

Ethical Legitimacy Work among Malaysian Citizen Journalists

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ABSTRACT

Citizen journalism expands access to public communication, but access alone does not establish whether non-professional contributors are entitled to be treated as responsible public communicators. This article examines how Malaysian youth citizen journalists claim legitimacy when publishing outside formal newsroom authority. It reports a secondary interpretive analysis of phenomenological interviews conducted in 2017 with 14 adult contributors aged 25–40 from CJ.MY, The Vocket and The Patriots. The participants came from varied occupational and educational backgrounds and were selected purposively as information-rich cases rather than as a statistically representative sample. The analysis identifies four contributor-controlled forms of ethical legitimacy work: writing within a defensible area of competence, checking and attributing information, orienting content toward public usefulness, and restraining expression when evidence, competence or public purpose is insufficient. A fifth element, relational recognition, is analytically different because it depends on platform selection, circulation, editorial mediation and audience response rather than on contributor action alone. The findings show that participants did not define citizen journalism as unrestricted online expression. Instead, they described public communication as defensible when it combined knowledge, evidence, service and restraint. The article therefore distinguishes credibility from legitimacy and avoids inferring audience trust from contributor self-reports. Because the interviews were collected in 2017, the framework is presented as a historically situated account whose contemporary relevance should be tested against algorithmic visibility, recommendation systems and creator-led news practices. The study contributes a layered account of legitimacy beyond the newsroom by separating ethical practices that contributors can undertake from recognition that remains externally mediated. The Malaysian case also demonstrates how communication ethics can be articulated through everyday contributor practice in a Southeast Asian platformed media environment.

Keywords: citizen journalism; journalistic legitimacy; communication ethics; public communication; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Citizen journalism expanded the range of actors able to witness, interpret and circulate matters of public concern, but participation has never settled the question of authority. The field has therefore moved beyond asking whether citizens can publish and toward asking what makes their contributions credible, responsible or recognizably journalistic (Domingo et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012; Wall, 2015; Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). This question is especially important in platformed media environments, where visibility can be achieved without the editorial routines and occupational standing that conventionally support journalistic authority.

The problem is not simply whether a particular post is accurate. Non-institutional contributors also have to justify why they should speak publicly, what they owe readers, and where they should limit their own expression. These are questions of legitimacy as well as credibility. Credibility concerns judgments about the believability or trustworthiness of claims and speakers. Legitimacy concerns a broader social judgment that a public role or form of conduct is appropriate and justified (Suchman, 1995; Carlson, 2017; Tong, 2018). A contributor may produce

a credible explanation on one topic without acquiring a general right to speak on every topic, and a contributor may claim legitimacy without audiences necessarily granting it.

This article examines these distinctions through Malaysian contributors to CJ.MY, The Vocket and The Patriots. The platforms differed in orientation and editorial structure, but all created spaces in which non-professional contributors could write for publics beyond their immediate personal networks. The interviews reveal that participants did not equate citizen journalism with any online post. They repeatedly narrowed the category through expectations of knowledge, verification, usefulness and restraint.

I describe these expectations as ethical legitimacy work: the practical and normative work through which contributors seek to make their public communication defensible. The analysis identifies four practices that contributors can enact directly—competence, evidentiary discipline, public usefulness and ethical self-limitation—and one relational condition that they cannot control fully: recognition through platforms, editors and audiences. Treating recognition as a condition rather than an equivalent practice avoids claiming that trust or legitimacy was actually achieved from contributor accounts alone.

The article addresses two questions: (1) How do Malaysian youth citizen journalists distinguish responsible public communication from ordinary online posting? (2) Through what communicative practices do they claim legitimacy outside formal newsroom authority?

The contribution is threefold. First, the article separates claims to trustworthiness from legitimacy as an achieved social judgment. Second, it offers a layered framework that distinguishes contributor-controlled ethical practices from externally mediated recognition. Third, it adds a Southeast Asian case to a literature still shaped heavily by professional newsrooms and Western media systems, while treating Malaysia as a site of conceptual development rather than merely a local illustration.

Citizen Journalism, Legitimacy and Ethical Practice

Citizen journalism as conditional public communication

Citizen journalism is used here to mean public-oriented information production by non-professional or non-institutional contributors who gather, interpret, explain or circulate information for audiences beyond immediate private networks. The category includes independent reporting, participatory initiatives connected to media organisations, community knowledge-sharing and networked witnessing (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Domingo et al., 2008; Wall, 2015). It does not include every instance of online self-expression.

This boundary is analytically necessary. If all public posting counts as citizen journalism, the concept loses explanatory value. If only work that replicates professional newsroom routines counts, the category collapses into professional journalism. Recent scholarship also shows that citizen journalism remains diverse and consequential in Global South settings even as questions about reliability and professional standards persist (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). A conditional definition therefore asks not only who publishes, but how contributors understand the obligations attached to publishing for others.

Credibility, trustworthiness and legitimacy

Legitimacy is commonly understood as a perception that an actor or practice is desirable, proper or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms and values (Suchman, 1995). Journalism has historically stabilised such perceptions through occupational identity, editorial routines, verification practices and claims to public service (Deuze, 2005; Carlson, 2017). Digital media unsettle that arrangement because public communication can acquire reach without passing through a newsroom.

Citizen journalism makes the distinction between credibility and legitimacy particularly visible. Credibility concerns the believability or reliability of specific content, sources or speakers. Legitimacy concerns the justified authority to occupy a public role. Research on professional evaluations of citizen journalism, for example, shows that assessments of credibility are shaped by individual and routine-level judgments rather than by a single

occupational standard (Salaudeen, 2022). Such judgments matter, but they do not answer the broader question of how contributors justify their public role to themselves and others.

Trust should be treated with similar care. Trust is relational: it involves a trustor who places confidence in another actor. Contributor interviews can show how people try to present themselves as trustworthy, but they cannot demonstrate that audiences trusted them. Studies of journalistic transparency likewise caution against assuming that practices intended to build trust will necessarily be recognised or rewarded by audiences (Koliska, 2022). The present analysis therefore examines claims to trustworthiness and legitimacy rather than treating trust as an outcome established by the data.

Journalistic legitimacy can also be redistributed through platforms. Molyneux and McGregor (2022) show how journalistic practices may transfer authority to social media platforms by treating platform content as already legitimate. For citizen contributors, the direction of transfer is different but related: platforms can make contributors visible, select their work and signal seriousness to wider publics. That recognition may support legitimacy claims, but it remains contingent on actors outside the contributor's control.

Youth participation and the Malaysian setting

Research on networked youth participation describes public engagement as increasingly hybrid, issue-based and connected to everyday media practices (Bennett et al., 2009; Loader et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2016). Platform access lowers barriers to entry, but contemporary recommendation-led environments also organise attention through ranking, metrics and creator visibility. TikTok-based citizen journalism, for example, combines reporting practices with platform-native presentation and audience engagement (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). Research on social media creators further shows that visibility is shaped by opaque platform systems (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), while the emergence of the “newsfluencer” marks a closer intersection between news production and influencer logics (Hurcombe, 2025). These developments sharpen the double task facing youth contributors: entering public conversation through digital fluency while differentiating sustained public contribution from impulsive or attention-led visibility.

Malaysia provides a useful setting for examining that task. Communication scholarship has long discussed media control, alternative media and contested public speech in the country (Kenyon, 2010; Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2012). More recent regional work shows that citizen journalism in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines is shaped by political, economic and cultural pressures as well as by changing professional boundaries (Prawira & Mahamed, 2025). Broader scholarship likewise describes citizen journalism as diverse and still consequential in Global South settings (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). The present article shifts attention from system-level restriction to the everyday standards contributors use when deciding what they can responsibly make public.

The label youth follows the operational definition used when the original study was designed and conducted. Malaysia's official framework at that time extended the category to age 40. The statutory reduction to below 30 took effect only on 1 January 2026 (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2026). Retaining the contemporaneous definition avoids retrospectively reclassifying participants who were recruited as youth contributors in 2017.

Ethical legitimacy work

Ethical legitimacy work refers to the practical and normative work through which non-institutional contributors seek to make public communication justified, responsible and useful. The term draws attention to decisions made before and around publication: whether a contributor has a defensible basis for speaking, how claims are grounded, why the material should be public, and when expression should be limited.

The re-analysis identified four contributor-controlled practices—competence, evidentiary discipline, public usefulness and ethical self-limitation. Relational recognition emerged alongside them, but it is analytically different. Contributors can seek circulation, respond to feedback and submit work to platforms, yet they cannot determine whether editors, readers or other media actors recognise their claims. Recognition is therefore treated as a condition of uptake that may reinforce, qualify or withhold legitimacy.

This layered formulation prevents two forms of over claiming. It does not treat ethical self-description as evidence that contributors consistently met their own standards, and it does not infer audience trust from platform circulation. Instead, it identifies the normative vocabulary through which contributors claimed a responsible public role.

Table 1. Analytical framework for ethical legitimacy work

Element	Analytical status	Core question	Empirical indicator
Competence	Contributor practice	Is there a responsible basis for speaking?	Writing within knowledge, research or experience.
Evidentiary discipline	Contributor practice	How are claims grounded?	Checking, sourcing, attribution and avoiding unsupported copying.
Public usefulness	Contributor practice	Why should this be public?	Educating, clarifying or serving readers and communities.
Ethical self-limitation	Contributor practice	When should expression be restrained?	Avoiding claims beyond evidence, competence or public purpose.
Relational recognition	Condition of uptake	How are legitimacy claims encountered by others?	Editorial selection, platform circulation, feedback and wider pickup.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and data source

The article is based on a secondary interpretive analysis of phenomenological interview data generated for a doctoral study of Malaysian youth citizen journalists (Mahamed, 2018). The original study examined contributors' role understandings, practices and experiences. The present article returns to the interview materials with a narrower question: how contributors described the standards and boundaries that made public communication legitimate in their own terms. A phenomenological orientation remains relevant because legitimacy is approached through lived meaning rather than imposed as an external score. The analysis asks when contributors felt entitled to write, what they believed they owed readers, and where they placed limits on their own expression. The article does not claim that contributors always enacted these standards consistently; it examines how they narrated and justified them.

Participants and recruitment

The original study involved 14 Malaysian contributors aged 25 to 40. Participants were purposively selected because they had experience producing public-oriented written content for CJ.MY, The Vocket or The Patriots. Recruitment combined platform access, researcher scouting and snowball sampling. The sample was intended to provide information-rich cases across platforms, topic domains, occupational backgrounds and levels of contributor experience rather than statistical representation. Pseudonyms from the doctoral study are retained. Gender is not analysed because the profile data available for this secondary article do not support a defensible gender analysis. The table therefore reports only details that are relevant to the analysis and consistently verifiable across participants.

Table 2. Participant profile

Pseudonym	Age	Platform/role	Topic domain
Darsh	26	CJ.MY contributor	Trends; urban festivals
Hud	34	The Vocket contributor	Malay culture and philosophy
Nur	26	The Vocket contributor	Student experience; mathematics; microbiology
Dan	33	The Patriots contributor	Defence and military

Jay	33	Founder/contributor, The Patriots	Malay culture; nation-building
Mus	25	The Vocket contributor	Travel; gadgets; business; finance
Faiz	31	The Vocket contributor	Travel; financial planning
Kamchan	40	The Vocket contributor	Hobbies; Japanese culture and practices
A. D.	33	Co-founder/contributor, The Vocket	Business; parenting; health; general information
Cikgu	39	The Vocket contributor	Education; student experience; syllabus
Ira	31	The Vocket contributor	Education; travel; Finland
Naem	31	The Vocket contributor	Travel health
Ash	35	The Patriots contributor	Adat Perpatih; technical and vocational education
Gana	33	Project manager/contributor, CJ.MY	Community stories; positive news

Interview procedure and research relationship

The main data collection period ran from March to May 2017. Interviews were arranged in Malaysian locations convenient to participants, including the Klang Valley, Johor Bahru, Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu. They were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. The interview guide invited participants to discuss writing practices, motivations, role understandings, ethical concerns and experiences with audiences or platforms.

The researcher had prior familiarity with the field through reading, preliminary engagement with platform actors and participant scouting, but was not a citizen journalist. This position offered contextual familiarity while requiring reflexive distance from contributors' self-descriptions. In the re-analysis, attention was paid to the possibility that a legitimacy-focused reading could foreground responsibility and understate accounts centred on personal interest or visibility.

Secondary analytical process

The secondary analysis proceeded in four stages. First, transcripts, coding outputs and findings chapters were re-read for passages concerning accuracy, source use, knowledge, usefulness, responsibility, motive and expressive boundaries. Second, these passages were coded interpretively. Third, the codes were grouped into the four practices and one relational condition shown in Table 1. Fourth, the developing framework was checked against complicating material, including accounts that stressed personal satisfaction, informal writing or platform visibility.

The distinction between practices and recognition emerged during this final stage. Earlier versions treated all five elements as equivalent dimensions. Closer examination showed that competence, checking, usefulness and restraint were described as actions or judgments contributors could undertake, whereas recognition depended on editorial selection, circulation and response. Reclassifying recognition as a condition of uptake produced a more defensible account of what the contributor interviews could and could not establish.

Extended excerpts are retained because the argument depends on how participants connected knowledge, ethics and public purpose in their own words. The analysis following each excerpt identifies the interpretive claim being made rather than using quotations as self-explanatory illustrations.

Trustworthiness and evidentiary boundaries

The doctoral project maintained records of research design, sampling, access, interview development and transcription. For the present article, analytic memos documented the selection of passages and refinement of the framework. The aim is conceptual transferability rather than statistical generalisation: the framework is

offered as an analytic vocabulary for comparison with other forms of citizen journalism and platformed public communication.

Three evidentiary boundaries are important. First, the interview material records contributors' self-understandings. It can identify standards they claimed, but it cannot verify whether those standards were enacted consistently in published work; no corpus of participants' articles was sampled for content analysis in this secondary study. Second, no audience or editor interviews were included, so relational recognition is analysed as a condition contributors described rather than as an externally confirmed outcome. Third, the 14-person purposive sample and the 2017 data are historically and contextually bounded. The framework is therefore offered for analytical comparison and contemporary testing, not as a population estimate or evidence that Malaysian platform practices have remained unchanged.

Ethics and consent

Participants received written information about the study, participated voluntarily and provided written informed consent. The original consent procedure allowed participants to decline questions and required permission for audio recording. Pseudonyms are used and directly identifying details are omitted.

FINDINGS

Competence as bounded authority

Participants did not treat citizen journalism as unrestricted permission to speak on any subject. They linked legitimate contribution to writing within what one knows, has experienced or has researched carefully. Competence therefore operated as a self-imposed gate: authority was claimed conditionally and within recognised limits. Jay, a founder and contributor at The Patriots who wrote about Malay culture and nation-building, expressed this most directly:

Firstly, youth have to increase their knowledge to be deep and huge-ranged. They have to read a lot [and] write what they know and understand. Most importantly, don't write and share things that we are unsure and have no expertise about. Youth citizen journalism to me is important and necessary. The youth voice and representation have to see this, because they are the voice of the next generation of leaders. So, the opinion matters, but at the same time when we as youth try to voice out things, the responsibility falls into two things or considerations: that those who are in higher position to listen, and at the same time for youth citizen journalists to practice ethical writing. (Jay)

Jay binds youth voice to obligation. He does not reject participation; he rejects the assumption that participation is sufficient. In his account, public speech becomes defensible only when it is accompanied by reading, judgment and answerability. Competence is not presented as superiority, but as a reason to limit oneself at the point of authorship.

Ira, a contributor to The Vocket whose writing centred on education and travel, made the same point through the idea of a niche area:

Aaa, someone who writes for the public and on a topic that he or she is familiar about. I mean like really familiar about. So, from my understanding, citizen journalists, they have their own niche area. So, like for myself, I see myself writing about education only. Even though I do write about, like my travel and, you know, stuff that I do every day and that kind of thing. But that's not my niche area. I see that when I write about education, that's when I see myself as a journalist. (Ira)

Ira distinguishes everyday posting from the area in which she recognises a journalistic role. Her authority is domain-specific rather than generic. The point is not that lived or professional knowledge automatically guarantees accuracy, but that contributors narrow their right to speak by asking where they possess a defensible knowledge base.

Across Jay's nation-building writing and Ira's education-focused writing, competence appears as bounded authorship. In the absence of occupational accreditation, reflexively narrowing the scope of one's claims becomes an initial form of legitimacy work.

Evidentiary discipline as a portable norm

Participants repeatedly emphasised fact-checking, source comparison and attribution. These practices mattered because contributors lacked the stabilising infrastructure of professional newsrooms. Verification therefore functioned as a portable journalistic norm: not proof of professional status, but a way of making public claims more accountable outside institutional journalism. Kamchan, a The Vocket contributor who wrote about Japanese culture and practices, described that discipline as routine work:

In writing articles, I need accurate facts. After I refer to them, I credited the source. Like credible website, for example. I choose only credible sites with independence from political influences as much as possible. Take one example. One time I wrote about coffee. Even though I only used other sources partly for my article, I still credit the source and make sure the information is accurate. I also mentioned to my Facebook blog readers my source for the original info. Another interesting article was about geishas. I took the content directly from the CNN website. I mentioned in quotes the storyline presented by the journalist from the original article, and I also credited the source website. (Kamchan)

Kamchan translates verification into observable routine: selecting sources he considers credible, naming where information came from, distinguishing quotation from paraphrase and signalling dependence on prior reporting. The relevant point is not only accuracy as an outcome, but attribution as a public display of answerability.

Faiz used the religiously and culturally meaningful term *tabayyun* to describe the obligation to check before sharing:

I think at the same time youth citizen journalist should do in Arabic what we call tabayyun or checking the facts, checking the news, the content, the data, credit the sources where it is due, is it true or not. That's why I think youth should be a citizen journalist, as the writing process usually forces you to think about things and situations. (Faiz)

Faiz frames verification as both a practical and moral discipline. It slows expression in an environment that rewards immediacy and presents the contributor as someone attempting to earn rather than assume authority.

Ash, a contributor to The Patriots who wrote about Adat Perpatih and technical and vocational education, made the boundary more explicit:

Otherwise, everyone can claim they are citizen journalists, but for me personally though, the concept may encourage everyone can be citizen journalist. Personally, I think if you are not ethical, you are not. That will be difficult, as the public will not know the information is accurate or not. (Ash)

For Ash, unethical conduct weakens the role claim itself. Read with Kamchan's source attribution and Faiz's emphasis on *tabayyun*, the accounts show checking and attribution operating across different topic domains as a shared expectation. This is where credibility contributes to legitimacy without becoming identical to it: evidentiary practices may make claims more believable, while their repeated use supports a wider claim to responsible public communication.

Public usefulness as moral justification

Participants did not justify citizen journalism only through a right to speak. They also asked what readers or communities might gain from the contribution. Public usefulness gave writing a moral purpose: expression became defensible when it helped others understand, learn, decide or notice something that mattered. Naem, a The Vocket contributor writing on travel health, described how personal knowledge became public-oriented work:

It started because I was bored and wanna share my knowledge with my Facebook friends. It's kind of my satisfaction to do that, but over time it evolved to serving the public after my articles were featured in The Vocket. The public can get, like, information on what I have shared, for public good indeed. For me, I think, I will increase in knowledge also personally. Let's say previously I wrote something related to how you want to survive in the winter. So when I did that, I did a lot of research, so this also improves a lot of my knowledge. I have to do a lot of research. I'm not like, only depends on one source, I need to go Google, or like UK websites, and US websites. (Naem)

Naem describes a movement from personal satisfaction to service. As the imagined audience widens, preparation becomes more demanding. Usefulness is not the opposite of self-development: researching for others also deepens his own knowledge. The legitimacy claim is therefore reciprocal rather than purely altruistic.

Hud, whose contributions focused on Malay culture and philosophy, described a similar movement from curiosity to responsibility:

First it was fuel by personal interest. Then it later developed as a sense of responsibility as I get older, a responsibility to inform the people about my particular interest, which I found not many people are having the knowledge and aware of the things I share about the Malay world, thoughts about Malay culture, etc. I will choose areas and topics that serve my personal satisfaction as well as spreading it to others, so that everybody knows about the meaning of Malay rituals, for example, why it is what it is and how the processes come about. (Hud)

Hud frames citizen journalism as civic knowledge work. He does not claim authority through formal journalistic status, but through researching, interpreting and sharing cultural knowledge that he believes is insufficiently understood. Public usefulness therefore includes explanation, cultural memory and practical learning, not only breaking news or political commentary.

Cikgu, a teacher and The Vocket contributor, linked usefulness to an ethical manner of education:

As a teacher, the essence of the profession is something to take seriously inside and outside the job by giving people information and knowledge mainly to educate. So, as a citizen journalist, I think it's not only me but also citizen journalists in general should go beyond just informing. Educate with courtesy, without judgments. Even if we know that the concerned party maybe wrong, we as a citizen journalist have to find ways to avoid being judgmental in such situations, rather try to enlighten them by the means of nurturing and educating the public. (Cikgu)

Cikgu's account makes usefulness relational as well as informational. To educate responsibly is to communicate without humiliation or careless judgment. Across health guidance, cultural explanation and educational care, participants treated usefulness as a reason why writing deserved public circulation and as a standard for how knowledge should be offered to others.

Ethical self-limitation as boundary work

Participants also constructed legitimacy through what they believed should not be written, which motives weakened citizen journalism and when expression should be restrained. This form of legitimacy work is significant because it rests on limits rather than maximal freedom. A. D., a co-founder and contributor to The Vocket, drew a boundary between public good and personal agenda:

I realize that some people are leaning toward their personal agenda rather than for the public good — be it for glamor or likes and responses. Everyone has their own reason for sharing and writing with purpose. A citizen journalist should not [be] as much of personal agenda, then you are not a citizen journalist. (A. D.)

A. D.'s distinction identifies a tension within platformed communication. Visibility is available, but it is not treated as a sufficient good. Likes, glamour and responses become problematic when they displace service, explanation or evidence. The boundary is therefore not simply between citizen and professional media, but between publicly oriented contribution and attention-seeking self-display.

Jay raised a related concern about sensationalism and emotional escalation:

Ethical here means at least to use your common sense and evaluation before posting anything, but this is sometimes lacking from youth, them being grumpy, impatient ... things like that. Sometime the way one voices out and reports things, especially in era for social media, if you want to be known and recognized, often people write something sensational to get the attention and something that make people mad and talk badly about. (Jay)

Jay treats platform recognition as morally ambivalent. It can amplify public value, but it can also reward impatience, anger and sensationalism. Ethical self-limitation operates as a brake on those incentives.

This finding sharpens the distinction between credibility and legitimacy. A sensational post may attract attention or persuade some readers, yet participants did not regard those outcomes as enough. In their accounts, a defensible public role required evidence, public orientation and restraint rather than circulation alone.

Relational recognition as a condition of uptake

The final element differs from the preceding practices. Contributors could prepare, check and limit their work, but seriousness also had to become visible to others. They described how writing moved through Facebook, BlogSpot, CJ.MY, The Vocket and The Patriots and, at times, attracted wider media attention. Recognition was therefore mediated by platforms, editors and audiences rather than produced by contributors alone. A. D. described movement from social media to platform featuring and possible mainstream pickup:

Once these youth citizen journalists shared in social media then got featured in our portal [The Vocket]. Then it became the opportunity for them ... as the mainstream media will highlight these youth and their stories or topics they share. (A. D.)

A. D.'s account shows recognition as layered. A contribution may begin within a small network, be selected by a platform and then become legible to wider publics. Platform endorsement does not settle legitimacy, but it signals that the work has crossed beyond private circulation.

Hud described a more everyday pathway through sustained platform use:

BlogSpot is a perfect space for me to write, share my idea and thoughts and interact with others ... After that, then came Facebook. That was and still is my main medium till now. (Hud)

Hud's account emphasises interaction, repeated visibility and feedback rather than a single moment of endorsement. Together, the excerpts show why recognition should be separated from contributor practice. Contributors can make claims and seek circulation, but recognition depends on editorial selection, platform affordances and audience response.

The data cannot establish whether readers trusted the contributors or whether professional journalists regarded them as legitimate. They show instead that contributors imagined legitimacy as something tested through continued engagement and uptake, not merely asserted in isolation.

DISCUSSION

Conceptual implications

The findings show that Malaysian youth citizen journalists did not define legitimacy through access alone.

They described four contributor-controlled practices that made public communication more defensible: speaking from a bounded area of competence, grounding claims in evidence, orienting writing toward public usefulness and limiting expression when competence, evidence or purpose was insufficient. These practices answer different ethical questions about who should speak, on what basis, for whose benefit and with what restraint.

Credibility forms part of this account but is not its endpoint. Verification and attribution can make a particular claim more believable, whereas legitimacy concerns the broader justification for occupying a public role. The same distinction applies to trust. Contributor interviews can show efforts to appear trustworthy, but they cannot demonstrate that audiences trusted the contributors. Relational recognition is therefore kept analytically separate from the four practices: editors, platforms and audiences may grant, qualify or withhold uptake, and circulation itself is not evidence that legitimacy has been achieved.

Public usefulness also broadens what counts as ethically serious citizen contribution in this dataset. Participants treated health guidance, education, cultural explanation and practical knowledge as public communication when such material was researched, explained and offered for others' use. The Malaysian case therefore adds to citizen-journalism research by showing how legitimacy can be articulated through everyday knowledge work as well as through political reporting or crisis witnessing.

Contemporary platform relevance

The interviews were conducted in 2017 and predate the present creator-led news economy and the wider use of recommendation-driven short-video platforms. Current research shows that social media creators experience algorithmic visibility as a consequential and often opaque condition of participation (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Studies of citizen reporting on TikTok document platform-specific reporting and engagement practices (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024), while work on "newsfluencers" shows how news production increasingly intersects with influencer logics and creator economies (Hurcombe, 2025). The framework should therefore not be read as evidence that the specific platform conditions described by participants have remained unchanged.

What changes most clearly is the relational-recognition layer. Editors and audiences still matter, but visibility can also be allocated through recommendation systems, engagement metrics, moderation, monetisation and creator branding. Recognition is consequently more sociotechnical than the 2017 accounts alone could show. A contributor may satisfy the four ethical practices yet remain difficult to discover, while attention-optimised material may circulate widely without meeting them. The four contributor-controlled practices remain useful as a normative check on incentives that reward speed, emotional intensity and share ability. This is a contemporary application of the framework, not a new empirical finding from the 2017 interviews.

The framework should also be treated as portable rather than universal. It emerged from 14 purposively selected contributors on three Malaysian platforms and cannot establish the prevalence of these practices across citizen journalists. Comparative research across Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines already shows that citizen journalism is shaped differently by political, economic and cultural pressures (Prawira & Mahamed, 2025). Other settings may give greater weight to witnessing, activism, emergency testimony or adversarial accountability. The value of the present framework is that these differences can be tested rather than assumed.

Practical implications

For citizen contributors, the framework can function as a pre-publication check: Do I have a defensible basis for speaking? What evidence supports the claim? Why should the material be public? What should be qualified, withheld or corrected? These questions turn legitimacy from an abstract label into decisions that can be made before publication and revisited afterwards.

Editors and platform publishers can support the same discipline by stating contributor standards, requiring clear attribution for contested factual claims, making correction routes visible and distinguishing editorial selection from blanket endorsement of a contributor. Media trainers can use borderline cases in which high-engagement material conflicts with evidence, expertise or harm minimisation. In current platform environments, such training should also examine how recommendation systems and attention metrics can reward choices that undermine evidentiary discipline or ethical self-limitation.

Limitations and Future Research

The evidence remains limited to contributor perspectives collected in 2017. The study therefore cannot determine whether participants consistently enacted the standards they described or whether audiences and editors recognised their legitimacy claims. A useful next design would pair contributor interviews with a purposively sampled corpus of their articles or posts, coding such features as source attribution, claim qualification, correction, evidentiary support and public-purpose cues. Audience and editor interviews could then test which practices are actually recognised as legitimate. Updated and comparative studies across platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and community-news sites, and across Southeast Asian cases, would show which elements travel, which need revision and which are specific to the Malaysian setting.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how Malaysian youth citizen journalists distinguished responsible public communication from ordinary online posting and how they claimed legitimacy outside formal newsroom authority. In their accounts, legitimacy depended on bounded competence, evidentiary discipline, public usefulness and ethical self-limitation. These were practices contributors could attempt themselves. Recognition remained different because editors, platforms and audiences could grant, qualify or withhold uptake.

The framework therefore makes a limited but useful claim. It describes the ethical vocabulary through which 14 contributors in a 2017 Malaysian setting justified public voice; it does not establish that they always met their own standards or that audiences trusted them. Its relevance to current creator-led, algorithmically ranked environments lies in the distinction between contributor-controlled practice and externally mediated recognition, which can now be tested under changed conditions.

Future work should test rather than assume that portability by linking contributor interviews to content analysis and external reception, and by comparing platforms and Southeast Asian settings. The broader question is not simply who may call themselves a journalist, but how non-institutional public communicators make authority accountable when visibility is easy to seek but legitimacy is not self-granted.

Ethical Statement

This article reports a secondary analysis of a non-clinical doctoral interview study conducted in 2017. Participants received written information about the study; participation and audio recording were voluntary; written informed consent was obtained; and participants could decline questions. Pseudonyms are used and directly identifying details are omitted. No formal institutional ethics approval reference number is available for the original study. The present article therefore reports the documented consent and confidentiality procedures without claiming an approval or exemption that cannot be evidenced.

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Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The interview transcripts are not publicly available because of confidentiality commitments and the risk of deductive identification in a small qualitative sample. De-identified excerpts supporting the analysis are included in the article.

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During manuscript preparation, OpenAI ChatGPT (accessed July–August 2026) was used for diagnostic structural review, language refinement, reference checking and journal-formatting support. The author independently reviewed and revised all outputs, verified participant quotations and citations against the doctoral thesis and source records, and takes full responsibility for the final manuscript. The tool did not generate research data or replace the author’s analysis and interpretation.

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