



Digital Information Disorder and Professional Gatekeeping: Implications for Journalism Credibility in Taraba State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between digital information disorder, changing gatekeeping practices, and perceived journalism credibility in Taraba State, Nigeria. Anchored on gatekeeping and social responsibility theories, the investigation adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, surveying social-media users (n=282) across three senatorial districts and practicing journalists (n=94; pooled N=376), integrated with in-depth interviews with 12 senior media practitioners. Quantitative results reveal universal reliance on social media for news (100.0%), predominantly via Facebook (52.1%) and WhatsApp (26.6%). A pronounced audience verification deficit was identified: 31.6% of users rarely or never verify claims before sharing, and 70.5% routinely believe unconfirmed digital reports. Concurrently, 82.9% of journalists report frequent deviations from professional legal and ethical standards, generating intense newsroom pressure as unverified viral claims precede factual correction (M=3.34, SD=0.71). Thematic analysis contextualises this strain across four dimensions, notably an “epistemic contagion” and reactive debunking burden that precipitate a perceived “journalistic deficit” and mutual trust erosion (70.6%). The study concludes that credibility diminishes when platform circulation outpaces professional gatekeeping and unvetted peer sharing eclipses institutional verification. It recommends institutionalising newsroom rapid-verification workflows, transparent report attribution, community-level forum moderation, and localized media-literacy interventions.

Keywords: disinformation, misinformation, social media, gatekeeping, journalism credibility

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital information disorder, encompassing both unintentional misinformation and deliberate disinformation (Ecker et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2023), presents a significant threat to contemporary journalism, public knowledge and democratic stability. As audiences shift from publisher-controlled distribution towards multi-platform, creator-driven ecosystems such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube (Hurcombe, 2025; Newman et al., 2025; Egan et al., 2026), the boundaries separating professionally verified reporting from unvetted, partisan commentary have become increasingly blurred. Historically, institutional gatekeeping filtered claims before publication through rigorous standards of evidence, legal scrutiny and editorial norms (Møller, 2022; Van Dalen, 2023). Today, algorithmic sorting and user-driven sharing have decentralised this function, placing journalists under persistent pressure to verify and debunk claims after they have circulated (Van Dalen, 2023). This structural shift threatens journalistic credibility because audiences who encounter news through platform intermediaries may develop lower levels of trust in news production procedures (Karlsen &



Aalberg, 2023), even though trust remains closely associated with perceptions of professional gatekeeping (Scheffauer et al., 2024).

In developing countries such as Nigeria, where rapid digital penetration (DataReportal, 2025) intersects with sociopolitical, ethnoreligious and security vulnerabilities (Hassan, 2023), understanding this credibility crisis is particularly important. Existing empirical studies in Nigeria have examined the psychological drivers of sharing false health and political information (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Usman et al., 2022), the circulation of visual and pandemic-related misinformation (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022; Aondover et al., 2024), broader systemic challenges (Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024), and the gap between awareness of fact-checking and actual verification practices (Olagunju & Okorie, 2025). However, two critical gaps remain in the literature. First, geographical and contextual bias is evident, as existing studies tend to focus on national-level overviews or major metropolitan centres such as Lagos, Abuja and Kano (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025). Thus, states such as Taraba, where communal sensitivities may heighten the consequences of information disorder and dedicated fact-checking infrastructure may be limited, remain insufficiently examined. Second, analytical isolation persists because previous studies have often investigated audience information-sharing behaviours or newsroom operational challenges separately. Few studies have empirically examined both dimensions simultaneously within the same local information environment.

The aforementioned gaps are significant because subnational information environments operate under distinct social, cultural and institutional pressures. Examining audience verification practices without considering newsroom gatekeeping, or newsroom challenges without accounting for audience behaviour, provides an incomplete understanding of how journalistic credibility is undermined or sustained, particularly during crises. To address these gaps, this study was conducted.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine how digital information disorder and changing gatekeeping practices relate to perceived journalism credibility in Taraba State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. determine the extent to which social media is used for news and information among selected respondents in Taraba State;
- ii. assess professional journalists' perceptions of the conformity of social-media content to professional journalism standards;
- iii. examine professional journalists' perceptions of the effects of social media on journalism practice in Taraba State; and
- iv. examine verification practices among social-media users and their implications for journalism credibility, public trust and social responsibility.

Literature Review

Platformised News Ecologies and Distributed Gatekeeping

Contemporary digital journalism literature conceptualises social media not merely as a neutral distribution conduit, but as a hybrid information ecosystem where professionally verified journalism, commercial entertainment, political disinformation, and peer messaging circulate



simultaneously (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Hameleers, 2023; Hurcombe, 2025). Specifically, Hurcombe (2025) demonstrates how online creators and “newsfluencers” blur the boundaries separating empirical reporting, opinion, and entertainment, while routine social messaging frequently propagates political disinformation and unverified claims (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Hassan, 2023; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025). The Reuters Institute documents the rapid ascendance of creator-led news (Newman et al., 2025) and intensified platform-mediated consumption globally (Egan et al., 2026). However, because macro-level scholarship operates predominantly at cross-national scales (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024; Scheffauer et al., 2024) or examines metropolitan audience sharing in isolation from newsrooms (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025), it fails to explain how journalistic norms and audience verification interact within subnational ecologies.

Institutionally, UNESCO (2025) frames independent journalism as foundational public-good infrastructure. Yet audiences increasingly encounter news via algorithmic feeds and community groups rather than branded publishers. Fletcher (2025) empirically links shifting news use to declining trust, while Karlsen and Aalberg (2023) show that platform context lowers story credibility. The analytical imperative is therefore to distinguish the participatory affordances of social platforms from epistemic hazards created when visibility and familiarity substitute for verified evidence.

Conceptual Boundaries, Cognitive Vulnerabilities, and Verification Routines

Scholarship on digital information disorder maintains rigorous conceptual boundaries among misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Fabricated stories systematically mimic professional news values to manufacture plausibility (Tandoc et al., 2021), whereas disinformation functions as a context-bound phenomenon coupling strategic actors, malicious intent, and deliberate fabrication techniques (Hameleers, 2023). Furthermore, terminological labelling of whether “fake news,” “misinformation,” “disinformation,” or “online falsehoods” shapes audience risk evaluations and responses (Tandoc & Seet, 2024). Systematic reviews confirm that contemporary inquiry encompasses computational detection, source credibility evaluation, social diffusion, and technological interventions (Aimeur et al., 2023; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

Cognitively, misinformation belief is sustained by intuitive heuristics, partisan confirmation, and emotional arousal, rendering false claims resistant to correction (Ecker et al., 2022). Applying uses and gratifications theory, Apuke and Omar (2021) observe that social motivations such as altruism and breaking-news sharing routinely override critical scrutiny. Methodologically, because self-report surveys capture subjective exposure rather than objective intent, audience verification routines offer an empirically defensible bridge to evaluating credibility. User investigations reveal that fake-news awareness, social ties, and credibility perceptions govern pre-sharing verification intentions (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Institutionally, fact-checking operates as an epistemic process negotiating public truth and consensus reality (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). Yet technological tools remain inadequate without educational and newsroom reinforcement (Tejedor et al., 2024), underscoring social-media literacy as a vital buffer against falsehoods (Usman et al., 2022). Crucially, extant empirical research



routinely isolates audience cognition (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Ecker et al., 2022; Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022) from internal newsroom routines (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022).

Algorithmic Selection, Professional Gatekeeping, and Media Legitimacy

Gatekeeping theory remains foundational for examining how professional journalism filters, verifies, and disseminates public affairs. Yet platformisation has decentralized filtering authority, as audiences bypass publisher websites for social and video networks where independent creators compete with legacy newsrooms (Egan et al., 2026; Hurcombe, 2025; Newman et al., 2025). Filtering authority is redistributed across professional editors, algorithmic systems, and citizen curators (Møller, 2022; Van Dalen, 2023). While legacy newsrooms adopt automated recommendation mechanisms to preserve gatekeeping relevance (Møller, 2022), algorithmic curation introduces structural tensions surrounding institutional legitimacy and communicative power (Van Dalen, 2023). Crucially, Scheffauer et al. (2024) establish that public preference for journalistic gatekeeping positively correlates with trust in traditional news, whereas algorithmic selection fails to generate comparable public trust.

Platform intermediation exerts demonstrable downward pressure on credibility. Karlsen and Aalberg (2023) show experimentally that encountering authentic news via social intermediaries reduces perceived credibility relative to direct publisher exposure, while Hastuti et al. (2025) find that platform algorithms reshape editorial judgement, commercial pressures, ideological polarization, and media legitimacy. Sustaining quality journalism thus requires systematic adherence to verification, factual accuracy, procedural transparency, and public-service values (Degen et al., 2024). Although citizen journalism expands grassroots reporting speed, it frequently exhibits severe credibility deficits rooted in weak verification and ideological bias (Hurcombe, 2025; Zhou, 2025). Rather than dismissing user-generated content, professional journalists must actively adapt verification and transparency routines directly to platform environments where unverified claims circulate.

The Nigerian Information Ecology, Subnational Dynamics, and Empirical Gaps

In Nigeria, rapid digital expansion intersects with acute challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and declining institutional trust (Fletcher, 2025; Hassan, 2023; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025; Usman et al., 2022), reflecting broader patterns linking platform intermediation to eroded credibility (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Ecker et al., 2022; Fletcher, 2025; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). With 109 million internet users and 47.8 million active social-media identities in late 2025 (DataReportal, 2025), mobile networks have expanded information access while accelerating false health and political narratives (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Hassan, 2023). Partisan actors weaponise digital falsehoods during elections to exploit ethnoreligious cleavages (Hassan, 2023), deepening systemic media vulnerabilities (Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024), while false health narratives diffuse rapidly across peer networks nationally (Aondover et al., 2024; Apuke & Omar, 2021; Usman et al., 2022) and in northern states such as Kano (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022). In urban centres like Lagos, public awareness of fact-checking organizations rarely translates into personal verification behavior on Facebook or WhatsApp (Olagunju & Okorie, 2025).

Crucially, metropolitan findings cannot be generalized to subnational environments like Taraba State, which possesses unique media infrastructures, ethnocommunal sensitivities, and



limited dedicated fact-checking resources (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025; Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024). Moreover, prior inquiries routinely isolate audience sharing motivations and literacy from newsroom operational realities (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022; Aondover et al., 2024; Apuke & Omar, 2021; Usman et al., 2022). This review identifies three critical gaps: conceptual conflation of erroneous claims with deliberate disinformation, methodological isolation of audience verification from newsroom gatekeeping, and contextual neglect of subnational ecologies. Addressing these gaps, this study analytically separates social-media users and practicing journalists while integrating their perspectives, examining how distributed gatekeeping, accelerated circulation, and audience verification deficits interact to shape perceived journalism credibility in Taraba State.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study integrates Social Responsibility Theory and Gatekeeping Theory as complementary frameworks. Social Responsibility Theory, rooted in post-war media critiques (Siebert et al., 1956) and expanded by McQuail (2010), emphasises journalists' obligations to accuracy, fairness, pluralism and public accountability. It guides Objectives Two, Three and Four by providing standards for assessing journalists' ethical practices and newsroom pressures. Gatekeeping Theory, developed by Lewin (1947), applied to news selection by White (1950), and expanded by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), explains how information is selected, filtered and disseminated. It informs all four objectives by examining how journalists, platform algorithms, group administrators and peer networks shape news visibility and verification. Together, the theories explain how decentralised gatekeeping can allow unverified claims to spread rapidly, while social responsibility provides the ethical benchmarks for evaluating verification, transparency and professional restraint.

Method

Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, combining questionnaires and 12 in-depth interviews to examine social-media news use, verification practices, and journalists' ethical and professional standards in Taraba State. The target population comprised 121,181 registered journalists and members of five major social-media forums. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula, a target sample of 400 was determined, comprising 388 questionnaires and 12 interviews. A purposive, multistage sampling procedure covered Jalingo, Bali and Wukari, yielding 376 valid questionnaires: 282 from social-media users and 94 from journalists, representing a 96.9% response rate. Two tailored questionnaires and a semi-structured interview guide were validated by experts, while pilot testing yielded a Guttman split-half reliability coefficient of 0.85. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 27, with frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, while qualitative data underwent hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022). Findings were integrated through

joint displays and narrative synthesis. Informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality were maintained, with interviewees identified using codes J1–J12.

Results

Socio-Demographic Profile of Questionnaire Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic distribution of the achieved questionnaire sample ($N = 376$, comprising $n = 282$ social-media users and $n = 94$ professional journalists)

Table 1. *Descriptive Profile of Questionnaire Respondents ($N = 376$)*

Demographic Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	256	68.1
	Female	120	31.9
Age Group	20 – 30 years	89	23.7
	31– 40 years	155	41.2
	41– 50 years	81	21.5
	51– 60 years	40	10.6
	61 years and above	11	2.9
Educational Attainment	SSCE/GCE	20	5.3
	OND/NCE	89	23.7
	HND/Bachelor's degree	223	59.3
	PGD/Master's degree	40	10.6
	Doctorate degree (PhD)	4	1.1
Marital Status	Single	128	34.0
	Married without children	88	23.4
	Married with children	116	30.9
	Widowed/Divorced	44	11.7
Occupation	Civil servant	229	60.9
	Entrepreneur/ Business	69	18.4
	Student/Applicant	58	15.4
	Farmer	20	5.3

As shown in Table 1, respondents were predominantly male (68.1%) and concentrated within the economically active age brackets of 31 - 40 years (41.2%), 20–30 years (23.7%), and 41–50 years (21.5%), meaning 86.4% of the sample fell between 20 and 50 years of age. Educational attainment was notably high, with 94.7% holding post-secondary qualifications, primarily HND/Bachelor's degrees (59.3%), OND/NCE diplomas (23.7%), and postgraduate degrees (11.7%). Occupationally, civil servants constituted the majority (60.9%), followed by entrepreneurs (18.4%) and students/applicants (15.4%). This profile reflects an educated, digitally

iterate populace in Taraba State capable of critically evaluating questionnaire items on news consumption and information disorder.

Table 2. *Patterns and Extent of Social Media Use for News and Information in Taraba State (N = 376)*

Survey Indicator	Response Category	N	%
Knowledge and Active Use of Social Media	Yes	376	100.0
	No	0	0.0
Use of Social Media for News and Information	Yes	376	100.0
	No	0	0.0
Social Media as Major Source of Information	Yes	352	93.6
	No	24	6.4
Primary Platform Used for News and Information	Facebook	196	52.1
	WhatsApp	100	26.6
	X	41	10.9
	Instagram	24	6.4
	LinkedIn	15	4.0
	Others	0	0.0
Perceived Extent of Social Media News Use	To a very large extent	234	62.2
	To a large extent	91	24.2
	To a very low extent	27	7.2
	To a low extent	20	5.3
	To no extent	4	1.1

Across the combined sample ($N = 376$), social media was universally embedded in daily news and information routines. As detailed in Table 2, 100.0% of respondents reported active knowledge and use of social media for news and information dissemination, and 93.6% identified social media as their primary source of news and information. Regarding platform hierarchy, Facebook (52.1%), and WhatsApp (26.6%) indicated dominant channels that are used for news discovery and sharing, together accounting for 78.7% of primary platform use, followed by X (10.9%), Instagram (6.4%), and LinkedIn (4.0%). Furthermore, 86.4% of respondents assessed the extent of social-media use for news in Taraba State as either “very large” (62.2%) or “large” (24.2%).

Table 3. *Extent and Frequency Assessments of Legal and Ethical Conformity (n = 94)*

Survey Indicator	Response Category	n	%
Journalists' Knowledge of Media Laws and Ethics	To a great extent	78	83.0
	Somewhat	11	11.7
	To a very little extent	5	5.3
	To no extent	0	0.0
Conformity of Social Media Content to Media Laws/Ethics	To a very large extent	8	8.5
	To a large extent	20	21.3
	To some extent	25	26.6

Frequency of Deviation from Journalism Standards	To a low extent	31	33.0
	To no extent	10	10.6
	Very often	43	45.7
	Often	35	37.2
	Occasionally	11	11.7
	Rarely	3	3.2
	Very rarely	2	2.1
Extent Social Media Reduces Confidence in Journalists	Never	0	0.0
	To a very large extent	27	28.7
	To a large extent	36	38.3
	To some extent	25	26.6
	To a low extent	3	3.2
	To no extent	3	3.2

To evaluate whether social-media content in Taraba State adheres to professional journalism standards, responses from the practicing journalist subsample ($n = 94$) were analysed separately. Table 3 above presents the distributions for extent and frequency assessments, and Table 4 below presents the four-point Likert-scale evaluations of information disorder and ethical non-conformity.

Table 4. Point Likert Scale Evaluations of Information Disorder ($n = 94$)

Perception Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Std. Dev. (σ)
Information on social media is in most cases mismanaged	49 (52.1)	37 (39.4)	6 (6.4)	2 (2.1)	3.41	0.71
Social media promotes hate speech and blurs truth from falsehood	61 (64.9)	23 (24.5)	7 (7.4)	3 (3.2)	3.51	0.77
Wrong use of social media leads to social media war and chaos	50 (53.2)	35 (37.2)	6 (6.4)	3 (3.2)	3.40	0.75

As shown in Table 3, 83.0% of the surveyed journalists possessed a great extent of knowledge regarding mass media laws and ethics, establishing their professional competence to evaluate content standards. Only 29.8% of journalists perceived social-media content in Taraba State as conforming to media laws and ethics to a large (21.3%) or very large (8.5%) extent, whereas 43.6% rated conformity as low (33.0%) or non-existent (10.6%), with another 26.6% indicating only partial (“some”) conformity. Consistently, 82.9% of journalists reported that social-media content deviates from professional journalism standards either “very often” (45.7%) or “often” (37.2%), and 67.0% indicated that exposure to unvetted social-media content reduces public confidence in professional journalists to a large (38.3%) or very large (28.7%) extent. Table 4 further demonstrates strong consensus among journalists that information on social media is predominantly mismanaged (91.5% agreement; $M=3.41$, $SD=0.71$), that platform circulation promotes hate speech and obscures the boundary between truth and falsehood (89.4% agreement; $M=3.51$, $SD=0.77$), and that such misuse fuels “social media war” and communal chaos (90.4% agreement; $M= 3.40$, $SD=0.75$).

Table 5: *Journalists' Perceptions of the Effects of social media on Professional Journalism Practice in Taraba State (n = 94)*

Rank	Perceived Effect on Journalism Practice	N	M	SD	Decision
1	Audience exposure to unsubstantiated social-media claims prior to verified journalistic correction reduces consumption of accurate reporting	94	3.34	0.71	Accepted
2	Cheap and easily accessible social platforms divert audience patronage away from conventional news media (print, radio, television)	94	3.30	0.75	Accepted
3	Unverified social-media "scoops" dysfunctionally displace the breaking-news role of professional journalists	94	3.22	0.83	Accepted
4	Proliferation of unvetted online content damages the reputation of traditional journalists as champions of truthful, balanced, and objective reporting	94	3.17	0.97	Accepted
5	Social media causes direct erosion of public trust in information presented by professional journalists	94	3.01	0.89	Accepted
6	Public overdependence on social-media content relegates professionally reported news to the background	94	3.01	0.87	Accepted
—	Grand Mean	94	3.18	0.84	Accepted

Every item in Table 5 exceeded the criterion threshold, yielding a Grand Mean of image (image). Journalists identified the rapid circulation of unverified social-media claims before professional verification as the most acute pressure (image), followed by audience migration to low-cost digital platforms (image), the displacement of journalistic breaking news by unverified citizen scoops (image), reputational spillover (image), and declining public trust (image) and visibility (image).

Table 6. *Self-Reported Verification Habits, Unverified Belief, and Confidence Impact (n = 282)*

Survey Indicator	Response Category	n	%
Frequency of Verifying Sources Before Sharing Content	Very often	51	18.1
	Often	80	28.4
	Occasionally	62	22.0
	Rarely	65	23.0
	Very rarely	12	4.3
	Never	12	4.3
Frequency of Believing Social Media News Without Mainstream Media Confirmation	Very often	116	41.1
	Often	83	29.4
	Fairly often	51	18.1
	Not often	32	11.3
Extent Exposure to Social Media Reduces Public Confidence in Professional Journalists	To a very large extent	88	31.2
	To a large extent	111	39.4
	To some extent	62	22.0
	To a low extent	12	4.3
	To no extent	9	3.2

To examine audience-side gatekeeping and verification routines, responses from the social-media user subsample (n = 282) were analysed. Table 6 presents the complete, uncollapsed

distributions divided into (behavioral verification and believability frequencies) and (Likert-scale perceptions of information disorder).

Table 7. Point Likert Scale Perceptions of Information Disorder Among Users ($n = 282$)

Perception Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	M	SD
Information on social media is in most cases mismanaged	145 (51.4)	101 (35.8)	24 (8.5)	12 (4.3)	3.34	0.81
Social media promotes hate speech and makes it difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood	156 (55.3)	113 (40.1)	4 (1.4)	9 (3.2)	3.48	0.69
Wrong use of social media promotes social media war and chaos in society	164 (58.2)	75 (26.6)	28 (9.9)	15 (5.3)	3.38	0.87

Table 5 reveals a striking paradox between audience awareness of information disorder and their personal verification behaviour. In Table 3, fewer than half of the surveyed users verify sources regularly before sharing (“very often” = 18.1%; “often” = 28.4%; combined = 46.5%), whereas 22.0% verify only occasionally and nearly one-third (31.6%) rarely (23.0%), very rarely (4.3%), or never (4.3%) check source authenticity prior to forwarding content. Even more tellingly, 70.5% of users admit that they “very often” (41.1%) or “often” (29.4%) believe news encountered on social media without cross-checking it against mainstream news media, with another 18.1% doing so “fairly often”. At the same time, 70.6% of users report that exposure to social-media content reduces public confidence in professional journalists to a large (39.4%) or very large (31.2%) extent. In Table 4, overwhelming majorities of users recognise the prevalence of digital information disorder and agree that social-media information is frequently mismanaged (87.2%; $M = 3.34, SD = 0.81$), that platforms promote hate speech and obscure truth from falsehood (95.4%; $M = 3.48, SD = 0.69$), and that platform abuse triggers “social media war” and societal chaos (84.8%; $M = 3.38, SD = 0.87$). Thus, high public recognition of online falsehoods coexists with widespread unverified belief and weak pre-sharing verification.

Qualitative Findings: Hybrid Deductive – Inductive Thematic Analysis of Journalist Interviews

To contextualise the quantitative survey patterns, transcripts from the 12 in-depth journalist interviews underwent hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis. Deductive categorisation was anchored to the study’s four objectives and theoretical frameworks (gatekeeping and social responsibility), while inductive open coding yielded four overarching interpretive themes synthesised in Table 6.

Table 8: Hybrid Deductive–Inductive Thematic Analysis Matrix of In-Depth Journalist Interviews ($n = 12$)

Deductive Anchor (Objective & Theory)	Inductive Open Codes	Emergent Theme	Endorsement (n, %)	Verbatim Excerpt
Objective 1: Platform News Use & Distributed Gatekeeping	✓ Affordable access ✓ Ethno-religious/linguistic group formation	Theme 1: Ubiquitous Citizen Participation Versus Verification Velocity	12 (100.0%)	“Whether we fight it or not, social media will forever be part and parcel of us. Ordinary citizens



	✓ Ubiquitous “citizen journalists”			who are not professionals will continue to give us breaking news from their locations...” [J4, Print Correspondent]
	✓ First-contact breaking news			“To think that content on social media will go in line with that of professional journalism standard is a thought in error... most contents on social media tend to tilt towards ideologies, chauvinism, and bias.” [J2, Broadcast Journalist]
Objective Legal/Ethical Conformity Social Responsibility	2: ✓ Untrained content encoders & ✓ Absence of editorial gatekeepers ✓ Ideological, ethnic, and religious chauvinism ✓ Defamation and hate speech	Theme 2: Structural Non-Conformity to Media Laws, Ethics, and Objectivity	12 (100.0%)	“People have taken the work for granted and do not care whether what they write, say, or do has any implication for society... most contents on social media abuse the canon of professional journalism practice, because most of the sources are unverifiable.” [J9, Wire Service Reporter]
Objective 3: Effects on Newsroom Practice & Reactive Gatekeeping	✓ Viral scoops outpacing newsrooms ✓ Exhausting post-hoc debunking ✓ Trivialisation of professional status ✓ Harassment when correcting falsehoods	Theme 3: The Double Burden of Reactive Verification and Occupational Devaluation	12 (100.0%) (7 [58.3%] direct threat; 5 [41.7%] conditional)	“If care is not taken, social media will make it difficult for the audience to access true, objective, balanced, and fair news as day by day, they are enmeshed in news that are in most cases lopsided and
Objective Audience Verification Deficits Credibility Spillover	4: ✓ Peer-network trust bias & ✓ Lopsided and opinionated feeds ✓ Emergence of a “journalistic deficit” ✓ Reputational spillover to legacy media	Theme 4: Epistemic Contagion and the Transfer of Distrust (“Journalistic Deficit”)	12 (100.0%)	



Theme 1. Ubiquitous Citizen Participation Versus Verification Velocity

Deductively aligned with Objective 1, all 12 interviewees (100.0%) confirmed that social media, particularly, Facebook and WhatsApp, has become the primary arena for news discovery and public debate in Taraba State. Inductively, however, participants distinguished between two competing dynamics within this expansion. One-third of the interviewees ($n = 4$, 33.3%) emphasised the democratising and participatory value of social platforms in enabling grassroots breaking news and civic critique. As one print correspondent explained:

“Social media has aided in the creation of diverse groups and social media pages in Taraba State where people unite to share common views and critique government. These groups cut across ethno-religious, socio-cultural, and linguistic backgrounds which have aided in giving voice to all and sundry. As it is, almost all social media users in Taraba State can see themselves as journalists. But as it is in the journalism parlance, they are seen and known as citizen journalists.” [J1, Print/Online Journalist]

Conversely, half of the participants ($n = 6$, 50.0%) emphasised that unrestricted participation frequently degenerates into democratic abuse when instantaneous speed overrides verification, while $n = 2$ (16.7%) highlighted how youths weaponise local forums to trade communal insults. Capture of eyewitness breaking news from remote local government areas where professional correspondents are absent was acknowledged as an irreversible reality, yet one fraught with verification hazards:

“Whether we fight it or not, social media will forever be part and parcel of us. Ordinary citizens who are not professionals will continue to give us breaking news from their locations and in most cases, the professional journalist may not be there. The only issue could stem from a lack of professionalism and observance of ethical values.” [J4, Print Correspondent]

Theme 2. Structural Non-Conformity to Media Laws, Ethics, and Objectivity

Aligned deductively with Objective 2 and social responsibility theory, all 12 interviewed journalists (100.0%) concurred that social-media content in Taraba State systematically violates mass media laws (such as defamation, privacy, and sedition statutes) and the NUJ Code of Ethics. Inductively, interviewees attributed this non-conformity to two root causes: (a) the absence of formal journalistic training among ordinary encoders, and (b) the deliberate capture of local Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups by ethnic, religious, and partisan entrepreneurs. One broadcast editor stated concisely that untrained users “could be biased, irrational, and self-centred in posting news and information” [J7, Radio/Online Editor]. Expanding on this structural standards gap, a senior state broadcaster observed:

“To think that content on social media will go in line with that of professional journalism standard is a thought in error. This is because, in the first place, an average social media user is not a professional journalist. Professionalism is the



subject here. When somebody is doing things without any kind of guidance and you expect that person to do it right, you may be disappointed. This is why most contents on social media tend to tilt towards ideologies, chauvinism, and bias.” [J2, Broadcast Journalist]

Theme 3. *The Double Burden of Reactive Verification and Occupational Devaluation*

Addressing Objective 3, inductive coding revealed a nuanced professional tension regarding how social media reshapes newsroom routines. While 5 interviewees (41.7%) maintained that legacy media (radio, television, and print newspapers) retain ultimate authoritative standing among discerning citizens, a majority ($n = 7, 58.3\%$) characterised unvetted social-media circulation as a direct existential and operational threat to mainstream journalism. Across both subgroups, participants described an exhausting double burden: journalists must not only gather and verify original news, but also expend scarce newsroom time investigating, debunking, and correcting viral falsehoods that have already captured public attention. As a wire-service reporter noted:

“Social media has changed the news and information space. It has created room for everyone to be involved in the business of news and information sharing. However, most contents on social media abuse the canon of professional journalism practice, because most of the sources are unverifiable.” [J9, Wire Service Reporter]

Furthermore, interviewees lamented an occupational devaluation of journalism in Taraba State, noting that the proliferation of sensationalist bloggers and partisan page handlers has led segments of the public to treat journalism “as a mere routine without respect and dignity,” adding that “people have taken the work for granted and do not care whether what they write, say, or do has any implication for society” [J5, Print Correspondent]. When professional journalists attempt to debunk popular communal or political rumours, they frequently face online hostility and accusations of bias from partisan audiences.

Theme 4. *Epistemic Contagion and the Transfer of Distrust*

Deductively linked to Objective 4, all 12 interviewees (100.0%) warned that weak audience verification habits and affective reliance on peer networks generate a spillover of distrust that contaminates professional journalism. Inductively, participants explained that because ordinary users receive news embedded within trusted interpersonal WhatsApp groups and friendship networks, they readily accept partisan falsehoods at face value. One broadcast journalist conceptualised the resulting public confusion as a “journalistic deficit”, a condition in which citizens saturated by cheap, instantaneous gossip and ideological propaganda lose access to, or faith in, objective verification [J12, Television Producer]. Summarising this epistemic contagion, a television news director cautioned:

“If care is not taken, social media will make it difficult for the audience to access true, objective, balanced, and fair news as day by day, they are enmeshed in news that are in most cases lopsided and opinionated. Another thing is that people will also be exposed to information that does not capture the true picture of happenings in society.” [J10, Television News Director]



Discussion of Findings

This study was carried out to investigate how digital information disorder and decentralised gatekeeping strain journalism credibility in a multi-ethnic, subnational Nigerian context. The study integrated quantitative survey data from social media users ($n = 282$) and practising journalists ($n = 94$; combined $N = 376$) with hybrid deductive–inductive thematic insights from journalist interviews ($n = 12$). Triangulation of survey data from social media users and practising journalists with thematic insights from journalist interviews confirms that social media constitutes the primary infrastructure for news discovery in Taraba State. Universal usage (100.0%) and high dependence (93.6%), led by Facebook (52.1%) and WhatsApp (26.6%), demonstrate how hyperlocal forums function as identity-aligned public spheres for citizen-led breaking news (Theme 1; J1, J4). Extending global and Nigerian scholarship on platformisation (Egan et al., 2026; Newman et al., 2025; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025), these findings validate gatekeeping theory: filtering authority has structurally shifted from institutional “Mr Gates” editors (White, 1950) to platform algorithms, group administrators and peer networks (Hastuti et al., 2025; Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Van Dalen, 2023), thereby eliminating pre-publication evidentiary filtering.

Triangulation in relation to the second objective reveals an acute standards gap (Theme 2). While 83.0% of journalists reported strong regulatory and ethical literacy, only 29.8% perceived online content as conforming to these benchmarks; 82.9% observed frequent deviations, and 91.5% agreed that online information is predominantly mismanaged. Interviewees explained that untrained citizen encoders frequently weaponise platforms to advance ethnoreligious chauvinism and hate speech (J2, J7). Corroborating Zhou (2025), Hassan (2023), and Onigbinde and Oloyede (2024), and viewed through the lens of social responsibility theory (McQuail, 2010; Siebert et al., 1956), these findings suggest that digital expression in Taraba State is routinely exercised without reciprocal obligations of balance, verification and harm minimisation.

Regarding the third objective, distributed gatekeeping transforms newsroom labour and strains professional authority (Grand Mean = 3.18). Journalists strongly agreed that unverified viral claims reach the public before professional verification and divert audience patronage. Theme 3 reveals an exhausting double burden: reporters must produce original, verified news while reactively debunking viral falsehoods amidst occupational disrespect (J5, J9). This demonstrates an epistemic shift from pre-publication filtering to post hoc corrective intervention (Degen et al., 2024; Møller, 2022; Scheffauer et al., 2024). However, this intervention is constrained because cognitive heuristics can anchor false beliefs, rendering subsequent corrections less effective (Ecker et al., 2022).

In relation to the fourth objective, a behavioural paradox emerges: despite high public recognition of online mismanagement (87.2%) and hate speech (95.4%), 70.5% of users routinely believe unconfirmed reports, while 53.6% verify sources only occasionally or never. Interpersonal trust heuristics on WhatsApp and Facebook displace formal verification routines (Theme 4; Apuke & Omar, 2021; Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022; Olagunju & Okorie, 2025; Usman et al., 2022; Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). Consequently, over two-thirds of users (70.6%) and journalists (67.0%) report eroded professional confidence, while majorities warn of platform-fuelled communal chaos. As sensationalism induces a “journalistic deficit” (J10, J12), credibility erodes through epistemic



contagion, whereby platform velocity outpaces editorial gatekeeping and digital cynicism is transferred to institutional journalism (Fletcher, 2025; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023).

Conclusion and Implications for Journalism Practice and Policy

This study examined digital information disorder, professional gatekeeping and journalism credibility in Taraba State, Nigeria, using surveys and practitioner interviews. Findings show that although Facebook and WhatsApp are vital news sources, unverified citizen reports, ethnoreligious framing, newsroom pressures and weak audience verification practices challenge journalism's credibility. The study concludes that digital platforms do not inherently undermine trust; the problem arises when information spreads faster than journalists can verify it and audiences lack the skills to assess its reliability. Restoring credibility therefore requires transparent newsroom verification, practical public verification skills and greater involvement of community forum administrators as frontline gatekeepers.

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Local media organisations should institutionalise dedicated rapid-verification desks and active official Facebook and WhatsApp broadcast channels to debunk viral rumours in real time.
- ii. The Taraba State Council of the NUJ, in partnership with tertiary mass communication departments and fact-checking organisations (e.g., Dubawa, Africa Check), should conduct regular hands-on workshops on reverse-image searching, geolocation, metadata verification, and conflict-sensitive reporting.
- iii. Practicing journalists should embed visible “verification explainers,” named multi-source attributions, and transparent correction notes within their digital reports so audiences can clearly distinguish professional journalism from unverified posts.
- iv. Taraba social-media forums should adopt basic community moderation charters that prohibit hate speech, require source links for breaking security or political claims, and flag unverified forwards.

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AI Use Declaration:

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors utilised generative artificial intelligence tools (Grammarly & Google Gemini) strictly for language refinement and structural organisation and proofreading to improve readability and flow of the work. The authors independently conceptualised the study, collected and analyzed the data, and retain full and final responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of this manuscript.
