

Filling the Gap: Citizen Reporting in Occupied Palestine

Citizen Journalism in Gaza

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the existence of citizen content in global news during the ongoing war in Gaza, Palestine. In contexts where access to journalistic experts in the region may be limited due to safety risks and constraints, news coverage may incorporate material produced by civilians on the ground within their reporting practices. Through a quantitative content analysis, the study inspects 120 pieces of media content from large news corporations, including Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN and BBC, collected between October 2023 and March 2025. The sample involves articles, liveblogs, photography, videography and social media content in an attempt to identify extents to which citizen journalism appears in conflict coverage. It also looks at how this practice is built into reporting, and whether its presence changes over time. The aim of the study is to analyze patterns in content to aid in providing an organized method to examine how citizen journalism emerges in war reporting.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, Gaza, war coverage, credibility, sourcing, media.

Filling the Gap: Citizen Reporting in Occupied Palestine

War coverage is central to how people understand ongoing conflicts globally. In situations where journalists are targeted and direct access to the ground of the conflict is restricted, it is up to news organizations to step into their intermediary roles when publishing narratives and telling stories, particularly about sensitive events, political parties and actors, as well as consequences all around the region (Winterlin et al., 2020). This becomes distinctly significant in the context of what is currently going on in Gaza, where risks in professional safety, limited entry, and the intensity of the conditions may affect a journalist's ability to report directly from the scene (Horoub, 2023). Under such conditions, the usual flow of information may change, with major corporate outlets potentially leveraging alternative sources of reporting material beyond the works of their own journalists.

There is a growing visibility of citizen journalism online, particularly during times of conflict. Citizen journalism refers to the production of news outside of traditional media by individuals who are not trained professionals (Owen, 2007). Gatekeeping theory explains how media organizations control the selection and flow of information while filtering out other viewpoints (Owen, 2007). In this context, citizen journalism challenges traditional gatekeeping by allowing ordinary individuals to contribute directly to political discourse, reducing reliance on institutional control. Such practices also raise concerns around verification and credibility, especially when news outlets rely on citizen-generated content that may not meet professional journalistic standards.

The role of citizen journalism becomes especially relevant in war settings, where access to information may be limited but the demand for immediate reporting is high. While existing research examines digital activism and media framing in conflict, less attention has been given to how mainstream news outlets incorporate citizen content throughout the course of a conflict, especially under changing conditions of journalistic access.

Addressing this gap is important for understanding how reporting procedures operate under constraints and how audiences may interpret reliability of this citizen coverage. This study uses a quantitative content analysis of 120 media items from major news outlets, including Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN, and BBC, to examine how citizen-generated content appears in war reporting. It aims to identify patterns in how such content is used, as well as whether its presence changes over time.

Literature review

Digital Activism and Alternative Narratives

Social media has become an essential tool in times of urgent political communication and forming narratives (Huda, 2022). Scholars describe that digital platforms enable users to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and participate directly in forming public discourse (Huda, 2022). These effects were named a form of networked activism, where people can come together in response to political conflict and unite in global solidarity (Huda, 2022). This highlights that social media platforms help users to organize protests, debate social issues, making them essential tools for digital activism (Huda, 2022).

Through the context of conflict, the informative power becomes increasingly critical. Social media allows for live documentation and emotional storytelling, which can affect public perception (Huda, 2022). Yet, scholars also criticize that online activism may not always generate “offline activism” (Huda, 2022). In spite of this constraint, social media still persists as a critical zone for political discussion and assembly (Huda, 2022).

Research on Palestinian media representation proposes that Palestinians have traditionally been oppressed in predominant international coverage (Najjar, 2010). Scholars argue that Israeli narratives usually dominate traditional media (Najjar, 2010). Due to this, Palestinians and those who support them head to social media to post their perspectives and challenge the dominant representation (Najjar, 2010). Digital platforms help Palestinians to

write their experiences on war, displacement, and resistance, helping to form their collective identity online (Najjar, 2010). During the war in Gaza, Gazans used social media platforms to publish their testimonies, and this produced alternative narratives that combated mainstream media framing (Najjar, 2010).

Recent research focuses on influencers' role as citizen journalists during the Gaza war (Hamdan, 2024). Researchers examined Palestinian influencers during the 2023-2024 Gaza war and described that they acted as key communicators by documenting events (Hamdan, 2024). This form of reporting widens traditional journalism and increases the visibility of Palestinian voices (Hamdan, 2024). However, scholars also highlight digital restrictions affecting Palestinian communication. Algorithms and content removal by social media platforms affect the visibility of Palestinian storytelling (Hamdan, 2024).

Studies showed that social media became an important space for people to share their views during conflicts, particularly when traditional news did not represent all perspectives (Alsharairi et al., 2025). During the Gaza conflict, individuals in nearby areas relied on independent posting in spaces that mainstream media did not cover (Alsharairi et al., 2025). These posts often provided alternative perspectives to dominant media narratives (Alsharairi et al., 2025).

Media Bias and Framing in Conflict Coverage

Research on media coverage of the Gaza conflict showed that bias shaped how events were presented to global audiences (Cherkaoui, 2025). International media frequently relied on framing that explained Israeli actions with justification, while Palestinian actions were described in more negative or simplified terms (Cherkaoui, 2025). This imbalance influenced how audiences understood the conflict, giving more legitimacy to one side while limiting the visibility of the other (Cherkaoui, 2025).

Research on media coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict showed that language and metaphor played an important role in shaping how the conflict was understood by audiences (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025). Media narratives were not neutral, but were constructed through specific linguistic choices that reflected underlying ideologies (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025). For instance, the use of metaphors simplified complex realities while also guiding audiences toward particular interpretations of violence (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025).

The study highlighted that repeated framing reinforced certain perspectives while overlooking others (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025). When particular terms and narratives were used consistently, they shaped how the conflict was perceived over time (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025). Media coverage therefore did more than report events, as it also influenced how audiences interpreted them (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025). As a result, media discourse functioned as a space where power and ideology were produced and maintained (Farukh & Iqbal, 2025).

Citizen Journalism and Credibility Challenges

Citizen journalism referred to a practice in which untrained individuals participated in the production and sharing of news (Owen, 2007). This practice challenged traditional media organizations by reducing gatekeeping and allowing individuals to contribute directly to political communication (Owen, 2007). Instead of information being controlled solely by professional journalists, citizens were able to document and circulate content independently, disrupting traditional reporting structures (Owen, 2007).

At the same time, citizen journalism has its faults as it cannot follow the consistent professional procedure that news companies have to fulfill to gather their information (Owen, 2007). This lack of organization and the inability to verify means that quality and accuracy can vary. While such practices allowed overlooked perspectives to emerge, they also raised concerns about reliability and the changing standards of news production (Owen, 2007).

User-generated content, also known as UGC, became a common part of the reporting process, particularly in situations where journalists had limited access due to conflict (Wintterlin et al., 2020). Wintterlin et al. (2020) explained that news organizations often relied on eyewitness videos and personal accounts to report on developing situations with limited professional coverage. This type of content enabled faster reporting and introduced perspectives from individuals outside traditional media structures (Wintterlin et al., 2020).

However, the use of such material also introduced challenges that could affect the credibility of news organizations if proper verification was not achieved (Wintterlin et al., 2020). The origin and context of user-generated content were not always clear, making verification difficult (Wintterlin et al., 2020). Journalists attempted to address this issue through transparency, such as indicating whether content had been verified (Wintterlin et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, research suggested that transparency did not necessarily increase trust, as audiences continued to question the reliability of unverified information (Wintterlin et al., 2020).

In war contexts such as Palestine, citizen journalism became increasingly significant due to restrictions on traditional media access, which contributed to misrepresentation (Horoub, 2023). Social media platforms allowed marginalized perspectives to appear in mainstream discourse, increasing visibility for individuals in affected regions (Horoub, 2023). These platforms created opportunities for audiences to engage with alternative accounts of events that challenged dominant narratives shaped by political bias (Horoub, 2023).

While this method of reporting has its strengths, it also raises some issues. Citizen-generated content was often immediate and emotionally driven, making it difficult to verify using professional journalistic standards (Horoub, 2023). This raised concerns about credibility, as audiences questioned the reliability of both the content and the outlets that used

it (Horoub, 2023). While citizen journalism expanded access to diverse perspectives, it also complicated the evaluation of news production and could impact trust in media institutions (Horoub, 2023).

Based on these, our study asks:

RQ1: Does the presence of citizen journalism vary across different media outlets in coverage of the war on Gaza?

RQ2: Does the type of citizen-generated content influence its primary function in news reporting?

RQ3: Does the attribution of citizen-generated content differ across media outlets?

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative content analysis to examine patterns in how citizen-generated content appears in global news coverage of the war in Gaza. This method is useful because it allows us to examine media content in a systematic and structured way, making it easier to identify recurring patterns across different outlets and formats. The study looks directly at the content itself. This makes it a good fit for understanding how citizen-generated material is used in news reporting and how its presence might change over time.

The sample includes 120 pieces of media content taken from four major news outlets: Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN, and BBC. These outlets were chosen to give a mix of regional and international perspectives, which helps us compare how coverage may differ depending on the media context. The sample has a variety of formats, including online news articles, liveblogs, photography and videography published by these outlets.

The content was collected over a specific time period, from October 2023 to March 2025. This time frame makes it possible to see whether reporting practices and the use of citizen-generated content changed as the situation developed. The study uses a purposive sampling strategy, in other words, only material directly related to the war in Gaza was

included through using keywords such as Gaza, 2023-2025, and news. The keywords help guide the process of purposive sampling as they are used directly for the search in the selected news outlets official websites. Each coder independently analyzed items, resulting in a total sample of 120 units of analysis. The unit of analysis in this study is one individual piece of media content.

A variable measures the presence or absence of citizen-generated content, which is coded based on whether the article has material created by civilians (eyewitness videos, photos, testimonies). Another variable defines the type of citizen content, which is coded depending on whether the content is a photo, video, or a mix of formats. Another variable measures source attribution, which examines how clearly citizen-generated content is identified, including whether citation of content sources are identified clearly, vaguely identified, not identified, or not applicable.

The function of citizen-generated content is coded to determine whether it serves as the primary source of information, supporting evidence, visual support, or background reporting. The media outlet variable states whether the content was published by Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN, or BBC.

A shared codebook with predetermined categories and definitions was developed prior to coding. At times when coding decisions were not clear, group members gathered to discuss such cases together to make sure there's a consistent interpretation of variables. This structured coding process made sure that coding was systematic and replicable, allowing researchers to repeat the study while using the same exact process.

Results

This section presents the findings for each research question (RQ), reporting descriptive statistics and chi-square tests where appropriate.

RQ1: Does the presence of citizen journalism vary across different media outlets in coverage of the war on Gaza?

RQ1 analyzed whether the proximity of citizen-generated content was dissimilar across media outlets (Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, Al Arabiya). Overall, citizen journalism showcased commonly across all outlets. Al Jazeera had the biggest ratio of citizen content (63.3%), then by BBC (60.0%), CNN (53.3%), and lastly Al Arabiya (43.3%).

A chi-square test of independence was carried out to analyze if these disparities were statistically indicative. The results revealed that the association between media outlet and presence of citizen journalism was not statistically substantial, $\chi^2(3, N = 120) = 2.83, p = .419$.

This implies that although there are noticeable distinctions in percentages, the use of citizen journalism doesn't significantly fluctuate across the four media outlets. That is to say, all outlets seem to integrate citizen-generated content at proportionately equal levels (see Table 1).

Table 1

Presence of Citizen-Generated Content by Media Outlet

Contingency Tables

Citizen Content		Media Outlet			
		Al Jazeera	Al Arabiya	CNN	BBC
No	Count	11.00	17.00	14.00	12.00
	% within row	20.37 %	31.48 %	25.93 %	22.22 %
	% within column	36.67 %	56.67 %	46.67 %	40.00 %
	% of total	9.17 %	14.17 %	11.67 %	10.00 %
Yes	Count	19.00	13.00	16.00	18.00
	% within row	28.79 %	19.70 %	24.24 %	27.27 %
	% within column	63.33 %	43.33 %	53.33 %	60.00 %
	% of total	15.83 %	10.83 %	13.33 %	15.00 %
Total	Count	30.00	30.00	30.00	30.00
	% within row	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %
	% within column	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %
	% of total	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %

Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	p
χ^2	2.828	3	.419
N	120		

Note. Continuity correction is available only for 2x2 tables.

RQ2: Does the type of citizen-generated content influence its primary function in news reporting?

RQ2 examined the connection between the type of citizen-generated content (photography, videography, social media, mixed) and its main function (supporting, visual, background, or primary content)

Detailed statistics exhibit that over all content types, citizen-generated content was most typically used in a supporting role. Social media content had the highest portion of supporting use (80.0%), followed by mixed contents (69.4%), photography (55.6%), and videography (53.3%).

In terms of separate functions, photography was habitually used as visual content (44.4%) but not as primary or background content. Videography demonstrated more deviation, with 26.7% used as background content and 20.0% as visual content. Social media content was the only type used as primary content (20.0%). Mixed content appeared as supporting (69.4%) and visual (30.6%), but not in other roles.

A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant relationship between content type and primary function, $\chi^2(16, N = 120) = 169.1, p < .001$.

This implies that the way citizen journalism is utilized firmly relies on the type of content. For example, social media content is more plausible to assist as primary reporting, while photography and videography are more generally used to facilitate or noticeably amplify professional journalism (see Table 2).

Table 2

Type of Citizen-Generated Content by Primary Function

Contingency Tables

Type		Primary Function					Total
		Non-applicable	Primary source of Information	Supporting evidence	Visual Support	On Background reporting	
None	Count	54.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	55.00
	% within row	98.18 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	1.82 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	% within column	100.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	5.26 %	0.00 %	45.83 %
	% of total	45.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.83 %	0.00 %	45.83 %
Photography	Count	0.00	0.00	5.00	4.00	0.00	9.00
	% within row	0.00 %	0.00 %	55.56 %	44.44 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	% within column	0.00 %	0.00 %	11.90 %	21.05 %	0.00 %	7.50 %
	% of total	0.00 %	0.00 %	4.17 %	3.33 %	0.00 %	7.50 %
Videography	Count	0.00	0.00	8.00	3.00	4.00	15.00
	% within row	0.00 %	0.00 %	53.33 %	20.00 %	26.67 %	100.00 %
	% within column	0.00 %	0.00 %	19.05 %	15.79 %	100.00 %	12.50 %
	% of total	0.00 %	0.00 %	6.67 %	2.50 %	3.33 %	12.50 %
Social media (text/tweet)	Count	0.00	1.00	4.00	0.00	0.00	5.00
	% within row	0.00 %	20.00 %	80.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	% within column	0.00 %	100.00 %	9.52 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	4.17 %
	% of total	0.00 %	0.83 %	3.33 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	4.17 %
Mixed	Count	0.00	0.00	25.00	11.00	0.00	36.00
	% within row	0.00 %	0.00 %	69.44 %	30.56 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	% within column	0.00 %	0.00 %	59.52 %	57.89 %	0.00 %	30.00 %
	% of total	0.00 %	0.00 %	20.83 %	9.17 %	0.00 %	30.00 %
Total	Count	54.00	1.00	42.00	19.00	4.00	120.0
	% within row	45.00 %	0.83 %	35.00 %	15.83 %	3.33 %	100.00 %
	% within column	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %
	% of total	45.00 %	0.83 %	35.00 %	15.83 %	3.33 %	100.00 %

Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	p
X ²	169.1	16	< .001
N	120		

Note. Continuity correction is available only for 2x2 tables.

RQ3: Does the attribution of citizen-generated content differ across media outlets?

RQ3 examined how citizen-generated content is attributed through media outlets. A substantial part of cases were coded as non-applicable (46.7%), showing that attribution was not appropriate or not displayed in various cases. Among applicable cases, 25.8% of content was evidently identified, 15.8% was roughly identified, 11.7% was not identified whatsoever.

A chi-square test was executed to analyze whether attribution practices varied by media outlet. The results showed that this relationship was not statistically significant. $\chi^2(9, N = 120) = 8.78, p = .458$.

This proposes that attribution practices are fairly steady across the four outlets. While there is some difference in how vividly sources are detected, no outlet considerably contrasts from the others in attribution patterns. The high percentage of non-applicable cases shows that attribution isn't always key in the production of citizen-generated content (see Table 3).

Table 3

Attribution of Citizen-Generated Content by Media Outlet

Contingency Tables ▼

Attribution		Media Outlet				Total
		Al Jazeera	Al Arabiya	CNN	BBC	
Non-applicable	Count	11.00	18.00	14.00	13.00	56.00
	% within row	19.64 %	32.14 %	25.00 %	23.21 %	100.00 %
	% within column	36.67 %	60.00 %	46.67 %	43.33 %	46.67 %
	% of total	9.17 %	15.00 %	11.67 %	10.83 %	46.67 %
Not Identified	Count	5.00	4.00	3.00	2.00	14.00
	% within row	35.71 %	28.57 %	21.43 %	14.29 %	100.00 %
	% within column	16.67 %	13.33 %	10.00 %	6.67 %	11.67 %
	% of total	4.17 %	3.33 %	2.50 %	1.67 %	11.67 %
Clearly Identified	Count	7.00	6.00	10.00	8.00	31.00
	% within row	22.58 %	19.35 %	32.26 %	25.81 %	100.00 %
	% within column	23.33 %	20.00 %	33.33 %	26.67 %	25.83 %
	% of total	5.83 %	5.00 %	8.33 %	6.67 %	25.83 %
Vaguely Identified	Count	7.00	2.00	3.00	7.00	19.00
	% within row	36.84 %	10.53 %	15.79 %	36.84 %	100.00 %
	% within column	23.33 %	6.67 %	10.00 %	23.33 %	15.83 %
	% of total	5.83 %	1.67 %	2.50 %	5.83 %	15.83 %
Total	Count	30.00	30.00	30.00	30.00	120.0
	% within row	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	100.00 %
	% within column	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %
	% of total	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	25.00 %	100.00 %

Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	p
X ²	8.783	9	.458
N	120		

Note. Continuity correction is available only for 2x2 tables.

Summary of Findings

As a summary, the results indicate that citizen journalism is clearly visible across all investigated outlets, with no significant dissimilarities in its occurrence or attribution methods. Although, the type of content plays a significant part in deciding how citizen-generated content is used within newer stories. While most content functions as an assisting role, certain types are more probable to operate as primary sources of information.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insight into how citizen journalism is integrated into mainstream news production, particularly in conflict coverage. Although descriptive statistics showed some variation across outlets, the lack of statistical significance suggests that major international broadcasters are converging in their use of such material. This aligns with Owen (2007), who argues that citizen journalism is embedded within contemporary media practices rather than existing as an alternative form. The relatively equal use across outlets also reflects Wintterlin et al.'s (2020) claim that news organizations rely on

user-generated content when access is limited. These findings suggest that citizen journalism is now a normalized component of global news coverage.

At the same time, the results show that the function of citizen-generated content is shaped by its format. The significant relationship found in RQ2 supports existing literature on digital activism and alternative narratives, particularly Huda (2022) and Najjar (2010), who highlight the central role of social media in shaping narratives. Unlike photography and videography, which were mainly used to support reporting, social media content was more likely to serve as primary content. This suggests that such platforms are not only spaces for participation but also direct sources of information. However, the dominance of supporting roles across most content types indicates that traditional journalism still structures how content is presented.

The findings on attribution provide insight into how credibility challenges are managed. The absence of significant differences across outlets suggests a shared approach, possibly reflecting common industry practices. However, the high number of non-applicable cases indicates that attribution is not always emphasized. This relates to concerns raised by Wintterlin et al. (2020) and Horoub (2023), who stress the importance of transparency and verification. While some content was clearly identified, other cases were vague or not identified, which may affect audience trust.

In relation to media bias and framing, the findings partially support previous research. Studies by Cherkaoui (2025) and Farukh and Iqbal (2025) argue that media framing shapes audience understanding. Although bias was not directly measured, the inclusion of citizen-generated content suggests that alternative perspectives can enter mainstream coverage. This supports Najjar's (2010) argument that marginalized voices use digital platforms to challenge dominant narratives. However, since most content is used in supporting roles, these perspectives may still be shaped by traditional media frameworks.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size ($N = 120$) limits the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on four media outlets does not fully represent global media coverage. In addition, coding categories such as “primary function” and “attribution” involve a level of subjectivity, which may affect consistency in interpretation. The high number of non-applicable cases also suggests possible ambiguity within the coding framework.

In conclusion, citizen journalism is widely integrated across major news outlets, with no significant differences in its presence or attribution. However, content type plays a key role in how it is used, with social media being more central. While these findings support existing literature, they also highlight ongoing challenges related to credibility, verification, and the continued influence of traditional journalism.

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Appendix A**Codebook**

Variable 0 – Coder:

1. Aljouri Al-Rumaihi
2. Haya Al Thani
3. Hissa Al Sada

Variable 00 – ID: article/post/scene ID

A number identifier assigned to each article (e.g., 001, 002, 003)

Variable 1 – Media Outlet:

1. Al Jazeera
2. Al Arabiya
3. Cable News Network (CNN)
4. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Variable 2 – Presence of Citizen Journalism:

0. No
1. Yes

Variable 3 – Type of Citizen Content :

0. None
1. Photography
2. Videography
3. Social media (eg. text/tweet)
4. Mixed

Variable 4 – Attribution:

0. Non-applicable
1. Not identified (shows content but nothing about who filmed it)
2. Clearly Identified (eg. location, name)
3. Vaguely Identified (eg. “according to...”)

Variable 5 – Primary Function of Citizen Content:

0. Non-applicable
1. Primary source of Information
2. Supporting evidence
3. Visual Support
4. On Background reporting

Appendix B**Coding Sheet**

Coder	ID	V1- Media Outlet	V2 - Citizen Journalism	V3 - Type	V4 - Attribution	V5 - PrimaryF unction
1						
2						
3						