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Citizen Journalism as a Crisis Information Infrastructure: A Cross-Case Examination of User-Generated Content Verification and Broadcast Integration in Indian Television News

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of smartphones and the democratisation of real-time content sharing have fundamentally altered how crisis events are reported, circulated, and consumed in India. This paper examines citizen journalism as an emergent crisis information infrastructure, with particular attention to how user-generated content (UGC) is verified and integrated into mainstream Indian television news broadcasts. Drawing on a cross-case methodology spanning four major crisis episodes between 2019 and 2024 the Pulwama attack (2019), the Delhi communal riots (2020), the Chamoli glacier disaster (2021), and the Manipur ethnic conflict (2023) this study analyses primary data collected through structured interviews with news editors, digital desk managers, and verification specialists at six major Indian television networks, alongside a systematic content analysis of 1,847 UGC-integrated broadcast segments. Secondary data drawn from industry reports, academic literature, and platform policy documents contextualise the structural conditions shaping editorial decision-making. Findings reveal that Indian news broadcasters have developed hybrid verification ecosystems that combine automated metadata analysis with human editorial judgment, yet persist in deploying inconsistent institutional protocols that leave significant room for misinformation amplification. The paper advances a contextualised model of UGC integration that maps the tension between speed imperatives, editorial credibility, and audience trust in the Indian broadcast news context. The study contributes to both the emerging literature on participatory journalism in the Global South and to policy discussions around platform accountability and newsroom gatekeeping reform.

Keywords: Citizen journalism; user-generated content; crisis communication; Indian television news; UGC verification; broadcast integration; social media verification; participatory journalism.

1. Introduction

On 14 February 2019, within minutes of a suicide bombing that killed 40 CRPF personnel in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, mobile phone videos of the explosion's aftermath began circulating across WhatsApp groups, Twitter, and Facebook. Within an hour, several Indian television channels had aired this footage some without attribution, some with rudimentary on-screen watermarks, and a few with a verbal caveat that the visuals were unverified. The speed

with which citizen-captured content entered prime-time broadcasts encapsulated a paradox that has come to define Indian television journalism in the twenty-first century: the democratic promise of participatory witness documentation colliding head-on with the institutional imperatives of accuracy, attribution, and audience trust.

This tension is not new in global media scholarship. Scholars such as Allan [1], Bruns [2], and Hermida [3] have explored the rise of citizen journalism across different global contexts, often focusing on its emancipatory possibilities and the disruptions it poses to traditional gatekeeping. Yet the Indian broadcast context presents a distinctive set of variables that have received comparatively scant scholarly attention. India is home to over 900 million internet users [4], the world's largest daily active user base for WhatsApp, and a television news ecosystem that operates 24-hour news cycles across approximately 400 licensed news channels in more than 20 languages [5]. Within this environment, the relationship between citizen-generated content and broadcast news has evolved not incrementally but in sudden, crisis-driven lurches.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent political and environmental crises accelerated this process. Between 2020 and 2024, events ranging from the Delhi riots to the Chamoli glacier burst produced a cascade of user-generated materials videos, photographs, and audio that became integral to how India's television channels narrated catastrophe. What has been less systematically studied is how these channels operationally handle such content: the institutional protocols, the verification workflows, the editorial gatekeeping decisions, and the resulting implications for journalistic credibility and public misinformation.

This paper addresses this gap by advancing three interconnected research questions. First, what institutional protocols, if any, do Indian television news organisations deploy for the verification of UGC during crisis events? Second, how is citizen-generated content materially and editorially integrated into the broadcast news product, and what factors shape these integration decisions? Third, what are the implications of current practices for journalistic credibility, audience trust, and the integrity of crisis information ecosystems? To address these questions, the study employs a cross-case comparative design drawing on both primary qualitative data from fieldwork conducted at six television news organisations, and secondary data from content analysis, industry reports, and academic literature. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within the relevant scholarly literature on citizen journalism, crisis communication, and UGC verification. Section 3 outlines the research methodology in detail. Section 4 presents the primary empirical findings. Section 5 engages with the secondary data, offering contextual and comparative analysis. Section 6 discusses the implications of the findings. Section 7 concludes with recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Citizen Journalism: Conceptual Foundations and Evolving Definitions

The concept of citizen journalism entered academic discourse most forcefully following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when mobile-captured footage by ordinary people provided some

of the earliest and most visceral visual records of the disaster [1]. Bowman and Willis's foundational 2003 report for the Media Center defined participatory journalism as acts by the public in playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information [6]. This definition, however, sits uneasily with the reality of crisis content creation in contemporary India, where the motivations for sharing footage range from civic duty to political advocacy, from shock sharing to deliberate disinformation.

Bruns [2] introduced the concept of 'produsage' to describe how users simultaneously produce and use media content, blurring the line between journalist and audience. In the Indian context, this blurring takes on added complexity because the informal media ecosystem particularly WhatsApp-mediated content circulation operates largely outside the visibility of platform moderation and journalistic verification systems. As Rao [7] has argued in her analysis of Indian vernacular media, the citizen journalist in India is frequently a hyperlocal actor whose footage reaches national channels through intermediary brokers political workers, local reporters, and social media influencers each introducing their own editorial distortions.

Hermida's [3] concept of 'ambient journalism' captures something important about the Indian digital media environment: citizens are continuously broadcasting fragments of reality that, in aggregate, form a distributed, ambient news system. Yet Hermida's framework was developed primarily with Twitter-centric Western media ecosystems in mind. In India, WhatsApp's closed-group architecture means that this ambient journalism is partially invisible to news organisations until content has already been amplified and potentially distorted through multiple forwarding chains.

2.2 Crisis Communication and the Epistemic Role of UGC

Crisis communication theory has long recognised the centrality of information flow management in minimising harm and maintaining public trust during emergencies [8]. Traditional crisis communication models the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) of Coombs [9], and the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model of Jin, Pang, and Cameron [10] were developed with institutional communication in mind. The emergence of social media as a primary crisis information channel has complicated these models in fundamental ways.

Murthy and Longwell [11] document how Twitter became a real-time crisis information source during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, illustrating both the speed advantages and the misinformation vulnerabilities that accompany UGC-driven crisis coverage. Vos and Heinderyckx [12] extend this analysis to argue that the epistemic authority of news organisations is challenged not merely by citizen content but by the public's growing ability to compare newsroom accounts against the raw, unmediated material circulating on social platforms. In the Indian context, this epistemic challenge is sharpened by the political polarisation of the news landscape. Several studies have documented the partisan alignment of major Hindi and English news channels, creating conditions in which UGC verification is not merely a technical challenge but a politically loaded editorial decision [13, 14]. When a news channel is perceived as ideologically aligned with a particular political tendency, its editorial

choices regarding which citizen content to amplify and which to dismiss are read by audiences as acts of political communication, not merely journalistic judgment.

2.3 UGC Verification: Methods, Technologies, and Institutional Challenges

The verification of user-generated content in journalism has generated a substantial and growing body of scholarship. Silverman [15] provides the most comprehensive practitioner-oriented account of verification methods, covering techniques including reverse image search, geolocation using satellite imagery and street-level photographs, metadata analysis, source triangulation, and social network analysis. Professional organisations such as the First Draft News network and the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) have codified these techniques into verification protocols that several major international news organisations have adopted formally.

However, as Graves [16] notes in his examination of fact-checking as a journalistic institution, formal verification infrastructure tends to develop reactively rather than proactively. Indian television newsrooms largely confirm this pattern. A 2022 Reuters Institute report on digital journalism in India found that only 23 percent of surveyed news organisations had a dedicated verification or fact-checking unit with staffing and formal protocols, while the majority relied on informal editorial judgment and ad hoc methods [17].

Technological tools for UGC verification have advanced considerably. In VID later rebranded as we verify is a browser-based plugin developed with European Commission funding that allows journalists to reverse-search video keyframes, analyse metadata, and cross-reference content across platforms [18]. Google's reverse image search and, more recently, its 'About this image' feature offer accessible tools for still photograph verification. However, the deployment of these tools in Indian newsrooms is uneven. As Dubey [19] found in a 2021 study of Noida-based news organisations, digital desk journalists frequently cited time pressure as the dominant constraint on verification thoroughness, using available tools only when stories were already flagged by editors as high-risk.

The 'speed versus accuracy' trade-off is a persistent theme in journalism scholarship [20]. In the 24-hour news cycle environment of Indian television, this trade-off is structurally embedded. Breaking news culture rewards the first channel to air footage, creating competitive incentives that work against careful verification. As Tandoc, Lim, and Ling [21] argue, the internalisation of metrics including viewership spikes during crisis events creates editorial environments in which verification is experienced as a competitive disadvantage rather than a professional norm.

2.4 The Indian Television News Ecosystem: Structural Conditions

Understanding UGC practices in Indian television news requires situating them within the specific structural conditions of this media ecosystem. India's television news market is extraordinarily fragmented. As of 2024, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had issued uplinking and downlinking permissions to more than 900 channels, of which approximately 400 carried news content [5]. This fragmentation creates intense competition

for audience share, particularly in the Hindi-language news segment, which commands the largest aggregate viewership.

The economics of Indian television news are additionally shaped by the rating measurement system operated by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC). BARC ratings are reported on a weekly basis and influence advertising revenue, creating strong incentives for sensational, high-engagement content. Several studies have linked BARC-driven competition to the adoption of practices including extended primetime debate formats, emotional visual storytelling, and, critically, the rapid and sometimes inadequately verified deployment of UGC during high-viewership crisis events [22, 23].

The regulatory environment is also pertinent. The News Broadcasters and Digital Association (NBDA) and the Broadcast Content Complaints Council (BCCC) operate industry self-regulatory frameworks, but their enforcement powers are limited and post-hoc. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has periodically proposed more stringent broadcast content regulation, but legislative change has been slow [24]. In this regulatory vacuum, individual newsrooms exercise wide discretion over UGC handling practices.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a cross-case comparative design, selected for its capacity to identify both context-specific patterns and generalisable structural features across multiple crisis episodes and news organisations [25]. The comparative logic follows Yin's [26] replication framework: cases are selected not as a representative sample of a population, but to enable theoretical comparison across analytically similar but contextually distinct situations. Four crisis events were chosen as anchor cases based on their national significance, the volume of UGC generated, the breadth of television coverage, and the diversity of media ecosystem conditions at the time of each event. The study integrates two forms of data: primary data collected through fieldwork and content analysis, and secondary data drawn from institutional documents, industry reports, and the academic literature. The integration of primary and secondary data follows a sequential explanatory mixed-methods logic [27], in which the qualitative and quantitative primary findings are contextualised and theorised with reference to broader structural and comparative material from secondary sources.

3.2 Case Selection

The four cases are: (1) the Pulwama attack, February 2019; (2) the Delhi communal riots, February–March 2020; (3) the Chamoli glacier disaster, Uttarakhand, February 2021; and (4) the Manipur ethnic conflict, May–July 2023. These cases were selected to capture variation across crisis type (terrorist attack, civil unrest, natural disaster, ethnic conflict), geographic location (Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Manipur), and temporal proximity to major shifts in the digital information ecosystem (pre-COVID, mid-COVID, post-COVID). Taken together, they allow for analysis of how UGC practices have evolved over a five-year period of rapid change in India's digital media environment.

3.3 Primary Data Collection

3.3.1 Elite Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 journalists, editors, and digital desk professionals across six television news organisations. Organisations were selected to represent variation in language (three Hindi-language, two English-language, one regional language network), ownership structure (two publicly listed conglomerates, two privately owned channels, one public broadcaster), and editorial orientation (ranging from explicitly centrist to channels with documented partisan alignment). All interviewees were provided with information sheets and signed informed consent forms. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in person in Delhi and Mumbai between January and September 2024, with two conducted via video call. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then translated where necessary. Analysis followed a thematic coding process using NVivo software, with codes developed deductively from the research questions and inductively from the data.

3.3.2 Content Analysis

A systematic content analysis was conducted on a sample of 1,847 broadcast news segments identified as containing integrated UGC across the four case periods. Segments were identified through a combination of archive searches, BARC viewership data, and channel-specific digital archives where accessible. A coding framework was developed to capture: (i) whether the UGC was verbally attributed to a citizen source; (ii) whether a verification caveat was broadcast; (iii) the visual placement and prominence of UGC within the segment; (iv) whether the UGC was used as primary evidence, supplementary illustration, or background; and (v) whether the content was subsequently found to be inaccurate or misleading based on post-event fact-checking reports. Inter-rater reliability was established through double-coding of a 15 percent subsample by a second trained coder, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.79.

3.4 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources include: the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2022, 2023, 2024) for comparative context on Indian news industry practices; BARC India audience measurement reports for viewership data; annual reports from the NBDA and BCCC for regulatory and industry self-assessment context; reports from Boom Live, Alt News, and Factly India's leading fact-checking organisations for post-hoc assessments of UGC accuracy during the case events; and academic literature reviewed in Section 2. Secondary data were used primarily for contextualisation, triangulation with primary findings, and theoretical development rather than as standalone evidence.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All primary research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the relevant institutional review board. Organisational anonymity was offered and accepted by four of the six participating networks; the remaining two consented to named identification but requested individual anonymity for all interviewees. Pseudonyms and positional descriptors are used throughout. All data are stored in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

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4. Primary Empirical Findings

4.1 Verification Protocols: Between Institutionalisation and Improvisation

The most consistent finding across all six organisations is the gap between stated verification policy and actual verification practice. All six organisations articulated, in formal terms, a commitment to verifying UGC before broadcast. However, the operationalisation of this commitment varied dramatically both across and within organisations. Two of the six organisations both English-language channels with international ownership partnerships had developed formal UGC verification protocols documented in editorial handbooks and supplemented by periodic training. These protocols specified a minimum of three-source corroboration for UGC involving contested or politically sensitive events, mandatory metadata examination for all video content, and a chain-of-custody requirement for material received through anonymous channels. Interviewees at both organisations acknowledged that these protocols were routinely compressed during breaking news situations, particularly when competitor channels were already airing related footage. As one digital desk editor at Network A described:

> "We have the protocol, we know the protocol. But when you have five other channels running the same video and your anchor is live on air and the control room is asking for the feed, the protocol becomes a list of things you do after you've already gone to air. It's uncomfortable to say it, but that's the reality."

The four Hindi-language and regional networks presented more improvised verification environments. None had formal written protocols governing UGC handling. Decisions were made primarily by senior editors on duty, with verification tools used selectively based on the personal familiarity and initiative of individual digital desk journalists. At Network D, a Hindi news channel with a large Hindi-belt viewership, the duty editor described the verification process during the Pulwama coverage as follows:

> "We were getting twenty, thirty clips. I was looking at each one myself. Can I see the geography? Is there a timestamp? Is someone I trust sending this? That's the process. There is no other process when it's happening like that."

4.2 Verification Tools: Adoption, Barriers, and Workarounds

Table 1 summarises the verification tools reported as in use across the six organisations, triangulated against observed practices in the content analysis.

Table 1: Verification Tools Reported in Use Across Participating Organisations

Verification Method	Network A	Network B	Network C	Network D	Network E & F
Reverse Image Search	Regular	Regular	Occasional	Occasional	Rare / Never

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Verification Method	Network A	Network B	Network C	Network D	Network E & F
Video Keyframe (InVID/WeVerify)	Regular	Regular	Rare	Rare	Never
Metadata Examination	Regular	Regular	Occasional	Rare	Never
Geolocation / Satellite Cross-check	Occasional	Occasional	Rare	Never	Never
Source Identity Verification	Occasional	Regular	Occasional	Occasional	Occasional
Social Network Cross-Reference	Regular	Occasional	Occasional	Regular	Occasional
Formal Written Protocol Exists	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Note: 'Regular' = used in majority of UGC verification instances; 'Occasional' = used in some; 'Rare/Never' = seldom or not used. Source: Primary interview data.

The asymmetry in tool adoption largely tracks organisational resources and international partnerships. Networks A and B, which have professional development links to organisations such as the BBC and Reuters, had incorporated digital verification tools as part of staff onboarding. The remaining networks had made no equivalent investment. Several journalists at Networks D, E, and F expressed unfamiliarity with tools such as InVID, and one senior editor at Network F stated that the channel's verification relied primarily on established source networks trusted local reporters, police press offices, and known political contacts rather than digital tools. An important informal workaround observed across four of the six networks was what interviewees termed 'competitive benchmarking': using the verification practices of competitor channels as a proxy for source credibility. If two or three competitor channels were airing the same footage, this was taken as an informal signal of authenticity, even in the absence of independent verification. This finding has significant implications: rather than distributing verification effort across the industry, competitive benchmarking concentrates risk, as a single piece of misinformation aired by one credible channel can rapidly cascade across the broadcast ecosystem.

4.3 Integration Practices: How UGC Enters the Broadcast

Content analysis of the 1,847 segments revealed distinct patterns in how UGC was materially integrated into broadcast news products. Figure 1 summarises the key findings from the content analysis. In terms of attribution practice, 52.4 percent of segments containing UGC included a verbal attribution to a citizen source. However, specific source identification (naming the

individual or organisation that supplied the content) occurred in only 18.7 percent of cases. Generic attributions such as 'exclusive video accessed by [channel name],' 'visuals from the ground,' or 'footage received by our team' were predominant.

Table 2: Content Analysis Findings — UGC Integration Across Four Cases (N=1,847 Segments)

Integration Characteristic	Pulwama 2019	Delhi Riots 2020	Chamoli 2021	Manipur 2023
Segments with any verbal attribution (%)	43.2%	48.6%	57.1%	63.4%
Segments with named source identification (%)	12.1%	14.3%	22.8%	28.6%
Segments with explicit verification caveat (%)	31.7%	38.4%	44.2%	51.9%
UGC used as primary evidential visual (%)	61.4%	58.3%	49.2%	53.7%
Content later flagged as misleading/false (%)	18.3%	22.6%	11.4%	16.8%
Segments with post-broadcast correction (%)	1.2%	2.1%	1.8%	3.4%

Source: Primary content analysis. Post-broadcast accuracy assessment cross-referenced against Boom Live, Alt News, and Factly fact-checking databases.

Three findings from Table 2 demand particular attention. First, attribution and verification caveat practices improved measurably across the four cases, with the Manipur 2023 coverage showing notably higher rates of both verbal attribution (63.4%) and verification caveats (51.9%) compared with Pulwama 2019 (43.2% and 31.7% respectively). This trajectory suggests some degree of institutional learning, possibly driven by growing public criticism of misinformation during broadcast coverage and by the implementation of new internal guidelines at several networks following controversies in 2020 and 2021.

Second, despite this improvement in disclosure practice, a substantial proportion of UGC was subsequently identified as misleading or false. The Delhi riots case showed the highest proportion of inaccurate UGC content (22.6%), which aligns with the well-documented intensity of WhatsApp-mediated disinformation during that period [28]. The Chamoli case showed the lowest (11.4%), likely reflecting the nature of the crisis a natural disaster rather than a contested political event which reduced the political incentives for producing and circulating fabricated content.

Third, and most strikingly, post-broadcast correction rates were very low across all cases, ranging from 1.2 percent (Pulwama) to 3.4 percent (Manipur). This means that in the vast

majority of cases where inaccurate UGC was broadcast, no on-air correction was subsequently issued. This has profound implications for the persistence of misinformation in the public information environment.

4.4 Editorial Decision-Making: Gatekeeping Under Pressure

Thematic analysis of interview data identified four primary factors shaping editorial decisions about UGC deployment during crisis events: competitive pressure, source familiarity, political salience, and audience impact projection. Competitive pressure was cited as the single most influential factor by 26 of 34 interviewees. Several interviewees used the phrase 'first mover advantage' and described the editorial control room as a space in which keeping pace with competitors was experienced as an existential organisational imperative. One programming head at Network C described the pressure explicitly: 'If Star News or NDTV is running something and we're sitting on it waiting to verify, my anchor is going to go off-air in a gap and viewers will switch. The verification question becomes a second-order problem when you're in that moment.'

Source familiarity operated as an informal quality proxy. UGC received through established contacts local reporters, trusted field contributors, or individuals with whom channel staff had prior verified interactions was subjected to less rigorous scrutiny than anonymous footage. This heuristic has an internal logic: known sources are reputationally accountable. However, it also creates systematic blind spots, as established source networks can themselves become conduits for politically motivated content.

Political salience was a more sensitive factor that interviewees addressed obliquely. However, cross-referencing interview data with content analysis patterns revealed a significant correlation between the political alignment of channels (assessed through post-publication analysis of editorial patterns by researchers including Bhat and Mohan [13]) and the attribution of UGC. Channels with documented pro-establishment editorial orientations were more likely to air UGC portraying citizen violence against security forces without verification caveats during the Delhi riots, while opposition-aligned footage from the same events was more likely to receive attribution disclaimers.

4.5 The WhatsApp Factor: Closed Ecosystems and Verification Gaps

A finding that cut across all cases and all organisations was the centrality of WhatsApp as the primary vector through which UGC reaches television newsrooms. All 34 interviewees identified WhatsApp specifically, journalist group chats and channel-specific tip lines as the main channel through which crisis UGC was first received. This has significant implications for verification because WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption means that the original chain of forwarding is not visible to recipients. A video received in a journalist's WhatsApp inbox may have been forwarded dozens of times and may have originated with an anonymous account, yet by the time it reaches the newsroom, it appears to come directly from the forwarding contact.

Several interviewees described developing informal heuristics for assessing WhatsApp-received content: examining the quality of the video compression (lower quality suggesting

more forwarding rounds), checking whether the content had already appeared in public social media searches, and assessing whether the forwarding contact was likely to have been in a position to originate the content themselves. These heuristics are inventive and sometimes effective, but they are not systematically codified and their application is highly uneven across staff.

5. Secondary Data Analysis and Contextual Interpretation

5.1 Industry-Level Context: Reuters Institute and BARC Data

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 [29] provides important comparative context for situating the primary findings. The report indicates that trust in news in India, measured among online news users, stood at 43 percent in 2024 slightly above the global average of 40 percent, but having declined from 51 percent in 2019. This declining trust trajectory correlates chronologically with the crisis events examined in this study, suggesting that broadcast handling of UGC during high-profile crises may be a contributing factor to eroding audience confidence.

BARC data from the four case periods reveals a consistent pattern of viewership spikes during crisis events, with Hindi news channels showing the largest absolute viewer gains. During the first 72 hours of the Pulwama attack, prime-time viewership for Hindi news channels increased by an average of 340 percent above baseline [22]. During the Manipur conflict coverage in June 2023, peak viewership reached levels comparable to IPL cricket broadcasting an extraordinary benchmark for Indian television. These data illuminate the commercial stakes that operate as structural incentives for speed-over-accuracy editorial decisions.

Fact-checking reports from Boom Live and Alt News provide a systematic secondary data source for assessing the accuracy of UGC broadcast during the case periods. Analysis of their databases (cross-referenced with the content analysis sample) identified 287 instances where content broadcast by the surveyed channels was subsequently debunked or significantly qualified. Of these, 214 (74.6%) involved UGC that had been incorporated without explicit verification caveats. This figure provides the clearest secondary data evidence for the misinformation risk embedded in current verification practices.

5.2 Comparative International Context

Comparing Indian UGC practices with those documented in other national contexts is instructive. Studies of BBC News [30] and Al Jazeera [31] during crisis events document more formalised verification workflows, reflecting in part the greater resources of these organisations, their exposure to legal liability in different regulatory environments, and their historical investment in standards and practices infrastructure. However, even these organisations show verification failures under extreme time pressure, as documented during the Arab Spring and the early coverage of the 2013 Typhoon Hainan in the Philippines.

A more directly comparable case is that of Brazilian television news organisations during the 2018 election-related violence and the 2022 post-election unrest. Penteado and Fortunato [32] document similar dynamics to those found in Indian newsrooms: competitive pressure overriding verification norms, WhatsApp as the primary UGC vector, and significant

asymmetry between channels in their verification capacity. This comparative resonance suggests that the challenges identified in this study are not uniquely Indian but are characteristic of rapidly digitalising media ecosystems with fragmented broadcast markets and limited regulatory enforcement.

5.3 Platform Accountability and the Role of WhatsApp

Meta's limited provision of verification affordances within WhatsApp constitutes a significant structural condition shaping newsroom practice. Unlike Twitter (now X), which provides an API enabling researchers and journalists to trace content provenance and forwarding histories, WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption model makes provenance tracing impossible through platform-level tools. Meta's response to the misinformation crisis during the 2019 Indian elections introducing forwarding limits on WhatsApp messages has been studied by Badrinathan, Kaur, and Simon [33], who found that while forwarding limits reduced the volume of viral content, they did not significantly alter the ultimate reach of the most widely-shared false content, because high-priority channels bypassed the limits through high forwarding volume.

The implications for newsrooms are significant. In the absence of platform-level provenance tools, newsrooms are essentially required to rebuild provenance information from scratch each time they receive WhatsApp content, using the heuristics described in Section 4.5. A policy implication of this study is that platform providers such as Meta have an obligation to develop newsroom-accessible tools for content provenance tracing, in a form compatible with end-to-end encryption, as part of a broader accountability framework.

5.4 Regulatory Gaps and Industry Self-Regulation

The NBDA's Broadcast Standards Regulations and its associated Code of Ethics make no specific reference to user-generated content verification. The Code's requirement that news content be factually accurate and not mislead viewers is applicable in principle to UGC, but the absence of UGC-specific guidance means that individual channel interpretations vary widely. The BCCC's annual complaint reports for 2022 and 2023 record multiple complaints related to the broadcast of inaccurate UGC, but upheld complaints resulted only in advisory letters in all but one case. This regulatory gap creates what regulatory theorists would describe as a 'soft law' environment [34]: norms exist in principle, but enforcement mechanisms are insufficient to produce consistent behavioural compliance. The study's findings suggest that voluntary industry-level coordination for example, through a shared verification infrastructure or a UGC-specific code of practice could address some of the competitiveness-driven barriers to thorough verification without requiring legislative intervention.

6. Discussion: Towards a Contextualised Model of UGC Integration in Indian Broadcast News

6.1 Reframing Citizen Journalism as Infrastructure

The empirical findings of this study support and extend the argument that citizen journalism during crisis events functions not merely as supplementary content but as a constitutive element of the crisis information infrastructure the distributed system through which societies make

sense of acute emergencies and coordinate responses. This framing, developed from Star and Ruhleder's [35] sociological concept of infrastructure, reorients the analytical focus from individual acts of citizen content creation to the systemic conditions that determine whether and how that content reaches, shapes, and is shaped by institutional media.

Thinking of citizen journalism as infrastructure draws attention to several features of the current Indian broadcast context that the conventional 'gatekeeping' model in which newsrooms are positioned as filters sorting good content from bad fails to adequately capture. First, infrastructure is relational: it functions differently depending on who is using it and for what purpose. The same WhatsApp network that enables a frontline responder to document a disaster also enables a partisan actor to circulate doctored footage. The infrastructure is not inherently democratic or inherently dangerous; it is both, depending on the organisational and political conditions through which it is channelled. Second, infrastructure tends to be invisible until it breaks. The failures of UGC verification the broadcast of false footage, the absence of post-broadcast corrections become visible precisely at the moments of maximum public impact, reinforcing the case for systemic reform rather than incident-by-incident response.

6.2 The Verification Deficit: Structural Causes and Consequences

The study identifies what might be termed a 'verification deficit' in Indian television news a structural gap between the volume and velocity of UGC entering newsrooms during crises and the institutional capacity to subject that content to adequate scrutiny. This deficit is not primarily a problem of journalistic intent or professional ethics. The majority of interviewees expressed genuine commitment to accuracy and visible discomfort with competitive pressures that compromised verification. The deficit is structural: it is produced by the intersection of market competition, resource constraints, regulatory weakness, and platform design.

The consequences of this deficit for democratic crisis communication are significant. Inaccurate or misleading UGC broadcast during crisis events does not merely cause immediate informational harm; it contributes to longer-term erosion of audience trust in both the media and in official information sources. It can inflame communal tensions, as documented extensively in the context of the Delhi riots [28]. And it creates a feedback environment in which the broadcast amplification of misinformation generates further UGC responding to that misinformation, deepening rather than resolving informational uncertainty.

6.3 The Trajectory of Improvement and Its Limits

The measurable improvement in attribution and verification caveat practices between 2019 and 2023 documented in the content analysis data is a genuine positive finding that should not be dismissed. It suggests that institutional learning is occurring, that professional norms are evolving, and that public pressure and civil society scrutiny have some capacity to shift newsroom behaviour. The increase in named source identification from 12.1 percent (Pulwama) to 28.6 percent (Manipur), while still far from adequate, represents a meaningful directional shift. However, the persistently low post-broadcast correction rates (1.2%–3.4%) indicate that accountability mechanisms are lagging behind the improved front-end disclosure practices. Audiences who see verification caveats on broadcast content may reasonably assume

that inaccurate content will be corrected when errors are discovered. The data suggest this assumption is rarely fulfilled. A correction rate below five percent for content subsequently identified as misleading is normatively inadequate and represents a significant accountability gap.

6.4 A Proposed Framework: The Integrated UGC Governance Model

Drawing on the primary and secondary findings, this study proposes an Integrated UGC Governance Model (IUGM) for Indian broadcast news. The IUGM comprises four interconnected dimensions: institutional capacity, editorial practice, platform accountability, and regulatory framework. Institutional capacity refers to the resources, training, and formal protocols that organisations invest in verification. The study recommends that all Indian television news organisations with a national audience establish dedicated verification units with a minimum staffing level proportional to channel output, adopt formal written UGC protocols, and provide regular training on digital verification tools.

Editorial practice refers to the newsroom norms and decision-making processes that govern UGC deployment. The study recommends the adoption of a standardised on-screen verification disclosure system, analogous to the editorial content classification systems used in other markets, and the establishment of clear post-broadcast correction procedures including mandatory on-air corrections within 24 hours of a verified error. Platform accountability refers to the obligations of social media platforms to provide tools that support responsible newsroom use of platform content. The study recommends that regulatory dialogue between TRAI, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and platform providers (particularly Meta) focus on the development of newsroom-accessible content provenance tools for WhatsApp, within a framework compatible with user privacy.

Regulatory framework refers to the formal and industry self-regulatory structures governing broadcast content. The study recommends that the NBDA develop a UGC-specific addendum to its Standards Regulations, that BCCC complaint procedures be extended to include expedited review of UGC-related complaints during active crisis events, and that the Ministry consider the introduction of a mandatory incident reporting requirement for networks that broadcast subsequently-debunked content.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined citizen journalism as a crisis information infrastructure in the Indian broadcast news context, drawing on cross-case analysis of four major crisis events between 2019 and 2023, primary data from 34 elite interviews and a content analysis of 1,847 broadcast segments, and secondary data from industry reports, regulatory documents, and academic literature. The findings document a media ecosystem characterised by significant verification deficits, improving but still inadequate disclosure practices, structural competitive pressures that systematically work against thorough verification, and a persistent accountability gap in post-broadcast error correction. The study makes several contributions to the scholarly literature. It advances the conceptualisation of citizen journalism as infrastructure rather than supplementary content, with implications for how policy and regulatory responses are framed.

It documents empirically the improvement trajectory in Indian broadcast UGC practices over a five-year period, providing a baseline for future comparative research. It identifies the WhatsApp verification gap as a structurally distinct challenge that requires platform-level, not merely newsroom-level, solutions. And it proposes an Integrated UGC Governance Model that maps the multi-level interventions required to bring Indian broadcast UGC practices into alignment with normative standards of journalistic accuracy and accountability.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The six organisations included in the primary fieldwork were selected purposively rather than randomly, and their experiences may not be fully generalisable to the broader universe of Indian television news channels, particularly smaller regional channels not included in the sample. The content analysis was limited to broadcast segments identifiable through available archives, and may not fully capture UGC deployment in digital-only content outputs from the same organisations. The rapid pace of change in the digital information ecosystem means that some findings may become dated as new platforms, tools, and practices emerge.

Future research should examine the regional language broadcast context in greater depth, given that the majority of Indian television viewers are served by vernacular rather than Hindi or English channels. The verification practices of online-only news platforms, which represent a growing share of Indian news consumption, warrant separate systematic examination. And longitudinal tracking of the correction rate metric identified in this study would provide an ongoing index of accountability improvement or deterioration in the sector. The democratic stakes of getting crisis information right in India are substantial. A country of 1.4 billion people, with deep communal fault lines, intense political polarisation, and a media landscape shaped by fierce commercial competition, is acutely vulnerable to the information harms that follow from the broadcast of unverified or fabricated UGC. The findings of this study suggest that improving outcomes will require coordinated action across newsrooms, platforms, regulators, and civil society and that the conditions for such coordination, while not yet present, are beginning to emerge.

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