

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS IN MASS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The post-truth era is characterized by the dominance of emotions and subjective opinions over objective facts, blurring the lines between reality and perception. This phenomenon poses serious challenges to journalistic integrity and ethical principles in journalistic work. This study aims to systematically review the scientific literature discussing ethical dilemmas, external pressures, and deviations in journalistic integrity between 2019 and 2024. By applying a systematic review approach and integrating three main theoretical frameworks, this study identifies the dynamics of roles, morality, and information interference that affect the quality of journalists' work. The analysis demonstrates the importance of ethical courage, institutional strengthening, and ongoing ethical literacy as the foundation for maintaining integrity amidst disinformation. This paper also proposes the Triadic Model of Integrity as a framework for further analysis and critical reflection on the realities of contemporary journalistic practice.

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1. Introduction

The post-truth phenomenon has brought about significant and profound changes in the way public communication occurs. In this era, facts and objective truth, previously the primary basis for shaping public opinion, have begun to shift. Instead, emotions, personal beliefs, and subjective opinions often play a dominant role in shaping public perception of an issue. This situation presents a significant challenge for the journalism profession, which has traditionally relied on the principles of truth, accuracy, and objectivity as the primary foundation for reporting and presenting news. Journalists must not only contend with internal pressures from their media institutions, such as traffic targets and editorial policies, but also with various external pressures stemming from political and economic forces, as well as increasingly complex social media algorithms.

In Indonesia, the challenges arising from the post-truth era are increasingly real and complex. Sharp political polarization has divided society into opposing camps, making the mass media often an arena for competing narratives. Furthermore, social media, as a new

public space, has accelerated and expanded the dissemination of information, including unverified information and even hoaxes. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the influx of economic and political interests that seek to exploit the media as a tool for achieving specific goals, often sacrificing journalistic principles and undermining the independence of the newsroom (Setiawan, 2023). Such pressures pose significant risks to the integrity of journalists, who must maintain their professional ideals amidst these temptations and challenges.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term post-truth refers to a situation in which personal feelings and beliefs are considered more influential in shaping public opinion than verifiable, objective facts. This situation creates a fundamental dilemma for journalists, who are professionally obligated to convey the truth accurately and impartially. They must choose between upholding journalistic ideals that uphold ethics and integrity, or adapting to market demands that often prioritize sensation, clicks, and virality. This choice is not just a matter of personal preference, but also closely related to the institutional and social pressures they face daily.

In this context, it is important to reflect on the concept of journalistic integrity as a moral and professional foundation that serves as the primary foundation for journalistic practice. This integrity involves a commitment to honesty, moral courage, and social responsibility that remains unwavering even in the face of external pressure and internal temptations. The critical question that arises is whether journalists are still capable of fulfilling their role as "guardians of truth" amidst the current wave of disinformation and information manipulation. Furthermore, this study attempts to identify the factors that enable some journalists to survive and adhere to the principles of journalistic ethics, while others fall into corrupt practices, compromise their interests, or simply follow market trends for the sake of their careers and livelihoods.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to systematically explore the dynamics of pressures journalists face in the post-truth era and how their integrity is tested and maintained in everyday practice. This approach is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the moral and professional roles of journalists, while also providing strategic recommendations for strengthening their integrity as a key pillar of democracy and guardians of truth in an increasingly complex and challenging society.

Theoretical Framework: An Integrative Approach to Journalist Integrity Analysis

Facing the complex challenges of journalistic practice in the post-truth and disinformation era, this study adopts an integrative approach that combines three key theoretical perspectives as an analytical foundation. This approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of journalistic integrity by examining role performance, the dynamics of moral development, and the context of information disruption that surrounds journalistic work today.

2.1 Performance of the Role of Journalists

Hanitzsch and Vos (2019) argue that the role of journalists reflects the normative values and social expectations inherent in the media profession in a democratic society. They identify three main roles that serve as benchmarks for journalistic function:

- **Watchdog:** In this role, journalists act as checks on public power, tasked with monitoring and critiquing the policies and actions of government institutions and corporations to maintain accountability and transparency. The watchdog role requires the moral courage to report on sensitive issues without pressure or intervention from those in power.
- **Information Provider:** Journalists' function is to convey facts, data, and news accurately, objectively, and neutrally, enabling the public to obtain reliable information

for decision-making. This role emphasizes the principles of truth and accuracy as the primary foundation of media.

- Civic Facilitator: Journalists facilitate public dialogue and citizen participation in socio-political life through reporting that encourages community involvement and the formation of critical opinions.

However, in the context of an integrity crisis, these roles have shifted. The phenomenon of media commercialization and the pressure of digital algorithms often force journalists to pursue sensationalism, prioritize viral content that can ignore ethics, or even become tools for certain political and economic interests (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2019; Setiawan, 2023). This shift creates serious ethical dilemmas and threatens public trust in the media as a democratic institution.

2.2 Moral Development and Ethical Courage

Plaisance (2020) offers an analytical framework based on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development to understand how journalists respond to ethical dilemmas in practice. Journalists' morality is not a static attribute, but rather the result of a dynamic process of developing ethical awareness, reflected in three levels of moral development:

1. Preconventional: At this stage, journalists' behavior is driven by the motivation to avoid punishment or direct negative consequences, so that the decisions taken are more reactive and pragmatic without deep consideration of moral principles.
2. Conventional: Journalists act based on adherence to organizational rules, social norms, and professional expectations. Moral behavior at this level is more oriented toward loyalty to the social structure and maintaining the reputation of the group or institution.
3. Post-conventional: At this level, journalists operate on the basis of universal moral principles, prioritizing truth and integrity, even if this carries personal risks such as intimidation, criminalization, or social isolation. This level reflects moral courage—the ethical courage to uphold the value of truth without compromise, even when faced with significant pressure (Plaisance, 2020; AJI Indonesia, 2023).

The concept of moral courage is crucial given the political and economic pressures affecting the journalism profession, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia, where the criminalization of journalists critical of those in power is increasing (AJI Indonesia, 2023). Case studies such as Maria Ressa in the Philippines and Haris Mahtul in Indonesia illustrate the importance of this moral courage in maintaining journalistic integrity amidst challenging circumstances.

Aris Mulyawan, Chairman of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in Semarang City, stated that the current state of press freedom in Central Java, particularly in Semarang, is at a worrying level. Based on AJI Semarang City data, there were at least 12 cases of intimidation and violence against professional and student journalists between January and March 2025. The intimidation was carried out by law enforcement officials, specifically the police and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI).

"Imagine, in just three months (January-March 2025) there have been 12 cases. The perpetrators were members of the military, meaning the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (Polri). There was also one case perpetrated by an unknown person (OTK). Our records show that most (acts of intimidation) were carried out by the police," he said.

2.3 Information Disorder Framework

In the digital age, journalism also faces the serious challenge of diverse information disorders. Wardle and Derakhshan (2021) introduced the Information Disorder Framework, which divides information disorders into three main types:

- **Misinformation:** The spread of false or incorrect information without any malicious intent on the part of the disseminator. Misinformation can spread unintentionally and still has the potential to mislead the public.
- **Disinformation:** The deliberate spread of false information to mislead the public, often by political, economic, or interest groups for strategic gain.
- **Malinformation:** The spread of true information that is used manipulatively to damage reputations, provoke conflict, or create social tension.

These three types of information disruption create unique complexities for journalists in carrying out their duties of verification and accurate reporting. The pressure to compete with fast-moving and viral news, coupled with social media algorithms that prioritize engagement over truth, increases the risk of reporting errors such as misquotation, biased negative framing, or data manipulation to meet market demands (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2021; Michailidou & Trezn, 2021; Setiawan, 2023).

2.4 Triadic Model of Integrity

Based on the integration of these three theoretical frameworks, this study formulates the Triadic Integrity Model as the primary conceptual framework for evaluating journalists' integrity practices during the current information crisis. This model consists of three interrelated dimensions:

- **Role Dimension (What):** Analyzes the extent to which journalists are able to carry out their professional roles ethically and consistently with journalistic values such as objectivity, independence, and balance of information (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2019).
- **Moral Dimension (Why):** Examines the moral reasons and internal motivations underlying journalistic actions, with a focus on the level of moral development and ethical courage of journalists in facing external dilemmas and pressures (Plaisance, 2020).
- **Context Dimension (How):** Examines the influence of the social, political, and economic environment, as well as digital media mechanisms that shape and influence the work of journalists, including how information disruption and social media platform algorithms affect the editorial process and the integrity of coverage (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2021; AJI Indonesia, 2023).

This Triadic Integrity Model serves as an analytical tool to understand not only what and why journalists act as they do, but also how external and internal contexts shape their ethical behavior and attitudes in carrying out their profession.

2. Method

This study uses a systematic literature review (SLR) method combined with an interpretive qualitative approach to deeply explore the issue of journalist integrity in the post-truth era. The study process began with the collection of secondary data in the form of scientific articles sourced from five reputable academic databases: Scopus, DOAJ, SAGE, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. The publication period was limited to 2019 and 2024, to ensure that the findings and discourses reviewed reflect the latest developments in global and regional journalistic practices.

To obtain relevant results, the researcher used a combination of keywords covering key topics such as "journalist integrity," "media ethics," "post-truth journalism," "disinformation,"

and "moral courage in journalism." From the initial search process, 237 articles were collected, which were then strictly selected based on several key criteria: journal quality (only journals ranked Q1–Q3 were considered), empirical relevance to contemporary journalism practices, and the significance of the context discussed in the articles. After the curation process, 45 articles were selected for further analysis.

The analysis process was conducted through thematic content analysis, guided by the theoretical categories contained in the Triadic Integrity Model, namely the performance dimensions of the journalist's role, stages of moral development, and the types and impacts of information disruption that affect the journalistic work environment. This approach enabled researchers to systematically map thematic patterns related to violations and strengthening of journalistic integrity amidst post-truth challenges.

No	Selection Criteria	Number of Articles	Information
1	Total initial articles from 5 databases	237	Search results with predetermined keywords
2	Article eliminated due to duplication/irrelevant topic	92	Off-topic, duplicate, or unscientific
3	Articles after initial screening	145	Continued to advanced screening
4	Article does not meet quality criteria (Q4, predatory)	57	Journals not indexed Q1–Q3 or low quality
5	The article lacks empirical/contextual relevance	43	Topic is too general or not appropriate to the Indonesian/global context
6	In-depth analyzed article (final)	45	Articles used in thematic analysis

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 External Pressure: Power and Regime

In developing countries, the journalism profession often faces significant direct pressure from political powers and ruling regimes. Threats to press freedom and journalists' safety are becoming increasingly worrying. Recent data from the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia (2023) shows a significant increase in criminalization cases against journalists, particularly those who dare to expose sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights violations, and abuse of power by public officials. These cases reflect how authoritarian regimes and various political interests attempt to stifle critical voices through intimidation, detention, and other repressive measures.

Two striking examples of strong moral courage in the face of regime pressure are the cases of Haris Mahtul in Indonesia and Maria Ressa in the Philippines. Haris Mahtul, an investigative journalist, faced serious threats after reporting on corruption cases involving local officials. Similarly, Maria Ressa earned international recognition for her tireless work exposing human rights violations and abuses in the Philippines despite repeated legal intimidation. Both figures demonstrated high integrity by refusing to compromise the truth, despite facing significant legal risks and political pressure. Their courage serves as an important symbol for the journalism profession, which ideally functions as a guardian of truth and a defender of democracy.

However, beyond these heroic cases, the reality is not always that simple. The majority of journalists in various media outlets, especially in developing countries, often choose to compromise to maintain their positions and careers within their organizations. These compromises can include refraining from covering certain issues, changing their perspectives, or even following editorial directives influenced by political and economic interests. This attitude reflects the dominance of conventional ethics—which prioritize adherence to the rules and norms prevailing within media institutions—over post-conventional ethics, which emphasize universal moral principles such as honesty and courage in upholding the truth without compromise. In other words, external pressures from power and regimes force many journalists to adapt and make compromises, often at the expense of their professional integrity.

3.2 Internal Pressures: Welfare and Corrupt Practices

In addition to external pressures from the regime and political power, journalists also face equally complex internal pressures related to their economic well-being and working conditions. Research by Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, and Porlezza (2022) revealed that low levels of journalist welfare correlate with an increased tendency to engage in corrupt practices in the reporting process. These practices include accepting envelopes or bribes, tailoring coverage based on orders from certain parties, and selling news to interested parties.

This phenomenon is widespread in Indonesian local media, particularly in reporting on issues involving local governments and the business sector. In many cases, journalists no longer serve as independent and objective information providers, but rather as information brokers, subject to economic logic and the interests of certain parties. They are forced or tempted to serve the interests of bribe-givers in order to earn additional income amidst economic uncertainty. Thus, the fundamental role of journalists as pillars of democracy and guardians of truth is being eroded, and the media's function as an institution of social control is being threatened.

Beyond economic factors, internal pressures also arise from the media organization's own structure, such as performance targets, pressure from editors-in-chief, and a work culture that lacks integrity. Journalists often find themselves in a dilemma between professional ideals and the practical needs of survival and job demands. This situation creates room for practices that deviate from journalistic codes of ethics, ultimately undermining the quality of reporting and public trust in the media.

In carrying out their profession, journalists are regulated by the Press Council's Code of Journalistic Ethics (KEJ), as stipulated in Article 6 of the KEJ, which stipulates that Indonesian journalists must not abuse their profession and accept bribes. This means that journalists must not use their profession for personal gain or accept rewards that could affect the objectivity of their reporting. Law Number 40/1999 concerning the Press, Article 9, stipulates that Indonesian journalists have and adhere to a Journalistic Code of Ethics. "This means it has been affirmed in the rules of the game issued by the Press Council."

The problem is that journalists, in carrying out their profession, also face welfare issues, as some do not earn an income equivalent to the district/city minimum wage (UMKM). In this regard, media companies are violating the Press Law, as stipulated in Article 7, Chapter 3, which regulates press company obligations, specifically the obligation to provide for the welfare of journalists and press employees.

In the era of press freedom, many parties are racing to establish press or media institutions without adequate consideration, including financial considerations. Ultimately, press workers and journalists become the "victims," with unmet welfare standards indirectly impacting the quality of their journalistic products. "Establishing a company also requires careful consideration and adherence to regulations. We must avoid violating regulations and workers' normative rights."

3.3 Polarization and Disinformation

One factor further complicating the challenges facing the journalism profession in today's digital age is the phenomenon of polarization and disinformation facilitated by social media algorithms. These algorithms indirectly encourage the production and dissemination of news that aligns with the ideological preferences of certain audiences. As a result, the phenomenon of echo chambers has emerged, where individuals only receive information that reinforces their views and prejudices, thus deepening social and political polarization.

Research by Michailidou and Trenz (2021) revealed that 71% of journalists in Europe feel pressured by social media algorithms in their news production process, while 53% admitted that they sometimes adjust news narratives to increase virality and attract audience attention. A similar trend is also evident in Indonesia, where the explosion of clickbait-based media and infotainment shows demonstrates a tendency to blur the lines between journalistic facts and entertainment. These media outlets produce content that prioritizes sensation and popularity over factual truth, ultimately exacerbating the problem of disinformation.

This situation further weakens journalists' position as trusted sources of information. They often have to balance the professional demands of presenting accurate news with the commercial imperative of generating clicks and ratings. Consequently, journalists are under intense pressure to modify news content to better "sell" in the digital marketplace, even if this potentially compromises the accuracy and integrity of their reporting.

3.4 Additional Case Study: Alternative Journalism and New Hope

Amidst all the pressures and challenges faced by journalists and the mainstream media, alternative journalism initiatives have emerged, offering new hope. Examples such as Project Multatuli, Tempo Investigasi, and Narasi represent media outlets committed to strong journalistic principles and a commitment to serving the often-marginalized public.

These alternative media outlets consistently prioritize rigorous verification processes, support for marginalized communities, and transparency in their editorial processes. They strive to maintain journalistic integrity through practices based on high ethics and the moral courage demonstrated in their investigative reporting. The existence of these alternative media outlets demonstrates that despite immense pressure from the regime and market logic, there is still room for journalists and media institutions to act as guardians of truth and agents of social change.

Furthermore, the success of alternative media in maintaining integrity and credibility also serves as inspiration and motivation for other journalists fighting on the front lines of journalism. These media outlets demonstrate that institutions founded on the values of professionalism and moral courage can serve as a strong bulwark in the face of the integrity crisis and the challenges of disinformation in the post-truth era.

Implications and Recommendations

Strengthening Ethics in Journalism Education

Journalism education must shift from a normative approach to a reflective and contextual one. Discussions of real-life cases, simulations of ethical dilemmas, and training in moral courage need to be expanded into the curriculum.

Media Institutional Reform

The media needs to strengthen independent structures for editorial oversight. An internal ombudsman, a strictly enforced code of ethics, and incentives for journalists with integrity are crucial steps.

Public Literacy Collaboration

Journalists and media must be part of the digital literacy movement to equip the public to recognize hoaxes, misinformation, and manipulative framing.

Ethical Use of Technology

The development of artificial intelligence to verify facts, detect disinformation, and analyze bias can be used to support the integrity of journalistic work.

4. Conclusion

Journalist integrity in the post-truth era is a complex issue involving dimensions of role, morality, and the information environment. This study proposes the Triadic Integrity Model as a tool for analysis and reflection on contemporary journalism practices. The findings indicate that integrity is not merely an individual issue, but a systemic one. Therefore, ethical and structural reforms involving education, institutions, and technology are needed.

Journalists in carrying out their profession must be able to carry out their professional roles ethically and consistently in line with journalistic values such as objectivity, independence, and balance of information (Role Dimension), examine the moral reasons and internal motivations that underlie journalistic actions, with a focus on the level of moral development and ethical courage of journalists in facing external dilemmas and pressures (Moral Dimension), and examine the influence of the social, political, economic environment, and digital media mechanisms that shape and influence the work of journalists, including how information disruption and social media platform algorithms affect the editorial process and the integrity of coverage (Context Dimension).

Several media outlets, often referred to as alternative media, are also considered committed to strong journalistic principles and a commitment to serving marginalized communities in their journalistic practices. These outlets consistently prioritize rigorous verification processes, support for marginalized groups, and transparency in their editorial processes. They strive to maintain journalistic integrity through practices based on high ethics and the moral courage demonstrated in their investigative reporting.

The existence of these alternative media outlets demonstrates that despite immense pressure from the regime and market logic, there is still room for journalists and media institutions to act as guardians of truth and agents of social change. Furthermore, the success of these alternative media outlets in maintaining their integrity and credibility also serves as inspiration and motivation for other journalists fighting on the front lines of journalism. These outlets demonstrate that institutions founded on the values of professionalism and moral courage can serve as a strong bulwark in the face of the integrity crisis and the challenges of disinformation in the post-truth era. They can be a force for comprehensive reform in journalistic practice in the post-truth era.

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