

An Analytical Study of Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism: Negotiating Truth, Privacy, and the Public Interest in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving digital media landscape, journalists are increasingly confronted with complex moral dilemmas that challenge traditional ethical boundaries. This study explores how journalists in Sri Lanka navigate competing demands related to truth-telling, privacy, and public interest. Using a qualitative methodology, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with professional journalists and a review of institutional documents and ethical codes. The findings reveal a persistent tension between the need for accuracy and the pressure for immediacy in digital reporting, compounded by ambiguous editorial guidelines and weak enforcement of ethical standards. Journalists often rely on personal judgment to resolve dilemmas, especially in situations where professional ethics and newsroom expectations conflict. The study also highlights the influence of digital platforms and audience-driven algorithms in shaping editorial decisions, often at the expense of ethical considerations. Based on these insights, the research recommends stronger ethics training, institutional support, and public engagement to reinforce responsible journalism in the digital age. This study contributes to the growing discourse on applied media ethics by situating journalistic decision-making within the sociocultural and technological realities of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Journalism ethics, truth, privacy, public interest, digital media, Sri Lanka, moral dilemmas

INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement and the instantaneous flow of information, journalism faces unprecedented ethical challenges. The digital age has transformed the landscape of news production and dissemination, amplifying the reach and impact of journalistic content while simultaneously complicating the moral responsibilities of media practitioners. As journalists strive to report the truth, they are increasingly confronted with the need to balance competing ethical imperatives particularly the right to privacy and the obligation to serve the public interest.

The tension between these values becomes especially pronounced in the context of digital platforms, where information can be shared globally within seconds and where the boundaries between professional journalism, citizen reporting, and sensational content are often blurred. Ethical decision-making in this environment is further complicated by issues such as data leaks, doxxing, surveillance reporting, and the monetization of click-driven content. These dilemmas raise critical questions: To what extent should journalists prioritize truth over privacy? When does public interest justify intrusion? And how can ethical journalism survive in a media ecosystem dominated by speed and competition?

In the context of journalism, truth refers to the accurate, fair, and comprehensive presentation of facts. It is widely regarded as the cornerstone of responsible journalism and is essential to the credibility and trustworthiness of the media. However, the pursuit of truth often clashes with privacy, defined as the right of individuals to control access to personal information and to be free from unwarranted public exposure. Meanwhile, public interest pertains to actions or information that benefit society at large particularly content that informs democratic participation, exposes wrongdoing, or safeguards public welfare.

The digital age marked by the rise of social media, online news platforms, and real-time information sharing has intensified the ethical tensions between these values. The pressure to publish quickly, gain audience attention, and remain competitive often leads to ethical compromises. For instance, reporting on the private lives of public figures, sharing graphic images, or publishing leaked content can raise serious questions about journalistic responsibility.

This study aims to explore the moral dilemmas that arise in contemporary journalism, particularly how journalists balance truth-telling with respect for privacy and considerations of public interest in a fast-paced, digitally driven media landscape. Through an analysis of real-world case studies, journalistic codes of ethics, and scholarly perspectives, this research will examine the ethical reasoning processes that underpin decision-making in modern journalism and evaluate the implications for media integrity and democratic accountability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalistic ethics plays a vital role in ensuring responsible reporting, particularly in contexts where public trust and democratic values are at stake. As journalism adapts to the digital age, ethical decision-making has become increasingly complex due to technological advances, audience expectations, and competitive media environments. This chapter reviews existing scholarly work and theoretical perspectives on key ethical principles in journalism truth, privacy, and public interest and examines the unique challenges presented by digital media. Special attention is also given to the Sri Lankan context, where media freedom, cultural norms, and institutional practices shape the ethical choices of journalists.

When discussing the ethical basis of journalism

Journalism is traditionally grounded in the values of truth, accuracy, fairness, and accountability (Ward, 2005). These principles are enshrined in numerous professional codes of ethics, such as those by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). According to Christians et al. (2011), journalism ethics is not merely a set of rules but a field of applied moral reasoning that helps journalists navigate competing duties.

Sri Lanka's media ethics guidelines—such as the Code of Professional Practice issued by the Editors' Guild and the Press Complaints Commission—likewise emphasize truth-telling, independence, and the responsibility to avoid harm. However, enforcement and awareness of such codes remain uneven across the industry (Wijesinghe, 2019).

When discussing the principle of truth in journalism, Truth is regarded as the cornerstone of ethical journalism. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) argue that journalism's first obligation is to the truth, not in an absolute sense, but as a discipline of verification and transparency. In the digital context, however, the pressure to publish news rapidly has led to growing concerns over misinformation, sensationalism, and reduced editorial oversight (Posetti & Matthews, 2018).

For Sri Lankan journalists, especially those working in online newsrooms, the tension between speed and accuracy is significant. Fernando (2021) notes that the lack of fact-checking infrastructure in local digital media outlets often compromises reporting quality and credibility.

When discussing privacy and the right to be alone, Privacy, as defined by Warren and Brandeis (1890), is the "right to be let alone." In journalism, this right often comes into conflict with the public's right to know. Ethical guidelines generally advise journalists to show sensitivity, especially when covering private individuals or distressing events. Yet, digital technologies—particularly mobile cameras and social media—have blurred the boundaries between public and private domains (Andrejevic, 2014).

Studies in South Asia (Gunaratne, 2017; Perera, 2020) highlight that Sri Lankan media occasionally violate privacy under the justification of public interest, especially in crime reporting and political scandals. This raises ethical questions about proportionality, consent, and the dignity of those affected.

When examining public interest versus public curiosity, while public interest justifies reporting that exposes wrongdoing, protects public health, or informs civic decision-making, it is often confused with public curiosity, particularly in tabloid or sensationalist journalism (Day, 2006). The ethical line between the two becomes more difficult to draw in the digital era, where audience engagement often rewards controversial or emotionally charged content.

Sri Lankan researchers such as Samarajiva (2016) have warned of the erosion of ethical boundaries in the media due to commercial pressures and political influence. In some cases, invoking “public interest” serves as a convenient justification for intrusive or unethical reporting practices.

When studying literature related to ethical issues in the digital age, The digital revolution has transformed the media landscape, introducing new platforms and ethical challenges. Journalists now operate in a hyper-connected, 24/7 news cycle where user-generated content, leaks, and real-time reporting can complicate ethical decision-making. According to Singer (2011), digital journalism has challenged traditional ethical frameworks, pushing journalists to constantly renegotiate their responsibilities.

Moral dilemmas in this context arise when journalists must choose between upholding one ethical value (e.g., reporting the truth) at the expense of another (e.g., respecting privacy). These dilemmas are often situational, context-specific, and influenced by institutional culture, legal constraints, and public expectations.

Sri Lanka’s media industry operates within a complex socio-political environment marked by issues such as state influence, press freedom limitations, and cultural sensitivity. The World Press Freedom Index has consistently ranked Sri Lanka in the mid to lower tiers, indicating persistent challenges to independent journalism (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Moreover, legal ambiguities—such as the lack of a comprehensive data protection law—and the dominance of vernacular media outlets have created a unique ethical landscape. Research by Wickramasinghe (2022) suggests that journalists often navigate moral dilemmas without adequate institutional support or ethical training, leading to inconsistent and sometimes harmful reporting practices.

Research Gap

While numerous studies have addressed journalism ethics globally, there is limited empirical research focused on how Sri Lankan journalists experience and respond to moral dilemmas in the digital era. Most existing work remains theoretical or policy-based, with little attention to the lived experiences of practitioners. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a context-specific understanding of journalistic ethics as practiced on the ground in Sri Lanka.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological framework adopted to investigate the moral dilemmas faced by journalists in Sri Lanka, particularly in balancing truth-telling, privacy, and the public interest in a rapidly evolving digital media landscape.

The methodology is designed to explore journalistic practices, ethical decision-making, and institutional challenges through qualitative inquiry, aiming for an in-depth understanding of how these dilemmas manifest in real-world media contexts.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of experiences, perspectives, and contextual factors influencing ethical decision-making in journalism. Given the complexity and subjectivity of moral dilemmas, qualitative methods such as interviews and document analysis are suitable to capture depth and diversity of journalistic thought and behavior.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the ethical challenges journalists, face in balancing truth-telling with respect for individual privacy in the digital age.
2. To explore how Sri Lankan journalists make decisions when public interest conflicts with ethical considerations such as accuracy and sensitivity.
3. To identify the influence of digital media technologies, including social media and algorithm-driven content delivery, on ethical journalism practices.
4. To assess the effectiveness of current ethical guidelines, training, and institutional support available to journalists in Sri Lanka.
5. To propose practical recommendations for strengthening ethical journalism practices in the context of evolving digital media landscapes.

Population and Sampling

The target population includes professional journalists, editors, and media ethicists working in print, broadcast, and online journalism in Sri Lanka. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select participants who have direct experience with ethical decision-making in journalistic contexts. The sample size was 30 participants.

- It comprises 05 reporters, 05 editors from national newspapers and 05 journalists from digital news platforms, 05 media scholars and 05 ethics trainers and also 05 representatives from media regulatory or advocacy bodies.

Data Collection Methods

Under this data Collection Method, the semi-structured interview method was used.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide to allow flexibility while ensuring core topics are covered. Themes include:

- Experiences with reporting ethically challenging stories
- Institutional pressures and gatekeeping
- Personal interpretations of privacy and public interest
- Use of digital tools and their ethical implications

Each interview lasted between 30 - 45 minutes and was audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis

Document Analysis

Selected media codes of ethics (e.g., Sri Lanka Press Institute, Editors' Guild), newsroom policy documents, and examples of controversial news coverage were analyzed to contextualize the findings from interviews.

Data Analysis

Data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach:

- Familiarization with data
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with coding and theme development.

Ethical Considerations

1. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
2. Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonymization and secure data storage.
3. Special care was taken to avoid pressuring participants to reveal sensitive or compromising information.

Limitations of the Study

1. The sample size was limited and may not represent all types of journalists (e.g., freelancers, regional reporters).
2. Data was collected primarily through self-reported experiences, which may be subject to bias or selective memory.
3. The study focused on mainstream journalism; alternative and citizen journalism were not within its scope.

FINDINGS

This chapter interprets and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives and the existing literature.

A recurring theme from the interviews was the tension between journalistic accuracy and the pressure to publish quickly, especially on digital platforms. Journalists acknowledged that the 24/7 news cycle often compromises fact checking practices. One participant noted:

“Sometimes we get five minutes to confirm something. If we delay, another outlet gets the story first even if it’s not accurate.”

This finding aligns with Singer (2011), who emphasized how digital media redefines journalistic routines and complicates traditional ethical standards. In Sri Lanka, the lack of institutional mechanisms to support real-time verification intensifies this dilemma.

Another prominent moral conflict involves privacy and the public’s right to know. Many journalists expressed difficulty in deciding when to withhold or publish personal information. While some stories involved public figures, others included private citizens unexpectedly caught in public controversies.

Journalists often referenced their own ethical judgment rather than relying on formal guidelines. This echoes Warren and Brandeis (1890) and Day (2006), who differentiate between public interest and mere public curiosity.

Interestingly, Sri Lankan journalists noted cultural and political pressures that influence privacy decisions. According to one participant:

“There is no real line. Editors sometimes say: ‘This is what sells.’ But we feel uncomfortable when families are dragged into a scandal.”

These comments resonate with Gunaratne (2017) and Perera (2020), who argue that privacy is often sacrificed for sensationalism in local media, particularly in crime and politics reporting.

While most participants were aware of the Sri Lanka Press Institute Code of Ethics, few reported that it directly guided their daily decisions. Instead, editorial policies and management pressures often overrode ethical considerations.

This finding supports Wijesinghe (2019) and Samarajiva (2016), who suggest that the lack of strong, independent self-regulation mechanisms in Sri Lanka weakens ethical journalism. Christians et al. (2011) also argue that ethics in journalism must be actively institutionalized rather than assumed.

One interviewee said:

“We know the ethics code. But if our editor wants a different angle, we don’t have much of a choice.”

This highlights a structural problem—journalists are aware of ethical ideals but often operate in environments that do not support ethical autonomy.

Digital media adds a new layer of ethical complexity. Journalists pointed out that online platforms amplify sensational content, often rewarding ethically questionable stories with clicks, shares, and advertising revenue. They also raised concerns about user-generated content and the spread of unverified information. One participant stated:

“When someone tags us in a video, we want to use it. But verifying it is tough, and once it's viral, the damage is done even before we publish.”

This reflects global concerns raised by Posetti & Matthews (2018) and Reporters Without Borders (2023), who warn of the erosion of journalistic integrity in digital ecosystems dominated by algorithms.

Despite constraints, many journalists reported relying on personal ethics and peer discussions to make tough decisions. A few referenced personal experiences where they deliberately withheld damaging information out of concern for fairness.

Many journalists report that the public has little awareness of the ethical constraints they operate under, which fuels misunderstanding and criticism when dilemmas arise. This reflects what Ward (2005) terms "ethical reflexivity" the ability to critically assess moral consequences in journalism. It also echoes the need for ethical imagination, where journalists consider multiple outcomes before publishing.

Journalists often turn to unverified social media content and anonymous online sources due to time constraints, which raise concerns about credibility and ethical sourcing. In some cases, journalists feel compelled to act as advocates for social justice, especially on politically or socially sensitive issues. This dual role complicates the objectivity expected of them.

Many journalists report experiencing indirect or direct pressure from political actors or advertisers, which influences how news is framed, or which stories are selected or ignored.

Moreover, there is a noticeable gap between how ethics are applied in traditional print media versus online platforms, where immediacy and user engagement often take precedence. Younger journalists tend to have more flexible interpretations of ethics in digital spaces, while older journalists adhere more strictly to traditional norms of accuracy and impartiality. Journalists facing ethical dilemmas and public backlash especially after publishing sensitive content, often lack institutional or psychological support, which can affect their professional well-being.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter summarizes the key findings of the study, reflects on the implications of those findings for journalism practice in Sri Lanka, and offers practical recommendations to support ethical journalism in the digital age. It also highlights the study’s limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

Summary of Key Findings

This study set out to explore the moral dilemmas journalists in Sri Lanka face when navigating issues of truth, privacy, and public interest in an increasingly digital media environment. Through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the following major conclusions were drawn:

Tension between speed and accuracy: Journalists often face pressure to publish quickly, sometimes compromising factual accuracy due to competition and digital immediacy.

- Ambiguity in balancing privacy and public interest - There is no consistent framework guiding decisions related to privacy. Choices often depend on the journalist's personal ethics and editorial pressure.
- Weak institutional enforcement of ethics - Although ethical codes exist, they are poorly implemented, and many journalists lack formal support for ethical decision-making.
- Digital challenges amplify ethical dilemmas - Algorithmic bias, user-generated content, and the pursuit of virality complicate responsible journalism and create new ethical grey areas.
- Reliance on personal judgment - In the absence of systemic support, journalists frequently depend on their own values and informal peer consultations when faced with difficult moral decisions.

Conclusions

The findings of this research underscore the fragile ethical landscape within which Sri Lankan journalists operate, especially in the context of digital transformation. While journalists are aware of professional ethics, real-world application is frequently hindered by time constraints, editorial interference, commercial pressures, and the structural weaknesses of media institutions.

The study also suggests that ethical journalism in the digital age cannot rely solely on individual integrity. A collective, institutional, and systemic response is essential to support journalists in making decisions that align with both professional standards and public accountability.

Recommendations

Strengthening Ethics Training

Journalism education at both university and vocational levels should integrate applied ethics with case studies relevant to Sri Lanka. Continuous professional development workshops should be made available to practicing journalists, focusing on real-life dilemmas and digital ethics.

Institutionalizing Ethical Guidelines

News organizations should develop and enforce clear editorial policies regarding privacy, truth verification, and the public interest. Independent bodies like the Sri Lanka Press Institute should work collaboratively with newsrooms to monitor compliance with ethical standards.

Developing Digital Literacy and Verification Tools

Journalists must be trained to critically engage with algorithms, audience analytics, and social media trends that may skew ethical decision-making. Newsrooms should invest in digital fact-checking tools and verification platforms to ensure accuracy under tight deadlines.

Encouraging Ethical Leadership

Senior editors and newsroom managers should promote an ethical culture by modeling transparency, fairness, and accountability in decision-making processes.

Public Engagement and Media Literacy

Media organizations and educational institutions should promote public understanding of media ethics, helping audiences distinguish between ethical and unethical reporting.

This study affirms that ethical journalism remains vital to democratic society, especially in a context where truth can be distorted, privacy easily violated, and public interest reduced to marketability. Navigating these moral dilemmas requires more than personal conscience—it demands institutional support, public trust, and a collective recommitment to journalistic responsibility in the digital era.

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