Why Is There No Ethics in New Media: A Critical Perspective on the Borderless Broadcasting of the Digital Age

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Summary

It has become increasingly rare nowadays to come across someone reading news from printed newspapers and magazines. The tradition of waiting for scheduled news broadcasts on television has largely disappeared. Instead, we now receive news from all kinds of sources through our internet-connected phones, tablets, and computers. The rigid and monotonous structure of traditional media's news flow has rapidly been abandoned in favour of the dynamic structure of new media tools. The foundation of this new way of receiving news is built on fast-paced, dense, and interactive content. Within this structure, a news source can originate from anywhere and anyone. News production is no longer limited to professional journalists; even an ordinary individual can generate news content. In fact, some news content today may even be produced by artificial intelligence. The news flow in the new era is extremely fast and contains a vast amount of data. This situation generates debate not only about the accuracy of news but also about its ethical dimension. The accuracy of a news item can be confirmed over time—it can be revealed to be true or false. However, whether the news is ethical is a more complex issue. Can ethical standards be expected from news in a new media environment? This question represents one of the major problems in the way new media delivers news. It should not be forgotten that if there is no ethics in news, there is no public interest. And content lacking public interest does not qualify as news.

Keywords: New Media Ethics, Clickbait, Viral Culture, Interest in News, Disinformation

Introduction

For a piece of news to have news value, the most fundamental condition is that it must be prepared within the framework of ethical principles (Jakesch, Buçinca, Amershi, & Olteanu, 2022). If ethical norms are not adhered to in a news report, this indicates that the public interest has not been considered and, therefore, that the right of society to be informed has not been respected (Wiertz & Boldt, 2022). So, what are the ethical principles in news reporting? In fact, these principles are quite clear and universal in nature. The basic ethical rules can be summarised as follows(Basın Konseyi, 2025):

- No one should be condemned, humiliated, or degraded in a news report due to their race, gender, age, health, or similar characteristics.

- News content should not include any approach that restricts freedom of thought, conscience, or expression.

- Journalists must not report news to serve their personal interests or gains.

- Private life cannot be made the subject of news unless there is a direct public interest.

- Information used in news reports must be verified through multiple sources.

- No one can be declared "guilty" unless proven so by a court ruling.

- A person cannot be accused of a specific crime before the judicial process is completed.

- Violence and bullying should not be presented in a way that encourages such behaviour.

- Advertisements and promotional content must not be presented as news.

- The right to reply and correction must always be respected.

If one or more of these rules are violated, the news in question cannot be considered ethically sound. Such reporting not only lacks public interest but also undermines the public's right to access accurate information. These ethical principles are universal and do not vary from country to country. Furthermore, they apply to both traditional and new media (Humprecht et al., 2022). A report that is deemed unethical in traditional media is also unethical in the context of new media. If a difference is perceived in this regard, society may begin to approach news from new media with suspicion(Swart, 2021). This undermines the freedom to receive information. Unless society demands adherence to ethical principles in new media as well, democracy will inevitably suffer as a natural consequence of this process (Bollinger & Stone, 2022).

1. Structural Features of New Media and the Problem of Oversight

New media is largely nourished by an environment in which the boundaries between the news producer and the consumer have significantly blurred (Meng, Chung, & Zhang, 2023). In this medium, the rapid and intensive production of news gains importance, while the identity of the news source often becomes secondary. When a news item is supported with visuals, published online, and receives sufficient interaction, it is frequently accepted without questioning the background of the content. For instance, an ordinary individual may record footage of a fire with a mobile phone and share it on any social media platform as "breaking news." This post can instantly transform into accessible news content for anyone with an internet connection. Moreover, users can interact with such news by commenting, sharing, or contributing with additional visuals (Kim, Xiong, Lee, & Han, 2021). This has given rise to the concept of "citizen journalism" in today's world. The same individual may even turn their thoughts on the event into an op-ed article and share it with a wider audience. In this context, freedom of thought and expression has acquired a very different dimension in the digital age (However, alongside these positive aspects of news in new media, the weakness of oversight mechanisms brings about significant ethical issues. In traditional media, news production is generally subject to editorial control and a "gatekeeping" process. In new media environments, such mechanisms are often absent. Especially for news producers outside established traditional media institutions, there is virtually no ethical oversight. Although gatekeeping is described by some circles today as a form of "pre-censorship," it essentially serves as a filter in terms of verifying the accuracy and ethical compliance of news (Narrain, 2022).

Another prominent issue in new media is the spread of "fake news" and disinformation. Unfortunately, many content producers create news that is either unverified or entirely fabricated and circulate it rapidly. News can be presented incompletely, in a biased manner, or deliberately distorted. This situation is particularly widespread on platforms where there is no editorial oversight or ethical responsibility mechanism.

News containing lies and disinformation is sometimes shared hastily and with good intentions, without verification, and sometimes it is deliberately created for personal gain or to boost engagement. In new media, such news can reach large audiences in a very short time and may even begin to be accepted as "truth" over time. This results in a far more dangerous outcome compared to traditional media. Today, a large portion of new media news is either produced by individuals or automatically generated by artificial intelligence tools. This creates serious problems concerning the accuracy of the news, the reliability of sources, and the ethical integrity of the content. As a result, due to the lack of oversight and the focus on speed, the violation of ethical values, information pollution, and the risk of misleading the public are significantly high in the new media environment (Haggart & Keller, 2021).

Democratization of news-making has indeed galvanized individuals toward information creation (Meng, Chung, & Zhang, 2023). Nonetheless, this evolution puts a great deal of pressure on the audience to critically discern the authenticity and credibility of information being received. Unlike conventional journalism, based on training, ethics, and institutional accountability, user-generated content lacks these mechanisms. While it has become easier for individuals to document and disseminate events in real time, it has also made it harder to discern

the factual integrity and context of such information. The volume and pace at which news propagates within digital arenas tend to overwhelm the communicative capacity of the audience and foster the propagation of misinformation (Haggart & Keller, 2021).

Also, the increase of algorithmically driven content dissemination mechanisms makes these issues more acute. Social media platforms optimize engagement over accuracy and display sensational or controversial items at the top of feeds. This system not only incentivizes the creation of clickbait or emotionally charged news, but also creates echo chambers where people are rarely exposed to dissenting opinions or corrective facts (Kim, Xiong, Lee, & Han, 2021). This makes it more likely that individuals are presented with news affirming their beliefs rather than reflecting objective accuracy. In these conditions, the difference between fact and opinion is increasingly blurred, and the very idea of objective truth is repeatedly challenged. Accordingly, journalism's future in the digital age demands that regulatory mechanisms and ethical standards be reexamined. Both traditional and new media outlets have an obligation to collaborate and foster digital literacy within their audiences while adopting mechanisms that encourage openness, fact verification, and accountability. Even controversial regulatory frameworks may become central to preventing the spread of false information while preserving freedom of expression (Narrain, 2022). Moreover, AI-generated journalism tools must be developed and used responsibly, with clear identification and ethical guidelines to distinguish them from human-produced content. Without such anticipatory actions, public miscommunication and the degradation of democratic discourse will continue their upward trajectory (Haggart & Keller, 2021).

2. Focus on Clicks and Popularity (Clickbait and Viral Culture)

The revenue sources of traditional media outlets are generally stable and relatively unchanging. The primary income of a newspaper or magazine comes from sales and subscriptions. Additionally, advertising revenue contributes significantly. In television news, ratings are the key determinant; advertising revenue increases based on viewership rates. Although there may be some supplementary income streams beyond these structures, the overall model is consistent and not easily manipulated. In contrast, the revenue model of new media news is largely based on user interaction, particularly "clicks." News websites and social media platforms earn a share of advertising income according to the number of clicks their content receives. Furthermore, as the click rate increases, the likelihood of securing more lucrative sponsorship deals also rises. Thus, the structure of revenue sources sharply diverges between new and traditional media (Luna, Toro, & Valenzuela, 2022).

In this context, within the new media environment—where metrics such as click-through rates and time spent on a page are of great importance—many news sites resort to mechanisms known as "clickbait." According to this strategy, eye-catching but misleading headlines and visuals are used to lure users into clicking on a story. While the reader searches for the content promised by the headline, they are redirected by attention-grabbing elements to other pieces of content, prolonging their stay on the page. The system then interprets this behaviour as both a successful click and substantial user engagement (Lalmas, O'Brien, & Yom-Tov, 2022).

Moreover, current and highly popular topics are often used as "bait" in news headlines. For example, during the university entrance exam results period, a headline like "Have the university entrance exam results been announced?" may be used to mislead users. Once users enter the page and fail to find the relevant information, they are often forced to repeatedly press the back button on their browsers. This process may take one or two minutes, creating the impression that the user has read the article. All these methods are examples of unethical news production, and unfortunately, the number of news websites employing such tactics is increasing by the day (Foreman, Biddle, Lounsberry, & Jones, 2022).

In Turkey, this issue became even more critical in 2022 when a regulation was introduced requiring web-based news sites to meet certain conditions to be eligible for official advertisements and announcements. The Press Advertisement Agency (Basın İlan Kurumu) provides official advertisement and announcement support based on the number of visits to internet sites. As a result, many news websites are not hesitant to use clickbait strategies to increase their traffic numbers. A low click rate means the inability to obtain official advertising and announcement revenue. As long as this structure remains in place, it seems inevitable that we will be increasingly exposed to clickbait content (Jodłowiec, 2023). This not only threatens journalism ethics but also poses a serious risk to the public's right to access accurate and meaningful news.

Revenue sources of traditional media are mostly stable and quite consistent. Sales and subscriptions are the primary income of a newspaper or magazine. Ad revenues are also a major income. Television news is decided on the basis of ratings; advertising revenues increase with the viewing rates. Although some ancillary sources of income may occur other than these arrangements, the system itself is stable and not changed easily. The new media news revenue system is mostly based on user interactions, particularly "clicks." Social media and online news platforms get a percentage of advertising revenues based on the clicks their information has garnered. Further, the more the click factor is raised and higher rates are achieved, the greater are the chances of seeking higher income sponsorship contracts. Thus, the trend of sources of revenue mostly varies between new and traditional media (Luna et al., 2022).

Here, within the new media environment—the one where rates of clicks and dwell time are more important than anything—the vast majority of news sites deploy mechanisms known as "clickbait." Within this system, sensational but untrue headlines and images are used such that the user is lured into clicking on an article. When the reader is waiting while they can access information promised by the headline, their attention is shifted by attention-grabbing features of other pieces of content while they are waiting, such that their time is still on the page. This system then interprets this action as a successful click and meaningful user engagement (Lalmas, O'Brien, & Yom-Tov, 2022).

Moreover, trendy and trending topics are often used as "baiting" in news headlines. For example, when it is the season of results of the entry examinations of the university, a headline news like "Were the results of the entry examinations of the university announced?" is likely used for baiting. When the user visits the page and doesn't find related information, they are often compelled to click the back button of their browsers time and time again. This may take roughly one or two minutes and may offer a semblance of the user reading the news. All these are instances of unethical news making, and unfortunately, the incidence of news pages employing such tactics is on the increase daily (Foreman et al., 2022).

This became serious in 2022 when Turkey enacted a regulation requiring web-based news websites to meet some requirements if they were to be eligible for official announcements and adverts. Official announcement and advertising facility is made available by the Press Advertisement Agency (Basın İlan Kurumu) based on the visitor traffic of internet sites. This is the reason why many news websites do not hesitate to resort to the use of tactics of clickbait when trying to increase their visitor traffic. Minimal clicks on a website or blog equal failure to access official announcement and advertising revenues. Until this system is sustained, it is only inevitable that we get gradually and consistently bombarded with clickbait information (Jodłowiec, 2023). This is not only harmful to journalism ethics but poses a big threat to the public right of access to meaningful and factual news.

3. Weakening of Journalism Norms

Traditional media journalism is a profession that requires significant education and experience. Journalism is considered a profession only when it is actively practiced. Therefore, earning income from journalism implies a more serious approach to the profession. Respect for the profession and acting in accordance with the dignity of journalism have been central to the dynamics of traditional journalism since the 19th century. For this reason, journalism has a well-established, traditional structure. It is both an educational and experience-based profession that evolves through intensive work (Freyn, Sedaghatjou, & Rodney, 2021) .

Today, with the decline in the importance of traditional media journalism, journalists have increasingly begun producing news on social media platforms. However, journalists who have received formal training or gained experience through working in press institutions are now a minority in new media. Although there are many similarities between traditional and social media journalism, the two fields are fundamentally different. New media journalism can easily disregard the norms of traditional journalism. The speed of news production and the fact that news can come from anywhere often lead new media practitioners to neglect two essential elements: accuracy and objectivity. Due to the pressure of immediacy, these principles are frequently overlooked (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of data journalism—which is based on technological proficiency—has further transformed the profession. While traditional journalism requires diligent, well-researched reporting, many new media reporters without journalistic training now produce content without adherence to any formal rules. This practice negatively affects the quality and value of news and frequently results in ethical violations (Zhai, Wibowo, & Li, 2024).

4. Anonymity and Hate Speech

One of the most troubling ethical issues in contemporary new media journalism is the prevalence of racist, sexist, and homophobic discourse in news content. Unfortunately, such content often enhances the reach and engagement of news in polarized societies. While this kind of reporting increases readership, it simultaneously intensifies social division and amplifies hate speech. The extent of racist, sexist, and homophobic language has become so pervasive that social media accounts are frequently reported and even suspended due to these violations (Banaji & Bhat, 2022).

Additionally, cancel culture and cyberbullying are commonly encountered problems in online news content. These issues sometimes escalate to international dimensions. For example, fabricated news about migrants often triggers strong public reactions, which in turn can lead to increased hostility and violence against refugees and immigrants. Unfortunately, tracking and monitoring such harmful content is often not feasible due to various technical, legal, or institutional limitations (Brady et al., 2024).

One of the most concerning moral problems within new media journalism is the use of racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric within news stories. All too often, this type of reporting boosts the audience and views of news within divided cultures. Although this type of journalism raises readership rates, it does so at the cost of deepening social cleavage and promoting greater volumes of hate speech. This incidence of racist, sexist, and homophobic terms has gotten so bad that social media profiles are regularly reported and even banned because of these infractions (Banaji & Bhat, 2022).

Further, online bullying and cancel culture are quite common phenomena of online news. They even come in international forms at times. For example, false news about immigrants is quite common and often initiates widespread public reactions, which can lead to greater violence and hostility toward immigrants and refugees. It is often next to impossible to follow and identify such offensive media due to several technical, institutional, or legal limitations (Brady et al., 2024).

5. Commercial and Sponsorship-Based Relationships

Another significant problem in new media journalism is the influence of sponsorships. Especially visual news websites are often sustained through sponsorship deals. Video-based news platforms and sites, which are gaining popularity day by day, have evolved into large-scale commercial enterprises. This development has enabled major corporations to participate as sponsors in the sector, leading to dependent journalism. The commercial interests of sponsors significantly shape the direction of the news content (Pradhan, Kishore, & Gokhale, 2023).

Large social media platforms, especially YouTube, consistently monitor the content of channels that produce news through sponsorships. News producers with high viewership and follower counts often secure major sponsorships, which in turn obliges them to consider the interests of their sponsors when reporting news. Furthermore, web-based news sites display a large number of advertisements,

which can sometimes make it difficult for readers to follow the news and may even cause frustration. Readers may struggle to locate the actual content due to excessive advertising. Another serious issue in new media is the presentation of advertisements in the form of news, which misleads the public and undermines journalistic credibility (Thomson, Angus, Dootson, Hurcombe, & Smith, 2022).

Conclusion

In the realm of new media, readers and viewers have unfortunately been transformed into mere consumers. The fact that the value of news in new media is determined by its audience has largely been forgotten. Generally, neither the news nor the audience is given the respect they deserve. However, the public's right to be informed can only be fulfilled when the news is of high quality. Therefore, when ethical values are disregarded in a news report, it ceases to hold the essential characteristics of news. This is something every news producer must fully understand. Public interest is particularly critical in journalism, and regrettably, it is often overlooked in new media reporting.

Attaining ethical standards in new media is not, in fact, difficult. It is the readers who must demand it. If readers show greater interest in ethically responsible journalism, the system will, in time, marginalise those who produce unethical content. If this structure is attempted to be imposed through legal regulations, it may give rise to a censorship mechanism. For this reason, while maintaining ethics in new media is challenging, it is by no means impossible. Globally, ethical initiatives of this kind are usually carried out by professional associations or independent non-governmental organisations, rather than by governments. Therefore, the concept of ethics in new media should be established through civil society organisations, not state authorities. For this to succeed, society must be thoroughly educated and made aware.

Older generations possess knowledge about the quality of news. However, younger generations often lack sufficient awareness regarding both news quality and ethical journalism. This may be due to their limited exposure to traditional media, resulting in an inability to recognise what constitutes ethical reporting. Thus, awareness-raising efforts should primarily target younger generations. The real struggle lies not with individual unethical journalists but with the large corporations that control new media platforms. It is not enough for society alone to demand ethical journalism; media corporations must also respond to these demands in a constructive and responsible manner.

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