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Canada

MediaVoice

CITIZEN JOURNALIST'S GUIDELINE



Citizen Journalist’s Guideline

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guideline is to promote citizen journalism, strengthen citizen journalists' activities, and enhance their role in fostering public engagement in democratic processes.

In Georgia, independent journalists and active citizens are at the forefront of combating disinformation, particularly during elections and political crises. With the advancement of technology and the growing potential of social and alternative media, citizens are increasingly involved in collecting and disseminating information. This underscores the need for tools and resources that make these processes more effective and encourage collaboration between citizen journalists and traditional and/or online media outlets.

The guideline is based on local and international experiences, incorporating practical examples and advice that align with ethical and legal standards. It is designed for active citizens and media professionals, while also appealing to a broader audience.

This resource is available in Georgian, English, Armenian, and Azerbaijani on the "MediaVoice" website: www.mediavoice.ge.

1. THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

The involvement of citizens in media content production is increasing. Nobel laureate and founder of the Philippine media outlet “Rappler,” Maria Ressa, highlights in her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator* (2022, p. 131) that citizen journalism is an excellent example of how technology can be used to drive positive change. She describes citizens armed with mobile phones who are empowered to demand justice and accountability.

It is safe to say that before journalism became a formal profession, active/citizen citizens existed who shared information using the resources available to them. In fact, one could argue that “citizen journalists” came first, paving the way for the emergence of professional journalists.

Technological advancements, the internet, and social networks have brought significant changes to public life, and journalism is no exception. With the rise of digital literacy and the growing use of smartphones, the process of obtaining and sharing information has become much easier. This evolution has fostered the development of “citizen journalism” as a form of alternative media alongside professional journalism.

Citizen journalism and citizen journalists have become integral parts of the media ecosystem.

Citizens now have the ability to independently gather information, create content, and distribute it across various platforms.

Citizen journalism enhances audience engagement, thereby promoting the free flow of information and contributing to the democratization of media.

2. WHO ARE CITIZEN JOURNALISTS?

Citizen journalists come from various professional backgrounds, including both employed and unemployed individuals, who independently create and distribute relevant content using their own resources.

According to *Britannica Encyclopedia*, [citizen journalism](#) is not produced by professional journalists. Citizen journalists are not formally employed by media organizations and may lack professional journalism training. Instead, they share content through websites, blogs, and social media platforms, providing an alternative to mainstream news.

Citizen journalists play a crucial role in situations where traditional media outlets face challenges in covering events comprehensively. This includes war zones, natural disasters, protests, crises and elections. Before professional journalists arrive at the scene, citizen journalists can quickly capture and disseminate critical information.

By reporting LIVE, sharing audiovisual content, and documenting key events on social media platforms, citizen journalists become frontline reporters of breaking news, bridging the gap between communities and the broader public.

Citizen journalism becomes particularly relevant during elections, political events, and both local and global crises. Citizen journalists play a crucial role in covering topics that may receive limited attention in traditional media. Their engagement often provides an alternative perspective to mainstream narratives, offering diverse viewpoints and filling gaps in media coverage.

For content to be considered citizen journalism, it must have informational value and serve as a newsworthy contribution. Simply recording a video with a mobile phone and uploading it to a social media page does not automatically qualify someone as a citizen journalist. The content should provide meaningful insights, document significant events, or expose issues that impact the public interest.

The term “**citizen journalism**” remains a topic of debate. In various academic and media literature, it is also referred to as “**participatory journalism**” or “**grassroots journalism**”. These terms highlight the unique nature of citizen journalism, where individuals engage in news reporting without the constraints of traditional journalistic structures.

Unlike professional journalists, citizen journalists do not operate within strict editorial guidelines or institutional frameworks. This flexibility allows them to take on multiple social roles while producing content, contributing to a diverse and decentralized media landscape.

2.1. CATEGORIES OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Citizen journalists can be categorized in different ways. However, we highlight three primary types as outlined in the National Association of Citizen Journalists' guidebook (Rossi & Cormier, 2010):

1. Accidental Citizen Journalist;
2. Advocacy Citizen Journalist;
3. Citizen Journalist.

An Accidental citizen journalist is someone who unexpectedly finds themselves at the center of an event and captures footage, photos, or audio of the occurrence, subsequently sharing it via social media or other digital platforms. These individuals are often focused more on audiovisual and photographic content rather than written reporting, where textual content may serve only as an introductory description. There is ongoing debate within international media and journalism communities about whether an individual who simply records and shares an event without additional journalistic effort should be considered a citizen journalist or merely an eyewitness documenting a moment in history.

An advocacy citizen journalist is an individual who actively supports and defends a specific social, political, religious, or ideological perspective. In this case, the journalist's position and bias are fully transparent and evident to the audience. This type of work aligns closely with **advocacy journalism**, which aims to promote a particular cause, and **solidarity journalism**, which seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized or underrepresented groups. Advocacy citizen journalists often use their platforms to influence public opinion, mobilize support, and drive social or political change.

A citizen journalist is someone who, on their own initiative, reports on news or shares their opinions about current events. This form of journalism is defined by the principle of news created by the people, for the people, and about the people.

Citizen journalists act as independent, free reporters, unrestricted by traditional journalistic norms, methodologies, or editorial oversight. They play a crucial role in diversifying media narratives and ensuring broader public engagement in the information ecosystem. Citizen journalists gather, process, investigate, report, analyze, and distribute news using various technologies made accessible by the internet.

Miller (2019) identifies four categories:

- » Participatory citizen journalist;
- » Para citizen journalist;
- » News media watchdog citizen journalist;
- » Community citizen journalist.

A **participatory citizen journalist** is someone who contributes to the creation of news, opinions, and informational content within traditional media. Miller cites Allan (2017) and provides an example from the 2005 London bombings, where citizen journalists submitted 100 photos, 20 videos, and 4,000 text messages to the media within just a few hours. These individuals were eyewitnesses, and media organizations utilized their materials because they lacked sufficient resources or direct access to the content (Allan, 2007).

A **para-citizen journalist** becomes particularly active during the coverage of demonstrations. These individuals are those who “accidentally engage in journalism” (Lasica, 2003, p. 71). Para-journalists create and disseminate news, opinions, and information related to ongoing events, forming temporary communities around a specific occurrence. Papacharissi (2015) describes this environment as an “affective news stream,” which refers to news collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinions, and emotions, all sustained by and sustaining news environments” (p. 34). In many countries, journalists face restrictions on reporting, making it difficult to provide information to the public under authoritarian regimes. In such situations, citizens utilize decentralized communication technologies to raise awareness and circumvent state control (Lotan et al., 2011). As noted, these citizen journalists become particularly active during the coverage of demonstrations, offering real-time updates and alternative perspectives beyond mainstream media narratives.

A **news media watchdog citizen journalist** is someone who verifies and critiques the news coverage, achievements, and practices of mainstream media. Their role involves scrutinizing media content to ensure accuracy, accountability, and ethical reporting.

A **community citizen journalist** focuses on local issues or niche topics that professional journalists often overlook (Johnson & St. John, 2017; Wall, 2015). These journalists are community-oriented reporters who cover news to fill gaps in traditional media coverage and/or to promote civic engagement (Metzgar et al., 2011). Community citizen journalists exercise editorial control over their reporting, handling the gatekeeping process from news selection to final publication without the involvement of professional journalists. Their work helps amplify underrepresented voices, address local concerns, and foster community awareness through independent journalism.

2.2. CITIZEN JOURNALIST VS. PROFESSIONAL JOURNALIST

We often see citizens at the epicenter of events, capturing what is happening around them using mobile phones. They are not professional journalists, nor are they their competitors. Citizens from various professions simply recognize the power their recorded material can have in amplifying the truth, and documenting events has become second nature to them.

► What is the difference between a citizen journalist and a professional journalist?

Unlike professional journalists, citizen journalists can report on events in which they are direct participants. In this regard, they cross a professional “red line”—while professional journalists act as observers, citizen journalists can describe events from their own perspective. The differences encompass various characteristics, which manifest in the ways information is gathered, processed, and disseminated, as outlined in Table N1.

Table 1: Differences Between Professional and Citizen Journalists

Criterion	Professional Journalist	Citizen Journalist
Professional Education and Qualification	Has received education and/or professional training in a media or communication field.	May or may not have received professional education or training.
Standards and Ethics	Adheres to professional and ethical standards of journalism.	May not formally restricted by professional journalistic ethics standards.
Use and Verification of sources	Utilizes tools for verification and reliable information gathering. Often relies on official sources and is obligated to verify information.	Relies on eyewitness accounts, stories, or information shared on social media, which may not always be verified.
Work Environment and Resources	Operates within a media organization, has access to resources, editorial support, salary and other facilities.	Not officially employed by the media; creates content voluntarily on a community-driven basis.
Personal Branding and Affiliation	Operates on behalf of a media organization with an established editorial policy and is accountable to the company and its management.	Not affiliated with any media organization. Shares information under their own name and on their personal platforms.

► What Do Citizen Journalists and Professional Journalists Have in Common?

To create valuable content, materials must be informative and include elements of journalistic storytelling, such as reporting, visual narration, explanations, and analysis. Therefore, not every **LIVE** broadcast qualifies as citizen journalism. Citizen journalists and professional journalists share several common characteristics, including:

- » Both aim to inform the public about current events and important issues;
- » Both utilize various methods and platforms to gather, process, and distribute information.
- » Both rely on video, audio, photo, and text-based materials to disseminate information effectively.

Like professional journalists, citizen journalists also utilize the doorstepping method.

Doorstepping occurs when journalists approach a respondent unexpectedly and ask questions without prior notice. This method is used to obtain important public information and ensure immediate responses.

For professional journalists, doorstepping is often a planned and strategically managed process that adheres to editorial standards. On the other hand, citizen journalists frequently employ doorstepping because they often find themselves unexpectedly in the midst of significant events or encounters with public figures. As a result, they impulsively attempt to obtain information on the spot.

While both professional and citizen journalists contribute significantly to the flow of information, their work styles, routines, responsibilities, and resources differ. However, their shared goal remains the same: ensuring transparency and public awareness through timely reporting.

2.3. CITIZEN JOURNALIST VS. WHISTLEBLOWER

A whistleblower is an individual who exposes internal violations or unethical behavior within an organization and makes this information public to inform society. For security reasons, whistleblowers often act anonymously.

► What is the Difference Between a Whistleblower and a Citizen Journalist?

Although both whistleblowers and citizen journalists play crucial roles in ensuring transparency and justice, their functions, scope of activities, and approaches differ significantly. These distinctions are outlined in Table N2 below.

Table N2: Comparison of Whistleblowers and Citizen Journalists

Characteristics	Whistleblower	Citizen journalist
Context and Scope of Activities	Operates within the context of organizational-level corruption, crime, or threats. Typically acts based on internal information from within the organization.	Publishes events of public significance. This may include videos recorded in public spaces, election monitoring, crisis documentation, and more.
Challenges	They often require legal protection; Their activities involve security risks, including the threat of retaliation.	They may spread misinformation; Their activities involve security risks.
Resources and Instruments	Internal organizational documents, evidence, and/or confidential information that may be provided to the media or disclosed through other means.	Videos and photos obtained at the scene of an event may be shared through social media and smartphones.

As we can see, both **whistleblowers and citizen journalists** play a crucial role in ensuring **justice and transparency**¹.

¹ For more information, please refer to the document, which provides a non-exhaustive list of Council of Europe instruments and precedents of the European Court of Human Rights related to Article 10 of the Convention: Whistleblowers, 2018, Council of Europe, Thematic Factsheet, 2018, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-on-whistleblowers-14june2018/16808b3531> (Last accessed: 20.01.2025).

3. SEVEN STORIES FROM CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

With the rapid advancement of technology, citizen journalism has also evolved, proving its growing significance in the media landscape. There are already several cases demonstrating its potential and impact. These stories range from covering crimes, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, election and political crises, revolutions, and other significant events.

» **The First Successful Example: OhmyNews in South Korea:** In 2000, South Korean online entrepreneur Oh Yeon-ho made a bold statement: *“Every citizen is a journalist.”* Dissatisfied with traditional Korean press, he and three colleagues decided to launch their own online daily newspaper. Without sufficient financial resources to hire professional journalists or print a physical newspaper, they instead built the website [OhmyNews](#). The platform started with 727 citizen journalists, primarily within South Korea. However, by 2007, it had expanded globally, boasting 50,000 contributor-reporters across 100 countries. OhmyNews became a pioneering model of citizen-driven journalism, demonstrating the power of participatory news reporting and the potential for decentralized, community-based news production.

» **“Rappler” Campaign (Philippines, May 10, 2010):** On May 10, 2010, during the Philippine elections, the media outlet Rappler, founded by journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, had 90,000 registered citizen journalists reporting on election events. In her book, Maria Ressa explains that citizen journalism played a crucial role in crime prevention during the elections in the Philippines:

“...There were many times leading up to and after the Maguindanao massacre when citizen journalists blew the whistle on bribery, corruption, election violence, intimidation, and much more. Their actions helped shape the days after, making it more difficult for candidates and their supporters to openly violate the rules of the election code. Anyone with a cell phone could capture their act, report it, and get the full broadcasting power of ABS-CBN behind them” (pp. 94-95).

» **George Floyd Case (USA, May 25, 2020):** On May 25, 2020, 17-year-old Darnella Frazier witnessed and [filmed](#) the killing of George Floyd on her phone in the streets of the United States. The young woman captured the moment when police officers mishandled the arrest of the Black man, using excessive force. Without her 10-minute [video](#)², the public would not have seen the full reality of the incident. The release of the video sparked nationwide protests, demanding justice for Floyd. The footage became crucial evidence, leading to the conviction of the police officer involved.

Despite not being a professional journalist, Darnella Frazier [received a special citation from the Pulitzer Prize Board](#) in 2021 for her brave documentation of the event. During the award ceremony, Pulitzer Prize Board Co-Chair Mindy Marqués [stated](#) that *“The Floyd story is particularly remarkable not only because it highlights the essential role of journalists, but also because it underscores the growing significance of ordinary citizens in the pursuit of truth and justice”*.

² In January 2025, a video on the Meta/Facebook platform received 1,800,000 views, 27,600 comments, and 37,000 reactions.

» **Tahrir Square Protests (Egypt, 2011):** During the Arab Spring, citizen journalists and activists played a crucial role in disseminating information about the protests in Tahrir Square, which were largely censored by traditional media. Through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, they shared real-time updates, videos, and photos, providing the world with firsthand accounts of the events unfolding in Egypt. These visuals and reports quickly spread across social media and became a vital source of information for international media outlets, allowing the global community to witness and respond to the revolution, despite state-imposed restrictions on press freedom (Source: BBC News).

» **Boston Marathon Tragedy (2013):** The Boston Marathon [bombing](#) in 2013 was a tragic terrorist attack that occurred on April 15, 2013, during the annual marathon in Boston. Two homemade bombs exploded near the finish line, resulting in the deaths of three people and injuring over 260 others. During the FBI investigation, analysts thoroughly examined not only security footage from cameras installed around the marathon area but also photos and videos captured by spectators on their mobile phones. These citizen-captured materials played a crucial role in identifying two suspects. Authorities publicly released the suspects' images and asked for assistance from the public in identifying them. The photos quickly spread across social media and news outlets, leading to an influx of valuable information from the public that contributed to the investigation.

» **Tbilisi Flood (Georgia, June 13, 2015):** The June 13 flood in Tbilisi, Georgia, was one of the most devastating natural disasters in the country's modern history. On the night of June 13, 2015, the Vere River overflowed, resulting in the deaths of 21 people, with 2 still missing. Hundreds of people were affected, and the Tbilisi Zoo suffered significant losses, as many animals drowned, while others escaped into the city. Videos and photos of the disaster quickly spread across social media, making it the primary source of information for many citizens. People on the ground documented the event in real-time, capturing the destruction and mobilizing [solidarity](#) and community support. This led to an outpouring of volunteers who assisted the victims and helped clean up the affected areas. Additionally, some social media posts warned citizens about the presence of escaped wild animals, urging caution. While some of these reports later turned out to be inaccurate or exaggerated, [citizen engagement](#) played a crucial role in raising awareness and encouraging public safety measures.

» **Post-Election Campaign #ISawFraud (#მეცნახეგაყალბება) - Georgia, 2024 Parliamentary Elections:** Following Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, a social media campaign emerged under the hashtag #ISawFraud (#მეცნახეგაყალბება). The initiative encouraged citizens to publicly share any election violations they had witnessed, using photos, videos, and testimonies. Numerous pieces of evidence gathered through this campaign were later used by civil society organizations and election monitoring groups to document potential election fraud and demand accountability. The movement demonstrated the power of citizen journalism, as ordinary people played a crucial role in exposing electoral irregularities and contributing to public discourse on the integrity of the electoral process.

4. COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

citizen journalists often serve as a lifeline for traditional media, providing real-time reports from locations where professional journalists cannot access or operate freely. In such situations, citizen observers and journalists act as “watchdogs”, helping to document and expose events as they unfold.

While they may not be formally employed by media organizations, citizen journalists use smartphones, livestreaming, and social media platforms to capture and share important stories. Citizen journalists can collaborate with media organizations in indirect ways.

When a news outlet publishes footage captured by a citizen journalist, it undergoes editorial scrutiny, effectively giving the citizen’s content a level of institutional validation.

This collaboration can also extend to professional or legal support in cases where citizen journalists face legal challenges, such as sharing covert recordings or protecting confidential sources. Unlike professional journalists, citizen journalists often lack legal protections and institutional backing, making partnerships with media organizations essential in ensuring their work is recognized and safeguarded.

5. LEGISLATION AND CASE LAW

The distinction between citizen journalists and professional journalists is often defined by their rights and responsibilities, which are reflected in legislation and judicial precedents. In both international and local legal contexts, key documents ensuring freedom of expression and media freedom include³:

» **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):** Article 19 states: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”*

» **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):** Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression, which applies to everyone, including citizen journalists.

» **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR):** Article 10 protects freedom of expression and editorial activity, extending its safeguards to both professional and citizen journalists.

Georgian law does not explicitly distinguish between the status of professional journalists and citizen journalists. However, certain regulations imply professional standards and outline the rights and responsibilities of accredited journalists.

» **The Constitution of Georgia, Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, and the Law on Press and Other Mass Media:** The rights and protections of journalists are clearly defined, including safeguards for their sources and guaranteed access to information. Citizen journalists are not explicitly covered under these laws, but freedom of expression is ensured under Article 17 of the Constitution.

» **Law of Georgia on Broadcasting:** This law aims to establish an independent public broadcasting system free from state interference while regulating the media sector based on principles of fairness, impartiality, and transparency. It ensures freedom of speech, promotes competition and equality among media service providers, and regulates the efficient use of frequencies through the national regulatory authority.

» **The Election Code of Georgia:** The Election Code requires accreditation for press and mass media representatives covering the electoral process. This accreditation procedure does not apply to citizen journalists.

³ Key texts, declarations, decisions, resolutions, and conventions related to journalists’ safety and freedom of expression can be found in the UNESCO repository. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/basic-texts> (last accessed: 20.01.2025).

5.1. INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL CASE LAW

At the international level, there are several important precedent-setting decisions that highlight the intersection⁴ between the activities of citizen journalists and professional journalists. Some notable cases include:

» **GLIK V. CUNIFFE (USA, 2011)**: This is one of the most well-known precedents where a U.S. court ruled in 2016 that a citizen has the right to record police actions in a public space. The court determined that such activity does not require formal journalist status and is protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

» **OBERSCHLICK V. AUSTRIA (ECHR, 1997)**: This case concerned freedom of expression in the context of journalism and emphasized the crucial role of journalistic activities in protecting democracy. While the ruling did not specifically address the status of citizen journalists, the scope of protection under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) extends to them as well.

» **Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v. Hungary (ECHR, GC, 2016)**: The court relied on the decision in *Cengiz and Others v. Turkey (2015)* and noted that political content ignored by traditional media is often disseminated through certain websites, thereby fostering the development of citizen journalism. The ruling highlighted that blocking such services deprives users of their right to freely receive and share information.

In Georgia, there are no known precedent-setting court decisions that explicitly differentiate between citizen journalists and professional journalists. However, legal practice concerning the use of covert recordings and source confidentiality is particularly relevant in this context.

⁴ ECHR-KS Key Theme - Article 10 Contributions to Public Debate: Journalists and Other Actors (Last updated: 31/08/2024). Available at: <https://ks.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr-ks/contributions-to-public-debate-journalists-and-other-actors> (Last accessed: 20/01/2025). This document from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) includes explanations related to the activities of citizen journalists, who benefit from the protection of freedom of expression under Article 10 of the ECHR-KS.

5.2. USE OF COVERT RECORDINGS

For citizen journalists, the use of covert recordings may involve legal risks, as their formal professional status is not recognized in court. This makes it more difficult to justify the “public interest” argument for such recordings.

For professional journalists, their recognized status and affiliation with a media organization can provide additional protection. In such cases, courts may consider covert recordings as admissible evidence, provided that they serve the public interest and do not violate legal provisions. These characteristics are outlined in Table N3.

Table N3: Use of Covert Recordings

Characteristics	Citizen Journalists	Professional Journalists
Legal Status	They do not have recognized professional status, which makes it more difficult to justify a covert recording as serving the public interest.	Professional status and media organization support can provide additional protection.
Justification of Public Interest	Legal risks are high, as they may struggle to substantiate the legality of creating a covert recording in court.	A covert recording may be considered in court if it serves the public interest and does not violate legal regulations.
Use as Evidence	The admissibility of a covert recording as evidence is more challenging due to the lack of formal professional status.	A court may accept the recording if it is justified that it does not violate legal provisions and serves the public interest.
Personal Responsibility	Legal responsibility falls entirely on citizen journalists, as they lack organizational support.	The possibility of receiving legal assistance from a media organization reduces the risk of liability.

5.3. PROTECTION OF SOURCE CONFIDENTIALITY

In Georgia, the **protection of source confidentiality** is one of the key mechanisms that journalists can use to safeguard the right to information. In practice, professional journalists have greater recognition, particularly when they are employed by a media organization. Legislation on Source Confidentiality Protection:

» **Constitution of Georgia (Article 17):** The Constitution of Georgia guarantees freedom of speech and expression, which includes the right to freely obtain and disseminate information. The protection of source confidentiality is an integral part of this right.

» **Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression (Article 11):** Journalists have the right not to disclose their sources, except in cases where it is deemed necessary to protect matters of **vital importance, such as saving lives or preventing serious crimes**. This protection applies to individuals who are legally recognized as journalists or work in a professional media environment. If a citizen journalist engages in journalistic activities, receives confidential information under a protection agreement, and its disclosure damages an individual's professional reputation, this norm may also extend to them. However, the law does not explicitly regulate this issue.

For professional journalists, source confidentiality protection is recognized in court proceedings and is often used as an argument that revealing sources could harm media freedom and public interest. However, certain problematic provisions in the Civil Procedure Code complicate journalists' legal protection. For citizen journalists, the situation is even more challenging, as reflected in Table N4.

Table N4: Protection of Source Confidentiality

Characteristics	professional journalist	citizen journalist
Legal protection⁵	Not obligated to testify in criminal cases regarding information obtained through professional activities.	Rarely protected due to the lack of formal status; protected as a civilian.
Media support	Has institutional support and protection mechanisms.	Lacks support and institutional protection.
Source protection in court⁶	Protected unless the case is related to national security or a serious crime.	The demand for source protection is weak.

⁵ Article 50 of the Criminal Procedure Code states that a journalist is not obligated to testify regarding information obtained in the course of their professional activities. The Code of Administrative Offenses does not recognize the concept of professional secrecy at all.

⁶ According to Article 11, Paragraph 3 of the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, "The court is authorized to issue a ruling on securing evidence only regarding the disclosure of that part of confidential information whose disclosure necessity has been proven."

The protection of source confidentiality in Georgia is provided by law and safeguards freedom of speech and expression. However, for citizen journalists, the effectiveness of this protection is weak, as they lack professional recognition and institutional support.

In this regard, establishing a framework for collaboration between citizen journalists and media organizations becomes even more critical.

6. ETHICAL STANDARDS IN MEDIA AND BEYOND

Ethical journalism is one of the key mechanisms for ensuring public awareness, pluralism, democratic values, and justice. In Georgia, the [Charter of Journalistic Ethics](#) serves as a media self-regulatory body, established in 2009 to set ethical standards for journalistic work. The Charter defines [11 core principles](#), which serve as an ethical framework for journalists. These principles guide media professionals in their responsible acquisition, processing, and dissemination of information. While primarily aimed at professional journalists, these principles are also a valuable reference for citizen journalists, as their work has a direct impact on public awareness and democratic processes.

Unlike a journalist employed in the media, a citizen journalist is free from editorial filters and bureaucracy.

They do not need to coordinate with an editor or producer on which news should be published, in what order, who should be selected as sources, what references should be used, how much time should be allocated to a story, how it should be framed in relation to other news, or on which platform it should be disseminated.

However, this also increases the level of responsibility, which falls entirely on the individual rather than on a media institution. This factor can work both ways—it may reduce self-censorship but, at the same time, it may increase feelings of vulnerability and fear.

At the same time, building trust is crucial for both professional and citizen journalists. In practice, there is a risk of spreading unverified information. Since citizen journalists are not trained professionals, they may overlook one of the fundamental principles of journalism—fact-checking. As a result, they may unintentionally become conduits for disinformation.

In such cases, the risk increases that a citizen journalist might become a misinformer and create a “fertile ground” for so-called *spiral disinformation*. [Circular or spiral disinformation](#) is a phenomenon where false or misleading information continuously circulates and amplifies within a specific network of sources, creating the illusion of credibility and widespread acceptance. This process can involve media outlets, social media platforms, and broader interest groups. The repeated dissemination of the same information makes it appear more legitimate and increasingly difficult to debunk.

7. THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS DURING ELECTIONS AND CRISES

The media plays a crucial role in informing voters and ensuring the transparency of the electoral process. Additionally, it is instrumental in increasing the accountability of stakeholders involved in the elections. Coverage and documentation of election-related events by both traditional media and citizen journalists extend beyond election day, encompassing the pre-election and post-election periods as well.

In Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, traditional and online media faced significant challenges in accessing polling stations and covering election-related developments. Due to the tense pre-election environment, which included the adoption of the so-called Agents'/Russian law, critical media entered the election year significantly weakened.

In Georgia, the elections were held at 3,310 polling stations, 67 of which were located abroad. The Georgian media—particularly critical, independent, and regional outlets—lacked sufficient resources to cover the elections in real-time at all polling stations and/or to have full access to information. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) accredited 158 representatives from the press and other mass media, of whom 78 (49%) were from international media organizations and/or their bureaus. Compared to the 2020 parliamentary elections, 54 more media organizations received accreditation in 2024.

The 2024 “MediaVoice” media environment study highlighted that collaboration with citizen journalists was evident in all regions, particularly filling the gaps in smaller media organizations. The real-time information provided by citizen journalists not only informed the public but also served as crucial evidence in election assessments, underscoring the power of grassroots media in safeguarding democracy. Against the backdrop of [political polarization](#) and legal restrictions imposed on the media, citizens documented instances of voter intimidation, procedural irregularities, and potential electoral fraud.

► **Legal Context: What Should Citizen Journalists Know?**

The recording of photos and videos is regulated under Georgian law, which limits media representatives to only 10 minutes of filming inside polling stations. The legislation strictly prohibits the use of photo or other electronic surveillance devices, recording equipment, cameras, and mobile phones within polling stations. This measure aims to protect voter privacy and ensure the integrity of the voting process. Theoretically, this regulation serves an important purpose; however, in practice, it restricts observers' ability to document violations, creating challenges in ensuring transparency in the electoral process.

Journalists as Targets of Violence During Elections. The Media Freedom Rapid Response ([MFRR](#)), released a statement about incidents of intimidation, threats, and physical and verbal assaults on journalists covering Georgia's parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024. MFRR [documented](#) at least 30 election-related media freedom violations involving 34 media workers.

As seen during the coverage of Georgia’s 2024 parliamentary elections, grassroots journalism exposes events that traditional media might overlook. These could include suspected fraud or procedural violations. In this way, citizen journalism contributes to the creation of a more transparent and fair electoral environment.

Thanks to social media platforms, such information reaches the audience almost instantly, enhancing public awareness and fostering a broader understanding of different perspectives. This form of news democratization also provides marginalized and underrepresented groups with a platform to make their voices heard.

The role of citizen journalists in election coverage is invaluable. However, unlike professional journalists, citizen journalists cannot obtain official media accreditation on election day, which means their rights and capabilities differ. These distinctions are outlined in Table N5.

Table N5: Working Inside and Outside Polling Stations

Characteristics	Citizen journalist	Professional journalist
Status and regulations	Does not have an official status and is not subject to media regulations.	Operates with an official status and is subject to media regulations.
Accreditation	Does not require accreditation from the election commission; may not be granted access to polling stations for coverage.	Requires accreditation from the election commission, granting the official right to cover elections.
Right to Be Present at the Polling Station	Does not have regular working rights within polling stations and cannot obtain a special status.	With accreditation, they can attend election commission meetings and remain at polling stations throughout election day.
Right to Record Video and Take Photos	Can record in public spaces, but restrictions apply within polling stations.	<p>On election day, they can take photos and videos following specific regulations, with a 10-minute time limit.</p> <p>They can record throughout the day from a designated area assigned by the polling station chairperson.</p> <p>Taking photos or videos inside the voting booth is prohibited.</p> <p>Interviews are only allowed outside the polling station building.</p>

The Area Where Work is Possible Without Accreditation and Where Most Violations Occur: The Perimeter Outside the Polling Station

What Should You Pay Attention To?

- » It is prohibited to place campaign materials within 25 meters of the entrance to the polling station. Any such material is subject to removal or dismantling.
- » On election day, it is not allowed to physically obstruct voters' movement inside the polling station or within 100 meters of the polling station.
- » It is forbidden to gather people or conduct voter registration within 100 meters of the polling station on election day.

On election day, dozens of citizen journalists actively covered the elections and were mobilized early in the morning across various polling stations in the country. Through Meta/Facebook and other platforms, they rapidly shared updates, playing a crucial role in documenting the electoral process. Several key incidents captured by citizen journalists became critical in identifying and exposing attempts at electoral fraud and violations.

According to the preliminary and [final reports](#) of local and international observers, the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia were marked by numerous violations, documented by both local and international monitoring organizations.

The key issues identified were also captured in footage recorded by citizen observers and citizen journalists, highlighting irregularities and electoral misconduct.

These irregularities were as it follows:

» **Voter Intimidation and Pressure, Physical Violence and Coercion:** video by [TV Formula](#) and [video-digest](#) by online platform Publika is a combination of observers' and citizen journalists' [footage](#) and indicates widespread voter intimidation, with ruling party agitators openly pressuring voters. Observers noted a "climate of hatred and intimidation," undermining the electoral process. Cases of physical violence and coercion were documented, further undermining the integrity of the elections. Ana Tsitlanadze, who at that moment took on the role of a civilian journalist and [filmed](#) the confrontation.

» **Voter Tracking at Polling Stations and gatherings:** gatherings or tracking of voters within 100 meters of the polling station building is prohibited (Election Code, Chapter VI, Article 45). [video-digest](#) by online platform Publika is a combination of observers' and citizen journalists' footage showing these violations. Opposition member Bakar Shoradze also took on the role of a journalist, [informing](#) social media users about possible violations in Borjomi. Mtavari TV [covered](#) the election violations, highlighting a range of issues, and also utilized information gathered by citizen journalists. Citizen journalists continued to [publish](#) election-day violations on their social media platforms, sharing collected evidence both during and after the election (in [Samegrelo](#), [Kakheti](#), [Tbilisi](#), etc.)

» **Possible Violations of “Carousel Voting” and Marking Rules:** According to legislation, if it is discovered through verification that a person has participated in or attempted to participate in the election with a fake or someone else’s document, they will be held accountable under Article 164(2) of the Criminal Code of Georgia (Election Code, Article 76). A voter who has gone through the marking procedure and participated in the voting process is not allowed to participate again in the same or any other polling station (Election Code, Article 64). [Video-digest](#) by online platform Publika is a combination of observers’ and citizen journalists’ footage showing these violations. Additional [video](#) taken by an observer, where the observer did not allow a person who came to cast a second vote to enter the polling station. This video was widely spread by traditional [media](#). Another example was captured in [Marneuli](#).

» **Violations of Ballot Secrecy:** Instances of compromised ballot secrecy were reported, raising concerns about the confidentiality of voters’ choices. According to the watchdog organizations, violations included the ruling Georgian Dream party installing cameras in polling stations, some of which captured views of sensitive areas such as registration desks, verification machines, voting booths, and the main ballot box, [gatherings](#) at voting booths, etc. The ballots used in the electronic voting were also so thin that voters’ choices were visible even from the back, mainly through the traces of markers given to voters to fill in the party circles (see videos spread by [Formula TV](#) and [Publika](#) spread in traditional and social media). The Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association ([GYLA](#)), has called for the results of all 2,263 electronic precincts to be annulled, citing mass violations of voting secrecy.

» **Misuse of Administrative Resources and Vote-Buying Allegations:** The ruling party was accused of misusing administrative resources to gain an unfair advantage, including leveraging state institutions for campaign purposes. There were allegations of vote-buying, with reports of parties offering incentives to voters in exchange for their support. The summary of the aforementioned violations can be found in [journalistic investigations](#) conducted by TV Pirveli.

! One of the most notable [episodes](#) of these elections was the incident at Marneuli precinct 69, when a deputy head of the municipal council Rovshan Iskandirov forcefully threw ballots into a ballot box. This footage was filmed by a citizen observer, which was covered by almost every television station. After coverage, this precinct was invalidated and investigation started and 2 persons detained. The physical confrontation that occurred in Samegrelo was filmed by opposition members. Videos and photos of citizen journalists were widely spread by influencers and [bloggers](#).

These and many other examples demonstrate the crucial importance of citizen journalism in the election process, especially in the context of modern technological progress, when short and actionable videos are interesting and important for the user. Citizen journalism plays a crucial role in promoting transparency and enhancing democratic participation.

During natural disasters, citizens rapidly share videos and updated information on social media from the scene or nearby areas. This type of activity can serve both an informational and a safety function.

8. CHALLENGES OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

► Disinformation and AI

One of the primary challenges faced by citizen journalists is disinformation and the risks associated with it. Content created by citizen journalists often carries an emotional and subjective perspective, as they perceive events from their own experience as participants. This can sometimes lead to the distortion of information. While misinformation may spread due to unintentional errors, disinformation is deliberately fabricated and strategically framed false information designed to manipulate public perception and emotions.

The rapid spread of disinformation is further amplified by the capabilities of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies that can generate manipulated videos, audio, and images. These tools pose significant risks for information manipulation, while at the same time, they do not impose professional accountability on the creators of such content. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the impact of social media algorithms, which often prioritize emotionally charged and sensational content, further fueling the spread of disinformation.

To counter these risks, it is essential to promote media, digital, and information literacy among the general public. Enhancing critical thinking skills can help individuals discern credible sources from misleading ones and prevent the unintentional spread of disinformation.

► Wartime Reporting and Information Security

Professional and citizen journalists working in conflict zones risk their lives to keep the public informed. The media and citizen journalists must exercise their right to freedom of expression responsibly, ensuring that they report on armed conflicts with extreme caution and provide audiences with accurate and reliable information. [The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) establishes in Article 20 that:

- » Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.
- » Any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence shall be prohibited by law.

[During wartime, citizen journalism](#) plays a crucial role in documenting collective and civil memory. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an unfiltered, unedited archive of citizen journalism has emerged, capturing the raw, unblurred realities of war.

According to fundamental principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), intentional attacks, aggression, violence, intimidation, harassment, hostage-taking, and other unlawful actions against media professionals in armed conflict zones are strictly prohibited at all times and in all places. Violating these principles constitutes a war crime. Under IHL, media professionals are considered civilians and, therefore, enjoy full protection as non-combatants in military conflicts.

International Humanitarian Law distinguishes between two categories of journalists working in conflict zones: accredited war correspondents embedded within armed forces and civilian-status journalists. For further details, see this [link](#). According to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) categories, a media professional can be classified as a journalist or a war correspondent.

A media professional is:

» Any individual who investigates, researches, collects, and/or disseminates news and information from an armed conflict zone, regardless of citizenship, accreditation, or media platform.

» Someone who disseminates information through various means, including film, photography, television, radio, print media, and digital platforms (including blogs).

For greater protection, journalists operating in war zones may receive special status. To benefit from this status, a journalist must hold an identity card issued in accordance with the model prescribed by the [Third Geneva Convention](#).

This identity document must be issued by the state of which the journalist is a citizen, a permanent resident, or where their employing news agency is based. This document confirms the journalist's status and grants them additional legal protections under IHL. During an armed conflict, the media is obligated to comply with IHL rules.

In war and conflict situations, the role and engagement of citizen journalists increase significantly. A citizen may spontaneously take on a journalist's role in a critical situation. However, this comes with significant risks. Beyond the danger of becoming a victim or target during conflict reporting, a citizen journalist may unintentionally record, disclose, or distribute information that provides an advantage to the enemy.

Providing sensitive information, filming key locations, or sharing real-time updates from conflict zones can be exploited by hostile forces. Any new information in the enemy's hands can become their strategic advantage. This is why it is essential for citizen journalists to refrain from live-streaming or recording videos in real time from sensitive war zones, especially from frontline areas.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, the Telegram messaging app became highly popular, particularly for sharing information among Ukrainian citizens in closed groups. However, controlling such closed groups and identifying members was extremely difficult. Although no definitive evidence exists, there were cases where locations shown in citizen-recorded videos were bombed shortly after their release. Some notable examples include:

» [The bombing](#) of a nine-story building in Dnipro in 2023 – While there is no direct evidence that citizen-captured videos triggered this attack, the incident underscores the importance of operational security and the risks associated with real-time information sharing during conflicts.

» [Rocket strikes on Kharkiv](#) – Throughout the war, Kharkiv repeatedly became a target of Russian missile attacks. There is a strong suspicion that videos recorded by citizens provided Russian intelligence services with precise location data. While no absolute proof exists, this case highlights why civilians and media professionals should refrain from filming and sharing real-time locations, particularly in active conflict zones.

» The Siege of Mariupol – During the Mariupol siege, civilians uploaded footage of the devastated city to social media, [increasing operational risks](#). These videos provided valuable intelligence to enemy forces, allowing them to better assess the situation on the ground.

While there is no definitive proof that citizen-captured videos directly led to the bombing of specific locations, it is crucial to avoid live-streaming or sharing real-time footage of strategic sites, military personnel, or key moments. We never know who might be watching behind the screen.

► **Citizen Journalist Safety and Data Protection**

For citizen journalists, data protection is of critical importance, as they frequently publish photo, video, and audio content that may contain personal data of individuals.

It is essential that during the process of collecting and disseminating information, citizen journalists adhere to confidentiality standards and comply with Georgia’s personal data protection legislation.

A balance must be maintained between public interest and the right to privacy, ensuring that human rights are not violated (ECHR, Krone Verlag GmbH & Co. KG v. Austria). The use of covert recordings is only legally permissible if it serves significant public interest and does not violate individual privacy.

Secure storage and dissemination of information is also a critical aspect of citizen journalism. Citizen journalists should use secure cloud services and encrypted storage solutions to prevent data leaks or unauthorized use.

When publishing personal data, extra caution is required—sharing sensitive information that could endanger a person’s location or safety should be minimized. To enhance security, it is recommended to use strong passwords and encryption methods to safeguard information from unauthorized access.

► Risks and Benefits of Going Live

Going live is essential for the rapid dissemination of information and ensuring transparency, but it does not guarantee full protection. Therefore, citizen journalists must have a security plan and a well-thought-out strategy to minimize risks.

During crisis situations, live streaming via mobile phones can, in some cases, enhance the safety of citizen journalists. It enables real-time documentation of events, increases public pressure and engagement, and creates a digital protective shield, which can somewhat deter repressive actions. Since live broadcasts are unedited and create a sense of presence, they are often perceived as credible evidence.

However, live broadcasting carries significant risks. For instance, a citizen journalist attracts attention not only from their audience but also from hostile groups, increasing potential threats. Additionally, location tracking becomes easier, which could be used to find or intimidate the journalist or others. Live streaming may also create a false sense of security, but when confronting authoritarian regimes, it is important to acknowledge that such visibility does not necessarily prevent violence.

► What Should You Know Before Going LIVE or Recording a Video?

- » **Mention your location and purpose** – Explain where you are and why you are there.
- » **Describe the event** – Provide a clear explanation of what is happening and highlight key details viewers should pay attention to in the video.
- » **Report facts** – If you witness **illegal activity, violations, or suspect misconduct**, describe what you have seen as accurately as possible.
- » **Repeat key information** – If you are live streaming for an extended period, **repeat the main details every 2-3 minutes** for new viewers who join the broadcast later.
- » **Title your video/LIVE** – Provide a simple and clear title summarizing the topic of the video.

► Trolls and Bots: What Should Citizen Journalists Be Aware Of?

Today, troll farms, troll-bots, and the uncontrolled spread of propaganda are among the biggest challenges on social media. It is often difficult for users to determine whether an account is controlled by a troll or a real person. This challenge is especially relevant for citizen journalists. Since the content they share might be inconvenient for certain individuals or groups, citizen journalists can become primary targets of troll attacks.

Coordinated troll attacks may include:

- » Posting offensive comments under posts
- » Sending harassing private messages
- » Engaging in “haha-react” manipulation (mocking reactions)

These actions are often highly organized and aim to apply psychological pressure on citizen journalists to silence or intimidate them.

Unlike professional journalists, citizen journalists do not have institutional protection mechanisms. This is why collaborating with media organizations can provide additional support and security against online attacks.

9. ADVOCACY AND INCLUSIVITY

Citizen journalism helps bring attention to groups and topics that are often overlooked by traditional and mainstream media. It can create a cultivation effect and play a role in challenging stereotypes, particularly in the areas of political participation and inclusivity.

Citizen journalism can promote civic activism by highlighting women’s and girls’ issues in the context of elections, political crises, and other socially significant topics such as education, the economy, and employment. It empowers marginalized and vulnerable groups, giving them a platform to raise awareness about their challenges to a wider audience. Citizen journalism is especially critical in combating gender stereotypes and covering socio-political processes that affect women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities.

With technological advancements and social media, women and marginalized groups are now more actively engaged in public discussions. Citizen journalists have played a key role in covering issues such as gender-based violence, political discrimination, and economic inequality. Citizen journalism challenges traditional stereotypes about women’s roles in public and political life, portraying them as active participants in various fields, including politics, economics, and social activism. For example, in Georgia, women’s participation in protest demonstrations has been widely visible on social media and mainstream media platforms. However, gendered disinformation remains a challenge—the deliberate spread of false information that uses gender narratives to discredit women. This is particularly prevalent during elections, political crises, and major societal changes. Citizen journalists can play a crucial role in identifying and exposing such disinformation.

Beyond reporting problems, citizen journalism also fosters activism. Citizen journalists can cover women’s participation in elections, highlight the political barriers they face, and advocate for greater inclusivity and equality in media and society. When reporting on gender-related issues, it is particularly important to adhere to the principles of solidarity journalism. Citizen journalists can create content that is not only informative but also conveys messages of support and empathy. For example, the “[Tell Me](#)” section on Radio Free Europe’s website focuses on stories of gender-based violence. This initiative not only helps inform the public but also empowers survivors. A similar format could be implemented on other platforms to strengthen the coverage of gender-sensitive topics.

The strengthening of citizen journalism contributes to gender equality and inclusivity. It creates an alternative space where women and marginalized groups can amplify their voices and actively participate in public discussions. In Georgia, where women’s political participation remains a challenge, citizen journalism can play a crucial role in overcoming existing barriers.

If you want to engage in advocacy, consider the following:

- » Choose topics that interest you and align with pressing societal issues.
- » Focus on topics that are overlooked by traditional media or lack sufficient resources.

10. HOW TO BECOME A CITIZEN JOURNALIST?

You might find yourself in a situation where you unexpectedly become a so-called “accidental” citizen journalist or a one-off contributor. As Rodriguez (2014, p. 205) states, this refers to a person who happens to be in the right place at the right time. A responsible citizen can play a role in creating valuable journalistic content. Here are some key considerations to keep in mind:

12 GOLDEN RULES FOR CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

- 1 Evaluate the Necessity of Sharing Information – Assess whether the information you are about to share is genuinely valuable and necessary for the public.**
- 2 Practice Self-Control – Avoid spreading emotional statements or unverified information. Accuracy is key in responsible reporting.**
- 3 Ensure Stable Footage – When recording videos or taking photos, avoid excessive camera movement to maintain clarity.**
- 4 Observe and Document Details – Take notes on the facts, time, location, participants, and context of the event. If possible, interview eyewitnesses to verify and cross-check information.**
- 5 Provide Context – Add a brief description to your content to help your audience understand the background of the situation.**
- 6 Choose the Right Audience and Platform – Identify the most relevant platform for your content to reach the intended audience effectively.**
- 7 Use Hashtags and Mentions – Utilize relevant hashtags and tag appropriate organizations or media outlets to increase visibility.**
- 8 Monitor Reactions and Feedback – Stay engaged with the audience and observe responses after publishing your content.**
- 9 Follow Ethical Standards and the “Do No Harm” Principle – Do not share misleading, false, or sensitive information that could harm others.**
- 10 Avoid Sharing Discriminatory or Harmful Content – Do not spread unverified, discriminatory, hateful, or personal information that may violate privacy rights.**
- 11 Protect Your Physical and Digital Safety – Do not put yourself in dangerous situations to capture content. Prioritize your well-being when reporting.**
- 12 Collaborate with Trusted Media and Professional Journalists – Partnering with credible media organizations and experienced journalists can enhance your credibility and ensure greater impact.**

11. USEFUL RESOURCES FOR CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

With technological advancements, the tools and platforms available to citizen journalists for gathering, documenting, editing, and publishing information are constantly evolving. As of 2025, the following applications are particularly useful:

» **CitizenEye** is an advanced mobile application designed specifically for citizen journalists to efficiently collect, process, and share important information. It integrates video recording, photography, audio recording, editing, and live streaming functions. The app also enables direct sharing of content to social media platforms or media outlets, enhancing accessibility and audience reach.

» **KineMaster** is a professional-grade mobile video editing application available for both iOS and Android users. It offers a range of editing tools, including multi-layer video editing, transitions, text overlays, and audio enhancements, making it an ideal choice for journalists who need to quickly produce high-quality videos on the go.

» **Splice**, developed by GoPro for iOS users, is a free video editing app with various functions. It allows users to edit video footage, add effects and captions, create titles, and include background music, providing a simple yet powerful tool for mobile journalism.

» **Adobe Premiere Clip** is a mobile video editing application that can be used independently or in conjunction with the desktop version of Adobe Premiere Pro. It offers an automatic editing feature for those with limited time or editing experience, while also providing advanced tools for professionals. The app is free and available for both iOS and Android.

» **Life360** is a location-sharing and safety application designed for coordinating family members and groups in real time. Citizen journalists often work in crisis zones and hazardous environments, making Life360 a valuable tool for sharing locations with trusted contacts, ensuring personal safety, and coordinating movements within teams. The app's **SOS function** automatically notifies designated contacts and emergency services in critical situations. Additionally, it tracks movement history, which can be useful for documenting journalistic fieldwork.

» **PimEyes** is an AI-powered facial recognition system that searches and analyzes images across the internet. Users can upload a photo to identify its presence on various websites, helping citizen journalists verify the authenticity of images and detect potential manipulations or misuses of visual content. However, ethical considerations must be followed when using PimEyes to ensure compliance with data protection and privacy regulations.

When utilizing these and other digital tools, it is essential to adhere to ethical standards and data protection principles to maintain journalistic integrity and safeguard individual privacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Media Organizations:

- » Media organizations should collaborate with citizen journalists and activists to facilitate information exchange and ensure accurate reporting.
- » Establishing and strengthening a network between professional and citizen journalists can enhance cooperation, knowledge-sharing, and skill development.
- » Joint efforts should be made to reinforce ethical standards, with media outlets supporting citizen journalists in fact-checking and ensuring ethical content production.

For Citizen Journalists and Activists:

- » Collaboration with media organizations is encouraged to ensure wider dissemination, fact-checking, and credibility of their content.
- » Understanding fundamental ethical standards is crucial for the distribution of reliable and objective information.
- » Careful selection of location is essential when covering crises—before starting a live broadcast, the journalist should ensure they are in a place where they can quickly exit if necessary.
- » Providing context before live streaming helps engage the audience and encourages them to share and amplify the message. Clearly stating the purpose of the live broadcast can enhance its reach and impact.
- » Using platforms that automatically save video content (such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) is recommended to prevent the loss of critical footage.
- » Respecting privacy and data security is essential—citizen journalists should avoid tagging or revealing personal information of individuals without their consent.
- » Working in teams during crisis coverage can enhance safety, enable situation monitoring, and ensure quick responses if needed.
- » Consulting legal experts is advised so that citizen journalists are aware of their rights and legal protections.

For Civil Society Organisations and Observers:

- » Promoting media, information, and digital literacy is crucial to strengthening civic engagement and responsible journalism.
- » Enhancing coordination with citizen journalists can improve the efficiency of information exchange and crisis reporting.
- » Training election observers in citizen journalism can help strengthen transparency and accountability in electoral processes.

For Government Authorities and Political Parties:

- » Improving the legal framework is necessary—Georgian legislation should recognize the evolving media ecosystem and formally acknowledge the role of citizen journalists.
- » Introducing mechanisms to protect sources for citizen journalists, especially when they report on matters of public interest, can help uphold press freedom and transparency.

CONCLUSION

Citizen journalism has become an integral part of the information ecosystem, strengthening democratic resilience. With the advancement of technology and the rise of social media, citizens play a crucial role in producing and disseminating information, particularly during elections, political crises, and other significant events. By decentralizing the flow of information, citizen journalists contribute to a more pluralistic and inclusive media landscape.

During Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, the swift actions of citizen journalists helped both traditional and online media cover events that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. The photos and videos captured by these journalists not only informed the public but also served as crucial evidence in identifying electoral irregularities and violations.

As citizen journalism evolves, so do its challenges. The risks of disinformation, data protection concerns, security threats, and the need for ethical standards remain pressing issues. Addressing these challenges requires greater investment in media, information, and digital literacy to empower citizen journalists with the skills necessary for responsible reporting.

The promotion and institutionalization of citizen journalism not only democratizes the media environment but also fosters solidarity journalism, amplifying the voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups. By cultivating an atmosphere of support and collaboration, citizen journalism can act as a catalyst for social justice and political change.

Ultimately, the synergy between responsible citizens and ethical journalism strengthens democracy. Enhancing the qualifications of citizen journalists and encouraging collaboration with traditional media will foster greater public trust in the media and contribute to the overall improvement of the media environment.

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The **Media and Communication Educational and Research Center - “MediaVoice”** was founded in 2015. The center’s mission is to support the development of the media and mass communication sector through educational and research activities, fostering media literacy, promoting democratic values, and assessing the media environment. It aims to facilitate the transfer of interdisciplinary knowledge and provide consultations in the fields of media, communication, media psychology, media law, and public relations. Additionally, the center conducts scientific research and enhances research potential at both national and international levels.

In the implementation of various projects, the center collaborates with local and international organizations, educational institutions, and media organizations. Since 2023, “MediaVoice” has been the sole representative from the South Caucasus region in the [Media Freedom Coalition’s Consultative Network](#). In 2024, the center became a member of the [Global Forum for Media Development \(GFMD\)](#) and the [Anti-SLAPP Coalition](#), further strengthening its international engagement in media freedom and protection initiatives.

Website: <https://www.mediavoice.ge/>

Email: info@mediavoice.ge

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mediavoice.ge>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/mediavoice_georgia

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/media-voice-georgia/>

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