

## **AI-Driven Citizen Journalism: Using Free Tools for Visibility and Ethical Content Creation**

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### **Abstract**

The democratization of digital media has significantly elevated the role of citizen journalism, yet independent reporters frequently lack the financial and technical resources inherent to legacy newsrooms. The rapid proliferation of free, generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools presents an unprecedented paradigm shift, offering grassroots actors the capacity to augment their reporting capabilities and digital reach. Despite extensive research on AI integration within institutional newsrooms, a critical gap remains regarding its unregulated application in non-institutional, participatory media. This study investigates how citizen journalists operationalize free AI platforms—such as ChatGPT, Canva, CapCut, Google Gemini and several other—to enhance multimedia content creation, language editing, and algorithmic visibility. Employing a rigorous secondary data analysis, this research synthesizes contemporary peer-reviewed literature, institutional media reports, and conceptual frameworks. The findings indicate that while free AI tools democratize high-fidelity media production and optimize search engine discoverability, they concurrently introduce acute ethical risks. These include algorithmic bias, AI-hallucinated misinformation, intellectual property infringements, and profound transparency deficits. The paper concludes that, in the absence of traditional editorial safeguards, citizen journalists must adopt a normative "human-in-the-loop" framework. Establishing stringent ethical guidelines for AI adoption is imperative to preserve the authenticity, accountability, and credibility of participatory journalism in an increasingly automated public sphere.

### **Keywords**

Citizen Journalism; Generative AI; Algorithmic Visibility; Media Ethics; Participatory Media; Digital Labor; Automated Journalism.

### **1. Introduction**

Over the past two decades, the digital media ecosystem has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a centralized, broadcast-centric model to a decentralized network of participatory media (Bruns, 2018). The proliferation of digital communication platforms has catalyzed the rise of "citizen journalism"—a phenomenon wherein non-professional actors actively engage in the collection, reporting, analysis, and dissemination of news (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Wall, 2019). Operating outside the traditional constraints of institutional gatekeeping, citizen journalists have become indispensable to the modern public sphere. They frequently provide real-time, ground-level perspectives during crises, political upheavals, and localized events that legacy media lack the agility or resources to cover immediately. However, despite their critical democratic function, citizen journalists have historically been constrained

by the lack of financial, technical, and editorial resources required to produce and distribute high-fidelity news content capable of competing with established institutions.

Concurrently, the journalism industry is experiencing a second major disruption driven by the rapid advancement and integration of artificial intelligence (AI). Initially characterized as “computational journalism,” early algorithmic applications were largely restricted to automated data reporting in finance and sports within well-resourced, legacy newsrooms (Carlson, 2015; Diakopoulos, 2019). However, the recent advent of Generative AI (GenAI)—powered by advanced Large Language Models (LLMs) and multimodal diffusion models—has fundamentally altered the epistemology of media production and distribution (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). AI is no longer merely an analytical tool for structured data; it has evolved into a synthetic agent capable of drafting complex narratives, editing multimedia, and curating dynamic content distribution at scale (Lewis et al., 2019).

For the independent citizen journalist, the democratization of free, consumer-facing AI tools—such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Canva, and CapCut—represents an unprecedented paradigm shift. These platforms effectively neutralize historical resource asymmetries. Functioning as automated, on-demand newsrooms, free AI platforms empower grassroots creators to ideate, write, translate, edit, and produce broadcast-quality multimedia with remarkable efficiency. Furthermore, these tools allow independent journalists to optimize their content for complex algorithmic distribution networks (Search Engine Optimization and Social Media Optimization), significantly enhancing their digital visibility and discoverability in a highly competitive, algorithmic attention economy (Bucher, 2018; Caplan & boyd, 2018). Despite the empowering potential of these technologies, their unconstrained use by independent actors introduces a critical research problem. The majority of contemporary scholarly discourse regarding AI in journalism has focused almost exclusively on institutional adoption. In legacy newsrooms, ethical frameworks, editorial guidelines, and “human-in-the-loop” oversight mechanisms are, theoretically, enforced to mitigate the risks of automation (Brennen et al., 2018). Conversely, there is a distinct paucity of literature examining the unregulated application of GenAI by citizen journalists who operate entirely without formal editorial oversight. In this decentralized context, the reliance on AI for content generation and visibility optimization precipitates severe ethical vulnerabilities. These include the systemic propagation of algorithmic bias, the dissemination of automated misinformation (frequently referred to as AI “hallucinations”), intellectual property infringement, and the profound erosion of journalistic transparency.

Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its critical examination of this under-researched intersection. This paper aims to bridge the gap between media informatics and participatory journalism by addressing the dual nature of AI as both a democratizing force and an ethical disruptor. The primary objectives of this paper are to: contextualize the evolution of citizen journalism in the GenAI era; elucidate how independent journalists utilize free AI tools to overcome resource constraints in content and multimedia production; analyze the mechanisms through which AI-driven optimization strategies enhance the algorithmic visibility of grassroots reporting; and critically interrogate the ethical dilemmas inherent in automated participatory media, ultimately proposing normative guidelines for responsible AI use.

## **2. Literature Review**

The intersection of artificial intelligence and independent media production represents a rapidly evolving subfield within media informatics and journalism studies. To contextualize the operationalization of free AI tools by citizen journalists, this review systematically examines five interconnected domains: participatory media, AI in journalism, AI-assisted content creation, algorithmic distribution, and media ethics.

### **2.1 Citizen Journalism and Participatory Media**

The theoretical foundation of citizen journalism is intrinsically linked to the democratization of digital publishing. Bruns (2008, 2018) conceptualized this paradigm shift through the framework of "produsage"—a portmanteau of production and usage—illustrating how audiences transitioned from passive consumers of legacy media to active participants in the information ecosystem. Central to this transformation is the practice of "gatewatching," wherein citizen journalists curate, verify, and contextualize news generated by both institutional and grassroots sources, bypassing traditional editorial gatekeepers (Bruns, 2018). While earlier studies primarily focused on the democratic potential of user-generated content during socio-political crises (Allan & Thorsen, 2009), contemporary scholarship emphasizes the structural inequalities in digital labor. Citizen journalists often face severe resource constraints, lacking the financial capital and technical infrastructure of traditional newsrooms (Wall, 2019), which makes the recent availability of free generative AI a critical turning point in participatory media dynamics.

### **2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Journalism Studies**

The integration of AI into the journalistic field has been extensively cataloged under the umbrella of "computational journalism" (Diakopoulos, 2019). Foundational research by Carlson (2015) and Dörr (2016) explored "automated journalism," focusing on natural language generation (NLG) algorithms used to produce routine financial and sports reports. Diakopoulos (2019) expanded this framework, arguing that algorithms are fundamentally "rewriting the media" by automating news discovery, production, and distribution. Furthermore, comprehensive global surveys led by Beckett (2019) through the LSE JournalismAI project highlighted that while AI significantly augments newsroom efficiency, it fundamentally alters journalistic workflows and professional identities. Crucially, the majority of this literature is institution-centric, focusing on well-funded legacy media. The literature lacks a robust examination of how these computational capabilities diffuse into the unregulated domain of citizen journalism.

### **2.3 AI-Assisted Content Creation and Media Automation**

The advent of Generative AI has shifted the discourse from automated data processing to synthetic media creation. Lewis et al., (2019) conceptualize this shift through the lens of "human-machine communication," positing that AI should be viewed not merely as a utilitarian tool, but as a communicative agent or co-creator in the journalistic process. For independent creators, free tools like Large Language Models (LLMs) and multimodal generators act as automated editorial assistants. Napoli (2014) warned of the "institutionalization of algorithms," where content is standardized to align with machine logic. However, recent studies suggest a more nuanced reality for grassroots creators: AI tools lower the barrier to entry for high-fidelity media production, allowing marginalized voices to synthetically overcome technical deficiencies in writing, graphic design, and video editing (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023).

### **2.4 Digital Visibility and Algorithmic Media Distribution**

In the contemporary digital ecology, content distribution is governed not by human editors, but by algorithmic curation. Caplan and boyd (2018) argue that media distribution is increasingly reliant on the opaque algorithmic architectures of tech monopolies. Visibility is, therefore, a prerequisite for journalistic impact. Bucher (2012, 2018) articulates the "threat of invisibility," asserting that algorithms dictate what information reaches the public sphere. To survive in this attention economy, citizen journalists must reverse-engineer algorithmic preferences. The literature indicates that AI-driven Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Social Media Optimization (SMO) are increasingly utilized to trigger algorithmic amplification (Gillespie & Boczkowski, 2014). However, this creates a profound tension: optimizing for algorithmic visibility often incentivizes sensationalism and engagement-bait, potentially compromising the nuanced reality of grassroots reporting.

#### **2.4 Ethical Challenges in AI-Generated Journalism**

The ethical implications of AI in journalism form the most contested domain in current scholarship. Lewis and Westlund (2015) outlined the complexities of cross-media news work through the "four A's" framework (Actors, Actants, Audiences, and Activities), highlighting how "non-human actants" (algorithms) obscure traditional lines of accountability. Diakopoulos (2019) has consistently warned of algorithmic bias, noting that AI models trained on historically skewed, Western-centric datasets often perpetuate systemic prejudices, posing a significant risk for citizen journalists reporting on marginalized communities. Furthermore, the propensity of generative AI to produce "hallucinations"—fabricating facts, quotes, or historical events with high confidence—introduces severe risks of automated misinformation (Brennen et al., 2018). In the context of citizen journalism, which lacks institutional fact-checking mechanisms and formalized ethical codes, these vulnerabilities are magnified, necessitating an urgent re-evaluation of transparency, copyright, and accountability in AI-assisted independent reporting.

#### **2.5. Research Objectives and Questions**

Addressing the epistemological and structural gaps identified in the literature, this study delineates three primary research objectives to deconstruct the operational, strategic, and normative dimensions of AI integration by non-institutional media actors. The overarching aim is to systematically map how consumer-grade AI models are reshaping the praxis of participatory journalism.

##### **2.5.1 Research Objectives:**

1. **To critically evaluate the functional utility of generative AI platforms** within the operational workflows of citizen journalists, specifically analyzing how these technologies mitigate historical resource asymmetries in text synthesis, editorial review, and multimedia production.
2. **To deconstruct the mechanisms of algorithmic visibility**, assessing how independent journalists operationalize AI-driven search and social media optimization to navigate complex platform architectures and amplify their digital reach.
3. **To interrogate the normative and ethical implications** precipitated by unmediated AI adoption in grassroots journalism—with a focus on algorithmic bias, automated misinformation, intellectual property paradigms, and transparency—to propose a framework for ethical content generation.

Mapping directly to these objectives, the study investigates the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do citizen journalists integrate free generative AI affordances (e.g., ChatGPT, Canva, CapCut) to augment reporting capacities and circumvent traditional barriers to high-fidelity media production?
- **RQ2:** In what ways do AI-assisted optimization strategies (SEO/SMO) mediate the algorithmic discoverability, distribution, and audience engagement of citizen-produced journalism?
- **RQ3:** What are the paramount ethical vulnerabilities inherent in the unregulated deployment of generative AI by independent creators, and what normative frameworks can safeguard journalistic integrity in an automated public sphere?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

Given the exploratory and rapidly evolving trajectory of artificial intelligence in media, this study employs a rigorous qualitative secondary research design. By systematically synthesizing existing scholarly literature, institutional media reports, and theoretical frameworks, this approach facilitates a comprehensive, macro-level analysis of the AI-journalism nexus. This methodology is particularly suited for capturing the broad socio-technical shifts occurring across decentralized digital platforms, transcending the geographical and temporal limitations of localized empirical sampling.

#### **Data Corpus and Selection Criteria**

The data corpus for this research was meticulously curated through a structured retrieval process across premier academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. To ensure the literature reflected both foundational media theory and the contemporary realities of generative AI, the temporal parameters for the search were primarily restricted to publications between 2018 and 2026. This timeframe captures the critical inflection point of advanced Large Language Models (LLMs) and diffusion models, while allowing for the inclusion of seminal participatory media theories (e.g., Bruns, 2008).

The selected literature was stratified into three distinct categories to ensure analytical depth:

1. **Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:** Empirical and theoretical scholarship from disciplines spanning media informatics, digital journalism, and human-computer interaction (HCI), providing the core theoretical scaffolding.
2. **Institutional and Industry Reports:** High-impact, large-scale empirical analyses from entities such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the LSE *JournalismAI* initiative, which offer critical industry-wide adoption metrics.
3. **Policy Briefs and Normative Frameworks:** White papers addressing algorithmic accountability, digital labor, and the socio-technical ethics of synthetic media.

#### **Analytical Framework: Thematic Analysis**

To rigorously interpret the curated corpus, the study utilized a qualitative thematic analysis protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method provides a highly structured mechanism for identifying, analyzing, and reporting latent patterns across diverse textual data. The procedure was executed in three distinct phases:

1. **Familiarization and Extraction:** A systematic review of abstracts, methodologies, and findings was conducted to isolate relevant discourse concerning AI affordances and constraints within non-institutional journalism.
2. **Inductive Coding:** Textual data was coded inductively, allowing nuanced categories regarding technological utility, algorithmic distribution, and ethical boundaries to emerge directly from the literature rather than relying on pre-determined constructs.

3. **Thematic Synthesis:** The aggregated codes were iteratively synthesized into three robust themes that directly answer the research questions: (a) *The Functional Affordances of AI in Content Generation*, (b) *Algorithmic Amplification and the Visibility Paradox*, and (c) *Normative Vulnerabilities in Automated Journalism*.

This methodological rigor ensures that the subsequent analysis is deeply grounded in established academic discourse, providing a highly valid foundation for evaluating the structural transformation of citizen journalism.

### **Role of Free AI Tools in Citizen Journalism**

The integration of artificial intelligence into the workflows of independent media creators represents a profound shift in the economics of digital news production. Historically, the capacity to produce high-fidelity, multimodal journalism was monopolized by legacy institutions possessing substantial financial capital and specialized human resources. The proliferation of free, consumer-grade AI platforms has effectively dismantled these barriers, providing citizen journalists with a suite of automated affordances that mimic the structural capabilities of a traditional newsroom. This democratization of digital labor is evident across three primary domains: textual ideation, linguistic refinement, and multimodal production.

### **News Writing and Ideation**

Generative Large Language Models (LLMs), notably ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Google Gemini, function as cognitive prosthetics for independent journalists. In the ideation phase, these tools are utilized to parse extensive datasets, summarize dense policy documents, and generate structured interview protocols, significantly reducing the cognitive load and temporal constraints inherent in solo reporting (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). During the drafting phase, LLMs assist in synthesizing raw field notes into coherent journalistic narratives. From an academic perspective, this dynamic exemplifies the shift toward "human-machine communication," where the AI acts not merely as a passive utility, but as an active co-creator in the journalistic process (Lewis et al., 2019). By accelerating the production cycle, these platforms enable citizen journalists to provide real-time coverage of localized events that might otherwise be ignored by institutional media.

### **Language Editing and Translation**

The credibility of participatory media is heavily contingent upon its linguistic presentation. Amateur reporting is frequently marginalized due to syntactic errors or an informal tone, which detracts from its perceived authority. AI-driven editing platforms such as Grammarly utilize advanced natural language processing (NLP) to enforce grammatical precision, structural coherence, and stylistic consistency (Broussard et al., 2019). Beyond mere proofreading, these tools elevate the stylistic register of citizen-produced content to meet professional journalistic standards. Furthermore, the integration of AI translation capabilities allows grassroots reporters to instantly localize their content for global audiences, effectively neutralizing geographic and linguistic barriers that previously isolated localized reporting.

### **Graphic and Video Content Production**

Contemporary digital audiences increasingly demand multimodal storytelling, prioritizing visual and auditory information over purely textual formats. Historically, producing broadcast-quality graphics or video required expensive software and specialized training. Today, AI-augmented design platforms like Canva empower non-institutional actors to generate complex data visualizations, infographics, and professional layout designs through intuitive, prompt-

based interfaces. Similarly, mobile-first video editing applications such as CapCut utilize AI to automate labor-intensive processes, including intelligent scene cutting, automated subtitling, and synthetic voiceover generation. These tools allow solo creators to produce dynamic, high-engagement video journalism tailored for platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, successfully circumventing the resource asymmetries that once marginalized independent multimedia creators.

### **AI Tools and Digital Visibility**

In the contemporary digital ecology, producing high-quality journalism is insufficient; content must navigate complex, opaque algorithmic architectures to reach an audience. The "platformization" of news means that distribution is no longer governed by human editors, but by machine learning algorithms that prioritize engagement metrics (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). For the citizen journalist, mastering these algorithms is an existential necessity. AI tools are increasingly deployed to reverse-engineer platform preferences, enhancing discoverability through sophisticated optimization strategies.

### **AI and Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**

To mitigate what Bucher (2012) terms the "threat of invisibility," independent journalists utilize AI to optimize their content for search engine indexing. Free AI platforms analyze trending search queries and semantic keyword clusters, enabling creators to embed high-ranking terminology organically within their reports. Furthermore, generative models can instantly draft highly optimized meta-descriptions, tags, and headlines. By aligning their content structure with the indexing protocols of dominant search engines, citizen journalists significantly amplify their organic discoverability, ensuring their reporting surfaces during critical public information searches.

### **Social Media Optimization (SMO) and Algorithmic Amplification**

Social media algorithms are designed to amplify content that triggers immediate user interaction. Citizen journalists leverage AI platforms to dissect audience analytics and determine optimal posting schedules, format preferences, and platform-specific trends. For instance, an in-depth investigative article generated with the help of Google Gemini can be fed back into the LLM to automatically extract a series of serialized, highly engaging micro-posts suitable for an X (formerly Twitter) thread. By atomizing long-form journalism into bite-sized, algorithmically friendly formats, independent creators can trigger the amplification mechanisms of social networks (Caplan & boyd, 2018).

### **The Visibility Paradox**

While AI-driven optimization drastically expands the reach of participatory media, it introduces a critical tension. (Gillespie & Boczkowski, 2014) argues that optimizing for algorithmic logic often requires content creators to conform to the algorithm's inherent biases—frequently favoring sensationalism, emotional polarization, and rapid-fire consumption over nuanced, objective reporting. For the citizen journalist, this creates a "visibility paradox." The very AI strategies required to ensure a story is seen by the public may simultaneously incentivize the degradation of its journalistic integrity, forcing independent reporters to constantly negotiate the boundary between algorithmic compliance and ethical reporting.

### **Ethical Issues in AI-Driven Citizen Journalism**

While the operational and distribution advantages of generative AI are substantial, the unmediated application of these technologies introduces acute ethical vulnerabilities. Traditional journalism relies on institutional gatekeeping—editorial hierarchies, fact-checking departments, and formalized codes of ethics—to mitigate risk. Citizen journalism operates in a decentralized, often individualized environment devoid of these structural safety nets. Consequently, the reliance on automated systems precipitates a series of profound epistemological and normative challenges.

### **Misinformation and the "Hallucination" Paradigm**

The most immediate epistemological threat posed by Large Language Models (LLMs) in participatory media is their propensity to generate plausible but entirely fabricated information, a phenomenon widely documented as AI "hallucination" (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). Because LLMs are predictive text engines rather than factual databases, they prioritize syntactic coherence over factual accuracy. For the citizen journalist working without institutional fact-checkers, the unverified publication of AI-generated text or manipulated multimedia (e.g., "deepfakes") can inadvertently disseminate misinformation at scale. This severely undermines the core journalistic mandate of truth-seeking and poses a direct threat to the integrity of the public sphere (Brennen, Howard, & Nielsen, 2018).

### **Systemic Algorithmic Bias**

Generative AI models are trained on vast, uncurated datasets scraped from the internet, which inherently reflect historical societal prejudices and hegemonic narratives. Diakopoulos (2019) notes that algorithms are not neutral; they encode the biases of their creators and their training data. For citizen journalists—many of whom utilize media to amplify marginalized voices and counter institutional narratives—relying on Western-centric, English-dominant AI tools presents a structural paradox. The uncritical use of these platforms can lead to the automated reproduction of racial, gender, and political biases, inadvertently marginalizing the very communities that grassroots journalism seeks to empower.

### **Transparency and the Crisis of Authenticity**

The integration of synthetic media into news production introduces a crisis of authenticity. Lewis and Westlund (2015) highlight the complexities of accountability when "non-human actants" are involved in cross-media news work. When a citizen journalist uses ChatGPT to draft an article or Midjourney to generate an accompanying image, the lack of disclosure regarding the AI's role violates the fundamental journalistic principle of transparency. Audiences have a normative right to understand the provenance of the information they consume. In the absence of standardized disclosure protocols, the proliferation of undisclosed AI-generated content risks eroding the foundational trust upon which citizen journalism is built.

### **Intellectual Property and Copyright Infringement**

The deployment of free AI platforms also navigates highly contested legal and ethical territory regarding intellectual property. Generative models are trained on billions of copyrighted works—including articles, photographs, and illustrations produced by legacy media and independent creators—frequently without explicit consent or compensation (Appelman & Hettinga, 2020). When citizen journalists utilize these tools to generate content, they risk disseminating derivative works that infringe upon existing copyrights. This creates a precarious

legal environment for independent actors who lack the legal representation to defend against potential intellectual property litigation.

#### **4. Discussion**

The thematic synthesis of the literature reveals a profound dichotomy at the heart of AI-driven citizen journalism: generative AI acts simultaneously as a democratizing catalyst and a normative disruptor.

On one hand, the findings demonstrate that free AI tools—such as Google Gemini, Canva, and CapCut—effectively dismantle the resource barriers that have historically marginalized independent media producers. By functioning as automated editorial assistants, these platforms empower non-institutional actors to produce high-fidelity text and multimedia, democratizing the capacity for sophisticated storytelling. Furthermore, the strategic application of AI-driven SEO and SMO allows citizen journalists to navigate opaque platform architectures, mitigating the "threat of invisibility" and amplifying grassroots narratives within the algorithmic attention economy (Bucher, 2012; Caplan & boyd, 2018).

On the other hand, the critical analysis of the ethical dimensions exposes a dangerous normative void. The very efficiency that makes AI appealing to independent creators simultaneously bypasses the friction of human editorial oversight—friction that is essential for verifying facts, checking biases, and ensuring accountability. The shift from human-mediated journalism to "human-machine communication" (Lewis et al., 2019) places the entire ethical burden on the individual creator. Without the institutional frameworks of legacy newsrooms, citizen journalists are left to self-regulate against the systemic risks of AI hallucinations, embedded algorithmic prejudices, and the erosion of digital authenticity.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that the integration of AI does not simply "automate" existing citizen journalism; it fundamentally reconstructs its practice and epistemology. The transition from institutional gatekeeping to algorithmic gatekeeping requires a new critical literacy. Citizen journalists must evolve from mere content producers into sophisticated managers of automated systems, possessing the technical acumen to leverage algorithmic visibility and the ethical discipline to constrain machine logic when it conflicts with journalistic integrity. The survival and credibility of participatory media in the GenAI era will depend entirely on how successfully independent actors can balance these competing imperatives.

#### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

##### **5.1 Conclusion**

This study has systematically investigated the profound intersection of generative artificial intelligence and independent participatory media. Through a rigorous secondary analysis of contemporary media informatics and journalism scholarship, this paper elucidates how citizen journalists operationalize free AI platforms—such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Canva, and CapCut—to navigate the complex digital ecology. The findings confirm that these technologies function as a powerful democratizing force, dismantling historical resource asymmetries by providing solo creators with the automated capacity to generate high-fidelity text, edit multimodal content, and optimize their output for algorithmic discoverability. AI effectively grants the independent journalist the infrastructural capabilities of a legacy newsroom, amplifying grassroots narratives within a highly competitive, algorithmic attention economy.

However, the democratization of media production via AI is inextricably linked to severe normative vulnerabilities. In the absence of institutional gatekeeping and formal editorial hierarchies, the reliance on automated systems introduces critical epistemological risks. The

propensity for Large Language Models to hallucinate facts, the systemic biases embedded in AI training data, the obfuscation of intellectual property, and the profound erosion of transparency threaten to compromise the foundational credibility of citizen journalism. Ultimately, this research concludes that generative AI does not merely augment independent journalism; it fundamentally reconstructs its praxis. To survive this paradigm shift, citizen journalists must evolve into critical managers of automated systems, balancing the imperatives of algorithmic visibility with the uncompromising demand for journalistic integrity.

## **5.2 Recommendations for Ethical AI Use**

To safeguard the credibility of AI-driven citizen journalism, this study proposes the following normative guidelines and best practices:

1. **Mandatory Implementation of the "Human-in-the-Loop" Framework:** Citizen journalists must never delegate final editorial authority to an algorithm. AI should be strictly utilized for ideation, structural outlining, and syntactic refinement. All factual assertions, data interpretations, and contextual nuances must be rigorously verified by the human creator prior to publication.
2. **Standardization of Radical Transparency:** Independent creators must adopt clear, standardized disclosure protocols. Any content—whether text, audio, or visual—that has been generated or significantly altered by AI must be explicitly labeled. This transparency preserves the audience's right to know the provenance of the information and maintains the authentic, human-centric trust inherent to participatory media.
3. **Cultivation of Algorithmic Literacy:** Citizen journalists must actively educate themselves on the limitations and inherent biases of the AI models they employ. Understanding that LLMs are predictive text engines, not factual databases, is crucial for mitigating the dissemination of automated misinformation.
4. **Ethical Optimization:** While utilizing SEO and SMO tools is necessary for digital visibility, independent journalists must resist the algorithmic incentivization of sensationalism. Optimization strategies should be employed to amplify objective, nuanced reporting rather than conforming to engagement-baiting architectures.

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