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War journalism in the digital age: The interaction between professionals and user-generated content

Воснна журналістика в цифрову еру: Взаємодія між професійним користувацьким аудіовізуальним контентом

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Abstract

The research aims to study the attitudes of professional journalists to user-generated audiovisual content and to understand its role in war coverage. A cross-sectional study was used to answer the research questions using a mixed-methods approach. The approach incorporated a close-ended questionnaire and in-depth interviews with 12 professional journalists. The findings showed that user-generated audiovisual content is widely used in war journalism to complement news stories, fact-checking, publishing, research, and real-time reporting. Telegram and Facebook are extensively utilised to source user-generated audiovisual content. To verify user-generated audiovisual content, consulting with experts, cross-referencing official sources, geolocation, reverse image search, and implementation of visual verification platforms are used. Both benefits and challenges characterise user-generated audiovisual content. For example, these benefits include enhancement of the ability to cover stories in inaccessible areas, providing unique perspectives on events, more effective engagement with the audience, and seeding up the news. At the same time, the findings showed that most participants face difficulties verifying the authenticity of user-generated audiovisual content, particularly challenges in maintaining professional standards, technical problems, the necessity to verify the authenticity, and the use of sensitive content. The recommendations on integrating user-generated audiovisual content in war news reporting were developed to maximise the effect of user-generated audiovisual content. Some include using user-generated audiovisual content to report on war zones, avoiding user-generated content as the sole source, implementing legal standards for using user-generated content, avoiding misinterpretation,

Анотація

Мета дослідження – вивчити ставлення професійних журналістів до користувацького аудіовізуального контенту та зрозуміти його роль у висвітленні війни. Для досягнення мети дослідження було використано перехресне дослідження на основі змішаних методів. Цей підхід включав закрите опитування 12 журналістів, а також інтерв'ю для отримання додаткової інформації з теми дослідження. Результати дослідження продемонстрували, що користувацький аудіовізуальний контент широко використовується у військовій журналістиці як доповнення до новин, перевірки фактів, публікацій, досліджень і репортажів у реальному часі. Telegram і Facebook використовуються для пошуку користувацького аудіовізуального контенту. Для верифікації користувацького аудіовізуального контенту використовуються консультації з експертами, перехресні посилання на офіційні джерела, метод геолокації, зворотний пошук зображень, а також платформи візуальної перевірки відео та фотозображень. У військовій журналістиці користувацький аудіовізуальний контент має як переваги, так і недоліки. Наприклад, ці переваги включають покращення здатності висвітлювати події в недоступних районах, різні перспективи бачення подій, ефективніше залучення аудиторії, швидкість повідомлення новини. Водночас результати дослідження показали, що більшість учасників стикаються з труднощами у перевірці автентичності користувацького аудіовізуального контенту, зокрема це дотримання професійних стандартів, технічні труднощі, необхідність перевірки автентичності та використання чутливого контенту. Щоб максимізувати ефект від використання користувацького аудіовізуального

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introducing fact-checking tools, and assessing source credibility. The outcomes can be implied in journalism, media studies, and conflict reporting.

Keywords: Audiovisual communication, media interaction, digital content, journalist strategies, media analytics.

контенту було розроблено рекомендації щодо інтеграції такого контенту під час створення воєнних репортажів. Ці рекомендації включають: використання користувацького аудіовізуального контенту для репортажів із зони бойових дій; уникнення користувацького аудіовізуального контенту як єдиного джерела інформації; впровадження юридичних стандартів використання користувацького аудіовізуального контенту, створеного користувачами; уникнення неправильного тлумачення інформації; впровадження інструментів фактчекінгу; оцінка достовірності джерела. Результати можуть бути використані в журналістиці, дослідженнях, що стосуються засобів масової інформації, та під час висвітлення збройних конфліктів.

Ключові слова: Аудіовізуальна комунікація, медіа-взаємодія, цифровий контент, журналістські стратегії, медійна аналітика.

Introduction

Context

In the last two decades, journalism has been marked by transformative changes in producing, accessing, and distributing audiovisual information, primarily driven by the proliferation of digital platforms and social media (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2023). The rise of smartphones and affordable recording technologies has democratised content creation, allowing professionals and citizens to capture and share real-time audiovisual communication. As primary distribution channels, social media platforms enable rapid news dissemination, often bypassing traditional media (Kitsios et al., 2022). This shift has led to a decentralised media landscape in which audiovisual content is dominant in engaging audiences. The second generation of web tools, such as social media, blogs, and video-sharing platforms, empower users to participate actively but not consume the information passively (Peña-Fernández et al., 2024). Web 2.0 changed audiences from passive recipients into active contributors, enabling them to comment on articles, share news, and create content (Masip et al., 2019). This participatory culture has led to the rise of user-generated content (UGC) (Cervi, 2019; Peña-Fernández et al., 2024).

Professional journalism and UGC differ significantly in standards, credibility, and purpose, yet both play vital roles in contemporary media (Zhu et al., 2023). Professional journalism is characterised by adherence to ethical guidelines, rigorous fact-checking, and structured storytelling crafted by trained reporters within established institutions (Truyens & Picone, 2021). It aims to provide accurate, balanced, and contextually rich information to the public. In contrast, UGC prioritises immediacy and personal perspectives, offering raw, unfiltered glimpses into events (Gruszynski Sanseverino & De Lima Santos, 2021). Kerkhof and Münster (2019) indicate that UGC is becoming more critical for today's media market. The scholars emphasise that it is widely used to enhance engagement, provide diverse perspectives, and offer real-time information (Kitsios et al., 2022). Some findings demonstrate that UGC helps build trust and authenticity since it showcases real customers endorsing products or services (Basile et al., 2024).

Research Problem

The recent findings show that UGC spreads rapidly during war, and it contributes to documenting events, providing real-time updates, and amplifying voices from affected regions (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2023). Often, UGC highlights stories that might be overlooked by mainstream media, shedding light on human suffering and resistance efforts (Zasiekin et al., 2022). In news reporting, UGC is a source of raw, on-the-ground content, such as videos, images, and firsthand accounts shared by individuals witnessing events (Breve et al., 2024). This material is particularly valuable during breaking news or conflict zones where professional reporters face limited access. However, the lack of verification in UGC poses risks of misinformation, requiring professional journalists to verify such material (Stewart, 2021).

The topic of the interplay between professional war journalism and user-generated audiovisual content (UGAVC) is critical in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war as it explores the evolving dynamics of how news and information about the conflict are produced and shared. This research helps to understand how these sources of information interact, complement, or sometimes conflict with each other and how they form public perception of the war. Additionally, this research highlights the changing landscape of war reporting, where the line between professional journalism and digital content becomes increasingly thin.

Objectives

Accordingly, the research aims to study professional journalists' attitudes to UGAVC and understand its role in war coverage. The research addresses three questions. They are the following:

- 1) Do professional war journalists use UGAVC? How do they interact with it?
- 2) What are the benefits and challenges of UGAVC? Does this content affect professional standards and ethics?
- 3) How does UGAVC affect audiences?
- 4) What are the requirements for integrating UGAVC in war news reporting?

Structure of the article

The research article explores the evolving dynamics of war reporting in the context of digital advancements. The introduction sets the topicality of the research problem by discussing the significance of war journalism and the emergence of UGAVC in the digital era, followed by a literature review that examines previous research on professional journalism practices and the influence of UGAVC. The methodology section presumably outlines the research design based on a cross-sectional survey to analyse the interaction between professionals and UGAVC. The results and discussion section presents key findings, such as the benefits and challenges of integrating UGC into war reporting, highlighting aspects like authenticity verification and ethical concerns. Finally, the article concludes by summarising the implications for journalism practices in the digital age and suggesting directions for future research.

Literature Review

UGC has become a widely studied phenomenon due to its profound impact on communication, media, and society (Kubin et al., 2024; Liaropoulos, 2023). The scientific sources demonstrated how UGC reshapes information ecosystems (dos Santos, 2022). In journalism, UGC is analysed to supplement traditional reporting, especially during crises (Cervi, 2019). Researchers examine its benefits and challenges, including misinformation, bias, and ethical implications of using unverified content (Kerkhof & Münster, 2019; Sang et al., 2024). The influence of UGC in marketing is another key focus. For example, several findings insist on the role of UGC in customer experience management (Gârdan et al., 2022; Sykora et al., 2022). Basile et al. (2024) explain the contribution of UGC to brand value co-creation. Also, Kitsios et al. (2022) present the employment of UGC in hospitality. Furthermore, some studies investigate UGC's role in facilitating collaborative learning in education (Okwilagwe & Jinadu, 2023). It is worth mentioning that information literacy is essential when people encounter UGC. In this context, some sources concern the formation of information literacy and skills of navigation of the complexities of UGC (Bhinder, 2020; Yeh & Swinehart, 2020). The recent findings show the role of UGC political activism and driving collective action in social movements (Aal et al., 2024; Yamamoto et al., 2022).

Recent studies prove that UGC is examined in different contexts during emergencies. Primarily, researchers investigate the use of digital content in covering war events (Liaropoulos, 2023; Maathuis & Kerkhof, 2023). Yadav et al. (2024) insist that digital content played a significant role in polarising views on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Some findings concern the ability of UGC to complement professional war journalism (Cervi, 2019). Gruszynski Sanseverino and De Lima Santos (2021) focus on integrating UGC into journalistic practices to present relevant information during a crisis. Some findings show the use of UGC in online newspapers to cover the Russia-Ukraine war (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2023). Besides, UGC is an instrument for countering terrorism by identifying threats and disseminating content that counters terrorist propaganda (Binder & Kenyon, 2022; Popovic & Kozar, 2023). The social impact of UGC is extensively discussed in the works of dos Santos (2022).

Academic inquiries also address the challenges of UGC (Kitsios et al., 2022; Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024) and understanding its emotional and psychological influence on audiences (Sang et al., 2024). Zasiakin et al. (2022) describe the psychological characteristics of UGC. Additionally, UGC often employs audiovisual communication that resonates deeply with audiences, enhancing its ability to influence opinions, attitudes, and behaviours (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2023; Leszczuk et al., 2023). However, some findings say UGC can also bring adverse psychological effects, such as anxiety, misinformation, or desensitisation, particularly during crises like wars or natural disasters (Kušen & Strembeck, 2023). According to Borges-Tiago et al. (2019), a person who generates audiovisual content is often fueled by profound motivation rooted in personal, moral, or societal imperatives.

Despite several challenges of UGC, scientific sources describe some successful cases when social media posts and videos documented conflicts, bringing international attention to war crimes and influencing aid efforts. For example, Meral and Meral (2021) explain the importance of digital content in the “Arab Spring” movement. Social media are also used to discuss the Syrian uprising, the civil war, and immigration (Miconi, 2020) or to protest the restrictions on women’s rights in Iran (Ahmadi et al., 2023). Hamas Elmasry (2024) focused on using UGC to cover the initial phase of the fifth Israel-Gaza war by popular news channels. A case study from the Russia-Ukraine war was described in the context of the formation of public opinion through UGC (Babenko et al., 2024; Geissler et al., 2023). Besides, some works refer to countering propaganda about the Russia-Ukraine war on social media (Hasan, 2024) and the significant emotional effect of UGC on audiences (Maathuis & Kerkhof, 2023).

The article addresses some controversies and debates surrounding the integration of UGC into professional war reporting. One central discussion deals with the tension between democratising news production and eroding journalistic standards. Some scholars argue that UGC enriches war journalism by providing diverse perspectives, real-time updates, and coverage from conflict zones (Berg et al., 2024; Maschmeyer et al., 2023). However, critics have concerns over the reliability and authenticity of UGC, emphasising the challenges it poses to maintaining ethical and professional standards in journalism (Basile et al., 2024; Sang et al., 2024). Another issue is the power dynamic between traditional journalists and citizen reporters, with some suggesting that UGC undermines the authority of professionals (Nah et al., 2024), while others see it as a collaborative opportunity (Kubin et al., 2024). Additionally, debates touch upon the use of sensitive content (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Zasiakin et al., 2022). When these perspectives are examined, the research reveals the complexities of war journalism in the digital age and the need for responsible integration of UGAVC.

Therefore, investigating the use of UGAVC during war and its media interplay with professional war journalism is essential for understanding the dynamics of war reporting and its impact on public perception. As traditional media face increasing limitations in conflict zones, UGAVC has become necessary for documenting real-time events. This content, shared by individuals directly involved or affected by the conflict, offers valuable information about human experiences and war realities. Examining how this content interacts with professional journalism allows for a deeper understanding of media influence, the role of citizen journalism, media analytics, and the ethical challenges in war reporting. The interplay between UGAVC and professional journalism may help shape the understanding of conflicts globally, influencing political discourse.

Methodology

Research Design

The attitudes of professional journalists to UGAVC and the evaluation of its role in war coverage were carried out based on a cross-sectional survey study equipped with a mixed-methods approach. The approach incorporated a close-ended questionnaire among journalists and in-depth interviews to gain deeper information into the motivations, decision-making processes, and ethical considerations of UGAVC. This cross-sectional design allowed researchers to assess the current interplay between professional journalism and UGAVC during a specific conflict, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war. During the investigation of theoretical analysis based on gatekeeping (Salonen et al., 2022), agenda-setting (Geiß, 2022), and framing theories (Lindgren et al., 2024), combined with empirical data resulted in a comprehensive understanding of how professional war journalism and UGAVC coexist.

Informants

The cross-sectional study involved 12 journalists representing diverse media platforms – television, radio, print, online journalism, and hybrid media. The selection of informants considered the following criteria: (1) professional background (war reporting experience, journalism experience, inclusion in journalistic role); (2) media platform representation; (3) geographical relevance to Ukraine; (3) experience with media interaction with UGAVC; (5) awareness of journalism standards; (6) diversity in demographics (age, gender, nationality); (7) availability and willingness to participate. Table 1 shows the characteristics of informants.

Table 1.
Characteristics of informants

Characteristics		Number
Age	Less than 30 years	1
	31-35 years	4
	35-45 years	4
	45-50 years	2
	Over 50 years	3
Gender	Male	8
	Female	4
Nationality	Ukrainian	9
	Other	3
War reporting experience	Yes	12
	No	0
Journalism experience	Over 10 years	12
	Less than	0
Role	Reporter	7
	Editor	3
	Multimedia producers	2
Media platform	Television	5
	Radio	1
	Print	2
	Online journalism	2
	Hybrid media	2
Geography	Located in conflict zone	2
	Travel to conflict zone	10
Media interaction with UGAVC	Always	1
	Often	4
	Sometimes	5
	Rarely	2
	Never	0
Possession of verification practices	Yes	12
	No	0
Adherence to ethical journalism	Yes	12
	No	0
Availability and willingness to participate	Yes	12
	No	0

Source: Author's development.

The justification for the sample size and participant selection strategy stems from the need to comprehensively understand the interplay between professional journalists and UGAVC in war reporting. The sample size was calculated according to the study's qualitative or quantitative nature. The selection strategy prioritised participants actively engaged in war reporting or managing UGAVC in professional contexts. Besides, the sample size was statistically calculated to ensure representativeness and reliability.

Instruments and Procedures

The cross-sectional study questionnaire was an integral instrument for collecting standardised data from professional journalists on their experiences with UGAVC. It explored themes such as the frequency and context of its usage, verification practices, ethical challenges, impact on audience engagement, and media analytics. Distributed electronically through email and professional networks, the questionnaire ensured a broad reach and accessibility, particularly for journalists actively engaged in war reporting. The questionnaire validation process involved several critical steps to ensure its reliability and validity. Firstly, the researchers designed the questionnaire based on a thorough review of existing literature and theoretical

frameworks related to war journalism and UGAVC. Secondly, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts in journalism, media studies, and digital communication to ensure the questions' relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Thirdly, pilot testing was conducted with a small, representative sample of participants. It helped to identify the possible difficulties in understanding the questions. Table 2 presents the questionnaire used during the cross-sectional study.

Table 2.
Cross-sectional study questionnaire

I. Media interaction with UGAVC				
1) How often do you interact with UGAVC?				
a) Daily	b) Weekly	c) Monthly	d) Rarely	e) Never
2) At what stage of your reporting process do you interact with UGAVC?				
a) Research	b) Complementing	c) Publishing	d) Fact-checking	e) Real-time reporting
3) What is your primary platform for sourcing UGAVC?				
a) Twitter	b) Facebook	c) Instagram	d) TikTok	e) Telegram
4) What type of UGAVC do you interact with most frequently?				
a) Video Footage	b) Photographs	c) Text-based posts	d) Infographics	e) Audio reports
5) Do you verify UGAVC?				
a) Yes		b) No		
6) What journalist strategies do you most frequently use for verifying UGAVC?				
a) Reverse image search	b) Geolocation tools	c) Cross-referencing with official sources	d) Visual verification platforms	e) Consulting experts
II. Benefits and challenges of UGAVC				
7) Does UGAVC enhance your ability to cover stories in inaccessible areas?				
a) Yes		b) No		
8) Do you believe UGAVC provides unique perspectives compared to traditional sources?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
9) Does UGAVC help you to engage audiences more effectively?				
a) Yes		b) No		
10) Do you think UGAVC speeds up the news reporting process?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
11) Does UGAVC improve the diversity of voices in your reporting?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
12) Do you face issues regarding the copyright or permission to use UGAVC?				
a) Yes		b) No		
13) Are there concerns about the ethical implications of using UGAVC?				
a) Always	b) Often	c) Sometimes	d) Rarely	e) Never
14) Do you find that UGAVC contains sensitive content that is challenging to publish responsibly?				
a) Yes		b) No		
15) Do you encounter challenges in verifying the authenticity of UGAVC?				
a) Always	b) Often	c) Sometimes	d) Rarely	e) Never
16) Do you face technical difficulties in editing UGAVC for publication?				
a) Yes		b) No		
17) Does using UGAVC create challenges in maintaining professional standards?				
a) Always	b) Often	c) Sometimes	d) Rarely	e) Never
III. Impact of UGAVC on audiences				
18) Has UGAVC had a more substantial emotional impact on audiences than professional journalism?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
19) Does UGAVC contribute to audience anxiety or stress during war coverage?				
a) Yes		b) No		
20) Does UGAVC foster a sense of urgency in audience reactions to war-related events?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
21) Do you think audiences trust UGAVC more than professional journalism?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
22) Does UGAVC motivate audiences to take action?				
a) Always	b) Often	c) Sometimes	d) Rarely	e) Never
23) Do you think UGAVC influences audience opinions about war-related events?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
24) Does UGAVC contribute to the spread of misinformation?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
IV. Integration of UGAVC in war news reporting				
25. For which type of stories do you use UGAVC?				
Breaking news	Personal stories	Investigation	Commentary	Other
26) Do you use UGAVC to provide visual evidence for your reports?				
a) Yes		b) No		

27) How often is UGAVC's sole source of audiovisual communication for a war-related story?				
a) Always	b) Often	c) Sometimes	d) Rarely	e) Never
28) Are ethical guidelines for using UGAVC in war reporting well-established in your organisation?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree
29) Have you ever decided against using UGAVC due to ethical concerns?				
a) Yes		b) No		
30) Does UGAVC help report on inaccessible war zones?				
a) Strongly agree	b) Agree	c) Neutral	d) Disagree	e) Strongly disagree

Source: Author's development.

In-depth interviews were employed as a complementary method to enhance the study's depth, focusing on integrating UGAVC into war reporting. These interviews provided a platform for journalists to discuss their personal experiences, share detailed accounts of specific challenges, and highlight innovative strategies for verifying UGAVC and ethical considerations for its usage. The questionnaire and interviews offered a comprehensive methodological framework to analyse the dynamic interplay between professional war journalism and UGAVC.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was employed for data analysis to provide quantitative and qualitative outcomes. The quantitative data from the close-ended questionnaire was analysed as Likert-scale responses using statistical instruments such as descriptive statistics and frequency analysis to identify trends and patterns in integrating UGAVC by professional journalists. These findings quantified the frequency of usage of UGAVC, the challenges faced, and its impact on audiences. For the survey, the data was analysed using SPSS software. The qualitative data from in-depth interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for developing recommendations on integrating UGAVC into war news reporting. The thematic analysis involved manual methods and qualitative data analysis software like NVivo to systematically organise and analyse textual data.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, presented in a clear format as a written consent form. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure the confidentiality of participant data, personal identifiers were anonymised during data collection and analysis.

Results and Discussion

Using UGAVC by professional war journalists

The literature review demonstrated that using UGAVC by professional war journalists became increasingly prevalent (Hamam Elmasry, 2024). The findings showed that journalists incorporate UGAVC into their war news reports to supplement their coverage (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2023). However, scholars insist that integration requires careful verification and ethical considerations to ensure the authenticity of the content and avoid spreading misinformation (Stewart, 2021). Besides, it was found that journalists often use UGAVC to provide a more emotional connection for audiences (Sykora et al., 2022). At the same time, the cross-sectional study proved that professional war journalists use UGAVC in their news reporting. Most use this content weekly and monthly (4 individuals each). Studying the interaction with UGAVC, it was found that 33,3 % use it to complement news stories and fact-checking. Besides, some journalists need UGAVC for publishing (17%) and research (8,4%). 25 % of participants stated that they interact with UGAVC during real-time reporting. Figure 1 shows the interaction with UGAVC.

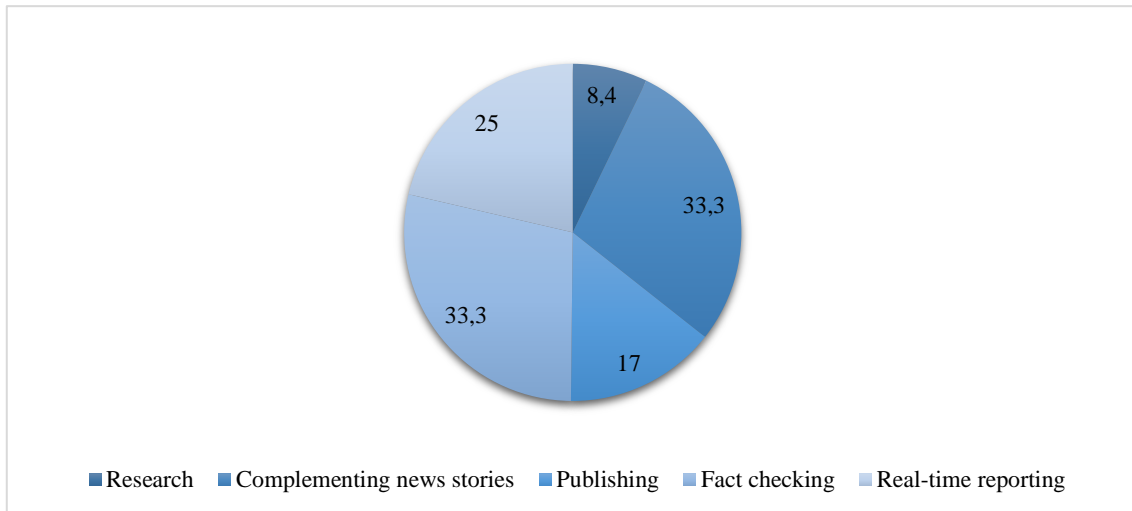


Figure 1. Interaction with UGAVC.

Source: Author's development.

The cross-sectional study also focused on using platforms to source UGAVC. The findings showed that most participants (4) use Telegram and Facebook to source UGAVC. Other platforms include Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Figure 2 presents the preferences of professional war journalists related to platforms for sourcing UGAVC.

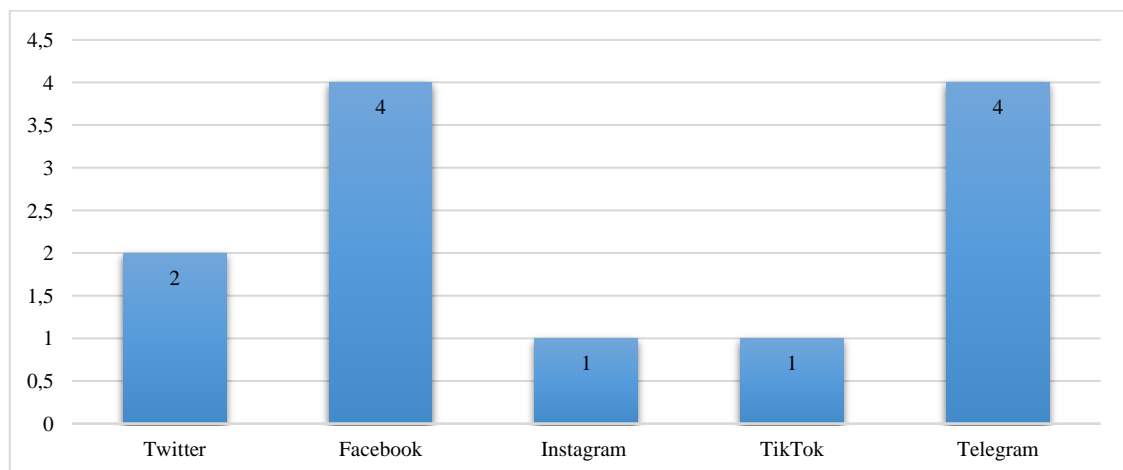


Figure 2. Platforms for sourcing UGAVC.

Source: Author's development.

The results prove that most journalists verify the content, but there were few examples of journalists using UGAVC in real-time reporting without verification. It was found that most participants consulted with colleagues and experts before broadcasting UGAVC (4 individuals). Other journalist strategies include cross-referencing with official sources, geolocation, Reverse image search, and visual verification platforms. Figure 3 shows the selection of journalist strategies for verifying UGAVC by professional war journalists.

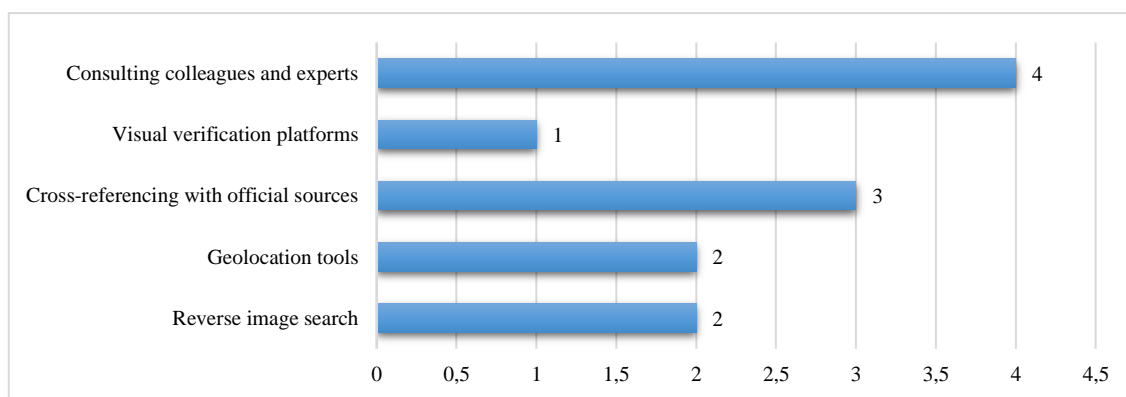


Figure 3. Verifying UGAVC.
Source: Author's development.

Further, it is necessary to explain the benefits and challenges of UGAVC to understand its impact on modern journalism, particularly in enhancing real-time reporting and audience engagement.

Benefits and challenges of UGAVC

The scientific sources revealed that UGAVC offers significant benefits and poses notable challenges in war reporting (Maschmeyer et al., 2023; Yadav et al., 2024). Among its advantages, UGAVC provides real-time comments from individuals directly affected by events, often filling gaps where professional journalists cannot be present due to safety concerns. Additionally, UGAVC allows for diverse viewpoints, democratising information dissemination. However, the challenges of using UGAVC include difficulties verifying content authenticity and accuracy (Kerkhof & Münster, 2019). Zhu, Lang, and Dietl (2023) admit that ethical considerations also arise. The cross-sectional study showed that professional war journalists face several benefits and challenges while integrating UGAVC into news reporting. Some benefits include enhancement of the ability to cover stories in inaccessible areas and providing unique perspectives on events compared to traditional sources. The benefits of UGAVC according to the study participants are given in Figure 4.

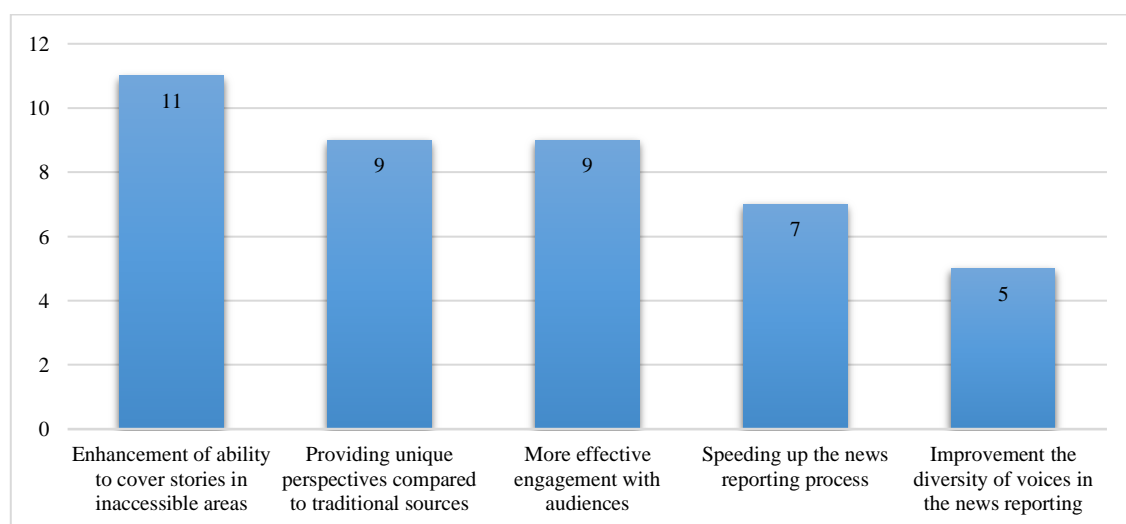


Figure 4. Benefits of UGAVC.
Source: Author's development.

At the same time, scientific efforts were oriented towards analysing the challenges of UGAVC. The findings showed that most participants face difficulties verifying the authenticity of UGAVC. Also, many professional war journalists admitted that UGAVC contains sensitive content, and it is essential to publish it responsibly. The challenges of UGAVC revealed during the cross-sectional study are shown in Figure 5.

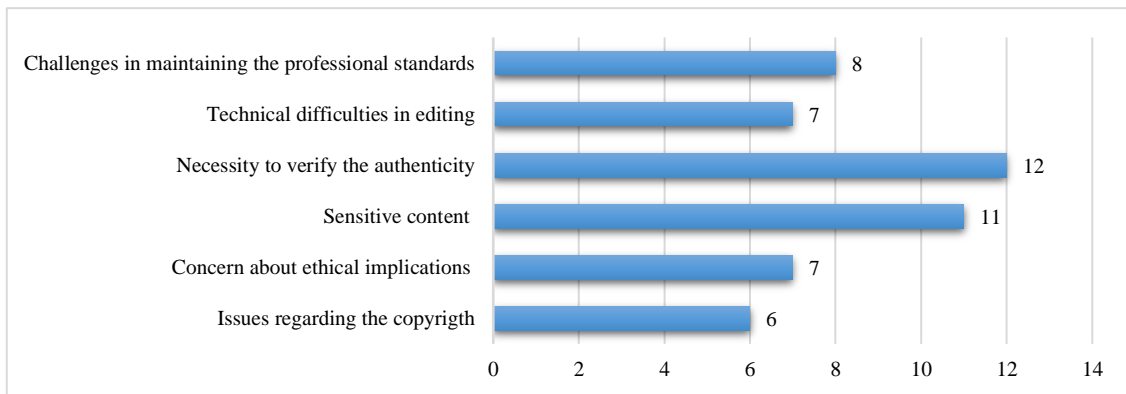


Figure 5. Challenges of UGAVC.

Source: Author's development.

Then, the impact of UGAVC on audiences was studied since it is essential to understanding how it shapes public opinion, influences emotional responses, and affects trust in media during war.

Impact of UGAVC on Audiences

During the literature review, special attention was paid to the impact of UGAVC on audiences by shaping their perceptions, emotional responses, and understanding of events, particularly during wars (Zasiekin et al., 2022). The findings showed that the impact is not always positive (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2023). At the same time, unverified or biased UGAVC spreads misinformation, polarises opinions, and erodes trust in media if not contextualised by professional journalism (Kerkhof & Münster, 2019). Additionally, the problem of authenticity of UGAVC was widely discussed in the scientific literature (Basile et al., 2024; Kerkhof & Münster, 2019).

At the same time, the cross-sectional study revealed that the use of UGAVC in war news reporting by professional journalists causes stronger emotions, anxiety, and stress. It also fosters a sense of urgency, influences audience opinions, and motivates them to take action. Moreover, it was found that in some cases, UGAVC helps build trust in news reports despite its ability to spread misinformation. Figure 6 summarises the impact of UGAVC on audiences.

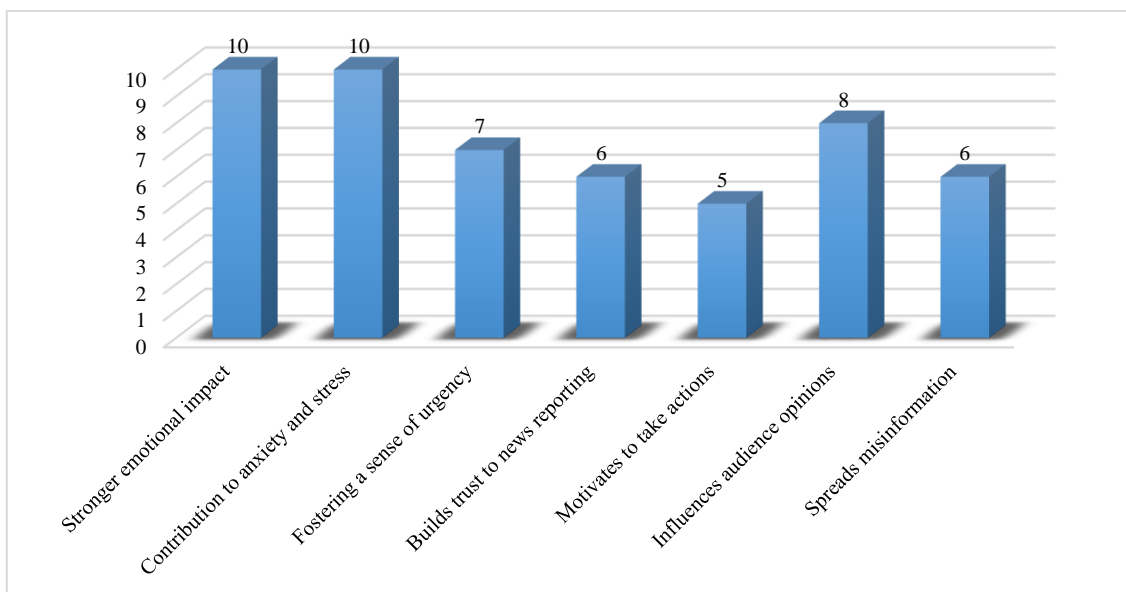


Figure 6. Impact of UGAVC on audiences.

Source: Author's development.

Further, the findings showed that to maximise the benefits of UGAVC in war news reporting, it is essential to integrate it properly through thorough verification, ethical contextualisation, and alignment with professional journalistic standards.

Integration of UGAVC in war news reporting

Analysing scientific sources proves that properly integrating UGAVC into war news reporting is essential for ensuring accurate and impactful journalism (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2024). The findings showed that, when verified, UGAVC enhances storytelling, adds depth and authenticity to war coverage, and fosters greater audience engagement (Peña-Fernández et al., 2024; Selvarajah & Fiorito, 2023). However, improper use of UGAVC leads to the spread of misinformation, sensationalism, and audience mistrust (Hasan, 2024; Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024).

The cross-sectional study enabled the development of recommendations on the integration of UGAVC in war news reporting. Journalists admitted in in-depth interviews that these recommendations are crucial in Ukraine today, considering the ongoing conflict and the vital role of accurate information in shaping both domestic and international perceptions. The well-defined guidelines ensure that such content is verified, ethically used, and contextualised to prevent misinformation and propaganda. The recommendations are also essential for protecting the rights and privacy of content creators. When information is a necessary tool during war, straightforward strategies for integrating UGAVC responsibly strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of Ukraine's war reporting. Figure 6 presents the analysis of recommendations for integrating UGAVC in war news reporting.

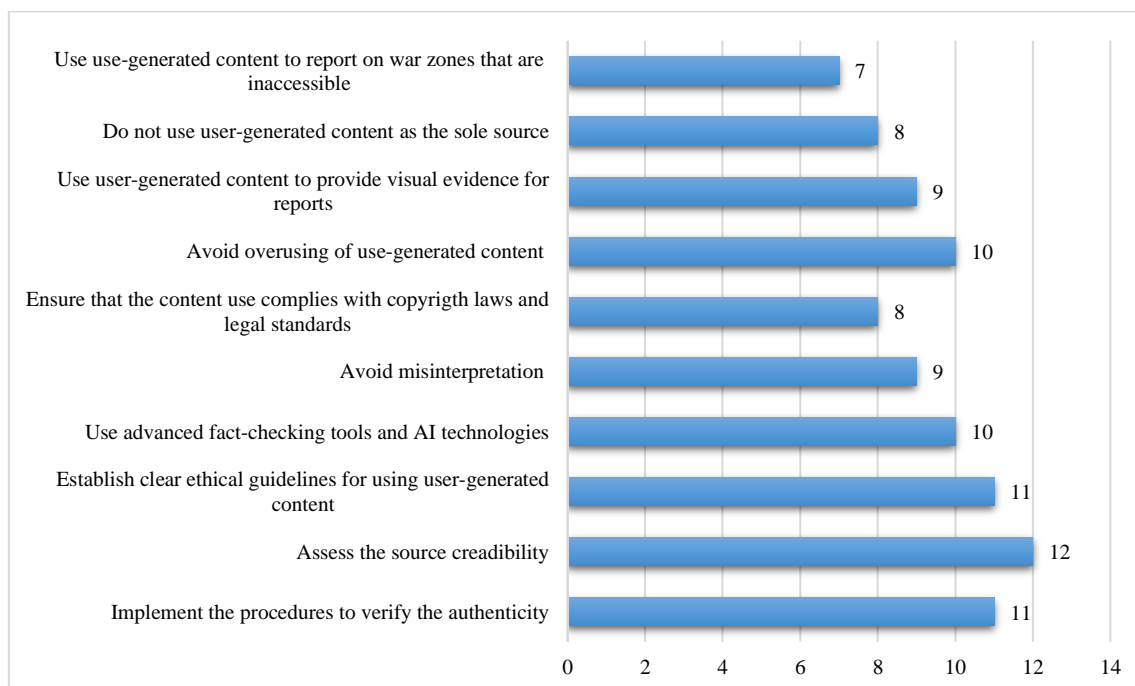


Figure 7. Recommendations on the integration of UGAVC in war news reporting.

Source: Author's development.

Therefore, the research focuses on the interplay between professional war journalism and UGAVC, investigating the opportunities and challenges of integrating this content into news reporting. It showed the necessity of developing ethical guidelines to verify and contextualise UGAVC, ensuring its responsible use while preserving journalistic standards.

The study is not without its limitations. First, a limited sample size may restrict the generalizability of the results. Second, the validity of the questionnaire was impacted by inexact question phrasing and reliance on self-reported data. These limitations prove the need for a cautious interpretation of the study's conclusions and underscore the importance of refining research instruments and methodologies in future investigations.

The research concerns significant implications for journalism, media studies, and conflict reporting. It emphasises the necessity to elaborate the frameworks for verification, ethical use, and contextualisation of UGAVC, particularly in conflict zones where misinformation has negative consequences. For example, the findings will be helpful in the development of advanced verification processes and adopt technological tools, such as AI-based content analysis, to ensure the authenticity and reliability of UGAVC. Moreover, the research underlines the importance of training professional war journalists in digital literacy and ethical decision-making to effectively integrate UGAVC into their reporting practices. In this context, this study may contribute to developing an advanced training program for early-career war journalists in Ukraine to use strategies for using UGAVC responsibly and effectively in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Conclusions

The study shows that UGAVC spreads rapidly during the war. It is used to complement news stories and fact-checking for publishing and research. Also, the cross-sectional study showed that Telegram and Facebook are extensively utilised for sourcing UGAVC. Other platforms include Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, but professional war journalists do not frequently select them. At the same time, the special attention was paid to verifying UGAVC. The results prove that consulting with experts is the most preferred strategy. Other journalist strategies include cross-referencing with official sources, geolocation, reverse image search, and implementation of visual verification platforms.

The study revealed that UGAVC offers significant benefits and poses notable challenges in journalism, particularly war reporting. Among its advantages, UGAVC provides enhancement of the ability to cover stories in inaccessible areas, providing unique perspectives on events compared to traditional sources, more effective engagement with audiences, speeding up the news reporting process, and improving the diversity of voices in news reporting. At the same time, the findings showed that participants face difficulties verifying the authenticity of UGAVC, maintaining professional standards, and technical difficulties in editing and processing sensitive content. Also, many professional journalists have concerns about the ethical implications of UGAVC and issues regarding copyright. Then, the impact of UGAVC on audiences was studied, and the cross-sectional study revealed that the use of UGAVC in war news reporting by professional journalists causes stronger emotions as well as anxiety and stress. Also, it fosters a sense of urgency, influences audience opinions and motivates them to take action. In some cases, UGAVC builds trust in news reports, but some journalists admitted its ability to spread misinformation.

The recommendations for integrating UGAVC in war news reporting were developed during the research. They included the following: using UGAVC to report on war zones; avoiding UGAVC as the sole source; using UGAVC to provide visual and audio evidence for reports; not overusing UGAVC; implementation of copyright laws and legal standards of using UGAVC; avoiding misinterpretation; introduction of fact-checking tools; establishment of clear ethical guidelines for using UGAVC; assessment of UGAVC source credibility; and implementation of procedures to verify the authenticity of UGAVC.

The study makes an original contribution by offering a comprehensive understanding of the interrelations between professional journalism and UGAVC in conflict zones. Unlike previous studies that often focus on the technological aspects of UGAVC or its ethical dilemmas, this research examines its integration into journalistic workflows, clarifying its impact on modern reporting practices. This contribution is especially significant in the digital transformation of journalism, where UGAVC shapes news reporting, particularly from conflict zones with limited access.

Importantly, the findings significantly impact both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study advances the discourse on participatory journalism by showing the collaboration between professional journalists and citizen contributors. It provides a foundation for further theoretical exploration into the co-creation of news content and the ethical tensions arising from this collaboration. Practically, the study emphasises the need for media organisations to develop advanced training programs to address the challenges posed by UGAVC.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of UGAVC on the audience, particularly in conflict zones where information warfare is prevalent. Additionally, the research could examine the psychological implications for journalists who integrate UGAVC into their news reporting. Further studies could also concern technological advancements, such as AI tools and blockchain, for verifying UGAVC and addressing issues of trust and accuracy in real-time reporting. It is worth mentioning that future research

could focus on cross-cultural variations in UGAVC usage, examining the impact of cultural context or regional dynamics on journalistic practices and the role of citizen journalism in conflict zones. These investigations could lead to the development of more accurate and reliable news reporting, ensuring that content from conflict zones like Ukraine is verified and reveals objective narratives.

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