

Chapter 8

Ethical Pitfalls in the Digital Age: When the Desire to “Serve Hot” Gets in the Way of Verification

Tendai Chari
University of Venda, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Using the case study approach, this chapter examines ethical shortfalls confronting the media in the Internet era. The one case is drawn from a story published in The New York Times in 2015, while the other is a story published in a Zimbabwean newspaper, the Daily News. The objective was to broaden knowledge on how the Internet is impacting ethical practices in local and global political environments. The chapter argues that the Internet’s architecture predisposes journalists to a host of unethical practices that were uncommon to the legacy media environment. Its immediacy exerts pressure on journalists to publish stories without adequate verification out of the fear of being “scooped” by competitors and citizen journalists who are less constrained to adhere to old-age journalistic ethics such as factual reporting and verification.

INTRODUCTION

There is no technological innovation that has had a contradictory impact on journalism practice more than the Internet. On the one hand, the medium has been an enabler of journalism practice, unlocking new opportunities for practitioners. On the other hand, it is viewed as a bane for journalism, inviting in its wake a plethora of ethical pitfalls linked to its ability to ‘instantly distribute highly searchable information without space restrictions...’ (Mendoza, 2012). This chapter examines the impact of the Internet on journalism ethics in order gain deeper insights on the transformative impacts of new communication technologies on journalism practice. Empirical data were drawn from two review cases illustrative of the adverse impact of the Internet on journalism ethics in local and global environments.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8359-2.ch008

Previous studies tend to romanticise the role of the Internet on journalism practice, foregrounding the Internet as an enabler of journalism (Berger, 1996, 2005; Moyo, 2007, 2009; Mudhai et al, 2009; Lee, 2012), while overlooking its negative impacts. This has tended to mask the Internet's negative impact on ethical practices. Klein and Kleinman (2002, 38) rightly assert that that different social groups interpret technologies differently and seek to shape them differently as well. Mabweazara (2010, 1) concurs when he states that new media technologies should be viewed as "embedded in in existing social, cultural and political and economic networks in which journalism is entrenched".

Although the social constructivist perspective accentuates social agency in the use of new communication technologies (see Mabweazara, 2010, 2011; Lee, 2015) debates have not broadened to encompass the negative effects of the Internet on journalism practice. As a result, there is a lacuna on threats posed by the Internet on journalism practice. This chapter fills this gap through an exploration of two review cases in which the Internet's architecture, could be directly or indirectly implicated in aiding unethical practices. The first case is the *Daily News* (Zimbabwe)'s publication of a fictitious story claiming that a woman had been beheaded by ruling Zanu PF supporters in front of her daughters. The second is a story published by the *New York Times's* East African Bureau Chief, Jeffrey Gentleman in December 2015, alleging that Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe had called Kenyans "thieves". These two stories, about separate incidents separated by more than a decade are illustrative of the Internet's negative impact on ethical journalism. The two case studies mentioned above are used as illuminating rods to shed light on how the Internet is negatively impacting on journalism ethics.

The rest of the chapter is divided into five parts. The first part is a discussion of the theoretical framework which underpins this article, namely the concept of global media ethics. It critically reviews the debate on global media ethics in order to situate the present study in a context. The second part discusses the methodological design and outlines the research questions. The third part gives a synopsis of the two 'case reports' (Zucker, 2009) which are the focus of this article, namely the *Daily News* (Zimbabwe) and the *New York Times* story referred to above. In the fourth part the two case reports are discussed through the prism of the global media theoretical framework. Part five, which is the final part of the paper is the conclusion and is a critical reflection of the chapter's findings and their implications on journalism practice in local and global political environments.

GLOBAL MEDIA ETHICS AND EMERGING NORMATIVE ETHICS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"Ethics" is a slippery term which suffers from semantic entropy. However, the term generally relates to whether actions are either right or wrong. "Media ethics", thus, connotes wrong or right in media practice. Ward (2008, 139) defines media ethics as a type of applied ethics which entail the analysis of media practice and "the application of its principles to situations and issues". Since what is right or wrong depends on the cultural and political context in which journalism is practiced, it is difficult to pin down what is ethical or unethical behaviour by the media. Media ethics are not static but forever evolving, implying that they are bound to be change as contextual factors change. In the Internet age journalism ethics are being redefined in an irrevocable way (Ward, n.d.; Lasica, 1997; Arant, 2000; 2003; Friend, and Singer, 2007; Ess, 2009; Ward, 2010; Berman and Shumway, 2003). How journalists should navigate the rugged ethical terrain in the digital age is a more of a conundrum. It is however incontrovertible that the Internet has enabled the media to have a global reach, thereby rendering geographical boundaries

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/ethical-pitfalls-in-the-digital-age/226670

Related Content

CSR as a Strategic Management Tool: Expectations and Realities of Two MNCs in Nigeria

Edwin M. Agwuand Agnes R. Taylor (2015). *Human Rights and Ethics: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 795-811).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/csr-as-a-strategic-management-tool/117062

Integrating Semi-Open Data in a Criminal Judicial Setting

Mortaza S. Bargh, Sunil Choenniand Ronald F. Meijer (2017). *Achieving Open Justice through Citizen Participation and Transparency* (pp. 137-156).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/integrating-semi-open-data-in-a-criminal-judicial-setting/162839

Informing About CSR Initiatives on the Corporate Website or Staying Invisible?: SMEs in Controversial and Non-Controversial Industries

Andrea Mangani (2021). *International Journal of Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Corporate Social Responsibility* (pp. 48-63).

www.irma-international.org/article/informing-about-csr-initiatives-on-the-corporate-website-or-staying-invisible/270472

Ethical Aspects of Information-Based Medicine (With a Focus on Mental Health)

Jan Kalinaand Nicole Tobišková (2022). *Ethical Implications of Reshaping Healthcare With Emerging Technologies* (pp. 42-70).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/ethical-aspects-of-information-based-medicine-with-a-focus-on-mental-health/289719

Poverty Reduction, Wealth Creation, and Tourism in Ethnic Minority Communities in Mainland Southeast Asia

Scott Hipsher (2017). *International Journal of Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Corporate Social Responsibility* (pp. 39-53).

www.irma-international.org/article/poverty-reduction-wealth-creation-and-tourism-in-ethnic-minority-communities-in-mainland-southeast-asia/203608