



RESEARCH PAPER

Impact of Social Media on Media Ethics of Journalists in South Punjab, Pakistan

¹ Dr. Samia Manzoor* and ² Muhammad Asad Ullah Shahzad

1. Assistant Professor, Institute of Media and Communication Studies, BZU, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
2. MPhil Scholar, Institute of Media and Communication Studies, BZU, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: samia.manzoor@bzu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to identify common themes related to the issues of content authenticity, algorithmic biases, professional ethics, and their impact on journalistic practices. The rise in reliance on social media has impacted journalistic practices. The current research aimed to explore how media ethics have been affected due to social media. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study gathered data through in-depth interviews with journalists representing diverse media outlets. Participants were asked about their experiences, perspectives, and observations regarding the ethical challenges they encounter while reporting on social media platforms. The analysis of interview data revealed several significant themes. Firstly, the blurring line between professional journalism and user-generated content has led to issues of information credibility and source verification. Algorithmic influences and filter bubbles have contributed to the echo chamber effect, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. Journalists often grapple with pressures to prioritize sensational and viral content, leading to potential conflicts between responsible reporting and engagement metrics. The challenge of verifying information from social media sources was also evident, affecting the accuracy and reliability of news reporting. The results showed that social media has impacted media ethics positively as well as negatively.

KEYWORDS Algorithmic Influence, Influencer Culture, Information Verification, Journalism Ethics, Sensationalism, Social Media, User-Generated Content

Introduction

Usually “ethics” and “morality” are confused with each other but in reality, these are entirely different terms. Morality relates to a complicated system of rules, values, and standards that impact or are thought to impact people's behaviors, while ethics instead of subjective or personal judgments and values, might be characterized as the study of concepts, universal opinions, and standards (Bartneck et al., 2021).

Ethical debates might be philosophical or practical ethics, according to LaFollette (2020). The goal, history, theory, or character of ethical notions and ethical assertions are all topics of philosophical ethics theorizing. Applied ethics, on the other hand, is more concerned with the criteria of right and wrong, as well as the specific norms governing a sphere of society or occupation.

Ethics is defined as “a framework of ethical principles through which particular motions and suggestions may be mediated as good or bad,” Practicing ethics is very important in every sphere of life and the field of media is no exception. News is incredibly important in the media. Information ethics, which focuses on the link among the production, diffusion, organization, and use of information, and the moral principles and ethical guidelines that regulate human behavior in society, includes news, data, and

material. It establishes a critical framework for considering ethical concerns such as news privacy, fresh conservation, moral agency, obstacles, and dilemmas that come from the information life cycle.

The rapid rise of social media has significantly influenced the landscape of journalism, presenting both opportunities and challenges for media professionals. As social media platforms become dominant sources of news consumption, journalists face ethical dilemmas and challenges that affect the credibility and trustworthiness of their reporting.

The goal of this study is to explore the ethical challenges confronted by journalists in the realm of social media journalism, and how these challenges impact the quality and integrity of news reporting. By understanding these ethical dilemmas and their implications on the profession, this research seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations to help journalists navigate the complex world of social media reporting responsibly and uphold media values in the face of external pressures and technological advancements.

Studying the impact of social media on media ethics and codes of conduct of journalists in South Punjab is significant because it helps to understand the evolving media landscape, update and adapt professional standards, maintain public trust, credibility safeguard journalistic autonomy and freedom of speech, and facilitate targeted professional development and training.

Literature Review

A rigorous literature review of the existing researches was conducted to understand the topic area fully. Memon (2015) addressed a variety of issues that affect professional journalists. Threats, arrests, torture, job insecurity, and feudal influence, he said, are among the methods used to prevent journalists from working freely, particularly in rural regions. These variables are linked to economic challenges, either directly or indirectly, and are thereby exacerbating local journalists' financial difficulties. Coverage of numerous taboo themes that need to be addressed, accuracy, truthfulness, impartiality, fairness, and respect for individual privacy are among the ethical difficulties encountered by Pakistani journalists (Raza & Akbar, 2013). According to Shabbir (2012), Pakistani media frequently engages in sensational, controversial, and unfavorable content in order to fulfill the constant race for ratings. Profit orientation remains the primary motivation behind participatory journalism techniques in poor nations, according to research (Vujnovic et al., 2010).

Because the media business in underdeveloped nations like Pakistan is unable to continue without financial assistance in the form of ads, it frequently compromises journalistic standards in order to reap financial rewards. Because there is no regular salary or incentive for journalists working in Pakistan's small cities, with the exception of a few media houses, local journalists rely primarily on political and industrial public relations sources to maintain their circulation and profit (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). These are the variables that influence journalists' ethical conduct. The Pakistan Press Foundation (2015) advised journalists to do journalism in accordance with ethical principles and values, but no concerted attempts have been taken to ameliorate the financial situation of journalists. According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), social media platforms have changed how news is gathered and reported on by becoming important news sources for many people. Journalists today rely on social media for in-the-moment information and user-generated content, which enables them to report on stories more

quickly and thoroughly. Additionally, the development of citizen journalism has been aided by social media platforms, allowing regular people to participate in news reporting and add to public dialogue (Hermida, 2012).

According to academics, ethical journalism is crucial for sustaining democratic ideals, encouraging openness, and advancing the common good (McQuail, 2010). The value of media ethics in promoting public credibility and trust has been highlighted in a number of studies (Bentele, 2017; Singer, 2010). This confidence is essential because journalists serve as a conduit for information sources to the public, delivering news that can be trusted.

According to research, journalists should confirm their sources and the accuracy of their material before sharing it with the public (Brennen, Simon, & Howard, 2018). Concerns concerning the spread of incorrect or erroneous information are raised when the drive to break news first can sometimes override the need for careful verification.

Another important ethical issue in social media journalism is privacy. Journalists frequently use social media platforms to find sources and information, however doing so may violate people's privacy. The distinction between public and private information is muddled, which raises concerns about how far journalists should pry into people's private lives or get access to password-protected material (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Material and Methods

Interview technique is used in the current research for data collection. The interviews were semi-structured, permitting open-ended discussions and probing of specific themes. The qualitative technique instead of focusing on a few variables, aids in the attainment of a holistic picture by giving a variety of dimensions and interactions in the environment; qualitative research is more flexible, processual, and conducted in participants' natural contexts (Cope, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this study because they allow the researcher to get in-depth information regarding a research subject from an informant (Johnston 2010 et al). Journalists with more than 20 years of experience who were affiliated with any media organization and those who solely used social media for journalism purposes made up the target demographics for this study. A purposive sampling strategy was used to choose participants who met the criterion for participation in the study. The researchers kept track of their personal observations after each interview. Researchers tried to keep a personal note of each interview's outcome. In the early stages of data collection, these reflecting comments also assisted the researchers in identifying any gaps. The interviews were then transcribed and searched for any recurring themes.

Results and Discussion

After data analysis the following themes emerged.

News values adherence

This theme encompasses respondents' knowledge and perceptions of media ethics. It includes their understanding of the values and principles that guide responsible behavior in the media industry. Respondents provided insights into the importance of truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and transparency in journalism. They also highlighted the significance of protecting the privacy and dignity of individuals, avoiding conflicts of interest, and promoting diversity and inclusion in media content.

Respondents acknowledged the challenges of viral content and the responsibility that comes with sharing information to a large audience on social media platforms. They also highlighted the importance of being cautious about the potential for misinformation and the need for media literacy and critical thinking among the audience.

Respondents acknowledged the transformative impact of the digital era, particularly the rise of social media platforms, on media ethics. The recognition of viral content's potential impact underscores the awareness of the responsibility that comes with sharing information to a wide audience online. As media consumers increasingly rely on social media for news consumption, ensuring the adherence to ethical principles becomes even more crucial in countering misinformation and upholding the integrity of journalism.

Media Values Role

This theme highlights the consensus among participants about the crucial role of media values in field reporting. Respondents emphasized that adherence to journalistic ethics is essential for responsible and effective reporting from the field. They emphasized the significance of upholding values such as accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and transparency in the news gathering process.

Participants unanimously agreed on the paramount importance of media values in field reporting. They recognized that field reporting, particularly in fast-paced situations, can present challenges in delivering accurate and reliable news. However, adhering to media values, such as fact-checking, presenting all sides of a story, and avoiding sensationalism, enables journalists to uphold their ethical responsibility to the public.

Within this theme, participants emphasized the direct link between media values and the credibility and reputation of reporters and media organizations. They acknowledged that failing to adhere to media values could compromise the quality of news, erode public trust, and lead to negative perceptions of journalists and media institutions. This awareness underscores the significance participants place on maintaining their credibility and the reputation of their profession through responsible and ethical reporting.

The recognition of media values as ethical guidelines highlights their role in guiding journalists' actions and decisions, ensuring the responsible and ethical gathering of news. Moreover, participants' acknowledgment of the impact of media values on credibility and reputation underscores the collective commitment to maintaining journalistic integrity and public trust. This study emphasizes the pivotal role of media values in field reporting and reaffirms the dedication of journalists to upholding ethical standards in their profession.

Challenges and Resilience of Media Values in Field Reporting

This theme highlights the prevalent perception among participants that media values are often not fully followed in field reporting. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of adherence to values such as accuracy, objectivity, and sensitivity in certain situations, particularly in breaking news scenarios or sensationalized reporting.

Participants uniformly acknowledged that media values are not always fully followed in field reporting. They identified instances where personal preferences,

sensationalism, or biased reporting may lead to deviations from the principles of accuracy and objectivity. Moreover, participants shared concerns about the impact of such practices on the overall credibility of journalism. This theme reflects the complex realities of field reporting, where journalists may face challenges in upholding media values amidst the pressure to provide rapid and attention-grabbing news coverage.

The influence of external factors, such as institutional policies, audience preferences, and the rush to be the first to report, on the extent to which media values are followed in field reporting. Participants acknowledged that these factors could sometimes lead to compromises in upholding journalistic ethics.

This theme highlights the influence of external factors on the extent to which media values are followed in field reporting. Participants mentioned institutional policies and the pursuit of TV glamour as factors that could potentially compromise media values. Additionally, the rush to break news first and cater to specific audience preferences can sometimes lead to ethical compromises. This theme emphasizes the need for media organizations and journalists to reflect on how external pressures may influence their commitment to upholding journalistic ethics in the field.

Amidst the challenges and external pressures, participants demonstrated a collective commitment to upholding media values in field reporting. Many participants highlighted their efforts to prioritize accuracy, fairness, and impartiality, even in demanding situations. They expressed a dedication to maintaining the public's trust and providing reliable and transparent news coverage. This theme underscores the resilience and professional integrity of journalists who strive to adhere to media values despite the complexities of field reporting.

Enhancing Media Ethics through Training for Regional Journalists

This theme highlights the participants' observations that media organizations, particularly in the case of regional journalists, often do not provide sufficient training on media values. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of focus on ethical reporting and the potential negative consequences of insufficient training.

They pointed out that this lack of training might contribute to the neglect of media values and ethical reporting in regional journalism. This theme raises concerns about the potential repercussions of insufficient training, which may lead to unprofessional practices and undermine the credibility of media outlets. The differences in training practices among media organizations. While some participants reported that their organizations prioritize providing extensive training on media values and ethics, others noted that such training is lacking or not given due importance. The responses revealed disparities in training practices among media organizations. Some participants acknowledged that their organizations are proactive in providing extensive training on media values and ethics to their journalists, ensuring they understand their role in shaping public opinion and upholding responsible journalism. However, others shared experiences where training in media values is not emphasized, leaving regional journalists without proper guidance in their reporting. This theme highlights the need for consistent and standardized training practices across the media industry.

Within this theme, participants who receive regular training on media values and ethics expressed its importance in guiding their reporting practices. They emphasized the significance of understanding the impact of their reporting on society and the role of responsible journalism in shaping public opinion.

Perspectives and Practices of media ethics and codes of conduct among Media Organizations

This theme highlights the observations made by some participants that media organizations generally do not place much emphasis on the implementation of media values by regional journalists. There is a perception that commercial interests and revenue generation often take precedence over ethical considerations, leading to a lack of focus on media values. Several participants expressed concerns about the lack of emphasis placed on media values by media organizations, particularly when it comes to regional journalism. This lack of emphasis may be due to a focus on commercial interests and revenue generation, which can lead to neglecting ethical considerations. This theme raises important questions about the priorities of media organizations and their commitment to upholding media values.

This theme revolves around the diversity of approaches among media organizations regarding the implementation of media values. Some participants reported that certain media organizations prioritize and insist on adherence to media values, providing clear guidelines and training to regional journalists. On the other hand, other participants observed that media organizations do not actively enforce media values and may not have strict policies in place. The responses revealed a varied approach among media organizations concerning the implementation of media values. While some organizations take a proactive stance and insist on adherence to media values, others may not have strict policies or guidelines in place. This theme highlights the need for greater consistency and standardization in media organizations' approach to ensuring ethical journalism among regional journalists.

Navigating Ethical Challenges in Media

This theme highlights the challenges faced by journalists in adhering to media values due to external pressures and commercial interests. Participants mentioned issues like editorial interference, management hierarchy, and the influence of advertisers or stakeholders, which can compromise the objectivity and independence of journalism. The participants identified external pressures and commercial interests as significant challenges in following media values. Journalists may encounter editorial interference or directives that go against their ethical principles, compromising their commitment to media values. The influence of advertisers or stakeholders can also affect the presentation of news, leading to biased reporting or the prioritization of profit over journalistic integrity. These challenges underscore the importance of maintaining editorial independence and upholding media values in the face of external pressures.

This theme focuses on the ethical challenges journalists encounter in following media values, such as balancing the public's right to know with privacy concerns, protecting sources, and navigating the complexities of new digital platforms. Participants discussed how rapid technological advancements and the proliferation of manipulated content pose challenges in verifying information and maintaining accuracy. The participants acknowledged the ethical dilemmas journalists face in adhering to media values. Balancing the public's right to know with privacy concerns and the responsibility to protect sources can create complex situations that require careful consideration and ethical decision-making. Additionally, the rise of technology, deep fakes, and manipulated content poses challenges in verifying information and maintaining accuracy in reporting. These challenges call for continuous learning and adaptation to stay ahead of emerging ethical complexities.

External pressures and commercial interests can compromise editorial independence and objectivity, requiring journalists to stand firm in upholding media values. Ethical dilemmas arise from the need to balance the public's right to know with privacy concerns and protect sources while navigating the complexities of a rapidly evolving media landscape. Resource constraints and declining public trust pose additional hurdles for journalists in delivering comprehensive and reliable news. Despite these challenges, journalists play a crucial role in upholding media values to ensure accurate, fair, and responsible reporting, and continuous adaptation and commitment are necessary to navigate the dynamic media landscape while maintaining journalistic integrity.

Promoting Media Values: Encouragement, Role, and Commitment

This theme highlights the perception among some participants that media organizations do not provide adequate encouragement for following media values. Some participants expressed the view that media organizations prioritize sensationalism and commercial interests over upholding media values, leading to a lack of encouragement for ethical journalism practices. The analysis of this theme reveals that some participants perceive media organizations to provide limited encouragement for following media values. There is a concern that media organizations prioritize sensationalism and revenue generation over adhering to media values. This perception may stem from the observation that TV channels often focus on sensational news to attract viewership, while newspapers, with more limited space, may adhere to media values to some extent. The lack of encouragement may lead to a sense of disillusionment among journalists, influencing their motivation to prioritize media values in their reporting.

This theme focuses on the positive role media organizations play in promoting media values. Participants pointed out that media organizations establish codes of ethics, provide training and resources, and foster a culture of accountability and integrity. They collaborate with industry associations and regulatory bodies to advocate for media values and engage in self-regulation to address concerns and complaints. The analysis of this theme shows that media organizations play a significant role in promoting media values. They establish codes of ethics and provide training and resources to journalists, emphasizing the importance of adhering to media values in their work. Media organizations prioritize news stories that align with media values, focusing on issues of public interest and presenting multiple perspectives. They collaborate with industry associations and regulatory bodies to advocate for media values and participate in initiatives to enhance media accountability and transparency. The presence of ombudsman or public editor positions further demonstrates the commitment to accountability and addressing concerns from the audience.

Documented Code of Conduct in Media Accountability and Implementation

This theme highlights whether media organizations issue a written code of conduct for their regional representatives. Some participants mentioned specific media organizations that have a documented code of conduct, while others were unsure or unaware of any formal code being issued. The analysis of this theme reveals that while some participants are uncertain about the presence of a written code of conduct for regional representatives, others mentioned specific media organizations that do have such documentation. The media organizations cited include prominent newspapers and news channels in Pakistan, such as Dawn Media Group, Jang Media Group, Geo TV, Express Media Group, ARY News, Dunya News, The Nation, The Express Tribune, The News International, Samaa TV, Daily Pakistan, Business Recorder, Pakistan Today, and

Daily Jahan Pakistan. These media organizations emphasize the importance of adhering to ethical standards, responsible reporting, fact checking, and maintaining integrity in their code of conduct for regional representatives.

The analysis of this theme shows that some participants questioned the effectiveness of having a formal code of conduct if it is not accompanied by accountability and implementation. They raised concerns about whether regional representatives are held accountable for following the code and if there are consequences for violations. The presence of a written code of conduct alone may not guarantee adherence to media values if it is not enforced consistently and transparently. Some participants highlighted that media organizations should not only issue a code of conduct but also actively monitor and ensure its implementation.

The analysis of the themes indicates that while some media organizations in Pakistan have a written code of conduct for their regional representatives, there are concerns about the accountability and implementation of these guidelines. However, to strengthen the adherence to media values, media organizations must ensure that the code is effectively communicated to regional representatives, and there are mechanisms in place to monitor and enforce compliance. Accountability measures should be transparent and consistent to foster a culture of responsible reporting and journalistic integrity.

Ethical Challenges in Social Media Journalism

This theme explores how the democratization of news production through social media blurs the distinction between professional journalism and user-generated content, potentially affecting objectivity and impartiality. The analysis of this theme highlights how the democratization of news production through social media challenges the objectivity and impartiality of journalists. With social media platforms allowing anyone to become a content creator and share news, the line between professional journalism and user-generated content becomes blurred. This presents a challenge for audiences in distinguishing between reliable, fact-checked news and unverified information shared by individuals without journalistic training or ethical standards.

This theme delves into the impact of social media algorithms on creating filter bubbles, where users are exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, potentially affecting the objectivity and diversity of information encountered by journalists. This can potentially impact objectivity as journalists may be less likely to encounter contrasting perspectives and diverse voices.

This theme examines the pressures faced by journalists on social media, including the need for quick reporting, maintaining a strong personal brand, and gaining engagement metrics, which can create conflicts of interest and influence objectivity.

This theme explores the challenges journalists face in verifying information from social media sources, such as user-generated content, anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The analysis of this theme examines the challenges journalists face in verifying information from social media sources.

Additionally, the widespread use of anonymous or pseudonymous accounts on social media introduces challenges to objectivity. Journalists may encounter information or sources that are difficult to verify or assess for credibility due to the anonymity of the

individuals involved. The spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media further complicates the verification process, requiring journalists to exercise rigorous fact-checking methods to ensure the accuracy of the information they report.

Conclusion

The rise of social media has revolutionized the landscape of journalism, presenting both opportunities and challenges for media professionals. This discussion explores the ethical challenges faced by journalists in the realm of social media journalism.

Social media platforms have democratized news production, allowing ordinary individuals to become content creators and share news events in real-time. While this opens doors for diverse perspectives, it blurs the line between professional journalism and user-generated content. The lack of gatekeepers and editorial oversight can compromise the quality and accuracy of information disseminated through social media. In this context, journalists face ethical dilemmas in identifying credible sources and verifying information. User-generated content may lack context and proper fact checking, leading to the potential spread of misinformation and disinformation. Striking a balance between authentic journalism and citizen reporting is crucial to maintain the profession's integrity and uphold media values.

Social media platforms use algorithms to curate content based on user preferences and behaviors. While this enhances user experience, it can also contribute to the creation of filter bubbles, limiting users' exposure to diverse viewpoints. Journalists, in turn, face challenges in reaching broad audiences and ensuring their reporting is not confined within echo chambers. The influence of algorithms can lead to the prioritization of sensationalism and click bait content to boost engagement metrics. This presents ethical concerns, as journalists may feel compelled to produce content that caters to algorithms rather than serving the public interest. Striving for ethical reporting that breaks through filter bubbles and embraces diverse perspectives becomes imperative to counter the effects of algorithmic curation.

Social media's fast-paced nature demands immediacy and real-time reporting. Journalists are under constant pressure to break news quickly, potentially compromising fact checking and verification processes. In this rush, ethical considerations such as accuracy, fairness, and balance might be sacrificed, leading to the spread of unverified information. Moreover, the growing influence of influencers and opinion leaders on social media introduces conflicts of interest for journalists. The pursuit of gaining popularity and maintaining a strong social media presence can overshadow journalistic objectivity. Balancing personal brand building with responsible journalism requires strong ethical judgment.

Verifying information from social media sources poses significant ethical challenges for journalists. User-generated content lacks editorial scrutiny and may be manipulated or staged. Journalists must adopt rigorous fact-checking measures and corroborate information from multiple sources to ensure responsible reporting. The anonymity prevalent on social media also adds complexity to the verification process. Journalists may encounter anonymous sources whose credibility is challenging to ascertain. Striving for transparency and accountability in reporting becomes essential to combat the spread of misinformation and maintain public trust.

Social media's influencer culture and the quest for viral content can lead to sensationalism and the prioritization of click bait headlines. Journalists may face ethical dilemmas in balancing responsible reporting with the pursuit of popularity and virility. The amplification of extremist or fringe voices through viral content challenges journalists' ethical responsibility not to provide undue platform and visibility to harmful ideologies. Prioritizing ethical guidelines over the pressure for online popularity is vital for safeguarding the credibility of journalism.

At the grass-roots level, Pakistani journalism is going through a difficult period. Journalists in South Punjab are suffering major financial difficulties. Financial difficulties, no or low pay. These are just a few of the problems: TA/DA, no actively pay, no pension, no registration system, no license system, no facilities, no residence, no criteria for journalism, bureau chief hegemony, family journalism, industrialists as owners, political pressures, marketing pressures, and rating pressures. These worries are resulting in 'lifafa journalism,' 'dehari journalism,' 'toutism,' 'yellow journalism,' 'concealing the truth,' 'sensationalism,' 'invading privacy,' 'non-professionalism,' 'blackmailing,' and bribery in the media. In order to resolve this terrifying scenario, the government, judiciary, and media should all play a proactive and effective role.

Recommendations

On the basis of the results of the current research following recommendations were made

- Media outlets must equip their journalists through relevant trainings so that they know the dos and don'ts of their jobs before entering the field.
- The wages of journalists should be increased so that they feel a sense of contentment and motivation for work.
- Journalists should be trained and informed about the use of technology and its hazards.
- Media organizations must develop strict policies regarding adherence to the journalistic codes of conduct developed by various organizations.

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