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Journalism ethics in a digital environment: How journalistic codes of ethics have been adapted to the Internet and ICTs in countries around the world

Jesús Díaz-Campo *, Francisco Segado-Boj

Facultad de Comunicación y Empresa, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR), Gran Vía Rey Juan Carlos I, 26002, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Journalism is facing new ethical issues because of the emergence of the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In this article, we examine how journalistic codes of ethics have been updated to address this new reality. Three research questions are explored through a systematic analysis of 99 codes from around the world. Results show that, of the 99 codes analyzed, only 9 include references to the Internet and ICTs. We conclude with proposals for changes in the codes that would help journalists resolve these new moral issues.

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1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), in general, and the Internet, in particular, have created a fourth kind of journalism in addition to print, radio, and television journalism—the so-called cyber journalism, digital journalism, or online journalism. This new digital environment sets up a number of ethical dilemmas for journalists. While digital journalists still face the same dilemmas that journalists—and the journalism profession—did previously, they now have some new ethical conflicts, as well.

The journalism process itself has changed radically, and we are in the middle of a changing media landscape (White, 2008). We speak of a bidirectional process in which everyone may take part in producing and presenting the news. In other words, every individual becomes a potential publisher. This is only one of the several—and major—transformations that have taken place in journalism in recent years. Interactivity, hypertextuality, the use of multimedia, and immediacy are some of the main features of digital journalism, and each of these, of course, raises its own new ethical issues.

As Evers (2001, 38) asks, "*To what extent is a site owner legally or morally responsible for what is being posted?*" This question includes articles and extends to anonymous comments. Is the site also responsible for links leading to offensive content? There are other new moral issues, as well, related to intellectual property, digital manipulation and the process of gathering news and contrasting sources, for example, that stem from the use of multimedia and the need for immediacy.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 941210211.
E-mail addresses: jesus.diaz@unir.net (J. Díaz-Campo), francisco.segado@unir.net (F. Segado-Boj).

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Hence, the main question could be formulated as follows: are the current codes of ethics in journalism valid for the Internet, too? While there is agreement that the Internet has changed journalism, there is no consensus on the impact such changes have had (Friend and Singer, 2007). Consequently, responses to this question reveal two opposing points of view.

On the one hand, there are those who remember Belsey and Chadwick's statement (1994) that ethics and journalism are inseparable. They would argue that the existing ethical guidelines are equally effective for the new media. In other words, ethics is ethics—whether applied to the new journalism or the old.

On the other hand, although the essence of journalism remains basically unchanged, it is obvious that the Internet "*shapes and redefines a number of moral and ethical issues confronting journalists when operating online or making use of online resources*," as Deuze and Yeshua (2001, 276) have stated.

There seems to be consensus that Deuze and Yeshua's statement is the most accurate. Many authors (Cooper, 1998; Ess, 2009; Evers, 2001; Demir, 2011; García Capilla, 2012; Pavlik, 2001; Suárez Villegas, 2015; Ward and Wasserman, 2010; Whitehouse, 2010, among others) have pointed out that new media calls for new ethics because the issues online journalists are confronting are different from those that traditional journalists face. Thus, as Hayes et al. (2007, 275) remark, in the digital environment, "*old assumptions about journalistic roles and values can no longer be accepted uncritically nor old approaches to them continued indefinitely*." In other words, new ethical issues require new ethical rules—or traditional ethical standards must be reformulated, at least.

Journalists have met these challenges through self-regulation which, according to Evers (2001, 46), is "*the only way to create online standards and to control the observation of moral rules*." Following Aznar (2005, 13–14), the characteristics of this modality of regulation are (1) that its objective is to make effective use of or contribute to a particular activity's deontology, and (2) that it is created and sustained by the same agents who engage in that activity.

This second characteristic which distinguishes self-regulation from legal regulation and, according to Mijatovic (2013, 5), represents one of its advantages in establishing rules of conduct for digital journalism: "*self-regulation appears to be a solution to increase online accountability while offering more flexibility than state regulation*."

Self-regulation is evidenced through a number of mechanisms, among which are deontological codes—i.e., documents that define the minimal expectations of moral activity, the ideal standards of conduct, and the accepted conventions of behavior (Elliott-Boyle, 1985).

The codes set forth the principles that journalists, in keeping with their ethical conscience, must abide by as they carry out their work. As Bertrand (2000) remarks, journalists around the world have found that, because the codes evidence a willingness to engage in self-regulation, they are an effective weapon against the threat of state intervention.

Even though the codes have sparked controversy on some occasions, a majority of academics and communications professionals still advocate for them because they are highly effective (Heinonen, 2004).

Twenty years ago, Tina Laitila (1995) analyzed 30 journalistic codes of conduct in Europe, observing that most of them (21) had been adopted or revised in the 1990s. Laitila claims that the introduction of ICT—in addition to political changes, such as the fall of the Berlin wall and the European integration process—was one of the main reasons the debate about journalistic ethics was rekindled during those years.

Given the huge impact the Internet has had on the work of journalists, it would be interesting to know whether a similar debate has again surfaced and whether the emergence of digital journalism has translated to new ethical guidelines. Let us remember that, in terms of ethics, journalism has been among the most dubious professions in recent years. According to Mamonova (2013), most European press councils are actively involved with the Internet as well as print, radio, and television journalism.

In this context, a working group organized in the United States by ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors) and the Poynter Institute drew up a new code of ethics in 1997 (Mann, 1998) in an attempt to adapt self-regulation mechanisms and, more specifically, journalistic codes of ethics to that new reality. Their document addresses the following issues:

1. Reliability of online content.
2. Usage of database information.
3. Linking.
4. Editorial control of potentially hurtful or harmful content.
5. Journalistic integrity and commercial pressure.

The next question, then, would be: to what extent has the content of deontological codes around the world been adapted to the new digital scenario? This is a concern that has been explored extensively with a focus on certain scenarios—for example, in the United States (Whitehouse, 2010), the Netherlands (Deuze and Yeshua, 2001), and Spain (Ruiz et al., 2007)—as well as in comparative studies of two countries (Micó et al., 2008). Until now, however, there has been no research of a global nature on this question. In contrast, in-depth studies on the current status and transformation of press councils have increased since the appearance of the Internet (Eberwein et al., 2011; Hulin and Stone, 2013).

Of all the research done on codes so far, probably the most ambitious is that of González Esteban et al. (2011), which was conducted in Austria, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, France, and Poland. It examined other mechanisms, as well, such as press councils and the role of the ombudsman. This research concluded that most of these countries lack any type of self-regulation mechanism for online journalism, in general, and all the initiatives that have appeared were spurred by individual media outlets.

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