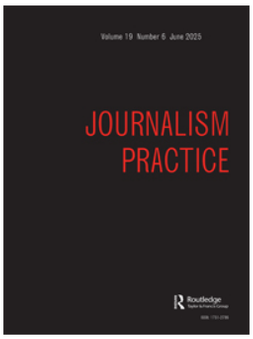

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Journalism and Ethical Praxis: A Thematic Analysis of Journalism Ethics Across Five European Countries

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ABSTRACT

The importance of high-quality, ethically sound journalism in sustaining a healthy democratic and deliberative public sphere is well established. However, recent trends suggest a lack of public trust in journalism (Fink 2019. "The Biggest Challenge Facing Journalism: A Lack of Trust." Journalism; OECD 2024. Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions—2024 Results) coupled with a range of online challenges to ethically sourced news warrant a closer look at the role that journalism ethics play in the working lives of journalists. This paper provides a thematic analysis of twenty-seven interviews with journalists in five European countries ranked consistently at the top of media freedom rankings, to explore the role of ethical frameworks and codes in their day-to-day practice. Overall, though ethical frameworks appear to play a role in the background in terms of shaping ethical behaviour, our interviewees signal that they are highly valued in terms of guiding their decisions and enhancing their brand. However, our research also highlights that there is concern about the wider communication environment and declining public trust. We suggest that this is a problem that journalism ethics bodies should address urgently given the widespread penetration of disinformation and misinformation within the news ecology and the concomitant erosion of public faith in mainstream news. The paper concludes by suggesting ways that this might be achieved.

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Journalism ethics; trust in journalism; media regulation; journalistic identity; news audiences; interviews with journalists

Introduction

This article presents findings from interviews with twenty-seven journalists in five European countries to explore the role that journalism ethics play in their professional lives. These interviews were conducted as part of a body of ongoing work examining regulator,

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public and journalistic parameters of ethics and trust which looks to address the knowledge gap that exists between regulators, audiences and news publishers and journalists (Firmstone and Steel 2022; Fox et al. 2023). We examine how journalists envisage their practice in relation to ethical frameworks[1] and codes to understand how ethics codes are used and for what purpose. In doing so the article draws to light the nuanced ways in which journalists' ethical identities play out in their respective areas of journalism practice adding qualitative insights to current survey-based understandings (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). A qualitative understanding of the role of ethics in the production of journalistically produced news is particularly significant in the context of declining levels of trust in news media, the increased use by audiences of alternative sources of news such as news influencers, and the growing apparent influence of non-professional and professional dis and misinformation actors. The position taken is that given the disruptive power of digital platforms on journalism ethics, coupled with more recent challenges which undermine trust in the news (Newman 2023), it is crucially important to continue to interrogate the utility and use of ethics codes and frameworks in combatting threats to the public sphere and to develop a clear response to such challenges. Our research question is:

> RQ: How do journalists make sense of and experience journalism ethics in their day to day working lives in countries that enjoy high levels of press freedom?

The rationale for our focus on "high performing" countries in the Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) rankings is to understand the role of codes of ethics in countries where ethical standards and levels of public trust in journalism are high. Though such measures are not without their problems (Schneider 2013; Tunç 2020) they help scholars and journalists alike identify exemplars within the field. By critically interrogating these exemplars, we hope to more clearly identify key challenges, especially those brought by digital platforms to trust in journalism more broadly.

Literature Review

Journalism ethics is broadly defined as a set of principles that guide journalists in their day-to-day practice which enable them to fulfil key functions of journalism in liberal societies (Ward 2018, 2013). The Worlds of Journalism Studies (Hanitzsch, Plaisance, and Skewes 2013) suggest that a well-developed sense of ethics goes hand in hand with a well-developed journalism culture, noting that "it follows that the sophistication and ambition of professional journalism ethics might reflect the relative state of development of countries' journalism cultures" (Hanitzsch, Plaisance, and Skewes 2013, 30). In exploring the role of journalism ethics in exemplar countries, we need to establish how journalists position themselves normatively in relation to ethics in order to do the work that they do. This requires an appreciation of the common values that drive ethical approaches. Here, we aim to add to understanding of what Ward terms the "macro" problems of what news media should do, given their role in society rather than to document the intricacies of the "micro" problems of what individual journalists should do in particular situations (Ward 2009, 296). We look to ethical codes and frameworks to see what they show us about the ethical values that represent overarching beliefs about the role and function of journalism, and which guide specific behaviours and actions at the micro-ethical level (Firmstone 2022).

The ethics of journalism as a profession are most commonly defined and expressed in formal written codes of ethics published by news organisations, regulatory bodies like press councils, or trade unions. Codes "ostensibly state the professional credos of journalists and the media personnel, stipulating permissible and forbidden behaviour as well as obligations to society" (Himelboim and Limor 2008, 255). By ethical frameworks we are referring to both those written statements intended to guide journalists' ethical practice that are developed within organisations or externally by press councils or media regulators; and the unwritten institutional culture that is part of the identity of the news organisation and professional culture of journalism.

One of the most wide-ranging studies is Himelboim and Limor's (2010) analysis of 242 codes of ethics from 94 countries which focusses on media institutions and organisations and suggests that codes of ethics "are the professional face media and journalistic organizations display for their peers, members, public, and government" (2010, 89). Moreover, analyses of written codes of ethics find that the dominant intention is one of guiding the actions of journalists, though, in some cases, they also refer to disciplinary and public-facing functions (Fox et al. 2023). Indeed, there has been a growth in scholarship on codes of ethics and how they might apply on a global scale (Ward 2013, 2018), in different regions of the world (Hafez 2002), as well as more localised ones (Wasserman 2011; Wasserman and Rao 2008).

Previous research has also studied how press council codes of ethics have developed in different country contexts and across time (Bertrand 1978; Jones 1980; Pritchard and Morgan 1989; Laitila 1995; Koene 2009). Fielden's (2012) analyses of press councils were written in response to the UK's *News of the World* hacking scandal in 2011 and explored different tensions within press regulation systems in different national contexts. Though valuable, these studies are quite dated and have largely neglected to examine ethical frameworks as experienced and perceived by journalists in their day-to-day practice. Moreover, since these studies, significant changes have occurred across the news media ecology, including the impact of social media platforms, continued decline in trust as well as the rise in disinformation.

As Slattery (2016, 2) notes journalists' codes of ethics position journalists as "morally responsible practitioners." As such ethics codes and frameworks are intended to guide journalistic practice. How journalists go on to experience these ethical frameworks in their day-to-day work, however, is in our view, however, underresearched. That noted, Mauri-Ríos et al. (2018, 223), conducted a mixed-method study on perceptions of press councils as a "regulatory" instrument from the European and the Arab-Mediterranean contexts. The study concluded that for the most part, press councils and media-produced regulatory systems do not seem to have much influence on the ethical behaviour of journalists, with legislation having more influence (Ibid., 237). However, Fengler et al. 2015 indicated that internal organisational codes are more effective than those from outside bodies such as regulators which come without direct sanction, though there are variations across countries with well-established regulatory mechanisms.

There is no doubt that there is a need for an "ethics of integrity for media professionals" (Christians 2010, 6), with the continued changes in the journalism landscape (Deuze 2008). The contemporary news landscape presents itself as a shifting news ecology (Firmstone 2016, 2), as we are confronted by new definitions of what it is to be a journalist today (Johnston and Wallace 2017, 850) and as journalists grapple with a crisis of

journalistic authority (Vos and Thomas 2018). Also relevant attempt to address key challenges of legitimacy and trust in journalism as an institution as journalists and news organisations look to new ways of reassuring their audiences amidst apparent declining levels of trust (Fink 2019; OECD 2024). With the advent of social media (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019); "deep fakes" (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020), AI driven journalism (Smith 2024), and strategies of mis and dis-information (Hameleers, Brosius, and de Vreese 2022) the role of journalism ethics in differentiating between legitimate journalism and other forms of public communication is ever more urgent. Amidst such change, digital-only media have sprung up in response to these shifts and taken advantage of the opportunity to provide alternative forms of news and an (ongoing) reshaping of the professional parameters of journalism (Wu 2017; Stringer 2018). Yet recent studies funded by the European Commission have indicated that only 33.1% of journalists as opposed to 70.7% of press councils considered that ethics codes have adequately responded to the challenges of digitisation (Masip, Suau, and Ruiz 2023). Similarly, Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj (2015) highlight how press councils and ethics codes have not adequately responded to the challenges of the digital realm.

Given that ethical journalism is key to building and maintaining trust among the public (Gibson et al. 2022; Culver and Lee 2019) it is arguably in the interests of the public and journalists themselves to have an unambiguous set of ethical and normative standards with which they can be effectively judged. Journalists, press councils and regulators, and audiences are therefore key agents in addressing the challenges of declining trust and legitimacy in news. Rather than solely focussing on the normative and regulatory context of journalism ethics, however, we borrow from George, Zeng and Mazumdar's emphasis on ideals and the "actually existing practice" of journalists (2021, 1281; see also Plaisance 2014). As such we focus on the praxis of news work by examining how journalists reflect on their engagement with ethical frameworks in their practice. We adopt the term "praxis" as a way of linking often abstract ethical ideas to their experiences and practices as journalists (Barkho 2017). In other words, we ask how journalists make sense of and experience journalism ethics in their working lives.

Research Design and Method

The choice and selection of the countries we studied were determined by the extent to which these countries perform consistently well on the various media performance indicators as compiled by NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders (https://rsf.org/en) and Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org). Though such indices are not without their problems (Schneider 2013; Tunç 2020), they offer a set of benchmarks that can be used to help identify countries that are considered to be performing well across a range of parameters related to their news media environment, ethics and regulatory cultures. By focussing on countries judged to be performing well on these measures we can examine the experiences of journalists working in what are, according to such measures, optimal conditions for media freedom, a well-functioning system of press regulation, high levels of media plurality and a well-established ethical culture. The five countries in our sample have consistently performed well in recent years, with Norway and Finland always ranked among the top five countries over the past six years and Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland largely being ranked within the top ten countries over

the same period. Though levels of trust in news are not high anywhere, these countries also rank comparatively highly in terms of audience perceptions of trust in news. Finland consistently has the highest level of trust worldwide (59%) and, in 2019 Denmark (57%) and the Netherlands (53%) were close behind, and though at 46% trust was lower in Sweden and Norway, it was higher than in the UK (40%) (Newman et al. 2019).

The dataset for this paper is drawn from twenty-seven open-ended semi-structured interviews consisting of approximately forty questions, with the responses to the questions thematically analysed (Braun et al. 2019). Our study sample (see Table 1.) spanned quality and popular national newspaper/news magazine journalists from both centre left and centre right publications local journalists[2]; investigative journalists working for national publications and journalists working for digital-only news organisations. Interviews were conducted across the professional spectrum, with senior journalists and editors through to beat journalists. All but those drawn from digital-only organisations are identified as being part of the legacy news sector and work within well-established newspapers, with high circulation rates and audience numbers. The digital-only category includes journalists working for startup digital-only ventures. We are of course all too aware that much of what constitutes legacy news media is now significantly geared towards online but these tend to be well-established brands (Nelson 2020) as opposed to new digital-only entrants. Here we are mindful that digital start-ups and what Nichols, Shabbir, and Nielsen (2016) term "digital-born" news providers "are not simply extensions of legacy media" but tend to be "smaller […] in terms of reach, resources and revenues […] giving voice to viewpoints marginalised elsewhere and engaging more directly with younger people less loyal to legacy media" (2016, 8).

The interviewees were recruited via email based on their fit with the categories outlined above. Each interview was conducted face-to-face in the interviewee's home country in late 2018 and Spring 2019 and was digitally recorded and transcribed. Given the cultural and linguistic differences within Switzerland, we included two digital-only news journalists, differentiated here as CH_06 and CH_06x. Similarly, for the Netherlands, we were given the opportunity to interview an additional local journalist, hence the inclusion of NL_4x. Anonymity was guaranteed so no identifiable information was provided.

Table 1. Journalists interviewed in each country split by beat and assigned ID code.

	Respondent Code: Switzerland	Respondent Code: Finland	Respondent Code: Denmark	Respondent Code: Norway	Respondent Code: Netherlands
National Quality Right	CH_01	FI_01	DK_01	NO_01	NL_01
National Quality Left	CH_02	FI_02	DK_02	NO_02	NL_02
Investigative	CH_03	FI_03	DK_03	NO_03	NL_03
Local	CH_04	FI_04	DK_04	NO_04	NL_04 NL_04x
Digital-only	CH_06, CH_06x	FI_06	DK_06	NO_06	NL_06
Total number of journalists interviewed	6	5	5	5	6

The transcripts were analysed via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) to identify patterns of meaning across our dataset in response to our research question. Reflexive thematic analysis provides scope for a qualitative mapping of understanding and meaning making and allows us to capture the interpretative horizons through which our interviewees perceive and put into practice codes of ethics and their normative components. Our semi-structured interviews (Seidman 2015) consisted of forty questions that sought to capture the extent to which journalism ethics informed their practice as journalists within their current role and address our research question. The questions were designed to explore five key areas as follows:

1. Their reflections as journalists within a country with a high ranking in the RSF index: questions were intended to elicit responses related to the primacy of independent, accurate and ethically robust journalism and the overall value of press freedom to the profession and wider society.
2. Awareness and understanding of the regulatory environment: questions explored how regulation applies to journalistic work in practice from their experience.
3. Changes in the digital environment: questions examined the extent to which digital innovations challenge journalistic practice and norms.
4. Codes of ethics: questions probed journalists' awareness of codes of ethics in their practice and the extent of their use in their daily work.
5. Questions about reflections on regulatory efficacy and the utility of established regulatory frameworks as a function of upholding journalism standards.

Following a deductive approach in which "coding and theme development are directed by existing concepts and ideas" as identified above we organised interviewees' responses around four themes that were common across the sample, though with some highlighted caveats. These themes concern shared core values, differentiation in the implementation of ethical values, the role of ethics codes and threats and challenges.

Findings

Shared Core values

We found consistency across countries and journalistic types in the core ethical values interviewees described as integral to their work. In discussing their experiences of what it means to practice journalism in a country with high levels of press freedom, journalists described how press freedom upholds conditions that enable them to practice according to standard journalistic norms and values (Deuze 2008), with traditional notions of the journalist being an agent for holding power to account as the ultimate aim. All interviewees from all sectors, across all our countries indicated that core values such as truth seeking and telling, holding power to account, facilitating transparency, the protection of vulnerable people and contributing to the public sphere were integral to their work. For example, FI_01 notes that their "*responsibility is to tell the truth so that not only the details are true but the wider picture is true*". Likewise, NO_04 noted that "*I have to find the answers that the people are looking for. I have to be a guard dog towards the*

government, towards the City Council. I have to make sure there's no abuse of power, for instance." Similarly, "*journalism is about fact-finding, finding the truth*" (NL_03).

Given the dominance, at the time of our interviews, of narratives about the potential for traditional journalistic norms and identities to be disrupted by new digital-only entrants, we were interested in the extent to which normative and ethical values might differ between legacy and digital-only contexts. Rather than being representative of a "new" kind of journalism, digital-only interviewees tended to report examples from their professional histories prior to their entry into the digital-only sector and as such, did not emphasise any distinctive ethical terrain for digital-only journalists. This is unsurprising given the broadly similar career trajectories of our digital-only interviewees, all of them having come from the legacy sector, with some still writing for legacy outlets. Indeed, there was a strong sense across our countries that there should be no difference in terms of journalism's core ethical values across different platforms, as this Swiss respondent notes:

> I think a lot of people say, yeah, it's on the internet, and then it's less good because it's not printed, but I don't feel that way at all, having worked in both. And I also worked for a TV station, actually, and it's the same principles of journalism whether we work online, TV or print. (CH_06x)

Likewise, the respondent working at a Finnish digital-only organisation noted in response to a question about different ethical norms that "*for quality journalism it makes no difference if it is digital or printed*" (FI_06). The implication being that journalism ethics should (and do) apply across the profession and are guided by a core shared set of values. The main area of demarcation came in terms of what is and isn't legitimate journalism within the online sphere, as it was clear that interviewees perceived core journalistic values as under threat from the likes of Facebook "fake news" and other online platforms and, as we see later, saw ethical frameworks as key to maintaining the boundary between professional journalism and "other" communicators.

Differentiations in the Purpose of Implementing Ethical Values

Though our interviewees tended to reflect a similar set of ethical and normative values as indicated above, there was evidence of differentiation in the purposes for which they apply these common values based on how they perceive their responsibility to the public.

Common patterns emerged in interviewees' perceptions of their ethical duty to have their work guided by these shared values according to the type of journalism practiced by interviewees. For example, the ten journalists fulfilling beat roles at left and right leaning national quality newspapers described the importance of their work being guided by the need to provide citizens with accurate information that enables the public to make informed choices " … *basic information so that they feel when they vote that they have been capable of making an enlightened decision*" (FI_2). Investigative journalists shared a sense of enacting ethical values that enable them to tell people things that they wouldn't know otherwise, "*to put in light [things] that others want to keep away from me*" (CH_03).

In addition to informing local people, a sense of acting on behalf of the community was prominent among local journalists who tended to emphasise proximity as a key mechanism in relation to their ethical disposition "*because you know everybody, everybody knows*

everybody, so I think they don't think that I'm a representative of fake news" (CH_04). Similarly—"*when one is at a local newspaper, one is closer to their audience*" (DK_04) was a key theme amongst this cohort. The sense of responsibility and way they enact ethical values is perhaps best summed up by this Norwegian local journalist "*So my responsibility is basically to take care of this town and the people living here, be their guard dog and to inform and educate people*" (NO_4).

With the exception of one respondent from Norway who explicitly challenged the ethical parameters of the legacy sector and sought to differentiate themselves from it as a digital entrant (NO_6), across our sample there seemed to be a strong sense that though the normative orientations of our digital-only journalists are comparible to those of their legacy colleagues, they aimed for a different outcome in their implementation. They all had a clear ambition to do something that met the core values and principles of "professional journalism" whilst also providing something new, different, alternative and "better." Each articulated a differing unique role that was clearly connected to the specific motivations and objectives of their organisation whether this be to give people the tools to find disinformation, to provide an alternative to mainstream media, or to provide a slower paced more explanatory and solutions-orientated style of journalism. For example, DK_06 articulated how the business model for their brand of digital-only journalism (ad free and member funded) shapes its normative orientation towards the public which they were at pains to state was in stark contrast to the commercial ethos of digital news within the legacy sector. According to this respondent, it is the legacy business model which is ultimately undermining journalism online because.

> When you are funded by ads and when you're funded by ads that don't pay as much as ads did in the paper times, then your job as media is not only to serve the public with valid and good information but also to create a lot of traffic. … When your business model is based on ads, you really serve two entities, the public and the advertisers. (DK_06)

The ethos of this particular news organisation in Denmark was strongly geared towards journalism as a solution to social problems by engaging with their readers in a conversation about matters of concern and interest, even if this means not making a profit. Similarly, the Dutch digital-only journalist described the distinctive role that digital-only journalism can play explaining that their organisation developed almost a personal relationship with their readers because of its particular ethos and relationship with its subscribers—

> because it is a personal relationship, and that is really the novelty of (our) model that it's not just for particular stories we ask for input from readers and get it, but also about the overall relationship as a member and as a publication, … . That's really different from newspaper writing where you just throw something at the reader. (NL_06)

The Role of Ethical Frameworks

In terms of our question relating to the role that ethical frameworks play in shaping journalistic practice, it is apparent from the interviews that ethical frameworks perform a number of roles. It's clear from our study that ethical frameworks play an important role in shaping professional identity and credentialising journalism: "*It's like a backbone, you can rely on it, and check what to do in certain situations*" (FI_06). This Finnish interviewee goes on to say that in addition to union membership, the codes of ethics "*have helped*

enormously" in helping to create and sustain journalistic identity and sense of "*solidarity*." A Norwegian respondent noted that in addition to the codes providing a general guide, they also highlight how the Press Council in Norway provides legitimacy and identity within the profession and signals to wider society the importance of press standards and fairness:

> One way of looking at it is its disciplinary boards and those creating codes of conduct is helping the press to have and maintain a kind of legitimacy, not only in the public but also towards the actors of the press, that they know if you're a politician or a bartender, whoever you are you know that you can be treated fairly. (NO_06)

The theme of an established code of ethics not only informing journalistic practice, but also wider society, resurfaced later in the interview. The respondent noted that having an established code of conduct that is more widely known amongst the public might engender greater levels of trust given the perception that "*journalists are always exaggerating*." This theme was also reflected in the Finnish interviews, with interviewees indicating that "*in Finland the public knows about our ethical code quite well*" (FI_01).

Indeed, in the Finnish context, high levels of media literacy and public awareness of the codes of ethics add a strong sense of personal responsibility in journalists' work. In particular, the notion that a news organisation will feel a sense of shame if it transgresses the accepted norms of journalism ethics was particularly strong here—"*the fact that you have to publish the decision so it's obviously in the same area that you had the original news, you have to publish and live with the shame*" (FI_02).

It's also clear that codes may function in the background with some journalists aware of their existence but having little apparent impact on their day-to-day practice—"*I know I've learned about some codes of ethics … but no I don't remember … I don't remember specific ones*" (NL_02), or "*I think it's a bit of a gut feeling*" (NL_04). This journalist from Switzerland also notes when referring to codes that "*it's mostly a background thing, if you have interesting decisions of the Press Council, you look at it, but it it's more background*" (CH_01). Codes tended only to be referred to when required, either to validate journalistic ethical authority, or to actively guide journalists when they had difficulty arriving at judgements.

> Well, they're guidelines for your daily work. Maybe you have experience, you have your own ethic, but still worth to have somewhere written down in what we believe about guidelines. Sometimes it's even good to take them out, to read them again. (CH_02)

Another respondent from Switzerland noted "*I think it's a very clear purpose that you have a testimonial of the standards that actually … That are currently in place, so you have something that people agree on and can refer to*" (CH_06). Though, of course, stating the requirement for having a clear set of standards, and actually drawing on them are two different things, these quotes illustrate the way in which codes function despite the perception that they are in the background, often as a fall-back position for journalists if required and also as a guide that once learnt, has a long-lasting impact. A sentiment that CH_06x also noted: "*I didn't study journalism, but I have seen this code of ethics tons of times because sometimes maybe, I will look it up or we had a fact sheet or something, and it's kind of a natural thing*." Likewise, when referring to the Press Council and its impact in Switzerland, CH_06x suggests that though it is not legally required, it does have an influence and is "*respected*." As with the Swiss interviewees above, DK_06

noted that the code of ethics exists in the "*background*" guiding journalistic practice but also exists to "*enhance the moral compass*" by providing extra guidance for journalists' own moral frameworks.

When it came to our cohort describing their practice, it is evident from above that a clear awareness of ethical standards plays an important role in shaping their work —"*the things I mentioned, which is most important to me, are the ethical codes*" (NO_01). Another respondent from Norway noted the broader purpose of codes and self-regulation as well as a need for codes to address the challenges journalism faces from the digital disruption of the news ecology:

> my belief is that it actually contributes to the Norwegian environment that we have for journalism, that I'm a bit worried about actually, but I'm hopeful for and I think that, more than ever, we need these codes of conduct. […] And I think that this is a good system both for trustworthiness and solidarity amongst journalists. And also like, ethics for the alternative media, that is challenging established journalism and the whole status of journalism in general. (NO_02)

Indeed, the adherence to prescribed journalistic values, which tend to be enshrined in journalistic codes of ethics, seems also to provide sustenance to the notion of a common journalistic identity which all our interviewees were keen to emphasise—"*it gives an understanding that there is profession, a peer community that has some rules that we need to uphold, that we know*" (DK_01).

Speaking about their dealings with informants, this respondent is keen to alert their sources to possible implications that might follow from divulging certain types of information: "*I try to be very honest to them about what it means if they talk to me and that it might be difficult for them. And I give them time to reconsider*" (CH_06). Here, the respondent is not signalling their reliance on a specific code of ethics, rather the importance of an ethical disposition in their work. The respondent said that if they were unsure about the ethical implications of a story, they would consult upwards within their organisation, especially if this were covering a sensitive topic. Though not explicit in terms of referring to the codes of ethics, the respondent pointed to a knowledge of journalism ethics as an important part of the job and referred to their ethics training: "*I've always said that was the most important part of my training, because writing and all that you can learn on the job, but these kinds of reflections you don't have the time*" (CH_06).

Respondents tended to emphasise the ethical dimension of their work in relation to their practice and as part of the identity of their organisation as a whole. Yet, despite the existence of press council codes of ethics, many referred to the ethical rules of their organisation, rather than a code developed externally. Within their workplace, this respondent noted that there are

> ten rules we adhere to but in reality every case is different and by debating it should share the same vision of what your role is, how you serve the public, how you define truth, how you serve democracy, that's a living bible. (NL_06)

A Danish respondent referring to in-house codes noted that they are aware of press council decisions but rarely refer back to them. Similarly, speaking of their in-house code of ethics, this respondent notes that codes "*are used quite a lot to just check something [as] sometimes you want to explain things to a reporter and I read what our code of conduct says*" (NL_01). As such the institution and its internal ethical frameworks were

signalled as key to guiding their practice, even if these are not apparent in specific ethical codes—"*I'm not a believer in codes, I'm a big believer in decency shared by colleagues*" (NL_06).

Threats and Challenges?

The interviews demonstrated that declining levels of public trust are significant in the context of debates about press ethics. Scandals involving press malpractice actively undermine public faith in the institutions of the press (Schiffrin 2019). The declining legitimacy of journalism fundamentally undermines the principles upon which democracy thrives. Worryingly, a number of our interviewees discussed the gradual erosion of journalistic legitimacy and argued that the profession was in "crisis." Lack of trust in journalism, in Denmark in particular, was something that stood out across our cohort of journalists through the range of news outlets, though there was a strong sense from the Danish digital-only respondent that the public lacked sufficient understanding of the genre of journalism, and this has led to a deeper crisis of legitimacy in journalism—"*I think the crisis in trust is also a crisis of genre, that the public as such, many people at least, they just don't trust the institutional voice, […] that maybe also has to do with social media*" (DK_06). This was also something that (CH_06) commented on —"*I notice that, that there's insults, there's political … If there's political disagreements, I get slurs.*" The implication being that if the audience is overly critical this says something about their confidence in the journalistic process, which may ultimately undermine the whole purpose of journalism. CH_06 went on to signal the broader trends in society that potentially contribute to this apparent declining trust in journalism and other public institutions more generally: "*So I think in general, it might have to do with a growing disrespect for the system, not only press freedom, institutions in general.*"

Public trust in journalism was also highlighted with reference to the threat from "fake news" given its ability to undermine journalistic integrity—"*everyone today has a platform to spread news, everyone can make a website that is fake news and make it look like it's coming from a trustworthy media*" (DK_01). Similarly, this journalist notes that "*public opinion about journalists isn't that good anymore. With our dear friend Trump, with fake news media*" (CH_02). The term "fake news" was also signalled as a means by which politicians and the public can delegitimise critical journalism as fake news which not only erodes trust, but could also act as the justification for ushering in tighter controls on the press:

> I think the fake news and fake media, fake journalists, this kind of a way to talk is rising, and of course when politicians are talking that talk, then it could have the effect that we would have more strict law. And I've been a little bit worried that not only these right-wing parties, but we also have like the traditional old parties, politicians who are using that same kind of language, that if you get a story … If there's a story that has a mistake, it concerns you, or it's critical of you, and you think it's not fair, and then you use this kind of, this story in that paper was fake news, and I think that's dangerous. (FI_03)

So, the challenge for journalists in our sample comes not only from reversing declining levels of trust amongst the public but also from hostile and increasingly populist attacks from political actors.

Discussion

The primacy of core values of accuracy, independence, impartiality and accountability which feed directly into their journalistic identity and role perception, are clearly underpinned by codes of ethics and ethical frameworks amongst the "high performing" countries in our sample. Whether these codes work "in the background" or as something that they refer to regularly in their practice, codes of ethics clearly play a role in journalists' operationalisation of established core values.

Our interviews also revealed that ethical codes of practice developed within the news organisation itself—as part of broader ethical frameworks—were equally as important as those that are externally developed by press councils. In some cases, more so, with the wider organisational culture and learning values on the job being much more evident in journalists' reported experiences (Fengler et al. 2015; Firmstone 2022; Mauri-Ríos et al. 2018).

Journalists' familiarity and understanding of the regulatory environment and the awareness and application of specific codes suggest that they may not play a conscious or visible role in day-to-day journalistic work but provide a broad normative framework for their practice. Ethical frameworks and codes therefore help to legitimise the profession internally in terms of their self-identity and their solidarity with other journalists. They may also discursively help to sustain what Vos and Thomas characterise as journalistic authority within an increasingly post-truth context (Vos and Thomas 2018).

From the perspective of the journalists, ethics are also valuable in that they provide safeguards for those who are the subjects of their stories. In other words, the existence of ethical guidelines is seen as evidence of journalists' commitment to protect the public and work in the public interest. Codes of ethics therefore not only play an important role in journalists' self-identity, but also from their perspective, provide reassurance to the public that journalists are acting on their behalf and in their interests. The fact that there was an acknowledgement in Denmark and the Netherlands that very few members of the public would be aware of ethics codes of practice seems to be a key tension in this dynamic and something that we reflect upon below.

Arguably then, ethical codes which seem to function as a legitimation device within countries may provide some measure of accountability (Fengler, Eberwein, and Leppik-Bork 2011). However, these may be ineffective if they do not feature prominently in public discourse about media standards and/or the public are neither aware of their existence nor of the protections they intend to offer. Though many journalists spoke about the importance of public trust and expressed concerns over its apparent decline, ideas about how journalists might improve trust by including audiences in discussions about journalism ethics and regulation were not forthcoming in any but the Finnish respondents. Here the value of public understanding of journalism and the ethical frameworks within which journalists work, in terms of cultivating trust in the profession was clearly a factor. It was very apparent that public scrutiny of journalism, armed with knowledge of ethics and an understanding of how journalism works, was perceived as a strong driver of trust in news media in Finland. Even though trust in all the countries in our sample is relatively high, interviewees expressed anxiety about the gradual erosion of trust via social media platforms given their tendency to distort the news ecology and drive content that is misleading or false. Over the period that the interviews took place "fake news" was increasingly

seen as a threat to journalism and the health of democracy, and we see that more recent concerns about misinformation, disinformation and ever decreasing levels of trust mirror these anxieties which centre on a deterioration of the relationship between the public and journalists.

Although the relatively small sample size limits the representativeness of our findings, the interviews indicate that there are few significant differences in journalists' ethical values and sense making across these countries where journalism is practiced in the context of high levels of press freedom. We did, however, find that these shared ethical and normative values tended to be manifest differently according to the perceived relationship of their sector with the public.

For example, local news journalists emphasised the significance of proximity and a closer relationship with their audiences in cultivating trust and as underpinning a strong sense of responsibility to apply ethical values in the interests of the local community (see also Firmstone and Steel 2022). Digital-only journalists, reflecting key findings from Nicholl et al.'s 2016 study are "clearly rooted in the profession of journalism" and are "similar in many respects to legacy media" (2016, 6). At the same time, interviewees from digital-only ventures often sought to stress their normative credentials as having greater value than their legacy counterparts. They broadly signalled a strong and distinguishing sense of purpose which was in part a result of their disassociation from the legacy sector and as digital-only enterprises. For example, the Finish digital-only respondent noted the distinctive public role of the journalist as helping audiences navigate and interpret the contested news landscape (Swart et al. 2016). Echoing this, but with a slightly different emphasis, our Danish digital-only respondent made clear the importance of distinguishing between genuine news providers and platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As such there seems to be no distinctly "digital-only ethical practice" or disruption to established ethical values evident within our findings. However, the perception that journalists were now much more vulnerable to abuse from the public was a major concern for all. Ultimately, despite signalling their uniqueness, journalists working for digital-only ventures differed little in their normative or ethical orientations and practice from their legacy counterparts.

Rather than being disrupted significantly by digital-only journalism, the greatest challenge to the perceived role and efficacy of journalism ethics was the deterioration in levels of trust amongst the public towards journalism. When we undertook the interviews in 2018 and 2019, the general perception was that such new entrants could bring with them significant digital disruption to the traditional news landscape (Pavlik, 2021; Stringer, 2018). However, since the fall of Vice and Buzzfeed, and with the benefit of hindsight, such models of niche journalism seem much less of a challenge to established news and journalistic values (Deacon, Smith & Wring, 2024), with the apparent threat now coming much more from disinformation and misinformation (Kyriakidou & Cushion, 2021) and, as highlighted by the US presidential election in 2024, from alternative media and "news influencers." Though, as our interviews show, these threats and challenges were also evident in 2018 and 2019, as was the perception of ethical frameworks as valuable ways to maintain and discursively construct boundaries between journalists and non-journalists. Moreover, at that time, the view was that digital was the future and that the industry would have to adapt or die. Yet none of our interviewees articulated any appetite to revisit or revise the ethics of journalism or their codes in light of these challenges. As we

write this paper in 2024, dis and misinformation are clearly major threats to journalism yet as with the perceived threat of digital disruption, there are few examples of ethics codes that have sought to directly address the challenges of declining trust and delegitimation of journalism more broadly.

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates that little has changed from earlier studies cited above in terms of the ways in which ethical codes are conceived and experienced by journalists. What has changed is the wider technological and social environment that has placed existing normative frameworks under pressure, suggesting that ethical frameworks play an increasingly important role in boundary maintenance demarcating high standards in journalism from those that don't share the same values (Carlson, 2017). The findings highlight the continuing importance of high ethical standards in journalism and the role that a clear sense of ethical practice as informed by ethical codes play in the lives of working journalists. The relative uniformity of the normative orientations of our cohort, coupled with the apparent shared sets of meanings to core journalistic ideals, in one sense, speaks to the powerful nature of these values and the central role they play in the formulation and maintenance of journalistic identity as praxis. According to our cohort, ethical frameworks function on several levels: They provide a credentialising element to their work and thereby offer a sense of legitimacy, professional identity and solidarity. They also provide a general guide to practice, whether explicitly or implicitly, and for many of our respondents, ethical frameworks signal to wider society of the standards they adhere to. For some, like the Finnish cohort, this extends to a disciplinary function as well.

Their role in "boundary maintenance" Our findings signal ethics codes' ongoing significance in the professional lives of journalists. However, it seems to us that despite the apparent robustness of journalism ethics in our "high performing" countries, given the continued relatively low levels of trust in news and journalism amongst the public (Fink, 2019; OECD, 2024) more could be done to shore up these instruments. Part of the crisis of journalism, according to our respondents is in relation to how the public fail to recognise these ethical frameworks nor the lengths journalists go to uphold them.

This study presents the view of the journalists themselves, yet arguably what is missing are the voices of those they purportedly serve—the wider public. Interestingly the lack of emphasis on the public in addressing these issues seems to indicate that resolving the problems of trust and perceived declining standards in journalism is solely the responsibility of journalists and the press councils. As such, we suggest in support of similar research (Masip et al. 2023) that press councils and those with responsibility for drawing up codes of practice for the press, reflect on how best to meet the challenges of declining levels of trust as well as the more recent incarnations of "fake news"—dis and misinformation—and build new and more innovative ways of enhancing journalistic standards and practice. It is imperative that there is a concerted effort to look again at journalism's ethical parameters yet with greater public input and knowledge of the processes and practices of journalists, in order to reinvigorate levels of trust and accountability within the sectors. Attempts at addressing these challenges are already underway with more nuanced understandings of audience engagement with news alongside the

development of enhanced ethical frameworks utilising an audience-centred approach (Firmstone et al. 2024; Gibson et al. 2022). Nevertheless, more needs to be done to emphasise the importance of ethics as well as reconsider their role and ongoing development within the democratic public sphere.

Notes

1. By ethical frameworks we are referring to both written and unwritten ethical guidelines practiced within news organisations.
2. There are many types of local journalism outlets—hyperlocal, regional, urban, rural, digital born, print/digital/broadcast, and legacy—here we selected journalists from legacy newspapers serving a city or municipality.

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