:24 PM - 29 Jan 2015

211 10



HENRY Okelue
@4eyedmonk

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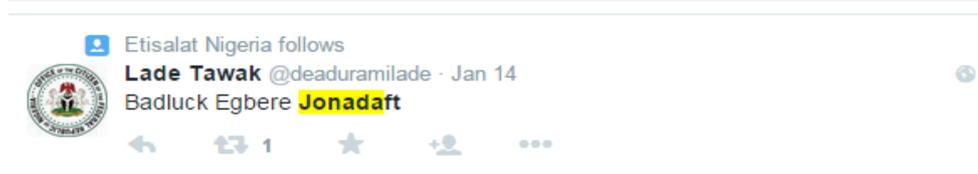
5. Documentary claims Olabisi Onabanjo was jailed for 20 months and died shortly after his release. Another lie. Onabanjo died in 1990.

2:40 PM - 29 Jan 2015

244 13

These were rebuttal to the documentary shown by African Independent Television (AIT), a documentary that a blogger like Abu and Henry Okelue (whose tweets were analyzed) believed was not in any way objective, accurate or truthful. Thus, where AIT seems to have failed in presenting a balanced side of the story, a citizen journalist such as Henry Okelue and a blogger like Abu corrected their errors.

Tweets on the attack on Jonathan's personality: However, there were tweets that were attacks on the personality of President Goodluck Jonathan. Citizen journalists called the president of the federal republic of Nigeria names like 'dumbo,' 'clueless' and all sorts of names. These were unethical as it was not only an attack on Jonathan's personality, but also an attack on the office he held. Below are some of these tweets



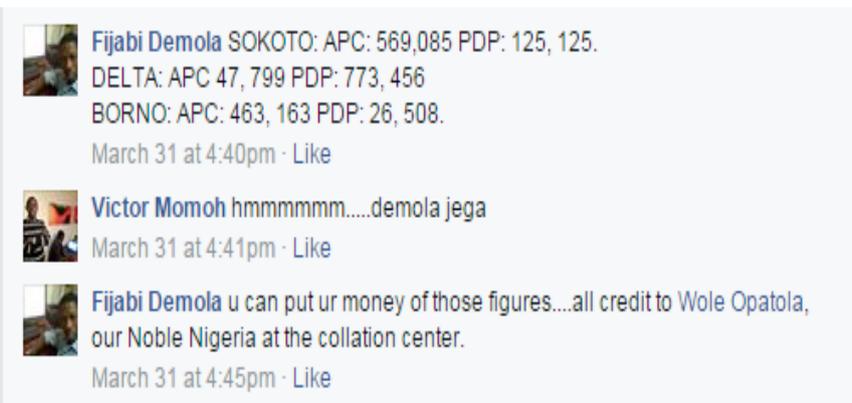
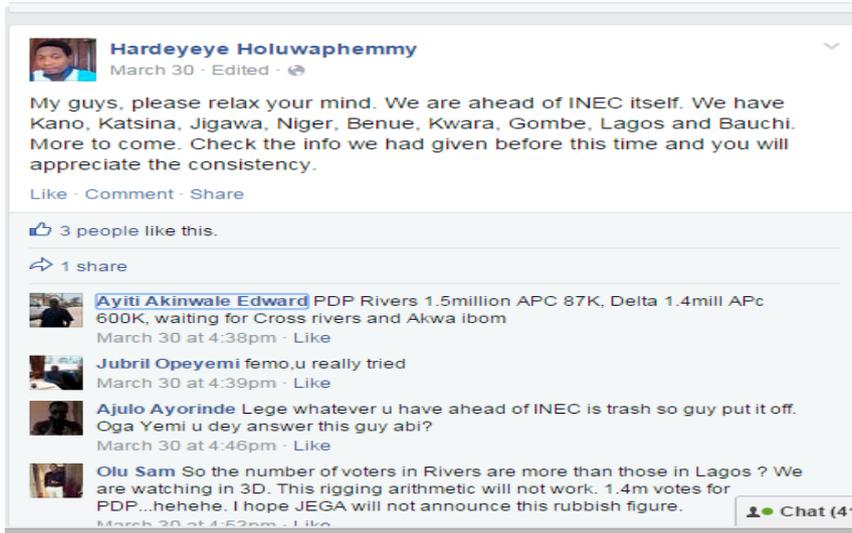
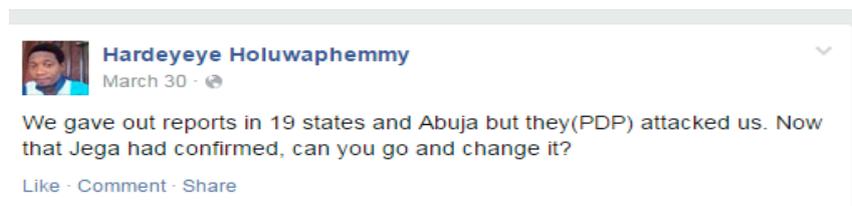
The tweets were obviously against the ethics of the journalistic profession as decency is one of the codes of ethics of journalism. The use of foul language in these tweets shows that these 'citizen journalists' were not in any way decent.

The 'publishing' of results through Facebook updates: Four Facebook updates were analysed and the focus is on the announcement of the result through these updates. In the Facebook posts below are some of the results as distributed by some citizen journalists. It is also important to look at the ethical dimension of this practice.



Scannews

Message from INEC



It is clear from these updates, that these citizen journalists were partisan and biased in their presentation.

The first post was the one copied from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)'s twitter handle and it stipulates that no one should announce the results before INEC. Thus, these results lacked the credibility it deserved, since none

of them were posted after INEC had made their official announcements. It is unethical and illegal for results to be published before the official declaration by the electoral body. What is unethical about this is that they might be misleading people though the results they post, especially when these results end up not tallying with INEC's official results.

Responses to the offensive 'death' advert by the press and the response by two bloggers (Ladun Liadi and Linda Ikeji)

Ethical Issue	Ladun Liadi's blog	Linda Ikeji's blog
Were they objective?	Yes	Yes
Balanced or bias?	Balanced	Balanced
Were they trivial?	No	No
Reactions/Feedback	51	233
Were there offensive words in the comments?	Yes	Yes

Source: Author

Ladun Liadi's blog article was centred on the professionalism of the *Punch newspaper* in publishing such an advert. Most of the readers that commented were critical of the advert.

Linda Ikeji's article gave another dimension to the presentation of the issue. She responded by presenting 13 tweet responses of people to the issue.

Analysis of forum on the issue of Buhari's certificate forgery and attack on Jonathan's personality

One of the most popular forums for citizen journalists in Nigeria is www.nairaland.com; it creates a platform for people to discuss mainly on issues that concerns Nigeria in what could be referred to as a public sphere space. It is pertinent to take a critical look at one of the discussions by a user named; *Etcetera* tagged *Buhari's Supporters are silly and unrealistic* and see the ethical dimension in the discussion trend.

Re: [Buhari's Supporters Are Silly And Unrealistic - Etcetera](#) by [Sammiejokes\(m\)](#): 5:29pm On Jan 31

lyntiffany:
 Well said Bro, our youths struggle in the rain, under sunshine, stay hungry a times trying to better their future by going to school, university e.t.c. Some where rusticated from campus cause of issues of falsification of result,some graduated with good grades but yet to find an organisation to fix themselves.
 Here we are with our mr integrity who falsified his result and lied to millions of learned Nigerians.
 If qualifications are no longer a standard for employment then our government should stop making our parents go through untold hardship sending their children to school as it is of no use to them cause they can seek for any position in the society with no qualification. All am saying is let the right thing be done.

Who is this, show us the proof that he falsified his qualification. See this jonadunce fan voting on certificate basis since 1960. Fk phd, jonadunce is a good example of a man who bought his certificate, he has never talked intellectually all his life, he should go and doctor the Animalz, we are human.

The issue of Buhari's certificate scandal created an avenue for citizen journalists to interrogate themselves and also gave room for some name calling.

The comment by Sammiejokes leaves little to be desired. Calling the former President, the commander in chief of the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria names such as Jonadunce was uncalled for, no matter how bad one feels about

his administration. Also saying that Dr. Goodluck Jonathan should go and, 'doctor the animals' shows lack of respect for the office of the president. This comment was not in any way ethical, because it is against the ethics of respect for human person. However, it is not just because he was the president, that he should not be called names, every human person deserves to be respected.

The comment by Easterbunny was another round of name calling, mudslinging and an utter abuse of the office of the president as this user tagged the then president a 'clueless zoologist'. This was another unfair treatment of the Nigerian president.

Re: [Buhari's Supporters Are Silly And Unrealistic - Etcetera](#) by [truvine\(m\)](#): 5:38pm On Jan 31

Easterbunny:
If buharis supporter are silly then I pity what GEJ supporters are.

If you are called silly for supporting someone that is not clueless, then what would you be called for supporting some one that is a certified clueless zoologist?
Answer that mister etcetera

Sai buhari for now until GEJ supporters get sense

The last content to be analyzed is a picture of the president that had the word, "desperado" on it. This is an extreme case
This kind of image will not have been allowed on the pages of the national newspaper. This is evidence that the gatekeeping function of *nairaland* was not in place or was not effective as the case may be.



There were offensive words in the comments and the use of these offensive words were not in any way justified. The discussion were responses to the calling of names by a user and the people from the other side responded by equally using offensive words. This was not in way right. The forum was obviously not in line with the ethics of the journalistic profession as decency is one of the codes of ethics of journalism.

Research Questions	Facebook	Twitter	Forum	Blog
1. What was the ethical dimension in citizen journalism practice during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?	The publishing of results was unethical	While some tweets acted as 'checks and balances' to the mainstream media, some resulted to names calling. These acts represented two different aspect to the ethical divide	Too much freedom on the forum made it a 'free-for-all' platform where people showed their partisan nature by calling their 'perceived' opponents names	The bloggers acted as 'checks and balances' and questioned the unethical conducts of some media outfit.
2. What were the ethical principles used by citizen journalists during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?	None was actually used in the issues analysed	Used a couple of ethical principles: objectivity, truth, balance etc.	None of the ethical principles were used	Used a couple of ethical principles: objectivity, truth, balance etc.
3. To what extent did citizen journalists apply the social responsibility theory of the media in their practice during the 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria?	Though other individual members of the society aired their views and opinion, the application of the social responsibility theory was not too satisfactory, especially in the presentation of the results	Some tweets helped in balancing the issue raised by a reputable media outfit which showed that those individuals applied the social responsibility theory. However, some tweets resulted to names calling, which was irresponsible.	They did not in any way perform their duties responsibly	Satisfactory as they helped in balancing the issue raised by a reputable newspaper. The feedback mechanism allowed by the bloggers showed that they applied the social responsibility theory to an appreciable degree

**Figure 1: Responses to research questions
Summary, conclusion and recommendation**

The several platforms of citizen journalism were exploited during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria as they showed that they were really so powerful to have been called the *fifth estate of the realm*. If the freedom that citizen journalists have is not within limits, it could be abused and might not augur well for the society. Thus, while citizen journalists had their good side in the 2015 presidential elections, they also had their bad side. While, they fuelled the passion of the elections through the many updates that made the elections really worth following, they also attacked the personalities of certain individuals. While they acted as checks and balance to news spread by the mainstream media, they also showed that their many excesses also need to be checked too. While they helped to keep people abreast of the results through their updates, the timing of these results were wrong as it was not ethical to have published these results before the official announcement by the electoral body (INEC). The aforementioned issues represent the ethical dimension to the citizen journalism practice in the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria.

There is also the need to position the citizens themselves on checking the authenticity of reports of citizen journalists before they accept it as fact. The social responsibility theory if exposed to citizen journalists will help them to understand that they should be responsible for their actions through responsible production of their contents in different platforms. Social responsibility theory if understood and applied by citizen journalists should help them to be the voice of the voiceless, support security, democracy, social and cultural development of the Nigerian state. Citizen journalism should not be used as weapon to cast slurs on political opponent. It should not be used to fan the embers of social, cultural, religious and economic differences of Nigeria. It should be used to protect the corporate existence of Nigeria. This means that if done well citizen journalism should be used to promote democracy, political participation and the sovereignty of the federal republic of Nigeria.

There should also be a clear distinction between citizen journalists and rumour peddlers. However, news blogs or other online news platform that have the habit of going against the ethics of journalism should be brought down by regulatory bodies. The citizen journalists should be made to face the consequences for their unethical practice if found wanting in practicing their own kind of journalism.

Due to the spread of citizen journalism, the need to have a code of ethics for citizen journalism has now become important. However, it could be difficult to enforce. It is one thing to set ethics; it is another thing to ensure that people carry out their duties ethically. This is where social responsibility comes into play. There may be codes but individual responsibility, decency and practice of virtues such as prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude will make citizen journalists to perform their duties well or in an ethical manner because their work should be used to promote the common good and minimise harm in the society. Professional journalists and citizen journalists need to seek a common ground in terms of ethics.

Urgent action needs to be taken on media literacy. Media consumers need to be duly educated on the information they regard as news on the media. Since the mainstream media is being watched by the citizen journalists, they (the citizen journalists) also need to be watched and regulated also in order to curb some of their excesses noted in this paper. The audience should be literate enough to understand how the media work and should be made to understand that they should not take every information they get

from the media (whether traditional or new media) hook line and sinker. Media literacy will help in taming the power of citizen journalists.

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