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Exploring South African Journalism Students' Perceptions of Journalism in Relation to War Reporting

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Abstract:

Journalism is a vital profession in today's world. However, existing research in tertiary journalism education is limited regarding understanding journalism students' learning experiences. Contemporary digital media forms are increasingly available to journalism students. Therefore, higher education institutions face growing pressure to produce ethical and informed journalism modules which align with professional constraints in the context of a multifaceted media age. This study explores the understandings of journalistic ethics and the transformation of such perceptions held by South African journalism students through their encounters with digital mainstream war reporting. Using a qualitative approach and utilizing purposive sampling, four full-time South African journalism students in their third year of study who consistently attend a private institution of higher learning were respondents. The data obtained from in-person interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate a transformation of these students' perceptions through their exposure to digital mainstream war reporting. The study reveals that the students' journalistic ethical values became increasingly complex. The findings showed that the challenges presented by digital mainstream media may serve as a vehicle for learning realistic journalistic ethics. The findings of this paper highlight implications for the education of young journalists in light of the financial and political elements of modern digital journalism. Specifically, this paper demonstrates the need for journalism to be taught not as just another theory-heavy, lecture-room-based tertiary subject, but in line with the practical constraints and (un)ethical challenges that the profession faces.

Keywords:

Journalism Education, Journalistic Ethics, War Reporting, Private Higher Education, Communication Technology

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Introduction

The path of South African journalists into the newsroom involves choices. Aspiring journalists are presented with the choice between studying at an institution of higher education or learning on the job. These options present a certain challenge to South African journalism education and training (JET) in its current state. While South African JET may offer students the opportunity to learn journalistic ethics such as impartiality and objectivity, learning on the job may teach more realistic journalistic practices (Bruns, 2019). In an exploratory pilot study on the retrospective views of several young South African journalists on ethics, Bruns (2019) found that these respondents believed that their ability to define and prioritize journalistic ethics stemmed from their experience in the newsroom. These respondents in the study (2019) found that they were exposed to or engaged in unethical journalistic behavior themselves more so in the newsroom than during their studies. Similarly, both Fierens et al. (2023) and Fulton et al. (2021) found that work-integrated learning was shown to decrease the fixed theoretical nature of the journalistic ethics instilled in journalism students.

The introduction of the digital sphere into the lecture room means that journalism students can now examine journalism practices through the words published online by a journalist in any location (Kirchhoff, 2022). This access to vast amounts of continuously updated information means that journalism students can obtain information on current events as they are being reported, assisted by constantly changing technology (Bruns, 2019; Kirchhoff, 2022). This may be a challenge for journalism students who are exposed to issues in the media that may have implications for their understanding of journalistic ethics. With the reporting of war, a chaotic and distressing situation, having been turned into profitable operations, questions surrounding the perception of journalistic practices as held by journalism students (Harris & Williams, 2018; Karabag & Imre, 2022).

Notably, previous researchers have acknowledged that neither journalism nor journalism education is neutral in attempting to foster communication about important societal issues (Steenveld et al., 2012). Further, the transformation from professional ethics based solely on objectivity to increasingly subjective values implies greater freedom for the media to use techniques such as agenda-setting (the media highlights certain news stories) and specifically, framing (the media dictates the way in which those stories must be understood) (Dhanasar, et al., 2018; McQuail & Deuze, 2020). In addition, previous researchers have also acknowledged the political economy of the media as a significant risk to the impartial transmission of information (Jansen, 2013; Wasko, 2014; McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Kodrich (2003) concluded that the provision of various journalism sources and specific activities aided American journalism students' scrutiny of ethical journalistic practice in relation to the Iraq War. Therefore, the journalism student's understanding of the ethical implications of a journalist's ability to fairly and accurately depict conflict-driven situations, such as war, comes into question. The subject of war

reporting has been chosen because it is an ongoing global issue that has implications far beyond immediate physical danger to local communities and freelance war correspondents (Harris & Williams, 2018; Karabag & Imre, 2022).

Therefore, this study explores South African journalism education in the digital age. It provides an in-depth discourse on the perceptions of four third-year South African journalism students at a private institution of higher learning (PIHL). This study focuses on understanding the transformation of perceptions of journalistic ethical values as held by these four journalism students in relation to information concerning ongoing wars. Furthermore, the perceptions that these students possess concerning journalism as a profession, as well as the mass media content they engage regarding digital mainstream media war reporting, will be explored. As such, the discourse includes references to war reporting, the inclusion of the internet in South African journalism education, the potential effect of media agenda-setting and political economy on journalism education and critical thinking in journalism education.

Literature Review

In the lecture room, sources of learning for what is required to practice realistic journalism in the newsroom include lecturers, traditional sources such as textbooks and journal literature, and the multimedia options available to students. Moreover, journalism students' understanding concerning the reporting of important events, such as war, unless they experience it themselves first, is largely dependent upon the media tools used by them. Questions regarding the transformation of these students' journalistic ethics throughout their engagement with these sources of information need to be investigated. This literature review will examine journalism education and journalism students' perceptions of journalism in relation to digital mainstream war reporting (Foster, 2010; Steenveld et al., 2012; Hamelink, 2015; Dhanasar, et al., 2018).

Journalism Education in the Twenty-First Century

Journalism courses and modules have become a method of professionalization (Murphy et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, such professionalization, according to Hanusch and Mellado (2014), Bruns (2019) and Murphy et al. (2020), includes teaching journalism students about what they may expect to encounter. Professionalization of aspiring journalists also includes teaching these individuals the ethical standards to which they are expected to conduct their journalistic work (Hanusch & Mellado, 2014; Bruns, 2019). These elements range from news formats such as hard or soft news to journalistic ethics like objectivity and impartiality (Hanusch & Mellado, 2014; Bruns, 2019). As Fierens et al. (2023) note, the lecture room can serve as a stabilizing influence for enabling the adoption of ethical practices by journalism students.

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When choosing formal tertiary study rather than entering the workforce directly, JET students' first point of contact is still largely the traditional form of the lecturer and course material. However, the efficacy of the lecture room has been debated (Bruns, 2019; Fulton et al., 2021; Fierens et al., 2023). Based on the ethical stances of several young South African journalists, Bruns (2019) suggests that the lecture room is insufficient for nurturing future professionals with a sound ethical code in comparison with the newsroom. Specifically, Bruns (2019) highlights a lack of practical experience as a problematic issue in empowering South African graduates to deal with complex situations presented to them by their journalistic tasks. Rather, according to Bruns (2019), young South African journalists tend to shift towards becoming self-taught and thus are subjective in terms of their ethical codes. This perspective seems to be supported by other research into work-integrated learning (WIL). Both Fierens et al. (2023) and Fulton et al. (2021), in the Belgian and Australian contexts respectively, have found that WIL methods, including internships as well as published articles written by students, can be used as a method to improve learning by enabling students to reflectively apply what they have learnt. These findings may reflect that these students were given access to real, working professionals and challenges from which they were able to learn a sense of realistic journalism. However, while the lecture room appears to be a contentious space for learning realistic journalism, these researchers have not investigated the various novel elements of digital media introduced to journalism students during their studies.

Journalism Education and Digital Media

Murphy et al. (2020) note that an integral relationship exists between JET and the journalism profession. In the workplace, journalists contend with issues such as "big data, artificial intelligence, social media and digital audience analytics" (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 3). As suggested by Frost (2018, cited in Murphy et al., 2020), educators should consider the circumstances currently faced by professional journalists. Existing research in the European and South African contexts suggests that, based on the perspectives of educational authorities, digital media has been incorporated into tertiary journalism studies (Steenveld et al., 2012; Katzenberger, 2024). However, there exists a lack of research into the appreciation of digital technologies by South African journalism students in relation to their education (Kirchhoff, 2022; Hossain & Wenger, 2024). One exception is Olagunju et al. (2022), whose study found that South African public university journalism students do respond to contemporary media forms in their studies, with social media having the potential to modify their perceptions of journalism.

Research in other contexts may provide more insights into journalism students' perspectives as a whole, regarding digital media in education. Galatsopoulou et al. (2022) found that young Greek journalism students believe that incorporating proactive video-based learning material and audio-visual content is valuable and meets their digital preferences. Similarly, using a quantitative approach, Zhang (2022)

found that the integration of digital media into the lecture room may be advantageous for Asian journalism students in terms of improving their test results. In the German context, Katzenberger (2024) found that young working journalists were taught the importance of mobile devices and social media in modern journalism but were not equipped with the necessary skills to integrate these devices and platforms into their work. These findings may be understood in terms of the preferences of the authorities responsible for setting the norms for JET as a whole, in their respective countries. Thus, consideration is needed concerning the preparation of journalism students through digital media, for the world of work, from the students' own perspectives (Galatsopoulou et al., 2022; Kirchhoff, 2022; Olagunju et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022; Hossain & Wenger, 2024; Katzenberger, 2024). As such, an investigation into the relationship between these digital technologies and South African journalism students' learning of journalistic ethical values is required to understand the areas wherein South African JET may be improved.

The concerning lack of focus in South African JET and related research in other jurisdictions is highlighted through a consideration of past journalism graduates' views on their education. Bruns (2019) found that young South African journalists increasingly view social media as a helpful tool to rely on during the course of their work. Similarly, Zhang (2022) summarized the suggestions of young Asian journalists who had studied journalism at the tertiary level, revealing that they were in favor of expanding the use of internet access and digital tools and media within the lecture room to make the study of journalism more relevant and simpler. The students' preference for learning through digital technology suggests a need for pedagogical reform to better align journalism curricula with contemporary media practices (Bruns, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Both South African and foreign journalism graduates perceive a disconnection between their academic training and the realities of modern digital journalism. The expressed enthusiasm for greater integration of social media and online tools within education reflects a broader dissatisfaction with the limited exposure to digital media during their studies (Bruns, 2019; Zhang, 2022). This further underscores the need for journalism curricula to evolve to align with the technological demands and professional practices of the contemporary news environment.

Journalism Education and Students' Perceptions of War Reporting

The existing literature provides limited insight into the connection between the actual content that journalism students may engage with online and their perceptions of journalistic ethics. This is concerning because each individual's explanation of reality is largely dependent on the values subtly communicated by the content which 'news providers' and other mass media organizations distribute (Hamelink, 2015, p. 5). As previously mentioned, this paper considers the theory of political economy in the media. This theory acknowledges the influence of owners and major role-players in media organizations over the dissemination of journalistic content. Specifically, this paper is concerned with

the manner in which the economic agendas of extremely powerful figures in mass media have superseded journalistic autonomy over the transmission of knowledge (Jansen, 2013; Wasko, 2014; Hamelink, 2015).

Therefore, the 'agenda-setting' theory as proffered by McQuail and Deuze (2020, p. 547) is relevant to the present discourse. McQuail and Deuze (2020) opine that the media has the potential to modify an audience's viewpoints concerning any subject. Thus, the media's presentation of specific subjects as significant is, as suggested by McQuail and Deuze (2020), to be a form of intentional, subtle persuasion. These agendas are informed by the competing interests of media organizations and the public (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Concern has been expressed regarding the facilitation of agenda-setting through 'framing' (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p. 550). It is contended that an audience's perceptions of subject matter, influential persons and regulations may be fostered by the specific diction used within news stories (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Specifically, the implied understanding conveyed through omission, inclusion and distortion in news stories is achieved by 'emphasis' framing (Valenzuela et al., 2017, p. 806). The conditioning of journalism students through traditional education is now threatened by increased social media access, including the fake news circulating on it (Holm, 2002; Hirst & Treadwell, 2011; Pérez-Escoda, 2022). The power of mass media organizations to use this vast digital ecosystem may have implications for both South African journalism students' perceptions of journalism and the continued survival of South African journalism (Hamelink, 2015).

This power is amplified by the presence of circumstances that pose a threat to ethical journalism, including political economy, agenda-setting and framing. While these threats to ethical journalism are acknowledged by some scholars and researchers, little research into the relationship of these with journalism students' perceptions of journalistic ethics exists (Bruns, 2019; Bergman, 2020; Theodosiadou et al., 2021). Theodosiadou et al. (2021) found that skepticism towards news framing is thought necessary by journalism undergraduates exposed to digital mainstream media, albeit in the Mediterranean context. Earlier, Clark (2013) investigated the thoughts of students at an American private university regarding the political economy elements of media ownership and concentration. Clark (2013) found that certain respondents believed these elements to be a threat to journalism. Moreover, it was the concern of Bergman (2020) that a lack of attention to political economy in Dutch journalism scholarship may have implications for Dutch students' criticism of actions taken by public authorities. This concern is noteworthy because (writing at the beginning of the millennium) Deuze (2002) argued that political economy has long been an issue affecting Dutch journalistic practices. Therefore, in light of the above, it appears crucial for the current researchers to investigate the presence and form of political economy theory in the education of South African journalism students.

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Fierens et al. (2023) found that students in internships with media organizations, take issue with the challenges posed by the financial aims of these organizations to journalists' ethical practices. More significantly, the findings by Bruns (2019) suggested that young South African journalists are not sufficiently skilled by their journalism education to deal with such issues that may challenge their ethical beliefs during the course of their journalism career. These findings may be explained by the fact that the lecture room might be framed as primarily a place for foundational learning and not for experiencing real ethical issues (Bruns, 2019; Fierens et al., 2023). This necessitates an exploration into traditional learning situations where work experience is not an option for journalism students, but where other facilities, such as digital media, could potentially substitute for this deficit.

Several studies have focused on the experience of journalism students with reporting in terms of crisis situations such as war. For example, Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) explored the experiences of Ukrainian journalism students concerning the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war as per the physical impediments it caused for their learning experiences. Kodrich (2003) studied American journalism students' engagement with print and television broadcasting war reporting materials for the purpose of investigating their critical thinking abilities. These studies revealed that their learning of journalistic ethics becomes complicated when considering their proximity to crises such as war. For some students, the situation may be as tentative as the disruption of lessons because of a bomb threat, while others are simply exposed to the biased views of a television presenter covering a conflict situation (Kodrich, 2003; Fiialka & Kornieva, 2024). Olagunju et al. (2022) found that South African public university students tend to use social media platforms extensively in journalism activities in response to tense conflict situations between ordinary citizens and public authorities. Nevertheless, there exists a dearth in understanding the intricate ethical beliefs held by South African journalism students who are studying journalistic ethics presented to them by mainstream media using the latest digital technologies in the lecture room.

Methods and Data

To explore the relationship between the study of journalistic ethics and digital mainstream war reporting, the researchers adopted the interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. In-person semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Considering the problem of peer pressure inherent in focus groups as well as the potential sensitivity of the data relating to the interviewees' opinions about ongoing wars and war reporting, a focus group was considered inappropriate for this study. The researchers' main objective was to investigate whether the sources the respondents used for war reporting transformed their perceptions of journalism. The second objective involved exploring the respondents' perceptions of journalism in relation to digital war reporting. The third objective involved analyzing the mass media sources that these respondents employed as sources of information for war reporting.

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The present study is situated within a South African private institution of higher learning in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The researchers are affiliated with the institution. The necessary ethical clearance procedures for the study were followed. Purposive sampling was adopted for the identification and selection of the respondents. Purposive sampling requires that the researcher determine certain traits of the population as being essential for answering their research questions (Pascoe, 2014). A sample of four full-time South African journalism students who consistently attended the same private institution of higher learning was identified. Although only four respondents were involved in this study, the sample size is consistent with qualitative research tradition that emphasizes depth, richness and meaning-making over numerical representation. Prior qualitative research also demonstrates that saturation can be achieved with small, purposive samples. Guest et al. (2006), for instance, found that core themes emerged in the study within the first six interviews, while Hennink et al. (2017) reported code saturation with as few as three interviews. The respondents, accounting for twenty per cent of the potential population for this study, were approached via WhatsApp and in person to explain the purpose of the research, and obtain their consent and availability to participate in the study. Anonymity was assured along with their right to withdraw from the research at any time. The respondents were given tags R1 – R4 to ensure anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and May 2025 at the convenient times for the respondents and on the campus. This choice was made based on the notion that, as the campus was familiar to the respondents, it would be easy to access, but would also provide a safe space for these individuals, especially in light of the sensitive topics the questions address. The semi-structured interviews consisted of six main questions with one to two sub-questions per question. Using the literature as a guide, these semi-structured interviews sought data on the following: (i) the students' motivations for studying journalism; (ii) the exposure the students had to journalism in their previous years of study; (iii) the incorporation of information relating to on-going wars into their studies; (iv) the primary sources utilized by the students relating to on-going wars; (v) how the students approached these sources; and (vi) the transformation of their perceptions in relation to these sources. The advantage of in-person interviews is the flexibility they offer in terms of space for follow-up questions (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Thus, the interviewer was able to adapt to the interviewee's voluntary responses as well as the spontaneous non-verbal cues presented by the interviewee in terms of framing follow-up questions.

During the interviews, data were collected via the use of written notes and audio recordings, that the interviewees had consented to through a consent form. Each interview lasted between eleven and twenty-five minutes, depending on the length of the interviewees' answers and the need for follow-up questions or clarification. In terms of the respondents' thoughts on their interviews, these were generally

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positive. After the interviews were completed, the transcription of the data was undertaken by the researchers.

While content analysis was initially intended as the data analysis method, the level of detail provided by the respondents necessitated thematic analysis be used as well. The researchers created codes based on the research questions and the data provided by the respondents (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). The researchers deductively analyzed the transcripts in accordance with the research questions. Thus, the researchers coded for the transformation of the students' perceptions, their perceptions of journalistic ethics and the mass media content they used as sources in relation to digital mainstream war reporting. Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) employed thematic analysis and inductive coding in their research into the ways in which journalistic ethics are perceived by their respondents. This limited methodology would not have been suitable for the current study as the research questions were quite clear regarding the content needed to meet the research objectives. However, the addition of thematic analysis and inductive coding proved useful in providing the researchers with surprising findings. Four themes emerged from the data as discussed below. The employment of the various data analysis methods enhanced the capacity of the researchers to meet the research objectives in a qualitative and in-depth manner.

Results

This section presents the results of the data collected from the interviews. In summary, the central findings reveal a transformation in the respondents' perceptions of journalism in relation to digital mainstream war reporting, alongside a reconfiguration of their understanding of journalistic ethics and professional identity. These findings contribute theoretically by illustrating how exposure to digital mainstream media practices, such as visibility, and algorithmic prioritization, shapes students' ethical reasoning and identity formation as emerging journalists. In this regard, journalism is not merely understood as a technical practice but as an ethically situated profession, negotiated through ongoing engagement with digital war reporting.

Theme 1: Transformation of Students' Perceptions of Journalism in Relation to Digital Mainstream War Reporting

The researchers sought to establish whether the four third-year South African PIHL journalism students digital sources of information used about ongoing wars had transformed their perceptions of journalism. The dominant voice indicated that a transformative effect had taken place: 'Yes' (R1); 'Definitely' (R2); 'I would say yes' (R3); 'Yes, it has' (R4).

For the each of the respondents, exposure to digital war reporting demonstrated the importance of journalistic ethics in relation to realistic ethical challenges: 'For me it, it showed me personally the type

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of depth that I need to go into to get my type of information and how correct my information needs to be as we've been taught now in our final year as well, that, you know, when we have our information, we need to have resources to back it up' (R1); 'I had to take into account their biases' (R2); 'I think obviously with the increase in war, you see a lot more journalism reporting and there are instances where I question, "Did this need to be published? Is this actually influencing"' (R3); 'The manner in which all these events are being reported, it really does show you how the same event can be perceived by so many different people. I guess that that is why it is important to remain objective from here' (R4).

The respondents' motivations for studying journalism were also discussed to further understand the transformation of their perceptions. Interviewee responses included: 'I chose to study journalism as it's an interesting field to be in. It's one that looks like it will open many doors. Like people just look at journalism as you sitting and writing stories. But there's actually more to it where you actually go out you gather your own type of information. You have the opportunity to also give the community or even the world a different view of what they expect or what they view like they hear it from different people' (R1); 'I'm interested in how journalism and what is presented in the media impacts the way people think and their beliefs and how they then behave in the world' (R4).

Further, the respondents clarified their choice to study journalism rather than work in the field immediately: 'Like I said previously, wanting to actually do reporting. I think it's extremely important to have theory before, like practical work. So that was definitely the biggest motivator for choosing it' (R3); I am happy that it's part of the modules because it really does make you see like the intricacies of journalism like how what is presented to you, the way it was intended to be presented to you and how it was, how it will affect your mind' (R4).

This data shows that the transformation of the students' perceptions of journalistic ethics through exposure to digital mainstream war reporting is possible. Further, the data indicates that while the transformation is unique to each respondent, the forms of these transformations are founded on motivations for studying journalism rooted in human-centered values.

Theme 2: The Respondents' Qualifications of Ethics in Relation to Learning Through Digital Mainstream War Reporting

This study sought to understand the varied perceptions through which the respondents defined journalistic ethics, in the context of digital mainstream war reporting. The respondents related their qualifications of journalistic ethics in terms of the effects of these ethics, or lack thereof: 'I obviously have to have like a resource behind me. So I need to back my information up knowing that the information I have is obviously linking to what people are thinking or what people are assuming and if they are assuming wrong, I need to also have backup to, you know, to say this is the reason why your information

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isn't correct and here are the resources why' (R1); 'I think that being objective, impartial and ethical is very, very, very important because like facts are facts and when you can have an opinion as a journalist, there are things that could be persuaded to be wrong or right, but facts are facts. You need to be transparent and like no propaganda' (R2); 'We exist in a world where there is a lot of opinions, a lot of bias towards reporting and having to include opinions would mean shaping how other people view things' (R3).

An equivalence between objectivity, impartiality and neutrality was made with the understanding that, as one respondent put it, 'to be impartial is to be like with neither one nor the other' (R4). Further, a surprising perspective concerning the framing of objectivity in a negative light was provided: 'I do understand the importance of being objective, but I also believe that it can unintentionally cause harm, especially to an oppressed party because it feels like the same as ignoring to me' (R4).

This data shows that the respondents' perceptions of journalistic ethics are not only important but varied in relation to their exposure to digital mainstream war reporting. While certain respondents focused on the consequences of the unethical practice of journalism, other respondents demonstrated concern with the subjective application of these ethics in journalistic practice.

Theme 3: The Professionalization of Journalism Students in a Space of Negotiation: The Digital Classroom

None of the respondents indicated that they had been able to partake of journalistic internships or experience work-integrated learning. Rather, the use of digital media in the study of journalism is a prevalent theme in the respondents' answers. To clarify, one of the respondents expressed optimism towards the research opportunities that the journalism assignments opened up to them. The lecturers and textbooks ('we were given a textbook last year' (R4)) for usual study served as a baseline for the respondents from which they could branch into what they optimistically viewed as research opportunities for journalism assignments: 'Nothing practical, I would say outside of like creating new stories for yourself and more theory' (R3); 'And then we also had to conduct our own research for our assignments. We have to look up our own journalism articles, newspapers, and all of those things' (R4). Each of the respondents employed digital and social media to obtain information relating to ongoing wars during their studies. They included websites, online newspapers and social media platforms in their responses: 'So, a lot of our information will definitely come from, like, the online news, the TikTok, Instagram. You can even get your news now even on WhatsApp as well' (R1).

One of the respondents indicated that their lecturers employed examples of war reporting to demonstrate the proper and improper applications of journalistic ethics: 'I wouldn't say it was curricular incorporated. I would say it was more interest-incorporated. So, topics would come up about like ethics

of journalism reporting and a lot of it was based on, “Did you see the war in Gaza? Did you see the war in Ukraine?” These are examples of how ethics is applied. These are examples of how it shouldn't be applied’ (R3). However, one respondent expressed concern with a lack of focus on and the absence of intense discussion of ongoing war reporting in their journalism lectures which they asserted the topic deserved: ‘Not really in the sense of that is because we focus more on media and what was happening in today's day and age. Recently this year, we talked about the Trump situation overseas. There's parts of it where the war was introduced into journalism but not into the depth that it should have been’ (R1).

Concerns were also raised by one of the respondents regarding their journalism lecturer’s teaching preference. The respondent smiled, finding it humorous to make comparisons: ‘Well, I think in this generation now like the people now especially like in college, they not really like into newspapers because I did, like my journalism teacher right now, she is old school in the type, where she would rather stick with newspapers rather than digital media and us, nowadays, we'd rather be in digital media rather than newspapers’ (R1).

Nevertheless, one respondent indicated that their lecturers were vital in assisting them in navigating digital media websites deemed objective sources of information. The dominant voice indicated that the respondents were exposed to war reporting from digital mainstream media sources, including the websites of News24, the BBC, The Washington Post, The Guardian and Al Jazeera. In addition, one respondent indicated that other mainstream media websites, such as the New York Times, were recommended by their lecturers: ‘I did take the information, and from there I'd start fact checking everything I received. I do verify and fact check using the New York Times, sometimes, depending on the type of war I'm looking at and also Reuters. I think Reuters. Simply because they're very objective in their reporting’ (R3); So when I approached those sites and I was told by my lecturers, they're more objective sites who don't necessarily do opinion pieces, but just, facts, it definitely put a new perspective on to I shouldn't be as trusting’ (R3).

This data shows that the lecturer serves as the entry point through which the journalism student is exposed to digital mainstream war reporting. However, the data suggests that various complications arise from relying on a subjective authority in the professionalization of journalism students in the current digital age.

Theme 4: Examining Ethical Ambivalence in the Construction of Digital Mainstream War Narratives

It is evident that despite the respondents’ lack of experience with real ethical challenges, digital media has served as a tool for experiencing such and helping them formulate their own opinions. The respondents generally referred to the ambivalent quality that digital media gives to ethical journalistic

practices. Specifically, digital media was framed as a tool that could be employed for ethical practices in relation to war reporting: ‘So I feel like being able to use like, TikTok or Facebook, being able to see what it means to be a journalist, what it means to actually go out into these war zones, go out into daily life, take pictures, be ethical, be objective would be very engaging, very active in your learning instead of just a passive learning’ (R3). Two of the respondents also singled out one particular digital media site, Reuters, as being particularly objective in terms of digital war reporting: ‘Reuters because, whilst it is written by people, I'm assuming, their stance is very objective, like it isn't really storytelling. It's more they just present you with the facts and then you read the facts and there isn't really like words where it's like this is bad or this is good’ (R2); ‘But then when you look at companies like Reuters, they offer both sides, which I feel is great in terms of you getting both perspectives’ (R3).

Respondents were also concerned with the capacity for digital media to promote unethical journalistic practices in relation to digital war reporting: ‘Digital media can now be fake. It can be also alternated like you can have, like you, as a journalist, can now put your information out knowing that you had the right information, but somebody else can take your information, alter it and then now say, “This is what you've presented”. So, it can be manipulated, it can be changed’ (R1); ‘I feel like the way in which the news is like worded really matters, because even simple words, if you just say them in a different way, even though they might mean the same thing, it might come across in a completely different way. TikTok and Instagram news isn't really reliable because there's often like no credible sources that these people use when they speak about the wars. And then when you look at actual news agencies, you still have to remember how they can be biased or not entirely truthful’ (R4).

This data shows that the respondents can think in-depth regarding digital media as a tool for both ethical and unethical journalistic practices in terms of war reporting. The respondents’ beliefs in the objectivity of certain online media organizations do not appear to detract from their concerns surrounding the inherent capacity of digital media to create ethical challenges for war reporters.

The above findings bring the discussion to the present study’s theoretical lenses of political economy and agenda-setting, including its subset framing, which enable the consideration of the possibly unethical ways in which journalism may be conducted. The lecture room context of the present study highlights that the various factors involved in students’ construction of meaning for the purpose of studying ethics must be explored. Specifically, we considered the presence of political economy, agenda-setting and framing in war reporting and their relation to the respondents’ qualification of ethics. The four respondents for this study were initially unsure of the abovementioned terms, displaying hesitance and confusion. However, the respondents were able to qualify these theoretical perspectives after they had been placed into the context of the study, namely, digital mainstream war reporting.

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The overarching view amongst the respondents defined political economy as a journalistic challenge: 'I think it's definitely something that has to be taken into account. A news source should be for the people by the people. But at the end of the day, you do have to account for things like money, political economy, the laws in your country. So you may not be able to report on specific situations which might cause bias as it might also lead to agenda setting or framing a specific narrative that you need to push out because of where you live or your circumstances or anything like that' (R2).

What is surprising is that a minority of the respondents did not construe political economy in terms of media theory: 'The political economy, I feel, is a blend of your trade and your relationships more on the political scale, being it international relations, be it national relations between leaders' (R3). A possible explanation for this understanding might be that the context of the discussion was the reporting of war in the media, leading respondents to think about the actual subject of war, rather than the circumstances surrounding its portrayal. This study found that the dominant understanding amongst the respondents, in terms of agenda-setting and framing, related to its use as a journalistic tool: 'Agenda setting is framing the narrative, essentially reporting on news that a person or a company deems more important than the rest of the news, and that influences the hot topic at the moment' (R3).

The researchers also explored the respondents' thoughts about the presence of agenda-setting and political economy in relation to information concerning ongoing wars: **'**Well, my personal perception is I don't think anything can be that objective. Like I think there still is a voice behind every… cause at the end of the day, every corporation has its own message that it's trying to say to people. So, whilst it can be objective like Reuters, I think it is like some sort of subjectivity to it' (R2).

Respondents were apprehensive about the possible ideological consequences of these unethical journalistic challenges: 'In terms of digital media too, not necessarily like news sites, but I think it falls into the agenda setting of you only receiving what you want to receive such that I support one side of the war and I will only receive information that supports my ideals and views' (R3); 'Because it is human nature to like, choose sides and we all have our own thoughts and opinions about things so I feel like complete objectivity or impartiality is impossible, especially when things like human rights, human lives are in the, are at play because we all have our own beliefs, especially in times of war, when there's often two sides. You know, people generally, well naturally gravitate towards one side' (R4).

References were also made to the possible consequences that unethical journalism may have for the maintenance of peace amongst opposing sides in war: 'A lot of the times like I know when the war happened in Ukraine, a lot of them were just making one party look like they were the bad type of people and then the other, like the other party, they were looking like, "OK, this is the innocent type of people". But you're not looking at the backstory of it, that, here could have been two sides to the story that you didn't hear, but you just looking at the people that were just, you know, in the war they doing this, but

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you don't understand. You haven't spoken to them to understand why they were doing what they were doing. You need to understand, you need to have a wider range, like you need to broaden your mentality, should I say, according to that, because a lot of people will be supporting one party and this party. And then there's also going to be commotion, there's going to be unnecessary events that will take place. So, I feel like there was a separation where people were, they did succeed most likely because a lot of people were like, “OK, these people were wrong in what they were doing” and then they looking at the other party and be like, why weren't they doing this? Why weren't they doing that? Why weren’t they taking action?”. But they didn't understand the reasons why so…’ (R1).

This data suggests that respondents hold contradictory views of digital mainstream media war reporting in relation to the ethical nature of practices employed by the organizations involved. Specifically, the respondents use the possibility of consequences to frame their understanding of the abovementioned ethical challenges. The data also shows that, despite learning in the lecture room, rather than the newsroom, these students can learn somewhat realistically and think in-depth about journalistic challenges they have yet to encounter.

Discussion

Theme 1: Transformation of Students’ Perceptions of Journalism in Relation to Digital Mainstream War Reporting

The researchers’ main objective was to investigate whether the sources the respondents used for war reporting had transformed their perceptions of journalism. The results of this study reveal that the respondents’ perceptions of journalism in relation to exposure to digital mainstream war reporting transformed into realistic understandings of journalistic practices. Despite never entering the newsroom, the ethical values of impartiality, objectivity, neutrality and accountability became of greater importance to these respondents. The finding demonstrates that it is possible to use real-world media not only to teach realistic journalistic ethics but to encourage in young minds the idea that ethical journalism should continue to be pursued as the standard for disseminating important information to a wide audience. This finding contrasts with the assertion by Fierens et al. (2023) that internships serve as a superior tool for transforming limited perceptions of journalism held by journalism students. This difference may exist as a result of the present study’s in-depth exploration of students who never had the opportunity to participate in realistic work experience but rather were given a better understanding through digital sources. Further, as the findings suggest, the respondents were motivated to study journalism due to their interest in the profession. Similarly, Lunga (2015) demonstrated that despite being convinced by the reputation of their chosen place of study, South African first-year university journalism students’ choice of journalism study reflects varied feelings ranging from a passion for journalism to frustration

with the pressure of journalism being a compulsory subject. Thus, the present study provides insight into the transformation of the understandings of journalism as held by those students not directly experiencing war. These findings may be applied in practice to journalism modules that take into account the unique perspectives of aspiring journalists. To clarify, best practices should be employed to help the students gain a realistic understanding of the journalistic field while simultaneously accounting for their personal motivations.

Theme 2: The Respondents' Qualifications of Ethics in Relation to Learning Through Digital Mainstream War Reporting

The secondary objective involved exploring the respondents' perceptions of journalism in relation to war reporting. The findings suggest that the respondents' perceptions became realistic and multi-layered in terms of acquired meanings. While certain types of ethics became more important to the students, they also considered certain community-based values. Nevertheless, these perceptions were centered on the respondents' concerns about the negative implications of unethical journalistic practice for community members.

Ethics in war reporting, as understood by journalism students, has been investigated to an extent in the literature. The literature shows that journalism students perceive that a situation-sensitive understanding of ethics amongst journalists is essential to ensure that threats such as false information are minimized in the context of war (Kodrich, 2003; Fiialka & Kornieva (2024). As Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) aptly describe, in their investigation of Ukrainian journalism students studying during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, that the respondents believed that journalists should report information in a manner that is accurate and objective, while simultaneously being empathetic towards victims of war. The suggestions by the respondents in the present study support the findings by Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) that to avoid unethical journalistic behavior, journalists should approach digital war reporting more objectively by ensuring: (i) that their sources are supported, (ii) their diction should be more considerate of war victims and (iii) they need to consider the possibility of multiple interpretations of any information shared, by people of various backgrounds.

The results also demonstrate that irrespective of their location, journalism students understand the importance of journalists practicing ethical journalism to ensure that conflict is not heightened through their choice of diction. Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) made a similar finding as their respondents argued that war reporting should remain fair and objective, accommodating more subjective, human-centered journalistic practices. However, the present study takes into account the framing of journalistic ethics in terms of cultural norms, with the possibility that the above-mentioned ethics of impartiality and objectivity may not be as rigidly incompatible with South African JET and democratic, public service-style journalism as scholars such as Botma (2016) contend. However, it could also be argued that the above-

mentioned respondents appear to pursue journalism largely based on westernized journalistic ethics with human-centered African ethics as an added vantage point. It would be expected that, given the four respondents are studying in South Africa, they would adopt the African principle of Ubuntu, which dictates that journalists should conduct their practices with the welfare, normative values and perspectives of local community members in mind (Fourie, 2018; Scott et al., 2022). This choice could be based on the respondents' notions that these ethics could serve as a vehicle for seeing their personal values and goals realized. To prepare future journalists for the ethical complexities of global media environments, students must be equipped with the skills to critically engage with and co-create ethical frameworks that draw from both Western and African traditions. While Western journalistic ethics foreground principles such as truth-telling, independence, and accountability, African ethics emphasize communal responsibility, empathy, and social harmony. Encouraging students to navigate and integrate these values throughout their education enables them to move beyond passive adoption toward active ethical reflection and innovation. Through this process, students learn to internalize and adapt ethical principles that are not only professionally rigorous but also culturally resonant and socially responsive. Cultivating such ethical co-creation within journalism education ensures that graduates emerge as reflective practitioners—capable of balancing global standards of professionalism with the moral and relational sensibilities embedded in African worldviews.

Theme 3: The Professionalization of Journalism Students in a Space of Negotiation: The Digital Classroom

The researchers also sought to situate the respondents' perceptions of journalism in relation to war reporting within the environments they exist. The results demonstrate the influence of the lecturer over the respondents' choice and perception of digital media sources in war reporting. The results reveal that lecturers may provide more perspectives on sources of digital mainstream war reporting. Lunga (2015) found through her study, that the position of the lecturer predisposes their influence over choices and actions taken by their students. However, the findings also suggest that the lecturer's influence may lead to confusion regarding the ethical nature of certain sources. Thus, the present study considered the respondents' subjective opinions on educational authority.

The transformation of the students' perceptions into a realistic state, presents a challenge to those studies which frame the lecture room as unsuitable for learning realistic journalistic ethics. Learning on the job, or work-integrated learning, may not be as beneficial to South African and other journalism students (Bruns, 2019; Fulton et al., 2021; Fierens et al., 2023). While a quantitative survey by Bromley et al. (2012) demonstrated that British journalism students who only experienced classroom learning share a uniform perspective of journalism, Reinardy and Jensen (2007) determined that American journalism students who had only experienced the lecture room value journalistic ethics more than those

who experienced work-integrated learning. Thus, the varied perceptions of journalism held by the respondents in the present study suggest that the lecture room, with adjustment for digital media, may not be as limited in terms of fostering multiple strains of thought. Rather, the updated lecture room in the twenty-first century, particularly in the South African context, may be an appropriate place to transform monotonous views on journalistic ethics and ensure that journalism continues to have an ethical basis.

However, the results suggest shortcomings where the perspectives of professional working journalists are absent. Where there is no access to workplace sources, such as working journalists, news editors, etc. for students, as Bruns (2019) recommends, then it becomes necessary to scrutinize ways in which these respondents are exposed to journalistic values, particularly in the current digital age. Both Bruns (2019) and Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) contend that student exposure to working professional journalists would provide a realistic understanding of the profession. Students who are studying during wartime need to meet war reporters (Fiialka & Kornieva, 2024). The abovementioned lack of focus by journalism lecturers on war reporting may be because South Africa is not currently experiencing any ongoing wars, so other issues are more important. Therefore, these findings highlight the shortcomings of South African JET. The lack of exposure to real workplace sources may result in journalism students struggling to understand their own ethical practices in demanding, real-time situations. This concern is especially heightened if the lecturers are not also professional journalists.

Theme 4: Examining Ethical Ambivalence in the Construction of Digital Mainstream War Narratives

The third objective involved analyzing the mass media sources that these respondents employed as sources of information in relation to war reporting. Building on the preceding points and insights, this section discusses the mass media content that respondents engaged with as sources of information about ongoing wars. The results provide insight into student conceptualizations of the above-mentioned digital threats to journalistic ethics and their related implications. Through a qualitative methodology, the study demonstrated that South African journalism students possess a multi-layered understanding of the integration of digital media in their journalism studies. The findings demonstrate ambivalent attitudes amongst the respondents regarding digital media as tools for ethically conveying journalistic information. Alternatively, the focus by Fiialka and Kornieva (2024) on the disadvantages of using technology to study during war was that their respondents found that online educational programs available through the Internet were less thorough than traditional education sources. This suggests that the educational needs and focus of journalism students vary according to the circumstances they face, with the proximity to war significantly altering their ideas of the disadvantages of digital media.

Further, the results reveal that the respondents hold two conflicting views simultaneously. Having definitive opinions on political economy, agenda-setting and framing, they criticize the above-mentioned

unethical mainstream media practices. This finding aligns with Hanusch and Mellado (2014), who found that South African final-year university journalism students believed that journalists should be critical of public authorities. However, the respondents believe that these same media organizations also serve as trustworthy sources to verify information. This belief is concerning because JET students are unable to experience the newsroom pressures of external advertising interests and editorial sway over journalists' political output (Bruns, 2019; Bergman, 2020). The present study contributes to previous research, which has been limited to the earlier forms of print and television broadcast war reporting, particularly as perceived by educational authorities (Kodrich, 2003; Fiialka & Kornieva, 2024). Previous studies have failed to provide insight into the transferring of ethics through digital media to students, particularly in the South African context (Galatsopoulou et al., 2022; Kirchhoff, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Katzenberger, 2024). Therefore, JET institutions may utilize these findings to integrate digital media, to prepare inexperienced students for contemporary ethical challenges. Media organizations, too, could utilize these findings to ensure that these students will employ ethical practices for the sake of the profession and not the political-economic demands of those in power.

Conclusion

This paper presented the results of research into journalism students' perceptions of journalistic ethics in relation to digital mainstream war reporting. The objectives of the study were to investigate the transformation of their perceptions, explore these perceptions and analyze the mass media sources they employed in relation to war reporting. Data collected via four semi-structured interviews with third-year journalism students at a private higher education institution revealed that while the respondents' perceptions of journalistic ethics through their exposure to digital mainstream war reporting became realistic, and the respondents' perceived certain journalistic ethics as necessary in navigating ethical challenges. Further, the data show that the lecturer is a complicated role-player in terms of introducing the respondents to digital media, an ethically complex journalistic tool. The data also shows that contradictory views of digital mainstream media war reporting in relation to the (un)ethical nature of the practices employed by the organizations involved, exist.

The study's qualitative design was suitable for deriving in-depth answers from the respondents regarding their perceptions. However, this may have served as a limitation in determining causal factors. The generalization of the findings is limited by the small number of respondents. Future researchers may use this study as inspiration for comparing the use of digital media in the classroom to work-integrated learning in South African journalism education and training. Moreover, a quantitative study using similar parameters to the present study may benefit from a larger number of respondents from multiple institutions.

Considering the findings of this study, JET institutions may benefit from incorporating work-integrated learning into the modules they offer to first-year journalism students. The inclusion of industry practitioners in the lecture room may also enhance the realism of journalistic ethics taught to students. Further, JET institutions should consider developing partnerships with media organizations through in-service training for journalism students. Thus, students would be provided with their own experiences of the criteria needing to be met in the development of their personal and professional ethics and values as journalists in training.

In terms of the theoretical contribution of this paper, the theories of political economy and media agenda-setting have been explored in terms of demonstrating the way in which these theories can be used to investigate student perceptions of the media as well as journalism education itself in the modern South African context. Highlighting the challenges of corporate interests and intentional media bias to JET students and researchers alike ensures that journalism remains a profession grounded in realism. Therefore, this study has demonstrated that for JET institutions, there remains the task of enabling students to meaningfully confront unethical media practices they may encounter throughout their journalistic careers.

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