



ROLE OF EDUCATION AND WORK EXPERIENCE IN JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTION ABOUT JOURNALISM CODES OF ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of work experience and education in ethical perception of Malaysian journalists (N =231). Results show that there is big numbers of journalists (more than half of the respondents) who have unfavorable attitude towards journalism codes of ethics. They believe that journalism codes of ethics do not decrease the journalist's mistakes effectively, and can not be formulated in a certain canon or principals. Meanwhile majority of them think journalists can use any method or technique to obtain news if it is essentially important for public including unfair methods like hidden camera and hidden voice recorder. However, the results shows, there is no significant difference between ethical perception of journalists who studied journalism/ media and those who did not. While there is a significant correlation between journalists' ethical perception and their work experince; the more experience they have, the more favorable perception they have regarding to journalism codes of ethics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Journalism ethics is defined as a species of applied ethics that examines what journalists and news organizations should do, given their role in society. Ethics does not simply ask how to live well; it asks how we should live well ethically, that is, in goodness and in right relation with each other, a task that may require us to forego personal benefits, to carry out duties or to endure

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persecution (Ward, 2007). Journalism ethics is essentially a practical activity (Black *et al.*, 1999) that seeks reasons to questions of how to act in uncertain situations; objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability are part of journalism ethics.

Journalism ethics has received little academic attention from those working within the wider field of professional ethics. Partly because of on-going uncertainty as to whether journalism is a profession or a craft, the idea of professionalism in journalism is 'a vague and contradictory one' (Meadows, 2001). There are many external factors which may influence on perception of journalists about journalism ethics including education and work experience. This article attempt to answer the following three questions:

1. What is the general perception of Malaysian journalists about journalism ethics?
2. Is there any relationship between journalists' work experience and their perception about journalism ethics?
3. Does journalism education make difference in journalists' perception about journalism ethics?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Importance of Journalism Ethics

"The first job of journalists is to find out, to communicate accurately, and to be truthful. If a journalist cannot be trusted, then this profession will be neither believed nor respected in public judgment." (Hargreaves, 2003). Ethics for journalists is crucial as people depend on them to access unbiased news. Information is power and journalists who are in the business of gathering and spreading information are said to be redistributing power; a role that makes them powerful. This implied that some ethical practices are necessary, so there is a commitment to a proper and a fair use of power by journalists and media practitioners (Faridah Ibrahim, 2010).

Professional journalists should be honest, truthful and reveal all crucial facts. They must be sensitive at times of grief and trauma. They should never suppress information or deform them and never allow personal believes or commitments to alter the story. As Hoo and Yeing (2010) said, journalists play an important role in reporting the news to the public for greater understanding on latest issues. Their responsibility is to gather information and to report it to the public. They have to act ethically and be professional in reporting news exactly and correctly. Although journalists may not consciously be distorting their reporting, they may, nonetheless, be reporting the events in a manner conducive to the interests and values of a particular section or society.

2.2. Journalism Education and Work Experience

Scholars are still studying about role of journalism education and work experience on journalists' perception about journalism ethics and their decision making in uncertain situations/journalism dilemma Aa. Schultz (2002), examining data gathered in 1992 and 1996 from U.S. journalists on conceptions of some journalism roles, compare the views of those with a graduate education in any discipline, those who trained in journalism/communication in graduate schools, those with a college education in any discipline and those who majored in journalism /communication as undergraduate. Some notable differences were found; but four different education groups were in general very close in such views.

Generally research about journalists' attitudes shaping during their work experience, is rare and exhibits mixed findings. Most of the studies focus of role of education and experience on journalism students. Bowers (1998) found a positive link between the number of journalism courses taken by students and their tendency to think journalism was highly useful to society. Becker *et al.* (1987) in their study of U.S. journalism and mass communication undergraduates, found little evidence that students' experiences at university had much impact on their professional orientation, but differences existed between sequence groups (e.g., specializations in print or broadcast) in views.

Bjmnson *et al.* (2007) after sampling journalism students in Norway near the beginning and then near the end of their two-year programs, noted that the ideals of watchdog journalism remained highly rated in their responses, but that there was some decline in the importance students placed on journalists having "a sense of justice," a finding that may indicate "a kind of reality-orientation" perhaps influenced by time spent in internship.

Elliott (1988) who studied on professionalism in journalism mentioned about education as a factors which significantly shape the norms and values of professional journalists. Hanna and Sanders (2007) studied on British journalism students in graduate programs to find out whether their views on the news media's societal roles changed during that education. The students' view also compared with experienced British journalists. They found little evidence of attitudinal change occurring among students during their journalism education. The apparent overall continuity, during that education, in their views of journalism roles indicates that most of these views were deeply internalized before arrival at university.

Rest (1983) showed that age, education, and life experience significantly influence on moral development. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found no relationship between tolerant of deception and media ethics instruction, college level, journalism class or journalism major.

Detenber *et al.* (2012) examined education and work experience in newsrooms as predictors of ethical perceptions among communication undergraduates at a large Singaporean university. Results of their study indicated that education is associated with ethical ideologies, perceived importance of journalism ethics codes, justifiability of using contentious news gathering methods, and concern towards journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. However, in this context, education is not a significant predictor of agreement with ethical principles or support for sanctions against journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. Ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) are associated with ethical principles and the degree to which using contentious news gathering methods is justifiable. Work experience in newsrooms is associated with perceived justifiability of using contentious news-gathering methods but not with ethical ideologies. The pattern of results was not entirely as predicted and may be a function of the way journalism is practiced and perceived in Singapore. The current article focused on neighbour country of Singapore; Malaysia. It tried to find out the perception of Malaysian journalists towards journalism ethics and to indicate the role journalism education and experience in their perception.

3. METHODOLOGY

The instrument used in the present study was structured and self-administered survey questionnaire. The respondents of study were selected in April 2011 Malaysian full-time journalists

in 5 main-streams and high-circulate newspapers were the scope of this study. The Yamane (1967) formula was used to calculate the sample size. Based on this formula, 39.89 percent of the population was chosen as the sample, which was 231 full-time journalists. Before distributing the questionnaire to the respondents, a pre-test was conducted. The pre-test helped the researcher to modify and rearrange some of the questions and to examine the internal consistency of items (questions).

After the data collection, a number of procedures were carried out to organize the data such as entering them systematically in the computer, scoring the data accurately, and applying normality. Then, appropriate statistical procedures were used such as; descriptive statistics cross tabulation, Chi-square test, Pearson correlation, and sample independent *t*-test.

4. RESULT

4.1. Respondent Demography

The profile of respondents is presented in terms of age, gender, level of education, field of study, work experience and job position. The results are summarized in Table 1. According to Table 1, the respondents were rather young as the mean value for their age is 34.2. From the total of 231 respondents who participated in this study, 55.0% were 19 to 33 years old, 32.5% between 34 and 48 and finally 12.5% were above the age of 49. The youngest respondent was 19 and the oldest was 62. The results showed that the number of female respondent was slightly higher. In fact, 58% of the respondents were female, whereas 42% were male. Based on Table 1, the majority of the studied journalists were well-educated with an academic background: 73.2% completed a Degree, 14.3% had a Diploma and 5.1% had a Masters or PhD qualification. Among the 231 journalists, only 7.4% had SPM (in English: Malaysia Certification of Education) (3.9%) or STPM (in English: Malaysia Higher School Certification) (3.5%).

Table-1. Profile of Respondents

Profile		Frequency	Percentage
Age (n=231) (Mean=34.2)	19-33	127	55.0
	34-48	75	32.5
	49-62	29	12.5
Gender (n=231)	Female	134	58.0
	Male	97	42.0
Education (n=231)	SPM	9	3.9
	STPM	8	3.5
	Diploma	33	14.3
	Degree	169	73.2
	Master/ PhD	12	5.1
Field of Study (n=220)	Journalism/Media	143	65.0
	Other fields	77	35.0
Year of Experience (n=231) (Mean=9.7)	Less than 10 Years	146	63.2
	More than 20 Years	85	36.8
Position (n=231)	Reporter	162	70.1
	Editor/Writer	46	19.9
	Sub-editor	14	6.1
	Chief-Editor	1	0.4
	Others	8	3.5

The results indicated that the majority of the respondents have studied journalism or media studies (65%). In fact, from 220 respondents, only 35% have studied in unrelated fields, such as science, engineering, art, or other social sciences fields. Journalism is a sector that people with a variety of different educational background can be employed in. In fact, there are many examples of self-taught journalists among the well-known successful ones around the world. The point is, in academic schools, journalism students become familiar with not only the skills of journalism, but also the theories and trends of the field. Journalism ethics is one of the inseparable courses in journalism in almost every college and university. Malaysian journalists who work in mainstream and high-circulation newspapers are among well-educated people who have related academic background.

In term of work experience, most of the respondents have worked around 10 years in the field of journalism. In fact, almost two third of the 231 respondents (63.2%) had less than 10 years of experience while 36.8% had an experience of more than 10 years (Table 1). Among them, 70.1% worked as reporters, 19.9% as editors or writers and the rest worked as sub-editor (6.1%), chief-editor (0.4%) or were employed in other positions (3.5%).

4.2. Ethical Perception

The first question of this study was to determine the ethical perception of journalists about journalism ethics. Eight questions were asked regarding to application, necessity, efficiency and effectiveness of codes of ethics in journalism by Likert Scale question style. The highest and the lowest score were 4 and 1 respectively, so the maximum score that a journalist could possibly achieve was 32 (8 x 4) and the minimum was 8 (8 x 1). After summing the scores, the results were categorized into two groups of “unfavorable” and “favorable” based on the mean value and were presented in Table 2. In fact, the results expected to specify how many journalists have favorable perception about journalism ethics and how many have unfavorable perception.

Table-2. Journalists’ Perception about Journalism Ethics (n=224)

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Unfavorable (less than 25)	132	58.9
Favorable (more than 25)	92	41.1

Mean=24.99, Min=18, Max=32

According to Table 2, from 224 journalists who answered the questions of this section, 132 respondents had unfavorable perception about journalism ethics. In fact, more than half of the journalists (58.9%) did not have positive stance toward journalism codes of ethics’ application, necessity, efficiency and effectiveness.

The mean value of responds was 24.98; it means the average scores obtained by journalists were mainly around 24 while the maximum possible score was 32. The actual maximum score was exactly equal to the maximum possible score, which means there were journalists who answered all

the questions correctly. Next table (Table 3) presented the detail description of perception items (questions) by dimensions and scores.

Table-3.Detail Description of Perception's Items

Perception Items	Mean	SD	SA	A	D	SD
a. Journalists should do their best to correct any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate.	3.42	0.60	110 (47.8%)	110 (47.8%)	8 (3.5%)	2 (0.9%)
b. Journalism as a profession needs an exclusive code of ethics	3.34	0.62	95 (41.2%)	123 (53.3%)	10 (4.3%)	3 (1.2%)
c. Journalism codes of ethics are useless to make decision in uncertain situation.	2.87	0.61	2 (0.9%)	55 (23.8%)	145 (62.8%)	29 (12.5%)
d. It is not important for journalist to verify the validity of the source of information if he/she thinks the information is right.	2.79	0.98	29 (12.7%)	52 (22.7%)	85 (37.1%)	63 (27.5%)
e. Journalism codes of ethics are not practicable in real world of journalism.	2.60	0.76	18 (7.8%)	76 (33%)	116 (50.1%)	21 (9.1%)
f. Journalism codes of ethics effectively decrease the journalist's mistakes.	2.57	0.71	15 (6.6%)	83 (36.2%)	116 (50.6%)	15 (6.6%)
g. Journalism ethics cannot be formulated in certain canon or principles.	2.27	0.69	26 (11.3%)	121 (52.8%)	76 (33.3%)	6 (2.6%)
h. Journalists can use any method or technique to obtain news if it is essentially important for public; (including hidden camera, hidden voice recorder and etc).	2.14	0.82	46 (20.1%)	121 (52.8%)	45 (19.7%)	17 (7.4%)
	2.77	0.69				

SD= Standard Deviation,

SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

As it was shown in Table 3, the overall mean value of all responds was 2.77 out of 4 with a standard deviation of 0.69. The standard deviation of this section was within +/- 1 explaining a suitable dispersion of data from the mean value.

The highest mean value of 3.42 was noted for 'Item a' which asked if journalists should do their best to correct any harmfully inaccurate published information. The respondents mostly chose the ethical options and, 110 journalists (47.8%) strongly agreed and another 110 (47.8%) agreed about this item. In Table 3 'Item b' stood as the second highest mean value (3.34 from 4), which means that most of the journalists believed it is necessary for their profession to have an exclusive codes of ethics. In fact, 53.3% of journalists agreed and 41.2% of them strongly agreed on that.

Next item was 'Item c' with the mean value of 2.87 out of 4. In this item, most of the journalists believed that the codes of ethics are useful to make decisions in uncertain situation. In fact, 62.8% of journalists disagreed with this unethical sentence which said: "journalism codes of

ethics are useless to make decision in uncertain situation”. However, the number of journalists who questioned the effectiveness of codes of ethics was noticeable (23.8%).

Most of the journalists showed their unfavorable perception in three last items in Table 3 as the mean values were so low; half of the journalists (50.6%) in ‘Item f’ disagreed that journalism codes of ethics effectively decrease the journalist’s mistakes. It means they mostly think codes of ethics cannot control the journalists’ unethical decision making. ‘Item g’ indicates that more than half of the journalists (52.8%) agreed that journalism ethics cannot be formulated in certain canon or principles.

The last Item asked if journalists can use any method or technique to obtain news if it is essentially important for public; (including hidden camera, hidden voice recorder, etc). Based on the journalism codes of ethics, only fair methods can be used by journalists to get news and information; spying or using hidden camera or hidden voice recorders were considered as unethical. However, in this survey, more than half of the respondents agreed (52.4%) and 19.7 strongly agreed that using such unfair methods is legitimate.

Faridah Ibrahim and Emma Mirza Wati Mohamad (2005) – Malaysia mass communication scholar- explains how expert Malaysian journalists manage the ethical delimita; she said in Malaysia editors in the newsrooms, better known as gatekeepers, would decide on whether to release or not to release certain news or facts to the public based on their journalistic norms and criteria. In some occasions, an event or happening of news value is judged as bad tastes, which is unethical in nature and hence, the news has to be spiked. This is a situation that can be described as a dichotomy between news value and ethical consideration.

4.3. Work Experience

The second question of this article asked if there is a relationship between journalists’ work experience and their perception about journalism ethics. To answer this question first a cross tabulation with Chi-Square test was applied. According to Table 4, 91 journalists out of 132, who had unfavorable perception about journalism ethics, were also categorized in the group with less than years of experience. On the other side, 41 journalists from 92 who had favorable perception about journalism ethics were categorized in the group with more than 10 years of work experience.

Table-4. Perception and Work Experience Cross Tabulation

Work Experience	Perception	
	Unfavorable (n=132)	Favorable (n=92)
Less than 10 Years (n=131)	91	51
More than 10 Years (n=92)	41	41

$\chi^2 = 4.26, p = 0.03$

The Chi-square test which was applied in this table revealed that there was a significant difference between journalists’ perception and work experience ($\chi^2 = 4.26, p = 0.03$). It means if journalists had more work experience, they had more favorable perception about journalism ethics.

In the other side, if journalists had less work experience they mostly had unfavorable perception about journalism ethics.

To answer this question, a Bivariate Pearson was also used to test the correlations between journalists' work experience and their perception. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) explains how closely related the two variables are. The results were presented in Table 5.

Table-5. Bivariate Pearson Correlation between Work Experience and Perception

	Perception	
	Pearson Correlation	Sig (2-tailed)
Work Experience	0.152	0.02

Table 5 shows that there was a significant correlation between journalists' work experience and their perception about journalism ethics ($r = 0.152$, $p = 0.02$). According to the rule of thumb suggested by Guilford and Fruchter (1973) there was a significant and definite relationship between journalists' work experience and perception, but the correlation was low or small.

4.4. Education

The last question of this article asked if journalists' education makes any difference in journalists' perception about journalism ethics. To answer this question, independent sample t -test applies to examine whether journalism or non-journalism studies in university has a significant difference in their perception about journalism ethics. The results demonstrated in Table 6.

Table-6. Independent Sample t -test of journalism education and perception

		N	Mean	Std Davison	t	df	p
Field of Study	Journalism	141	24.9	2.5	0.2	212	0.83
	Non Journalism	73	24.8	3.0			

$p > 0.05$

According to Table 6, t value with the freedom degree of 212 was 0.2 while the p value was 0.83. Therefore, since the p value was more than 0.05, there was no significant difference in perception of 141 journalists who studied journalism and 76 who studied other fields about journalism ethics.

5. CONCLUSION

Results of this study showed that more than half of the respondents (58.9%) had unfavorable perception about journalism ethics; although there were many who believed that journalism needs exclusive codes of ethics, there were also a big number of journalists who considered the codes not practicable in real world and do not effectively decrease the journalists' mistakes. They also assumed that there is no objection to apply some unfair methods like hidden cameras or hidden voice recorders to obtain news.

Big numbers of respondents in this study had at least degrees in journalism/media. The results showed that no matter the journalists had academic journalism education, the perception still the same with those who studied in other fields. It can be concluded that journalism educations in Malaysia do not effect on journalists' perception about application, effectiveness and necessity of journalism ethics. The study revealed that journalists in Malaysia mostly learn about journalism ethics through experience. The results showed that the more journalists had experience, their perception about journalism ethics become favorable. It means the expert journalists in Malaysia are more aware and responsive about the application, effectiveness and necessity of journalism ethics than juniors.

For better undrestanding regarding to journalism ethics in Malayisa some qualitative research need to be done to find out the obstacles of applying journalism ethics in real situations by interviewing academics and journalists. Meanwhile, media system and structure is very important factor in practicing journalism ethics in this Asian country. According to Banerjee (2002) it is only in a liberal democratic society where media have some amount of independence, that one can expect media practitioners and journalists to uphold professional standards and ethics. In other words, a journalist operating in an environment with strict media control cannot be judged for his ethical practices. Hence, he cannot be expected to sacrifice everything, including his life, for the sake of moral and ethical beliefs.

Faridah Ibrahim (2010) beilives while the news media across developing nations look at media laws and regulations as significant leverage to hold them accountable, a majority of Malaysian journalists prefer to work from within in the form of self-censorship. Ethically conscious journalists also feel the need for voluntary recognition and acceptance of responsibility to provide the kind of information that will not rupture the social fabric and cause unrest among the people.

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