



**DIGITAL
JOURNALISM
AND THE NEED
TO REDEFINE
ETHICAL
CODES**

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies revolutionized journalism and the way media outlets work. At the same time, they influenced a change in the audience's habits, which migrated from traditional media to Internet platforms. Digital journalism, online newsrooms, portals, social networks, and other Internet platforms have led to a situation in which the news spread incredibly quickly. In a situation in which every citizen can now publish information and photos, join live from any point on the planet, and local media outlets can publish globally attractive news and topics, traditional journalism and traditional media outlets are facing enormous pressure. First of all, they should adapt their operations to the new circumstances and speed up the process of verification of information, photos, and other content. Faced with the need to catch up with that speed, there is a danger of an increase in negative phenomena, such as fake news, manipulations, and spins, which not only go against the universal ethical norms but can also have a devastating effect on the reputation of the media outlets. In the existing circumstances, it is necessary to answer the following question – what are the biggest challenges in terms of compliance with the universal ethical norms in digital journalism, and whether there is a need for revision and upgrade of the existing ethical codes. In that context is the question of whether the ethical codes of the Western Balkan countries follow the trends of the countries that lead in terms of media outlets' freedom. A comparison was therefore made of the codes of ethics of the five countries that have the leading positions according to the Media Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders that encompassed the codes of ethics of the five Western Balkan countries.

Keywords: ethics, digital journalism, digitization, media, journalists.

1. WHAT IS DIGITAL JOURNALISM

The simplest definition of digital journalism is the use of technology to tell stories and disseminate information in the fastest possible way, by focusing on the audience in a marketable manner (Perreault G., Ferrucci P., 2020). Digital journalism is the vanguard of modern reporting, a blend of traditional journalistic principles and cutting-edge technology, a modern response to the evolving demands of a connected society.

It requires possessing a unique set of skills: strong writing and reporting skills, the inclusion of multimedia elements, that is, journalists need to know how to create these elements and include them in their stories, the ability to analyze and interpret data, digital literacy, knowledge of the ways of optimization i.e. how to improve the visibility and reach of their content, social media management and reporting skills, recording, editing and sharing content using mobile phones, audience engagement skills, content management systems, basic knowledge of coding, scalability, collaboration in multidisciplinary teams, networking, and project management.

The most intensive changes in journalism since the introduction of digital technologies revolve around the main characteristics of “network” journalism i.e. hypertextuality, multimedia, and interactivity (Lopez-Garcia X., Garcia-Orosa B., 2023).

The interactivity in this process implies that the users can discern their choice, but also the possibility for participation. As a consequence, critical questions are raised about the role of journalism and the journalist when the user can choose what to see, from which point of view, and even collaborate in the creation process. That is why the boundaries are blurred about who is the creator and who is the recipient of the information, but the same also goes for the authority in journalism. The production process of the interactive journalistic narrative is highly technological and requires specialized knowledge of journalism and design. It requires producers to consider how audience engagement and user activity fit into the story (Herrero J., Van der Nat R., 2023).

The audience is no longer a mass of passive recipients of information, but an assemblage of active participants who are called upon to construct meaning through interaction.

The latest research talks about how the habits of citizens are changing regarding media outlets and the platforms on which they prefer to follow the news, be informed, and “networked”. Social media has changed the way news is created and distributed, and users themselves participate in the sharing and transmission of content. The importance of the topic is also indicated by the fact that 4.95 billion people use social media, which is twice as much as in 2015. The average social media user is involved in an average of 6.7 different media platforms. The average time a user spends on social media per day is 2 hours and 24 minutes. Facebook is the leading social network with 3.03 billion active users, followed by YouTube (2.49 billion), WhatsApp and Instagram with 2 billion.

The importance of the daily use of mobile devices was difficult to predict. Many social practices have changed and it is expected that they will continue to change. Those changes include the ways where and what kind of news we consume through mobile devices, but also the challenges in changing the media landscape and the new skills and knowledge that should be part of the journalism student programs (Silva-Rodriguez A., Vaage Oie K., 2023).

2. ETHICS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

The ethics in digital media outlets is about various ethical issues, practices, and norms in online journalism, blogging, digital photojournalism, citizen journalism, and social media. It includes questions about how professional journalism should use these “new media outlets” in order to research and publish stories, but also how to use text and photos provided by citizens.

Ethical journalism implies journalism that is accurate and fair, and that journalists are honest and courageous in the process of gathering, reporting, and interpreting information. We can list some broadly agreed ethical principles and professional standards: truth and accuracy, independence, impartiality, and fairness, the principle of minimizing harm, i.e. acting in the public interest, respect for the right to privacy, responsibility, and correction when errors are discovered.

Ethics remains a category that is determined by human will and activity, however, technology has the peculiarity of amplifying the effects of human behavior and ethical behavior. The degree of media and political culture has a great influence on what changes new technologies cause. Those are an influx of disinformation and fake news, publication of unverified information, rumors and speculations, amplification of hate speech and discrimination, manipulative visual content, violations of privacy, disregard of copyright, and abuses of anonymity (Dzidal, 2018).

Accuracy, fairness, and accountability remain fundamental and these values are non-negotiable, regardless of the medium outlet or technology through which journalism is delivered. The future of journalism may be digital, but these principles will continue to guide the profession ensuring society remains well-informed. Some theorists believe that ethics in journalism must be seen in the context of culture, technology, and history. Journalists and scholars largely view journalistic codes and principles as something that transcends time and space, but ethics in newsrooms is closely tied to the culture in which they are developed and the technology used for their production.

Ethical principles do not become obsolete, but, in times of rapid changes related to technological development that have inevitably influenced and continue to influence journalism and the way media newsrooms work, they need to be relevant and applicable. In a world where technology is rapidly developing, the importance of ethics needs to be reintroduced as a concept. Due to the emergence of several new problems in public information, there is a need to supplement the rules for the ethical and professional work of the media (Dzidal, 2018).

In the last few years, the biggest challenge for digital journalism is the use of generative artificial intelligence in the creation of journalistic content. Larger media organizations have drawn up or are in the process of drawing up rules and guidelines on how artificial intelligence tools can be used in the daily work of their newsrooms.

In November 2023, the international organization Reporters Without Borders and 16 partner organizations published the Paris Charter on Artificial Intelligence and Journalism, which defines the ethics and principles that journalists, newsrooms, and media around the world should follow and apply in their work with artificial intelligence. In response to the turmoil that artificial intelligence has created in journalism, the Charter defines ten principles for preserving the integrity of information and preserving the social role of journalists. The most important principles are that ethics must govern technological choices in the media outlets, that the human (human agency) remains central to editorial decisions, and that the media outlets must help society confidently discern between authentic and synthetic content.

There is research (Cools H., Diakopoulos N., 2023) that suggests that, when developing or updating guidelines related to the use of generative artificial intelligence, it would be worthwhile to review the existing codes of conduct and journalistic principles as a basis for thinking about

whether those principles can be respected in the face of change driven by generative artificial intelligence. For example, how the use of artificial intelligence will affect the normative commitment to journalistic independence. The use of artificial intelligence in journalism assumes many ethical challenges, especially in terms of the potential for algorithmic bias and the lack of transparency in the decision-making process when artificial intelligence is used. The pitfalls mentioned about algorithms powering AI systems can reinforce existing societal biases leading to disinformation, discrimination, and harm to marginalized communities (Somorin K., Ademola OE, 2024).

Following the explosion of generative artificial intelligence at the beginning of 2023, a small number of newsrooms have published ethical guidelines regarding its application in journalism and newsrooms. Most of them focus on issues related to human supervision of published content, transparency regarding the synthetic or human origin of published content, limitations placed on journalists for use of artificial intelligence, the need not to disclose private information on artificial intelligence platforms, the claim of human responsibility for any published content, the risk of bias built into generative artificial intelligence tools.

3. ETHICAL CODES AND DIGITAL JOURNALISM

In order to identify the main ethical challenges in digital journalism and to find out whether there is a need to update the existing ethical codes considering the changed circumstances in which journalism works, we compared the ethical codes of five countries in the Western Balkans region that hold the five leading positions of the annual (2024) Media Freedom Index of the international organization Reporters Without Borders.

The purpose of the World Media Freedom Index is to compare the level of freedom enjoyed by journalists and media outlets in 180 countries. The definition of media freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders and their panel of experts, is: “the ability of journalists, individually or collectively, to select, produce and disseminate news in the public interest, independent of political, economic, legal and social influences and the absence of threats for their physical and mental safety.” The questionnaire and the map resulting from the research of this international organization are based on five different categories of indicators: political context, legal framework, economic, social and cultural context, and security.

In the latest research, the five countries at the top of the list are from Europe: Norway (1st place), Denmark (2nd), Sweden (3rd), Netherlands (4th) and Finland (5th). In terms of Western Balkan countries, the ethical codes of North Macedonia (36), Montenegro (40), Bosnia and Herzegovina (81), Serbia (98) and Albania (99) are analyzed.

The very title of the Code of Ethics for journalists in Norway says that is intended for all journalists – from print media outlets, radio and television to Internet media. In terms of recommendations related to digital journalism, a danger is stated that some posts and links may lead to other electronic media that do not comply with the Code of Ethics, therefore links towards other media outlets should be clearly marked. It is considered good press behavior to inform the users of interactive services about how the publication registers you and further uses your use of the services. If the editorial office decides not to arrange communication via digital channels, that should be said clearly. The editors have a special responsibility to remove the parts that do not comply with the Code of Ethics.

The Code of Ethics for journalists from Denmark and the Law on Responsibility of Media Outlets in that country include no specific items that refer to additional ethical rules concerning digital journalism. The Swedish Code of Ethics of journalists also does not include special provisions that refer to the work of digital media, however, the media ethics system includes a media ombudsman which is an independent self-disciplinary body, which acts on complaints about the editorial content of newspapers, magazines, broadcast media and their websites and the social media. The media ombudsman is an investigative body in the process and acts on complaints from individuals who feel unfairly treated by the media. The Swedish media self-regulation system is not based on legislation – it is entirely voluntary and is funded by four journalistic organizations and four broadcasting companies. These organizations and companies are responsible for drafting the Code of Ethics for the press, radio, and television outlets in Sweden. The guidelines of the Press Council of the Netherlands state that the basic task is to provide a framework for self-regulation based on the instructions that describe the requirements that journalism has to meet.

The recommendations in Finland's Code of Ethics apply to all forms of journalistic work. Concerning journalistic content published on the Internet, this Code, which is intended for Finnish journalists, clearly includes an item that says that "it is not enough just to remove the incorrect information or caption, but the public must be told about the error, and how and when the correction was made." In October 2011, an annex to the guidelines was adopted, which is binding and refers to content generated by the public on Internet websites maintained by media outlets. In terms of the comments related to the content published on the Internet pages, the editors or operators should use filters to prevent the publication of offensive language and inappropriate content. The editors should have prepared rules in case of comments that include hate speech and offensive content and a way to select and remove those comments. A clear boundary should exist on the media websites between forums intended for the public and editorial content.

In some ethical codes of the Western Balkan countries, there are also special provisions that refer to the work of digital journalism. Some of them have adopted guidelines for this issue towards the ethical codes that apply only to digital media.

The code of journalists of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia includes no special provisions relating to digital journalism. An initiative for the adoption of a new Code of Ethics has been launched in the country and this project is being implemented by the Association of Journalists, the Council for Ethics in the Media, and the Macedonian Institute for Media. In 2021, the Council for Ethics in the Media in Macedonia adopted guidelines for ethical reporting of online media, i.e. implementation of the code of journalists in the online area.

The Montenegrin code of journalists includes provisions that refer to digital journalism. For example, when journalists use information obtained from social networks, weblogs, and other online sources, there is a special need for stronger verification of facts, photos, and other references. For online media outlets, the need to define internal rules related to third-party comments is specifically stated, and the goal is to avoid illegal and unethical content.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Press and Online Media Outlets Code is derived from the existing European standards of journalistic practice and aims to lay the foundations of a system of self-regulation in the press and online media that is considered morally binding for journalists and editors, owners and publishers of printed and online media outlets.

The code of journalists of Serbia includes provisions that refer to digital media outlets. For example, downloading photos from the Internet is listed as a serious violation of the code in the copyright section. There is a special item regarding comments on texts published on the Internet portals. In this case, there is a "Self-regulatory code of good professional practice in digital publishing in the territory of the Republic of Serbia". The rules are set by the Digital Publishing Council of Online Publishers. In case of deviations from the code, sanctions are prescribed by the

Council of Online Publishers, and the publisher who is the subject of the complaint is exempted from its composition in the given case.

A revised version of the ethical code of journalists of Albania was adopted in 2018 so it could respond to the new forms of journalistic expression created by the Internet. The principles of this code apply to all media and journalistic platforms, both offline and online, including journalistic content disseminated through social media and Internet portals. At the same time, ethical guidelines were published for online media that follow international practices and norms as a continuation of the guidelines of the code towards the new forms of journalistic expression created by the Internet.

The comparison between the ethical codes of the five first-ranked countries on the index and the five countries of the Western Balkan region shows that there is no big difference in their contents. In both cases, there are not many provisions that refer specifically to digital journalism.

Those that can be applied relate to identifying and verifying sources of information, commenting, and language used by the users on Internet portals, including combating hate speech and the manner of keeping and archiving published content. Attention is also paid that some hyperlinks and posts do not lead to Internet websites that are contrary to general ethical norms.

In both cases, there is no revision, i.e. addition of new provisions that refer to the use of artificial intelligence in digital newsrooms. This situation should be considered because the majority of media outlets and media organizations in the world have already drawn up and applied guidelines on how to treat the use of artificial intelligence in the process of creating media content.

In the case of European countries, there is room for some of the ethical issues to be regulated with guidelines for self-regulation, and this is also the case with the countries from the Western Balkans that were analyzed. Some of the codes of European countries mention the regulation of how the interaction with the audience is carried out, and the transparency regarding the use of their personal data, which is not the case with the analyzed Balkan countries. A good signal is the awareness, especially in the Macedonian case, of the need to revise the Code of Ethics, as in the case of Albania.

4. CONCLUSION

The analyzed content shows a conclusion that there is a need to revise the existing ethical codes and update the guidelines so they correspond to the changes that happen with the revolution in the use of technology, but also to the use of artificial intelligence in the process of creating and publishing journalistic content. This does not mean that there is a need to draw up new codes, but to rather upgrade the current ones in the areas that will be affected by the revolutionary change in technology and its application in journalism. Because the use of algorithms and generative artificial intelligence can lead to the uncontrolled spread of prejudice, disinformation, and misinformation, the importance remains that digital journalism must respect all professional ethical norms and basic values and principles of journalism regardless of the platform or the format used.

The way laws and legislation work in the environment in which they exist is also important. The speed with which digital media content is published should in no case happen at the cost of disregarding the ethical rules. Information in the media must be accurate, substantiated, verified, and published without sensationalism, without the intention of harming anyone regardless of the platform through which it is published. They should be inclusive, i.e. include all necessary points of view, independent, and transparent about the methods used. Online media outlets should

bear in mind that sharing content from third parties, without verifying their reliability, can seriously undermine the credibility of journalism and violate intellectual property rights.

The most important challenges for newsrooms, journalists and media workers, and editors lie in the verification of information and news sources and adherence to ethical principles in daily work. Media workers should be constantly reminded of ethical principles, and training should be organized for young journalists before they get involved in professional work in the media outlets.

The change in the way media outlets work and in the habits of the audience, in addition to opening up dilemmas regarding compliance with ethical standards in the creation of journalistic content, also imposes the question of the increasing necessity of introducing the concept of media literacy at all levels in the educational process.

That is why it is very important that the general public, as a user of these contents, be familiar with the possible pitfalls and use that content critically, as well as keep these premises in mind as users of social networks and media.

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