Journalism students in internship and deontology in French-speaking Belgium

Research report

Media Councils in the Digital Age

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This report presents the results of a collective research study on the relationship to journalism ethics among journalism students. This qualitative study was based upon focus groups with 33 students from the main journalism trainings in French-speaking Belgium (the Masters programmes at UCLouvain, ULB, ULiege and IHECS) and were conducted between September and November 2019. The objective of the research was to analyse how journalism interns are confronted with ethics, how they apprehend these issues and how they deal with, deviate from or adjust with those standards. Our aim was to determine whether ethics are present, and in what ways, in the accounts of professional integration practices of students who have done internships. Questioning their representations and experiences with ethics is of particular interest: it sheds light on the perceptions and questions in relation to professional ethics expressed by journalists who are in the process of discovering and adapting to the professional world and the resulting professional practices. Students' accounts of how ethical standards and principles are - or not - implemented during their internship make it possible to observe not only their concrete application, but also their possible questioning or even non-observance by journalism students. This research aims to provide a better understanding not only of the daily ethical choices and reflections of the actors interviewed, the changing representations of the ethics they convey, but also of the factors that contribute to these challenges such as, for example, the editorial identity of the media, its economic environment, its managerial organisation, the collective dynamics within the editorial offices, the way in which the individual sees his/her career, as well as his/her ethics.

Asking journalism students about ethics involves questioning their relationship to the media professional identity and their political conception of journalism, in a professional world undergoing a process of disorganisation/restructuring (Demers, 2007). Each of the ethical points of view must be questioned in order to try to perceive which conception of journalism is deployed in the transition between the period of training and the discovery of professional realities, through individual trajectories. It is in this perspective that the present research tries to determine whether the ethical framework plays an important role, and according to what modalities it possibly does so, in the process of defining the professional trajectories and identities of these (future) journalists.

Before going further into the study, it is necessary to clarify what this research project did not want to undertake. The first potential *a priori* that it is important for us to deny is that we would want to provide an evaluation of the ethical "quality" of newsrooms / media companies or training courses. This study in no way aspires to establish any kind of ranking. Beyond this

obvious fact, it is tempting to imply that such an analytical approach would make journalists in training privileged indicators of the state of the newsrooms, which would presuppose that they would be "ideal" newcomers to the profession. Each one of these future graduates takes part to different professional sub-fields, whose common feature is the journalistic activity, carried out in specific contexts. All of them develop more or less conscious strategies of insertion and adaptation, being more or less critical to the norms, customs and ways of doing things specific to the editorial office in which they worked. The way they look at the world they are supposed to join cannot therefore be free of strategic issues linked to the complex socialisation of newcomers, the limited possibilities for rapid stabilisation and the variable professional cultures in which they are integrated (Standaert, 2016). Likewise, the way these actors view professional ethics at the beginning of their careers can only be based on an academic type of learning which, whatever its quality or theoretical and epistemological perspective, cannot claim to establish them as valid scientific observers. Their level of understanding of the ethical foundations and their criticism of deontology are quite diverse, their knowledge of precise standards can vary, and their interest in the deontological aspects of the practice of journalism is more or less important. Finally, this level of understanding can be the expression of a critical positioning or an adherence to professional – or even corporatist – prescripts.

In the focus group survey, which results are summarised in this report, students were interviewed after having received at least one year of journalism training and having completed at least one internship in a media company. The interview guide for the focus groups invited them to discuss journalistic professional ethics, or deontology, according to two aspects: their conceptions of deontology and their experiences of deontology. The focus group facilitator asked them open-ended questions on these two themes and, if necessary, asked them to illustrate their comments with situations that they had experienced or that had been reported to them, in order to discuss them collectively.

We have carried out 8 focus groups (two per training institution) with an average duration of an hour and fifteen minutes (ranging between 45 minutes and 95 minutes) and each one involving 4 to 5 students. These 8 focus groups were recorded, transcribed into verbatims (keeping the orality of what had been said) and then coded and analysed by a team of 8 journalism researchers: David Domingo, Marie Fierens, Florence Le Cam and Florian Tixier (ULB), Benoît Grevisse and Olivier Standaert (UCLouvain), Boris Krywicki (ULiege) and Amandine Degand (IHECS).

From a preliminary analysis of this work, five main themes were identified. These are those which we will develop in this research report.

1. Representations: answers to the question "What is professional ethic for you? "and the developments it led to.
2. Negotiations: reflections linking theoretical learning and practical experience and the subsequent adjustments or arrangements they produced.
3. Tensions: situations in which professional ethic may conflict with other issues and which can lead to different interpretations.
4. Judgements: value judgements or criticisms, expressed about journalism and the media, related to professional ethics, with an explicit normative background.
5. Contemporary issues: issues related to the current media environment and issues of journalistic professional ethics.

These five themes illustrate the relationship to professional ethics of journalism students in French-speaking Belgium, by analysing how they feel about it and how they have experienced it in the field, during their internships.

1. Representations

First of all, the focus groups (FG) conducted in the framework of this research with journalism students who have completed at least an internship illustrate and allow us to define ethics as a set of rules, principles and decision-making tools in accordance with the normative values of the profession. They are defined in a rather diverse and concomitant manner (abstractly), which must nevertheless be applied in the practice of the profession (concretely).

The aim of the analysis of this first theme is to understand more precisely how journalism students conceive and define deontology. Our results show that, concomitantly, it can be a norm, it can be confusing, it can be a framework, it can be an obstacle and it can be useful.

The normative dimension of deontology

"Framework", "set of rules", "beacon", "guide", "tool", "path", "moral code"... the terms used by students to define professional ethics are numerous. Among them, the word "norm" is the one that comes up most often in the speeches analysed. Its use could reflect the integration, by students, of the vocabulary used in their (future) professional field, since it is also the term "norm" that is found in the first sentences of the code of journalistic deontology adopted by the *Conseil de déontologie journalistique (CDJ)* in 2013[1]. When it came to defining professional ethics, many respondents also mention the notion of respect, in various forms (respect for information, respect for the journalist in his/her work, respect for the witness, for the person questioned, for the public, etc.).

Deontology and ethics are often mixed up

A few participants used the term "ethics" to define *deontologie,*[2] which could lead to some kind of confusion on their part. It appears that not all respondents seemed aware that their personal ethics might be more restrictive, or different, than professional ethical standards.

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[1] The CDJ is the self-regulation organisation of the journalistic profession and media sector for French-speaking Belgium. The full text of the code can be found here: http://www.lecdj.be/telechargements/Code-deonto-MAJ-2017-avec-cover.pdf

[2] The French concept *déontologie* refers to the set of collective ethical standards adopted by a profession, in contrast with éthique, which is attached to individual values.

One respondent told that he could take liberties regarding deontology and build his own deontological framework. In so doing, he reintroduced a confusion between personal ethics, which is the responsibility of the individual, and deontology, which is the responsibility of a given professional group. Along this line, some people saw deontology as a tool for reflection, and more precisely, they would describe it as a normative tool and a support for ethical reflection.

Deontology is a framework that can (or cannot) be respected

Should we always respect ethical norms? The question was debated by some respondents. One of them believed that it is not compulsory to always respect professional ethics norms. Another said that it is not always possible to respect it in the practice of the trade. These interventions can be interpreted as a reflection of a so-called objectivist or structuralist vision of professional practices (Accardo, Abou, Balastre, Marine, 1995), calling for negotiations on the respect of ethical standards, all the more so in a context where commercial logic dominates within media companies.

Deontology: a constraint as well as a protection

If deontology can be seen as a barrier or a limitation, it can also be seen, at the same time, as a protection, a tool for defending journalistic values (informing in a truthful and independent way...). Some people compared it in this sense to a "parental presence". Deontology can thus embody a defence tool vis-à-vis a source or a person who is the subject of a journalistic production. It can also protect journalists from certain requests that they would consider illegitimate, and that may come from their superiors, for example.

Deontology is useful because it gives credibility

According to the respondents, professional ethic gave them credibility in the exercise of their work, to the eyes of their peers and those of the public. It also enabled them to distinguish themselves from other actors in the diffusion of information, to position themselves as professionals, with their own "specific ethics" (Ruellan, 2011). For some respondents, without journalistic deontology, everyone could be a journalist. However, access to the journalistic

profession is not conditional on obtaining a diploma or signing a code of ethics. We can see that they engaged in a "boundary work" in order to define the contours of legitimate journalism, i.e. journalists who know and apply the code of ethics (Carlson, 2016), referring in a normative way to the existence of a profession.

All these conceptions and definitions reveal plural visions of deontology based on various presuppositions (tool, standard, value, ...) and a certain confusion with personal ethics.

2. Negotiations

This theme shows how journalistic ethics is seen as a space for negotiation in the journalist's professional relations with their sources, peers and public.

Negotiations concern precisely the application of deontology in a professional context. They refer to one of the main tensions underlying the different conceptions of deontology mentioned by the participants, opposing an application on a case-by-case basis and justifying the taking into account of circumstances, to its application in the strict sense, most often independently of the context. During their internships, the respondents confronted for the first time their knowledge of deontology with a context of professional production, according to the specific characteristics of each media. It is therefore no longer an option for the interns to isolate the question of ethics from others, but on the contrary, they experience for the first time how it is negotiated jointly with all the other dimensions of journalism (economical, socio-professional, cultural, technological...) in a specific context (a newsroom).

The theme of "negotiation" sheds light on two sub-themes:

- the flexible nature of the application and convening of journalistic deontology by those involved in journalism;

- the deliberative nature of deontology.

Deontology is flexible:

Deontology is considered by the participants as a field of knowledge (consisting essentially, or even exclusively, of graduate or post-graduate courses in almost all cases) in which understanding and application are arranged and negotiated according to different parameters

and circumstances: the editorial line, technical and production constraints, the personal judgement of a journalist, circumstances linked to the subject matter or sources used, the imperatives of profitability and productivity, or even the position of the trainee itself… Students tend to find it difficult to accommodate or justify their practical experience in connection to the theoretical knowledge they acquired.

These negotiations on deontological issues are either presented in negative ("we shouldn't have done it this way", "we have to fit a circle into a square") or in reassuring ways, in the sense that they reinforce certain visions of ethics, forged *a priori* or constructed during the training.

Thus, the theme of negotiation seems important in the eyes of the interviewees because it introduces the need to position oneself (within the framework of the FG and amongst others) regarding those principles. But these principles are also very rarely named explicitly by the respondents. In fact, the different aspects of self-regulation mechanisms (codes, standards, ethics council, internal authorities) is almost never used in the interviews.

As a result, the flexible nature of the application of the code of deontology refers as much to its intrinsic complexity as to the respondents' random knowledge of this code and their limited professional experience.

The deliberative nature of deontology

The focus groups highlight the importance of invoking professional standards as an individual within professional spaces, in which deontology can be mobilised in a wide variety of ways. As such, it can be seen as a deliberative tool that can be used to protect oneself, to justify one's actions and to engage in a form of reflexivity and exchange with colleagues.

For each individual, deontology takes on a deliberative dimension: it can be summoned to justify choices (sometimes undertaken quickly and without prior consultation), to distance oneself from those of others, and thus serve as a strategic tool from the point of view of professional interactions. Deontology seems to oscillate between these two poles, individual and collective, like in many case in journalism, and it is in this respect that it is often 'negotiated' rather than applied as a process that arbitrates schematically all possible scenarios.

3. Tensions

Far from being merely a set of norms for socialising practices, or the expression of negotiations of real-life situations, deontology is also, for journalism students, an object of tension because it is embodied in logics that are not all consensual (right to privacy vs. logics of profitability and productivity, for example). It is even an area of tension when the interns are confronted with their peers and sources, for example, and must justify certain choices.

Thus, while a rather normative discourse has developed on the general expression of the definition of deontology as a norm, once it is used in the interns' day to day practice, and therefore "negotiated" (theme 2), it sometimes can be perceived differently: as interactions that can be tense.

Dependence to the media company

Students deploy a form of relativism about the design and application of ethical principles, considering it as a framework that they may or may not respect. This relativism is above all linked to the identity of the media company and their personal way of conceiving deontology. To illustrate this fact, students point out structural and identity specificities, but also organisational modalities of the media and their format which contribute to very diversified representations and applications of deontology.

- The structural and identity specificities concern in particular the differences linked to the business model of the media, and notably to its financing. The question of the medium also becomes a discriminating factor. Thus, some media are considered less conducive to a rigorous application of deontology. This is the case of the Internet, which has been presented, on several occasions, as a less standardised space, where practices would be less subject to careful verification and systematic proofreading. The web is also presented as a workspace where the youngest, and therefore the least experienced, professionals generally work.
- Organisational modalities are also an argument used by students to better understand this relativity. The organisation of the editorial staff, its size, but above all its operating methods and the role of the editor-in-chief are of paramount importance. The working conditions of journalists, the time they have at their disposal and the relationships they

have with their colleagues are also important. Moreover, certain topics, such as local news, sport or culture, would imply specific interpretation to deontology.

Therefore, deontology seems to be perceived as a flexible framework, a tool, a reflection that is dependent on the media company, but also on the topics and working conditions. The credibility of the media is often invoked as a safeguard which implies that some media pay more attention to deontology than others; but some students testify to difficulties in making these questions collective. Rather, they are faced with very individual issues that can lead to an avoidance of concern and forms of self-censorship.

Journalism and public relations

Our focus groups participants often mention the difficulty of producing information without leaning towards a form of promotional content. This appears specific to the exercise of certain types of specialised journalism (sport, music, women's press) or to certain types of media (size and type of structure, relationship to sources).

Practices that contribute to confusion between public relations and journalism are analysed through the prism of deontology by some participants. And many respondents become aware of the equivocal nature of the content they are supposed to produce during their internships, especially when they are confronted with sources who want the media to publish the content they offer. The insistence of some PR services also confronts interns with the difference between information and promotion: they would like to clearly define it but sometimes they find it difficult to do so. The confusion is said to be reinforced by the nature of the subjects entrusted to them, which in turn depends on their status as interns and the period during which some of them carry out their internships, i.e. the summer holidays.

Being an intern

Because of their intern status and inexperience, some participants stated that they did not engage themselves with questioning, from a deontological point of view, the practices of colleagues who have been working in the media for a long time.

Others claim to have detected ethical ambiguities but kept their questions unvoiced because of their status of interns, the short (unpaid) time they spend in the newsroom or a lack of self-

confidence. There are thus many silences surrounding deontological issues understanding by young journalists. These silences could also be explained by their willingness, as "newcomers", to make a good impression on the editorial staff. Hence, they would not jeopardise their chances of eventually being hired at the end of their internship, or simply secure to be positively evaluated by the media and their training institution.

Most of the participants agreed that their status of interns puts them in front of many deontological challenges and even tricky situations. Some of them mention the difficulty of presenting themselves as journalists, interns or members of the editorial staff of a media organisation to the sources they are asked to work with. Indeed, in order to obtain certain information, they have to present themselves as journalists and not as interns, which constitutes an ethical problem for them.

Others simply refer to their inexperience, which pushes them to follow guidelines without questioning them. Finally, the stories to cover, suggested or even impose by the managers, could be very difficult to deal with in an informational and non-communicative way. However, one of the participants tempered this observation by stating that the nature of the subjects proposed to interns does not expose them to important "deontological risks".

4. Judgements

Although the students surveyed generally have rather fluctuating representations of deontology, they do not hesitate to make references to it to assess the quality of their productions and guide their practices. Thus, they have a fairly normative vision of what they consider to be "good journalism", i.e. journalism that follows deontological norms, even if these norms are sometimes perceived as outdated and not fit to meet the contemporary challenges of information production. They see deontology as an important part of their professional identity and deplore the fact that there are journalists who admit not having read (all of) the code of ethics, which knowledge and understanding appear rather essential to them. However, the imprecise definitions of deontology do not prevent it from playing a dynamic role as a set of reference for students, who mobilise certain elements of it (sometimes in a confusing way) on many occasions. In their eyes, therefore, deontology constitutes a rather heterogeneous corpus but is nonetheless significant as a way of assessing their journalistic productions and those of others.

This normative stance on deontology leads young journalists to make three types of judgements, characterised by their vehemence: firstly, on the values of journalism as a profession; secondly, on the factors that threaten the respect of deontology inside the newsrooms; and thirdly, on the effectiveness of the sanctions proposed by self-regulatory bodies.

Judgements on the values of journalism and on the media companies

The students are convinced that ethics is a necessary instrument to defend the value of journalistic independence, considered central to their profession, and, more specifically, to gain and cultivate public trust, seen as the essential goal of journalism. One of the speakers regretted that only a minority of the journalists he met during his internship defended independence.

The judgements on the quality of the information produced by the media company in which the respondents did their internships show a strong adherence to the deontological rules, which serve as a point of reference for students. The tensions identified in the previous section, seen as threats to the respect of deontological rules, lead the participants to hold very critical discourses on the journalistic cultures in which they have been immersed.

Deontology is also mobilised to criticise commercial pressure, especially in a context of economic crisis that forces the media to maximise their production at a lower cost. Tensions linked to marketing or advertising communication practices are pointed out, but also the predilection for sensationalist subjects which will encourage Internet users to click on the story. Students are quite reluctant to write articles that promote products, but at the same time, they seem to think that deontology is not strong enough to oppose the pressures of economic "power" (advertisers and media owners) on the work of journalists.

Judgements on norms

Despite the general stance of defending codes of ethics, as mentioned in judgements towards media companies, young journalists sometimes also take a critical view of the relevance of those very norms, most of the time in relation to the effectiveness of self-regulatory bodies.

One of the respondents considered that deontology should be "flexible" and adaptable according to the democratic relevance of the information to be collected, so as not to become a barrier to

the work of journalists. Another considers that norms are sometimes obsolete, even if some "major principles" are not going to change.

Students also consider that, more than the journalists themselves, it is the media companies that should be sanctioned, as they are the ones who create the working conditions that can allow or prevent the respect of deontology. Participants also mentioned the need for more media education to facilitate public knowledge and understanding of the deontological rules of journalism.

5. Contemporary issues

This theme concerns students' perception of professional ethics as adapted or not to the current professional context, whether from a socio-economic or professional point of view, particularly in terms of what is at stake and professional recognition and differentiation. It also shows many questions from respondents about the use of social networks by journalists, which is regularly seen as a threat to deontology, or making it even more necessary than before, in terms of the protection of sources, for example, or the ease of traceability of online connections.

For journalism students, despite the existence of the code, deontology remains impalpable and constantly changing. For some, the current context is characterised by a period of rupture, of reinvention, which is still far from being over. For others, the ability of journalists to rethink their professional ethics has been immutably delayed, which casts doubt on the potential for concrete professional renewal.

From a personal point of view, some students are struggling to develop a true ownership of ethical standards, and thus to decide on their current relevance. Others, on the other hand, concede that they have incorporated them. In any case, students tend to suggest that they are discovering a kind of "new code" of ethics in the field, that practice induces a laxer way of applying theoretical principles.

Social networks and their implied imperative of immediacy of information, are regularly mentioned as causes of the circumvention of norms. The relatively recent digital developments in the sector suggest the need for a "modernisation" of deontology. It would seem that, in the eyes of students, journalism has remained in a bubble of idealistic ethical purity.

Most students clearly feel that ethics do not sufficiently frame online behaviour, which can cause anxiety. They struggle to define their role in a circumscribed way, especially with regard to the role of the community manager, which they occasionally have to assume, without having the skills or the time to do so properly.

Social networks also blur the boundaries between private and public places: is it possible to use images published publicly on social networks? Most students seem to be aware of questions regarding privacy, on which they find it difficult to decide, arguing that this is a grey zone and that there is still a legal void around these issues.

Conclusion

The relationship that journalism students in French-speaking Belgium have with deontology is twofold and, in a way, paradoxical. Sometimes they consider it in an abstract way and offer clumsy definitions; and sometimes they use it in a very concrete way in their professional practices. But even when applied professionally, deontology and the interactions it involves - with peers, sources and the public - are rarely free of tensions or even problems. Deontology is seen by participants as a set of norms that can sometimes even be considered as the law, sometimes more personal ethics. However, it is mostly seen as a loose framework which young journalists almost always define as flexible and malleable. The relative nature of deontology depends on the network of constraints, notably economical, temporal or in terms of human resources, in which it is embedded. Its application would require from them a constant effort of adaptation to this network of constraints. In addition to these, in their specific case, their status as interns may imply a lack of supervision, a relative adherence to the editorial line of the media for which they work or difficulties in expressing their doubts or disagreements.

Given this context, the application of the code of deontology is considered in a plural way by the students interviewed. It is sometimes seen as an obstacle hindering their professional practice, sometimes brandished as a protection of the values of journalism. Indeed, most journalism students consider deontology to be useful, in particular because it gives credibility to their professional practice. But many also say that it does not always address the problems and issues they face.

Some people therefore perceive it as ill-suited to the current context. This inadequacy is especially pointed out when social networks are mentioned. Indeed, these "new" media supports lead to new practices that raise new deontological questions. The students then develop a normative discourse on deontology and its concrete applications, while acknowledging that they do not completely master its theoretical implications. The aspects on which the code of deontology seems to be mistaken are multiple: the theory/practice gap, the difficulty of defining the role of the journalist, the savage aspect of media behaviour on social networks and, above all, the perceived ignorance of these norms among professional journalists themselves. In addition, there are practices in which the boundary between journalism and communication is blurred, calling into question the central value of independence. The relationship to sources and audiences should thus be (re)thought in a changing media context.

To qualify the lack of adequacy of journalistic deontology to the current context and to the world of ICTs helps them as a way to formulate, in a more global way, the new obstacles that they identify to the "good practice" of the profession. It seems that they are struggling to cope with all these news aspects, in total contradiction with, what they refer to as, the simplicity of use that previous generations enjoyed. In general, the discussions with the participants reveal a certain way of conceiving and talking about journalism. Whether it is through the negotiations to which deontology constantly leads, or in the tensions that can produce conflicts of interest for journalists and media companies, but also in the judgements made about the profession, its standards or its values, deontological issues allow them to discuss journalism and its transformations. The mention of the status of intern also draws out more general considerations about how participants see their (future) profession, how more experienced journalists practice it and how they relate to their audiences.

Finally, it might be useful to suggest that the reflexivity most often referred to in the FG remains very little oriented towards meta-ethical reasoning, in the sense of criticism of the legitimacy of the deontological system as it exists: it is almost systematically presented as an implicit norm, as something self-evident, desirable or even 'ideal', to mention some of the terms used by the respondents. Even if the *Conseil de déontologie journalistique* is sometimes given as a reference, there is still both a weak identification of the Belgian French-speaking actors of deontology and a weak questioning of the current normative framework. Nevertheless, the discussions revealed certain discrepancies (e.g. technological), certain inadequacies, or in any case new challenges for ethics, in relation to new tools and uses, among others. The recourse to a normative vision of the deontological system seems reassuring because it allows young journalists to place their evolving professional practices within a defined framework, even if this framework is considered at the same time too constraining and poorly adapted to their working reality. It can be hypothesised that this vision probably stems in part from the lack of knowledge and practice mentioned above. At the same time, however, it can serve as a framework justifying, or even arguing for, a much more critical reflexivity towards the observed professional practices and the evolution of journalism in general, as a productive activity and as a profession.

In a context of very strong technological and economic constraints and in times of adjustments to a democratic political model, it is probably between idealised/normative representation, pragmatism, opportunism, cynicism or disappointment that various ways of conceiving and therefore defining the dynamics of journalism will unfold. It can be hypothesised that the

emergence of the theme of negotiations in focus groups is partly due to the particular situation of the individuals interviewed, who are still studying, but who have recently completed a first (and brief) experience in a professional environment (except, possibly, for some freelancers who are already better acquainted with the workings of a newsroom): their framework of vision is fairly close to the "norm", whereas more experienced journalists are sometimes less so and would probably be less surprised by these arrangements and circumventions. And yet, we could also develop a contrary approach, and question, under the same conditions, older journalists who could, in view of their experience, feed, even more so here, reflections on the difficulties of living with the need to use deontological principles in a period of major transformations not only of production, but also of working and employment conditions.

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