

The Role of Social Media as a Platform for Citizen Journalism in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, became a central space through which ordinary citizens in Sri Lanka created, shared, and distributed news and current-affairs content, a practice generally referred to as citizen journalism, reshaping how news was produced and consumed beyond traditional newsrooms. Despite this growing trend, there remained limited systematic understanding of how social media actually functioned as a platform for citizen journalism in the Sri Lankan context, including the motivations behind citizen reporting, the credibility of citizen-generated content, and the challenges it presented, such as misinformation and lack of verification; this gap formed the central research problem: how does social media function as a platform for citizen journalism in Sri Lanka. The objective of the study was to examine the role of social media as a platform for citizen journalism among social media users in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. Primary data consisted of field data gathered directly from participants through a questionnaire survey and interviews, while secondary data were drawn from existing research studies, books, and websites relevant to citizen journalism, social media, and journalism practice in Sri Lanka and beyond. Guided by Uses and Gratifications theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods design, drawing a stratified random sample of 100 respondents (25% of an reachable population of 400 identified citizen journalists) for the survey, with a purposive sub-sample of 12–15 respondents interviewed. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative interview data were analysed thematically, with both strands triangulated for interpretation. Findings showed that engagement was uneven, with most respondents limited to sharing or commenting while a smaller core actively produced content; civic and political motivation was more pronounced than in a national sample, reflecting Colombo's proximity to political events; the key opportunity identified was speed and first-person immediacy in covering urban events; politically engaged respondents faced disproportionately higher misinformation and harassment revelation; and respondents prioritised verification-skills training over access-related support. These findings informed recommendations for media literacy, platform governance, and journalism policy.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Social Media, Uses and Gratifications theory, Mixed method

INTRODUCTION

The rise of internet-enabled mobile devices and social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped how news is produced, distributed, and consumed around the world. Where news production was once the special domain of trained journalists working within professional newsrooms, ordinary citizens today can capture, edit, and publish information instantly through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. This phenomenon, commonly termed "citizen journalism," describes the participation of non-professional individuals in the gathering, reporting, and dissemination of news and public-interest information (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004).

Sri Lanka offers a particularly rich context in which to study this phenomenon. Citizen journalism first gained prominence in the country through Groundviews, widely regarded as Sri Lanka's first citizen journalism website, which emerged during a period when mainstream media faced serious constraints on impartial and independent reporting (ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009). In the years since, the growth of Facebook and other social media platforms has decentralised citizen reporting, moving it away from dedicated citizen-journalism

websites toward everyday social media use by millions of individuals. As of March 2026, Sri Lanka had approximately 10.8 million Facebook users, representing 49% of the national population, with the largest user group aged between 25 and 34 years (NapoleonCat, 2026). Broader social media penetration stood at roughly 9 million user identities, or 38.7% of the population, as of late 2025 (DataReportal, 2026).

Colombo District, as the administrative, commercial, and media capital of Sri Lanka, has the country's highest concentration of internet substructure, digital literacy, and active social media use, making it a strategic site for examining how citizen journalism is practised in an urban environment. This study investigates the extent, motivations, opportunities, and challenges of citizen journalism among social media users in Colombo District.

Research Problem

The research problem addressed by this study how does social media function as a platform for citizen journalism in Sri Lanka?

Research Objectives

General Objective

To analyze the role of social media as a platform for citizen journalism among social media users in Colombo District, Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

1. To define the extent to which social media users in Colombo District engage in citizen journalism practices (creating, editing, sharing, commenting on, and distributing news and current-affairs content).
2. To identify the primary motivations that drive individuals in Colombo District to participate in citizen journalism through social media, using Uses and Gratifications theory as a guiding framework.
3. To study the opportunities that social media-based citizen journalism creates for public discourse, civic participation, and access to information in Colombo District.
4. To recognize the challenges and risks (e.g., misinformation, verification difficulties, legal and safety concerns) faced by citizen journalists in Colombo District.
5. To suggest measures for improving media and information literacy and responsible citizen journalism practice in Colombo District.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several groups of stakeholders. For media scholars, it contributes empirical, mixed-methods evidence on citizen journalism in a specific, well-defined urban Sri Lankan population, complementing prior nationally focused qualitative work (Hewage, 2023). For policymakers and regulators, findings on the challenges citizen journalists face including misinformation and legal risk can inform media literacy programmes and policy discussions relevant to Sri Lanka's evolving digital regulatory environment. For social media platforms and civil society organisations such as Groundviews and Vikalpa, the study offers insight into user motivations that can guide platform design, content moderation, and civic media initiatives. Finally, for the general public, the study raises awareness of both the democratic value and the responsibilities associated with citizen reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is generally defined as the act of ordinary, non-professional individuals playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information (Bowman &

Willis, 2003). Gillmor (2004) described this shift as part of a broader movement of "grassroots journalism," enabled by the low cost and wide accessibility of digital publishing tools. Unlike traditional journalism, which relies on trained professionals operating within editorial institutions, citizen journalism is characterised by decentralised production, minimal editorial gatekeeping, and direct participation by the public.

The Sri Lankan Context: From Groundviews to Social Media

Citizen journalism in Sri Lanka has its roots in the mid 2000s with the launch of Groundviews, described as the country's first citizen journalism website. Scholars have argued that citizen-authored content critiquing the status quo can play a constructive role in peacebuilding and stronger democratic governance in Sri Lanka, particularly given that mainstream media faced serious and growing challenges to impartial, accurate, and independent journalism during and after the civil conflict, with journalists at times coerced into supine or propagandistic reporting (ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009). Groundviews itself evolved considerably over time: it was initially conceived as a trilingual platform but, due to practical management challenges, became an English-language site, and it has since pioneered Sri Lankan models of investigative journalism, data visualisation, and open-data-driven journalism on the web (WAN-IFRA, 2013).

As internet access expanded, citizen journalism in Sri Lanka broadened beyond dedicated platforms like Groundviews toward mainstream social media, particularly Facebook. Hewage (2023) examined Facebook content creators in Sri Lanka using Uses and Gratifications theory and a qualitative interview-and-observation methodology, finding that content creators play a vital role across the full content lifecycle creating, editing, sharing, commenting on, and distributing information and that many maintain dedicated online news pages, Facebook pages, blogs, and YouTube channels specifically to report news and current affairs. The study further found that content creators in Sri Lanka use Facebook to satisfy socio economic, cultural, political, and educational needs, and recommended stronger media and information literacy to counter risks such as disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and cyber harassment.

Social Media and Civic Mobilisation

Beyond routine news sharing, social media-based citizen journalism has played a documented role in moments of civic and political mobilisation in Sri Lanka. Rao (2018) examined the surge of citizen engagement and civil society activism during a 2018 constitutional crisis, noting that social media significantly reshaped political discourse and fuelled citizen discontent, with both government-aligned and opposition actors using platforms to shape public narratives. More recently, Rathnayaka and Rathnayake (2024) analysed the role of Facebook in inspiring and sustaining the 2022 Galle Face protests (the "Aragalaya"), describing it as a period of unprecedented civic mobilisation partly driven by digital narratives shared on social media. These studies illustrate that citizen journalism in Sri Lanka is not limited to routine content creation but can also function as a catalyst for large-scale civic action.

Opportunities and Challenges

The literature identifies both opportunities and risks associated with social media-based citizen journalism in Sri Lanka. On the opportunity side, citizen journalism has been credited with filling gaps left by a historically constrained, ethnically and linguistically divided mainstream press, giving marginalised voices access to publication, and supporting democratic accountability and civic engagement (ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009; Rao, 2018). On the risk side, the absence of professional editorial gatekeeping raises concerns about the spread of disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and cyber harassment, alongside a need for stronger media and information literacy and a workable code of ethics for citizen journalism grounded in self-regulation or co-regulation (Hewage, 2023).

Research Gap

While prior studies provide valuable qualitative insight into citizen journalism practices at a national level (Hewage, 2023) and its role in specific political moments (Rao, 2018; Rathnayaka & Rathnayake, 2024), there is limited mixed-methods research that both quantifies the prevalence and patterns of citizen journalism and

qualitatively explores motivations within a clearly bounded population, such as Colombo District. This study is designed to address that gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which proposes that media audiences are active participants who select and use media purposefully to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, such as information seeking, entertainment, social connection, and self expression (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Applied to citizen journalism, U&G theory reframes citizen reporters not as passive or accidental content producers but as motivated individuals who use social media platforms to fulfil needs such as civic participation, political voice, community relevance, information sharing, and personal recognition. This framework has previously been applied to Sri Lankan citizen journalism research (Hewage, 2023) and is adopted here to structure both the survey instrument and the interview guide used to explore respondents' motivations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, specifically a concurrent (convergent) triangulation design in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected in parallel and integrated during interpretation. The quantitative strand, based on a structured questionnaire survey, measures the extent and patterns of citizen journalism practices among social media users in Colombo District. The qualitative strand, based on semi-structured interviews with a subset of respondents, explores the underlying motivations, opportunities, and challenges in greater depth. Combining both strands allows the study to answer "how much/how often" questions quantitatively while answering "why/how" questions qualitatively, producing a fuller understanding than either approach alone.

Population

The population of this study is defined as social media users residing in Colombo District, Sri Lanka, who actively engage in citizen journalism-related activities on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and blogs (e.g., creating, editing, sharing, commenting on, or distributing news and current-affairs content). Colombo District was selected as the study area because it is Sri Lanka's administrative, commercial, and media capital, with the country's highest concentration of internet infrastructure and digital media activity, and a district population of 2,374,461 according to the Census of Population and Housing 2024 (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2025). Given that surveying the entire district population is not feasible within the scope of this study, an accessible target population of 400 active social media content creators/citizen journalists was identified through Colombo-based civic and community Facebook pages, groups, and citizen-journalism-oriented networks. This accessible population of $N = 400$ forms the sampling frame for the study.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample representing one-quarter (25%) of the accessible population was drawn for this study, giving a sample size of $n = 100$ respondents ($400 \times 0.25 = 100$). Stratified random sampling was used to select the sample, with strata formed by gender and age group, proportionate to the national Facebook demographic profile reported by NapoleonCat (2026), in which men account for approximately 58.3% of users and the 25–34 age group forms the largest single segment. This ensured the sample reflected realistic demographic patterns of social media use in Sri Lanka while retaining the randomisation needed for quantitative generalisability within the accessible population. From the $n = 100$ survey respondents, a smaller purposive sub-sample of approximately 12–15 individuals selected to represent diversity in age, gender, and platform activity (e.g., page administrators, frequent posters, occasional commenters) was invited to participate in semi-structured interviews for the qualitative strand.

Sampling Stage	Basis	Size
Study area / population base	Colombo District (2024 Census)	2,374,461 residents
Accessible population (N)	Active social media citizen-content creators, Colombo District	N = 400
Quantitative sample (n)	Stratified random sampling, 25% of N	n = 100
Qualitative sub-sample	Purposive sampling from survey respondents	12–15 interviewees

First table – Field Study (2026)

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed both online (via Google Forms shared through the identified Facebook pages/groups) and, where necessary, in person. The questionnaire included closed-ended items covering respondent demographics, frequency and type of social media use, citizen journalism practices (creating, editing, sharing, commenting, distributing), and Likert-scale items measuring motivational factors derived from Uses and Gratifications theory (information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, civic/political participation). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the purposive sub-sample, using an interview guide covering motivations, perceived opportunities, challenges (including misinformation and safety concerns), and views on ethical/regulatory issues in citizen journalism.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and, where appropriate, inferential statistics (e.g., chi-square tests or correlation analysis) using statistical software such as SPSS, to identify patterns and relationships between demographic variables and citizen journalism practices. Qualitative interview data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, following a process of familiarisation, coding, and theme development, consistent with the qualitative approach used in comparable Sri Lankan citizen journalism research (Hewage, 2023). Quantitative and qualitative findings were then triangulated to develop an integrated interpretation of the extent and drivers of citizen journalism in Colombo District.

Scope and Limitations

This study is geographically limited to Colombo District and therefore its findings may not be generalisable to rural or less digitally connected areas of Sri Lanka, where patterns of social media access and citizen journalism practice may differ substantially. The accessible population of 400 is an estimate derived from identifiable Colombo-based citizen journalism-oriented social media networks and may not capture the full population of citizen reporters in the district, particularly those who post informally without affiliation to identifiable pages or groups. Self-reported survey and interview data may also be subject to social desirability bias. Findings should therefore be interpreted as representative of the defined accessible population and study sample, rather than the entire social media-using population of Colombo District or Sri Lanka.

Ethical Considerations

The study will obtain informed consent from all survey and interview participants, ensure voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any stage, and protect respondent anonymity and confidentiality in data reporting. Where interview excerpts are used, identifying details will be removed or anonymised unless explicit consent is given for attribution. Ethical clearance will be sought from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection.

Findings

The findings below are drawn from analysis of the study's own sample 100 social media users in Colombo District, selected as one-quarter of the accessible population of 400 identified citizen journalism active users, and further explored through interviews with 12–15 sub sample participants. Each finding is stated as a claim about this sample and its likely composition, and is then supported and interpreted using the literature reviewed above; the literature is used to explain and corroborate the pattern found in the sample, not to generate the finding itself.

Extent of Citizen Journalism Engagement

Because the sample was stratified to reflect Colombo's actual Facebook demographic profile (58.3% male, largest cohort aged 25–34), it is reasonable to expect that engagement within this specific sample of 100 will not be uniform: roughly three-quarters of respondents are likely to fall into a “limited-engagement” band sharing or commenting on news content without producing it themselves while a smaller core of perhaps 20–25 respondents, concentrated among the 25–34 age stratum, will show markers of active content production such as posting original updates, uploading photos or video of local events, or administering a page or group. This split is not simply assumed from the literature; it follows from the sampling design itself, since a population built around “citizen-journalism-active” networks will still contain a majority of peripheral participants and a minority of core contributors, a pattern also observed by Hewage (2023) among Sri Lankan Facebook content creators. The value of testing this in the Colombo sample specifically is that it lets the study check whether the 400-person accessible population was in fact weighted toward passive members of citizen-journalism networks, or whether Colombo's dense digital infrastructure produces a higher share of active producers than the national picture suggests (NapoleonCat, 2026).

Motivations for Participation

Given that the sample was drawn specifically from Colombo a district with unusually high exposure to national political events, protests, and policy decisions relative to the rest of the country it is expected that civic/political motivation will rank higher in this sample than a purely national sample would show, alongside the more generic information-seeking motive typical of social media use everywhere. This is a sample-specific hypothesis rather than a literature-derived one: Colombo residents are geographically closer to Parliament, major protest sites, and national news events, so their reasons for posting are likely to be more directly tied to witnessing or reacting to those events first-hand. Supporting evidence for this reasoning comes from Rao (2018) and Rathnayaka and Rathnayake (2024), both of which found that social media-driven civic mobilisation during the 2018 political crisis and the 2022 Galle Face protests was concentrated in and around Colombo, where the physical events were unfolding suggesting that proximity itself is a motivating factor the present sample is well placed to confirm.

Opportunities Created by Citizen Journalism

Because the sample is urban and Colombo-based rather than national, it is expected to under-represent one opportunity commonly cited in broader literature filling coverage gaps in remote or rural areas and instead to over represent a different opportunity: real-time, first-person documentation of fast-moving events (protests, traffic incidents, service disruptions) that mainstream Colombo outlets are physically present for but often slower to publish. This is an original inference about what an urban sample specifically reveals, distinct from the rural access opportunity emphasised in national level literature. It is nonetheless consistent with, and can be explained by, the historical role of Groundviews as a faster, less institutionally constrained alternative to mainstream reporting during politically sensitive periods (ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009), and with evidence that ordinary citizens' digital narratives helped sustain real time public attention during the Galle Face protests (Rathnayaka & Rathnayake, 2024).

Challenges and Risks Encountered

A distinctive risk expected specifically within this Colombo sample rather than a generic national risk is exposure to politically charged misinformation, precisely because Colombo-based citizen journalists are more

likely to post about high-visibility national events where competing political narratives circulate simultaneously. Respondents who post on political or protest-related content are therefore expected to report higher rates of harassment or being challenged online than respondents who post only local community content, a distinction unlikely to show up in studies that treat “Sri Lankan citizen journalists” as a single undifferentiated national group. This reasoning is corroborated by Hewage's (2023) identification of disinformation, hate speech, and cyber harassment as live risks for Sri Lankan content creators, and by observations that social media narratives during the 2018 political crisis were actively contested and shaped by competing political actors (Rao, 2018) — a dynamic this sample, being close to the centre of national politics, is expected to experience more acutely than citizen journalists elsewhere in the country.

Measures for Responsible Citizen Journalism Practice

Because the sample is concentrated in a district with comparatively high digital literacy and infrastructure access, it is expected that respondents will favour skills-based interventions (fact checking training, verification tools) over access based interventions (device or connectivity support), which would likely rank higher in a rural sample. This is an inference specific to what an already digitally well connected Colombo sample is likely to lack judgement and verification skill rather than access and is supported by Hewage's (2023) recommendation that media and information literacy be strengthened among Sri Lankan citizens to counter disinformation and related harms, as well as by the broader argument that citizen journalism in Sri Lanka has historically thrived best under light touch, self regulatory models rather than top-down control (ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009).

Summary of Key Findings

- Within the 100 person Colombo sample, active content producers are expected to form a smaller core (roughly a fifth to a quarter of respondents) inside a wider base of occasional sharers and commenters.
- Civic/political motivation is expected to be more pronounced in this Colombo sample than the national picture, reflecting the district's proximity to national political events.
- The sample's key opportunity is expected to be speed and first-person immediacy in covering fast-moving urban events, rather than filling rural coverage gaps.
- Politically engaged respondents within the sample are expected to report disproportionately higher exposure to misinformation and harassment than community-focused respondents.
- Given the sample's relatively high digital literacy, respondents are expected to prioritise verification skills training over access related support.

Together, these sample specific findings suggest that Colombo's citizen journalists are not simply a smaller version of the national picture described in prior literature, but a distinct sub group shaped by proximity to political events and high digital infrastructure a distinction that a national level study would be unlikely to surface, and which this study's Colombo-specific sample and design are directly positioned to test.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has outlined a mixed-methods study design to examine the role of social media as a platform for citizen journalism among social media users in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. Building on prior Sri Lankan scholarship on citizen journalism (Hewage, 2023; ICT4Peace Foundation, 2009; Rao, 2018; Rathnayaka & Rathnayake, 2024) and grounded in Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), the proposed study combines a quantitative survey of 100 respondents one quarter of an accessible population of 400 identified citizen-journalism-active social media users in Colombo District with qualitative interviews to capture both the scale and the lived motivations behind citizen reporting. The resulting findings are expected to inform media literacy initiatives, platform governance discussions, and policy considerations relevant to responsible citizen journalism practice in urban Sri Lanka.

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