

**When tradition meets innovation:**

**Ethical journalism in the digital age**

*An exploratory case study and critical discourse analysis*

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## **Preface & Acknowledgments**

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## **When tradition meets innovation: Ethical journalism in the digital age**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In a world awash in digital media technologies, traditional journalism – as an occupational field and paradigmatic form of communication – is undergoing radical change. While the digital age scourged the professional journalistic practice with a poisonous blend of doubt and defiance; it also eroded a pre-digital consensus on journalism ethics. Considering the enduring nature of the traditional journalism industry today, the literature is mystified as to how professional journalists should comply with the norms and standards for ethical and responsible journalism while keeping up with a 24-hour news cycle in a regime of convergence news-making. This study looks at how a range of new media actors, communicating online, have challenged the pursuit of ethical journalism in the digital age. From the vantage point of the *New York Times*, the BBC, and ABC – three distinguished traditional news outlets – it purports to explore how leading international online news media approach ethical journalism in the digital age. An international perspective is thus taken to respond to this inquiry. The analysis is methodologically executed through an exploratory case study and a critical discourse analysis. The former method examines the current codes of ethics of the selected news organizations to identify what ethical and editorial values and standards they preach and abide by. The latter method explores how these values and standards are discursively shaped and implemented into practice in 60 health-related news coverage on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, specifically. The main overarching result indicated that leading international online news media’s approach to ethical journalism is still very much rooted in a pre-digital media era. Indeed, a consensus was found across the three selected news organizations on the continuing relevance of a pre-digital mindset to achieve responsible and ethical journalism today. Therefore, although the internet halted the unidirectional paradigm of mass communication, online news media are not (and perhaps should not be) entirely divorced from the value system of traditional news outlets. This finding not only challenges the “crisis narratives” in the existing literature on the quality and future of traditional journalism, but also scholarly assumptions on the futility of pre-digital journalism ethics to guide professional journalists as they sail the blustery sea of an ongoing media revolution.

**KEYWORDS:** *case study, critical discourse analysis, ethical journalism, health news coverage, (digital) media ethics*

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## **List of abbreviations**

ABC: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

IFJ: International Federation of Journalists

The *NYT*: *The New York Times*

UK: United Kingdom

## 1. Introduction

Certain figures stand out in the history of the profession of journalism. Towering above all of these would certainly be John Thadeus Delane, an editor of *The Times* of London who left an enduring stamp on the philosophy and body of principles for responsible journalism. He made his mark in 1852 by articulating the standards of rectitude and duty by which a journalist should be judged. This noble effort instigated the development of more than four hundred codes and statements of principles worldwide to protect the concept of editorial independence and journalism as “fourth estate”. It symbolizes one of the earliest attempts to establish the ground rules for modern notions of ethical journalism (White, 2016). Harcup (2014) defined the latter as a journalistic activity informed by a commitment to strengthen the craft of journalism rather than an interest to foster commercial considerations, and which is conducted in harmony with both the letter and the spirit of ethical codes and guidelines. However, the advent of digital media profoundly altered the normative landscape of journalism and the duties that fall on professional journalists (Ward, 2014). As the world witnesses the age of open information, journalism’s honorable tradition as a democratic agent of the public sphere – committed to truth, honesty, and decency – is under attack (White, 2016).

The collapse of the old information order blurred the conceptual foundations of what journalism “is” and “should” be while fundamentally disrupting the ethical configuration in which cultural production traditionally took place (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). It created a universe of new media that undermined the relevancy of a pre-digital consensus on journalism ethics. Traditional news outlets are losing control over the means of production and distribution as their content turns into a commodity contingent upon a select group of powerful digital platforms able to aggregate record numbers of end-users (and their attention thereof) (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Moreover, the unique Internet attributes of interactivity and multimediality shifted the basic mission of the journalist from selecting and reporting the news towards helping the public figure out what is valuable across a plethora of fake news and “clickbait” articles available online. As a result, ethical journalism is put in a position of uneasy equipoise with history, culture, and technology. A growing body of research concurred with this view, arguing new media technologies shaped and redefined several moral and ethical issues confronting professional journalists when operating online (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Ward, 2018). To this day, scholars remain perplexed as to how journalists should make ethical and responsible decisions to keep their credibility in an environment that has lost its long journalistic tradition and affords no time or opportunity to reflect (Lynch, 1998; Harcup,

2020). If only, as Schudson (2013) has wished, journalism can hold still for a moment to assess where it stands at times of epochal change.

The current research draws upon these quandaries on the state of affairs of traditional journalism in the digital age and sets out to qualitatively untangle this matter from an ethical lens. Therefore, the following research question has been designed: *How do leading international online news media approach ethical journalism in the digital age?* It draws upon two sub-research questions:

1. What are the current ethical and editorial values and standards the *New York Times*, BBC, and ABC preach and abide by?
2. How do the *New York Times*, BBC, and ABC implement these values and standards into practice in their online health-related news coverage?

In light of the sub-research questions, this thesis sets out two objectives. First, it aims to identify the values and standards traditional news outlets uphold through an examination of their journalistic codes and guidelines. Secondly, it seeks to explore how these outlets implement their values and standards into practice by analyzing the discursive processes that construct ethical journalism in their online (health-related) news media. By performing an exploratory case study and critical discourse analysis (CDA) respectively, the researcher purports to grasp an accurate picture of where ethical journalism stands in the digital age as well as whether the conditions under which traditional journalism is now practiced are inimical to the production of ethical and responsible online news.

Due to the limited scope of this study, the researcher selected three international news organizations, namely – the *New York Times* (henceforth: the *NYT*), the BBC, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (henceforth: ABC). The purpose of selecting these organizations is twofold. First, by placing an organization's approach to ethical journalism against those of other systems, the researcher can deliver a clearer and more precise account of the relevance and practical use of journalism ethics in the digital age. After all, the repercussions of our ongoing media revolution upon the traditional journalism industry are felt across the board and are not exclusive to particular news outlets. Secondly, these outlets share several characteristics, including a set of western cultural and social norms as well as an influential reputation both within their country and abroad. Hence, by comparing their approach to ethical journalism, this study provides empirical evidence on the existence (or absence) of a consensus on the handling of ethics in the digital age. Such a finding has two

implications. First, the literature remains mystified as to whether traditional news organizations, in practice, stick to a pre-digital mindset for ethical journalism or remodeled their ethical norms and thinking instead, to better suit today's media ecology (Ward, 2016). Secondly, it contributes to the debate on the future of traditional and ethical journalism, which often hinges on a "circling the drain" or "bleeding obvious" narrative as the world embraces a new digital reality (Harcup, 2012).

The evolution of journalism remains a mind-blowing uncertainty. Nonetheless, traditional news sources have not utterly lost their value and standing today. A recent report revealed traditional media has been the most-used news source during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as the public seeks technical and specialized knowledge (Ofcom, 2021). Yet such an influencing position also means that the methods for reporting health issues responsibly and ethically are crucial (Chang, 2012). Prior research, however, identified several problems in health-related news articles as journalists scramble to cover the impact of highly ambiguous and uncertain diseases, including inaccuracies, errors of inference, omissions leaving out essential background information, and exaggerated facts evoking unnecessary fear (Molitor, 1993; Hampl, Taylor & Johnston, 2004; Chang, 2012). These findings reveal a bitter irony: an apparent ethical deficit in health-related news coverage yet their prominence to keep the public abreast on important public health issues. The latter inspired the researcher to narrow down the scope of this study to the analysis of online news media covering the coronavirus pandemic, exclusively.

The scientific relevance of this study resides in a lack of academic research on how traditional news outlets pursue ethical journalism in the production of online news in the digital age (Ward, 2014). For Eldridge (2017), this can be attributed to the relatively small number of pure, genuine online journalistic efforts compared to the flow of trivia and entertainment overrunning the Internet. However, according to McNair (2018), traditional news reporting is a critical topic for academic inquiry because of its history of probing the use (and misuse) of power in society to preserve the democratic order. Nevertheless, Chari (2019) noticed that the real impact, threats, and risks the Internet age poses on journalism ethics remain fully unexplored. Hence, critics are left to guess about the strategies, practices, and interests of professional journalists to explain how ethical journalism in an online newsroom works. Additionally, existing literature primarily investigated journalists' perceptions of the ethical dilemmas in the digital age (García-Avilés, 2014; Mauri-Ríos, Marcos-García & Zuberogoitia-Espilla, 2020). This prevailing focus on journalists' thoughts and opinions motivated the researcher to look beyond qualitative interviews or focus groups. Bednarek and

Caple (2014) called for greater attention from scholars towards the critical linguistic analysis of news discourse to improve the bedrock of research in media ethics and journalism studies. Accordingly, this study employed a discursive research method to explore what these journalists do in practice, how they truly implement journalism ethics in response to media convergence. Scholars also called future research to investigate the work of journalists who report on health, a topic that remains understudied with a few exceptions (Wallington, Blake, Taylor-Clark & Viswanath, 2010). This research gap is tackled through this study and consolidates the latter's applicability and pertinence.

As regards the social relevance, this study sets out to sensitize the public to the contemporary ethical dilemmas in online news content resulting from the shattering of tried-and-true journalism practices. The findings also support journalists in their daily practice, enhancing their consciousness and reflexivity on the ethical decisions they make as well as attempting to renew the public's trust or alleviate skepticism vis-à-vis their professional dedication for ethical and responsible journalism. In this context, Fuller (2010) argued that an ethical examination of the journalistic work provides better knowledge of the flaws in the human mind that might dissuade the unscrupulous to take advantage of them. Additionally, the study's comparative approach enhances the public's awareness of different journalistic cultures, thereby casting a fresh light on individuals' own journalistic tradition and enabling them to contrast it with those in other countries.

The remainder of this research is divided into the following structure. First, a literature review is presented to outline the theoretical analytical framework that guided data analysis and interpretation of the results. Secondly, a thorough description of the methodologies and data collected for the analysis is provided, outlining the methodological execution of the exploratory case study and CDA. Thirdly, the results are presented and discussed in light of the research question. Lastly, a conclusion running through the purpose, findings, and implications of this study is given and provides several avenues for further investigation.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Before going into the analysis, it is important to situate the research questions within the context of the existing literature. This study aims to explore how leading international online news media approach ethical journalism in the digital age. It thus alludes to two interrelated topics, both of which have been substantially explored in academic research: the origins and purpose of ethical journalism on the one hand; and its challenge for traditional news organizations amidst technological change, on the other. Accordingly, this section first provides a broad theoretical background and an understanding of how journalism is part of the ethics sphere. It unpacks the traditional concept of ethical journalism, its nature, characteristics, and problems. Drawing upon the social responsibility theory of the press, it further examines the contentious debate on professional journalistic ideals and the significance of codes of ethics. The second part goes on to examine the struggle to achieve ethical journalism in (health-related) online news media as professional journalists are in a constant battle for survival against new digital players and platforms. Additionally, the literature review exposes different academic perspectives on the call for a new mindset and universal code for ethical journalism in the digital age. This section concludes with a gap in the literature, which this study aims to reduce.

### **2.1 Ethical journalism: nature, characteristics, problems**

#### **2.1.1 Ethics and how journalism is part of that sphere**

As “obedience to the unenforceable”, the domain of ethics represents the extent to which individuals can be trusted to obey self-imposed law (Moulton, 1997). Though “ethics” can be an elusive term suffering from semantic entropy, it is, in its most general sense, taken to be the study of the grounds and principles for right and wrong human conduct that guide individuals on how they ought to treat one another in a world of voluntary relationships (Sanders, 2002). Contemporary philosophical usage typically distinguishes ethics into a theoretical and applied part. The former is concerned with the epistemic status of ethical statements. The latter is more practical and examines what instances of conduct are right or wrong and ought to be furthered in society (Pattyn, 2000). In reality, both parts are involved in ethical thinking because the distinction is not absolute but a matter of emphasis and interest.

Ward (2013) underscored the debate between the ethical theory of relativism and absolutism. The former states that what is right or wrong for an individual or society does not necessarily hold for another, although the situation might be equivalent (Ward, 2013).

Relativists reject universal moral standards and conceptualize ethics in line with the societal norms and technological development of one's culture (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks & Meyer, 1992). In contrast, absolutism holds the belief there is an objective and invariant standard for what is right and wrong that transcends time and place (Ward, 2013). Both ethical views have their own premise and jostle for primacy. Yet, despite their disagreements, they would commonly concur with the view that an individual journalist is an essential unit of ethical agency (Richards, 2004; Iggers, 2018). Journalists decide what behavior is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, and laudatory to report. Since their choices can cause harm, it is paramount journalists remain risk-averse in the selection and reporting of news (Meyers, 2010). Hence, no matter which ethical belief or approach is preferred, there seems no escaping the question of ethics in the field of journalism and the media, in general.

According to Baldasty (1992), the relevance of modern journalism ethics was already flagged in the late 1800s and early 1900s during which the press industrialized and developed massively. There was disillusionment with the liberal hope that a free, maximally unfettered press would produce a healthy "marketplace of ideas" with the emergence of the powerful mass commercial press (Ingber, 1984, p. 2). People questioned the ability of an unregulated press to construct rational opinion for the public good. As a result, concerns over pluralism in the media cropped up given a growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of press barons who wielded significant influence over public discourse. Critics also charged the press with being sensationalistic and biased because of increased dependency on profit and advertisers (Baldasty, 1992). As a result, the social responsibility theory of the press emerged to alleviate the public's concern the press would become a means for large-scale manipulations and a profitable market vehicle to serve vested interests (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). According to Ward (2014), the theory prevented a laissez-faire media system and promoted a self-regulation mechanism instead, to develop an accountable media culture. It gave rise to journalistic associations which, to professionalize and moralize the journalists, developed codes of ethics and standards to encourage responsible action on the part of members of the press and guarantee the public's social right to receive information.

Whereas the social responsibility theory remains essentially liberal – defending liberty of expression – it calls on the press to be responsible to society and publish in a certain prescribed way. It ensures ethical journalists work in the service of mankind by precluding their rampant charlatanism, opportunism, or Hobbesian pursuit of crude self-interest in practice (Thomass, 2000). This re-defined role and duty of the press – moving away from reporting pure facts towards the idea that journalism should be socially and morally

responsible – was, and still is, anathema to classical libertarian theory. Nevertheless, the theory has resonated well around the world and has been widely accepted in Western liberal democracies, wherein professional journalists have the freedom to publish in return for responsible coverage of essential public issues (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). This echoes the Global Charter of Ethics adopted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Accordingly, the institutional setting of the press demands from its practitioners not only mechanical and craft-based skills – a nose for news – but also the pursuit of professional behavior in the service of the public and the application of ethical norms (IFJ, 2019).

Hence, every step in the journalistic decision-making process assumes some sort of underlying rationale as to what is good or bad, virtue or vice, worthy of praise or blame necessary to guarantee the integrity, reliability, and status of journalists as “truth-tellers” (Carpentier, 2007). In this respect, ethical journalists are those who are meticulous about the verification of facts, diligent about pursuing the truth, focus on issues of civic concern, and provide an editorial perspective that is scrupulously fair and objective (Hindman, 2017). Ethical journalism is therefore largely *process-driven*, where the focus is on production rather than consumption. This coincides with Ward (2010) who described ethical journalism as inherently practical, something we “do” and thus, a species of applied ethics. For Harcup (2020), despite its amorphous and contingent nature, ethical journalism strives to offer guidance to journalists on how to assess a situation, report a story, and critically reflect on their ethical decisions. Yet the emphasis on practical skills sparked debate as to whether journalism comes closer to a genuine craft than the exercise of a particular profession.

### 2.1.2 Ethics of professional journalism

The approach to journalism as a positive factor for democracy and in need of further professionalization typically resonates with the dominant mood of the 1970s. For journalists to assume special role-based duties, educational training and a commitment to work with codes of ethics are essential to abide by – a century-old but still familiar – set of principles, such as independence, accuracy, truth-telling, and objectivity (Ward, 2014). In this spirit, Weber (1946) theoretically began the study of professions and theorized that people who shared common positions and interests produced social stratification of class, power, and status in society. He defined journalists as “pariahs” to underscore their ability to separate from the rest of society, adhere to certain ethical values despite relentless pressure to conform to a rationalized and disenchanting world (Weber, 1946, p. 96).

Professionalism here is strongly defined in terms of norms and ideals giving

occupational members a sense of belonging and pride as well as directing their ethical decisions in practice. However, this approach has been progressively perceived as uncritically naïve, or romantic, because professionalism creates expectations amongst practitioners and those it serves, which the field of journalism cannot necessarily live up to (White, 1995; Drechsel, 2000; Carpentier, 2007). As a result, the logic of professionalism – with its routines and walls of exclusiveness – did not acquire unanimous intellectual support.

A different perspective viewed professionalism as a reflection of what is fundamentally wrong with contemporary journalism. For Waisbord (2013), the meaning of professional journalism remains loosely used as common parlance, or shorthand, to describe various aspects of journalistic work. In addition, professional journalism is decisively embedded within a bureaucratically structured and market-driven enterprise that daily resorts to information produced by the state and organized politics (Waisbord, 2013). In such a sphere of influence, journalists' agency gets filtered out through socialization and occupational ideology while ethics becomes a style of behavior tied to a productive task. For Meyers (2010), corporate ownership undercuts journalism's guarantee to provide impartial information to the public and compromises its responsibility to act as a watchdog of powerful institutions. In a similar vein, Berkowitz and Limor (2003) researched the impact of social and professional dimensions on ethical decision-making. Their findings confirmed journalists are caught in a dialectic between their professional values and news organizations' business imperatives, making their ethical decisions more complex, relativistic, and vary by context.

Other scholars perceived the sociology of profession as bastions of narrow and elitist interests (Nordenstreng, 1998). They viewed professionalism as a thinly veiled attempt to control public expression and contested the normative system of journalism as a form of imperialism undermining democracy (Nordenstreng, 1998). Waisbord (2013) provided a similar account and recognized a train of thought, which saw professional ideals as placing the task of reporting in a straitjacket, precluding it to enlighten society at its full potential. For scholars who conceded the dissension, such as Zelizer (2005), the idea of journalism as a profession continues to carry the day, if unevenly so.

### 2.1.3 Traditional journalistic codes of ethics and principles

The clash between adherence to standards of professional conduct and the realities of public concerns has extensively been explored in professional ethics literature. It might well explain two contrasting viewpoints raised by Keeble (2001) on the relevance of codes of ethics from journalists' perspectives. Accordingly, some journalists perceive these codes as

central vehicles of professionalization and instruments of consciousness-raising. Their appeal lays on the assumption they comprise ethical principles which fit the needs of the public in a democracy (Keeble, 2001). Codes of ethics also define the boundaries of the journalistic field – the professional *habitus* as Bourdieu (1984) would put it – in which journalists acquire series of do's and don'ts on how they ought to perceive, think, and act (Sanders, 2002; Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011). Likewise, Elliott (1988) argued codes enable the journalistic field to be recognized as a “discreet industry” because what separates one profession from another are – in theory – shared principles, not technical skills (Elliott, 1988, p. 28). Wiik (2009) suggested a different account, one that perceives journalistic codes as a vital legitimizing tool or rhetorical tactic for claiming professional jurisdiction.

Yet other journalists dismissed codes of ethics as a mere cosmetic and rhetorical device to veil hypocrisy – criticizing the fortress journalism thinking for being self-centered and alienated from the people whom it is supposed to serve (Keeble, 2001). For White (1995), codes of ethics represent at best a presumed set of values or ethos that protects the reputation of professional journalism, which seeks to justify itself in terms of established norms. Howard (2019) tapped into the debate about the traditional values inscribed in the codes, their misconceptions, and contested relevance. In his view, the value of objectivity is unattainable because it does not guarantee the absence of viewpoint. For Nicholson (2018), the subject of journalists' stories often impedes the process of objectivity. Hence, even the best trained ethical journalist can succumb to unconscious personal biases that slant the report in one direction or the other. This led scholars to construe the voice of neutrality as a tool, rather than a fundamental principle, to perform ethical journalism (Howard, 2019).

In a similar vein, Nordenstreng (1995) claimed that the principles embedded in codes of ethics are full of contradictions. He elaborated upon two principles of traditional journalism to explain their paradoxical nature. First, the principle of truth-seeking in the sense of factual accuracy, which is arguably the most sacred dogma amongst professional journalists. Nordenstreng (1995) argued the way a fact-oriented concept of truth has been conceived and practiced in journalism has remained superficial, especially in relation to objectivity. His argument furthered the discussion posed by Glasser and Ettema (1989) on how journalists can function as guardians of the moral order while claiming to be detached observers only. These scholars highlighted journalists' daunting task to operate within a “sphere of consensus” on what is factually right or wrong standard of conduct when this consensus is neither stable nor complete (Glasser & Ettema, 1989, p. 2). In the same spirit, Nordenstreng (1995) noticed the confusion on the principle of truth-seeking, making journalists tend to dissolve and objectify

morality in the process of separating facts from opinion. Rephrased, journalists actively locate and shape for themselves a moral order to obtain the needed empirical framework for their news coverage. They become crafts persons of public morality – though this is denied by the canons of objectivity. This makes the principle of truth-seeking a paradoxical and deceitful device preventing as much as helping the truth being discovered (Nordenstreng, 1995).

Nordenstreng (1995) further expounded his reasoning on the ethical principle of seriousness defined as the pursuit and effective dissemination of needed information. This principle safeguards journalists' focus on "hard" news bearing a particular significance to community life, such as politics or economics. In practice, "hard" news stories often lend an unrelentingly serious tone (Hindman, 2017). However, this traditional dogma has been challenged with the rise of "infotainment", which attempts to make journalism an entertaining commodity, satisfying consumer desires rather than communicating serious and essential public matters (Nordenstreng, 1995, p. 117). The clue to this paradox is that an informal, entertaining narrative provides an alternative for people to enlighten themselves through softer and more sensational styles of reporting, e.g., a political satire.

The increasing prominence of "infotainment" eradicated the monopoly enjoyed by traditional news outlets to inform the public on serious matters (Boukes, 2019). They can no longer expect everyone to tune in as their field's demarcation with other cultural genres seems to be fading away (Boukes, 2019). Moreover, providing information about individuals' preferences does not constitute a central value of ethical journalism but a misuse of professional expertise to benefit a subgroup of society over the public at large (Meyers, 2010). Nevertheless, commercial motives seem to have taken primacy over democratic ideals as traditional news outlets increasingly monitor web traffic to scrutinize their audiences' behavior and plan content production (Vu, 2014). As a result, scholars fear a drastic move towards an environment where journalism softens and tailors its content to the needs of consumers who *want* to be entertained rather than citizens who *should* be informed (Boukes, 2019).

In a different light, Zelizer (2009; 2017) rejected codes of ethics' effectiveness, because they do not come close to reflecting the complicated context and structural constraints within which journalists work. In her view, journalists fail to realize that technological diffusion, with expanding maze of digital spaces, renders codes of ethics confusing and unviable. This confusion extends to what ethical journalism stands for and how traditional journalists should serve the public good. For her, the only reason journalists still cling on to codes is because, at some primal level, they offer a step back into a digital-free

world, meaning simpler and more certain times (Zelizer, 2017). She joined Meyers (2010) for whom it is rare that journalists learn their ethical duties in a top-down fashion. Rather, they learn their duties through their interaction and relationships with other practitioners in the workplace. This “learning by doing” enables young practitioners to imitate and avoid the positive and negative behaviors of their experienced counterparts. However, it also suggests that the formation of ethics vary by organization, and thus, the ethics of different traditional news outlets might differ, even in subtle ways (Meyers, 2010).

Ward (2009) is not a fervent opponent of journalistic codes but akin to previous scholars, he stressed the importance of journalists to reinterpret and balance ethical principles in light of new facts, especially in this rapidly changing world. From his relativist standpoint, the boundaries of ethics change, or else, the advocacy for new ethics from the consideration of the Web would have been omitted from contemporary scholarly debates (Ward, 2009). Hence, journalists are challenged to reach – what Rawls (1993) would call – a “reflective equilibrium”, a process of working back and forth between individual moral judgments and established principles and norms (Rawls, 1993, p. 8).

In light of the foregoing, scholarly literature on the nature, characteristics, and problems of ethical journalism often gets bogged down in polarized positions as advocates and opponents stake out their respective territories. Journalism seems on a knife-edge between accepted professionalism on one side and a genuine craft on the other that promises more than it can deliver. Accordingly, it seems fair to assume that journalists’ ethical thinking is an ever-evolving social practice. It requires the guidance of codes of ethics but cannot be shackled to them.

## **2.2 Ethical journalism in the digital age**

### **2.2.1 Journalism and technology: a win-win relationship?**

In a fairly dramatic reversal of fortune, the rise of the platform economy and the collapse of the dot-com bubble took the world of news by storm. Although digital media have been described as the golden gate to deliberative democracy, they profoundly disrupted the creation of content of traditional news outlets with the concomitant realization that technology produced a trend nobody could afford not to practice (Tsui, 2009). Journalists are buffeted by gale-force wind in every direction as they attempt to manage ethical journalism along with the warp-speed version of the Web and the increasing influence of market logic (Harcup, 2020). Certainly, the journalistic field benefits from technological developments considering an increased range of choices in newsgathering techniques and the opportunity to deepen news

stories with interactive links. But technology also seems – wholly or partially – responsible for impoverishing journalistic standards (Zelizer, 2009). The tension between journalism and technology inspired scholarly research to explore what is left of the meaning of ethical journalism in the face of technological change.

Boczkowski (2009) demonstrated journalists' difficulty to blend in and come to terms with the new media landscape. In his view, the proliferation of outlets and the growth of publication of online news altered journalists' longstanding practices of monitoring competitors. It has meant that journalists have far more knowledge about the outputs of other media. When this information transparency is combined with the ethical journalism culture of checks and balances, what results is journalist's tendency to mimic their competitors – that is, to provide their consumers with equivalent information and more (Boczkowski, 2009). Such mimicry in news production increases similarity in levels of content overlap between print and online news. Yet it also affects the patterns of risk aversion in ethical and editorial judgment, challenging the normative role of ethical journalism in providing a healthy and diverse public sphere.

Newton (2009) adopted a similar pessimistic tone and noted that the space in which journalism operates is being taken over by new forms of journalism whose distinguishing qualities present many threats to the most cherished ethical values and standards, such as instantaneous reporting and extreme content customization. Yet his work differs from Boczkowski (2009) as he called for a rethinking of journalism as a field of cultural production that should capitalize upon technological advances and conquer new turfs rather than resisting innovation or reacting to moves by new entrants. In other words, Newton (2009) recommended journalism to twin its moral high ground with new social practices to invest in opportunities that might be more fruitful in the future.

More radically, Hindman (2017) believed journalists have a positive obligation to use audience measurement technologies to better understand their audiences' baseline preferences. For him, much of news stories' impact is foreseeable today. Therefore, journalists are required to make a good-faith effort to anticipate the true consequences of their professional choices and continually test the reception of their stories to maximize social impact. Whilst fully aware that mingling old-age values with digital metrics makes ethical journalism more convoluted, Hindman (2017) deemed it necessary for journalists to realize the extent to which they are truly fulfilling their civic goals. In a similar vein, Deuze (2019) suggested broadening the definition of journalism beyond its formerly distinct and fenced organization of news work. In his view, the news industry as it has traditionally been

conceived is no longer meaningful in a media landscape where new technologies open up publishing opportunities for virtually every citizen (Deuze, 2019).

Journalism finds itself in a quagmire. Its essence remains the same yet the conditions under which it is practiced broke from the past and are in permanent flux, jeopardizing the implementation of journalism ethics in return. While hopeful, the foregoing scholars seem to converge on the idea that technology is impoverishing the edges of an intellectual tradition rather than fostering the latter's autonomous value system that functions as the "go-to" places for the most reliable and qualitative news sources. Despite similar cynical claims – such as Harcup (2020) arguing traditional journalism is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, and ultimately, a dire future – traditional and online journalism still co-exist. Whether the crisis narrative is even a proper term of choice to describe journalism's present set of challenges is open to debate (Zelizer, 2015). Other scholars resorted to the "stickiness" quality of the journalistic institution as a theoretical explanation for why journalism is slow to adapt to changes and evolves in a path-dependent pattern (Anderson, 2011). Yet more optimistic pundits have recalled Darwin's theory of evolution to defend what Franklin (2008) called an "editorial Darwinism" according to which journalism is able, like organisms, to adapt to changing circumstances and compete with adversaries to survive and reproduce (Franklin, 2008, p. 307).

### 2.2.2 From traditional to online journalism: a rugged ethical road

Journalists are re-examining their purpose and role at a time when media moguls and new socio-economic imperatives nurture a new ethos in their professional practices. In a bewildering fog of news, Ward (2010) is not surprised the ship of traditional journalism is disoriented when ethical values, such as truth-telling, impartiality, and gatekeeping, unceasingly rub up against the culture of online journalism. For others, global media players like the BBC retain an unrivaled authority that confirm and interpret the news (Flew, 2018). Still, the inroads online journalism has made into newsrooms altered the normative landscape for optimum journalism.

In this context, Singer (2010) outlined four key aspects that spawned a structural change in the journalistic field, each with its ethical implication. The first aspect relates to a widespread economic downturn for traditional news organizations. Their stock prices plummeted and the pre-digital business model collapsed with the rise of untidy ones that focus more on revenue streams than ethical conformity. Secondly, a de-institutionalization process occurred as newsrooms' staff sizes shrunk and journalists' responsibilities scattered

across a multi-platform environment (Singer, 2010). According to Hallin (1992), this ongoing de-institutionalization led professional journalists to lose their unified identity and uncontested centrality to the public sphere. Paradoxically, it is their devotion to the bedrock principles of journalistic ethics that requires them to alter their traditional responsibilities and behavior.

Thirdly, a shift in the narrative structure owing to new digital technology relocated the construction of meaning into a more fluid and open format. This reverberates the social theory of modernity whereby scholars like Bauman (2005) advocated a shift from “high” modernity – when journalism emerged as the primary sense-making practice of modern culture – to “liquid” modernity (Bauman, 2005, p. 1). The latter describes a society where the conditions under which its members act are fragile and temporary – preventing the consolidations of any habits or routines. Traditional news organizations do not escape the impact of fast-paced radical change and it is the uncertain, volatile features of modern life that professional journalists fail to come to terms with (Deuze, 2008). Deuze (2008) later adopted the term “liquid” to demonstrate how disruptive technologies and social trends wreak havoc on the then-solid foundations and institutional contours of traditional journalism (Deuze, 2008, p. 857). Going back to Singer (2010), his final aspect pointed to an emerging news process in which journalists and the public are engaged in a more interconnected, open, and collaborative relationship. The latter jeopardizes a detached professional stance, which Singer (2010) considered a core tenet of ethical journalism.

Singer’s (2010) account of contemporary journalists being pulled in conflicting ethical directions has not fallen on deaf ears. A growing body of literature further explored the effects of using the internet as a reporting tool for professional journalists and their news culture. Research at a BBC operation in the United Kingdom (UK) revealed the unrest, technological myopia, and decline of specialist skills that the interactive media has created in the newsroom (Cottle & Ashton, 1999). Likewise, Singer (1997) found that journalists’ role drastically changed from selecting and reporting the news towards helping the public figure out what is valuable and true across the million bits of information available online. The importance of sense-making – the need to be a credible source of interpretation in a world of virtually unlimited information choices – was particularly emphasized in his research (Singer, 1997). Accordingly, the gatekeeping role of the traditional journalist did not diminish considering journalists have a more active role to play in the online world to filter out important public matters and help people put information into perspective (Singer, 1997). This account complements that of Bruns (2005) for whom traditional journalists increasingly

assume librarian practices of “gatewatching” to monitor, rather than control, the output gates of news publications and other sources (Bruns, 2005, p. 11).

The implementation of new technologies in the newsroom also led to a spread of multi-skilling as journalists move from the era of single-media to multimedia reporting (Clarke & Bromley, 2012). Yet a discord exists as to whether multi-skilling benefits or impairs traditional journalistic practices. Clarke and Bromley (2012) usefully summarized the two opposing sides. According to its supporters, multi-skilling increases journalists’ technical capabilities and provides them more freedom and control over their end-products. For instance, Singer (2004) found a perception amongst journalists that regarded newsroom convergence as a career booster and a tool for professional enhancement.

However, according to its critics, journalists face increased pressure under a regime of multi-skilled and multi-media working. It incites them to remain tied to computer screens to demonstrate flexibility in performing multiple roles and functions, which decreases their autonomy in return. (Clarke & Bromley, 2012). Moreover, the increase in workload might encourage, if not compel, journalists to brush aside high journalistic norms and standards to keep up with an erratic 24-hour news cyclone. For instance, Doudaki and Spyridou (2013) investigated the content relationship between print and online news. Their findings revealed how technological and market restrictions led to more copy-paste journalism and less original reporting to meet arbitrary productivity metrics. Similarly, Deuze (2006) noted the increased practice of shovelware, which denotes the repurposing of traditional news content across a range of websites with little or no change just to satisfy consumers’ fairly ravenous appetite for news. The ethics of adaptability and immediacy characterizing online news is challenging the pride of place that lengthy and detailed news articles have enjoyed – features that remain strongly privileged by professional norms (Hindman, 2017).

Nevertheless, there is evidence that multi-skilling has already been embraced by traditional news outlets as a form of upskilling to strengthen journalists’ control over the production of news with the proviso, of course, that it will alleviate their concerns about the perceived complexities of multimedia production (Cottle & Ashton, 1999). While this might be a valuable strategy for growth, it puts the closed and privileged culture of traditional journalism at odds with a public sphere founded in the open, collaborative, and interactive system of emerging spaces. More so, it is in such a public sphere that neologisms emerge with citizen journalism and “do-it-yourself” media producers who capitalize on the affordances created by convergence and digital tools to annotate, appropriate, and recirculate content (O’Sullivan, 2011). This user-generated content and partisan news production, touted

as a new pathway to social enlightenment and betterment, instigated what Hall (2001) called “disintermediation” (Hall, 2001, p. 53). The latter describes how the rise of new participatory folk culture – less constrained to adhere to old-age journalistic ethics – resulted in traditional journalists losing their intermediary position between public institutions and news consumers. In his view, the emergence of news providers illustrates a preference for anti-elitist discourse and led to the wholesale discarding of traditional moral benchmarks (Hall, 2001).

The latter stance retained its relevance over the years, as indicated by Harcup (2020) whose research revealed professional journalists still lack a rulebook to maintain a credible ethical identity as they sail a blustery sea of wired and wireless media. Metaphorically, he likened ethical journalism to a compass point orientating professional journalists towards the realization of best practices. In his view, it is when no such ethical compass point exists, as in the digital age, that journalism is at risk or inflicting harm – whether that be disavowing minority voices, intruding on individuals’ privacy, or distorting reality through stereotyped and hurtful news coverage (Harcup, 2020).

### 2.2.3 From passive to active: journalists’ changing voice

Emerging forms of new media accentuated the need for traditional journalists to dig deeper into events to explain *what* happened and *why* it happened to avoid reiterating what has already been shared online (Albæk, 2011). In turn, journalists are required to cast aside their conventional role as detached observers and narrate more investigative news stories instead. This style of reporting exposes journalists’ authorial voice, which outlines different perspectives, offers background information while assessing potential future consequences (Albæk, 2011).

However, journalism’s greater independence from sources of authority increases skepticism towards them. The existing literature amply illustrated how digitalization fueled a certain distrust and low level of believability from the public toward democratic institutions, including journalism (Blöbaum, 2014). This is when professionalization, as previously mentioned, becomes an essential discursive strategy to confirm professional jurisdiction in news articles (Wiik, 2009). Yet for Weiler (1983), claims of professionalization are necessary but insufficient. Journalists, to augment their statements’ credibility, need what he called “compensatory legitimation” – that is, relying on specialized, objective knowledge by consulting experts for assistance in reporting and selecting the news (Weiler, 1983, p. 268). This provides news coverage with the necessary depth, breadth, and factual expertise to

transcend the level of simple-minded interpretation of complex issues and events – especially when the digital age drastically reduced the amount of time between an event and production deadlines. By the same token, journalists have a responsibility to honestly report on their reliance upon expert knowledge to guarantee their interpretation emanates from a reliable and objective source rather than private feelings and opinions (Albæk, 2011).

In this context, Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) developed the idea of an “emotional turn” to demonstrate how the affordances of digital platforms and social media opened up space for emotion in the production of news. Emotions challenge the normative ideals of ethical journalism and the rational, informative dimensions of journalistic practices, which aim to educate citizens by appealing to their reason only (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). In truth, research on journalism discourse revealed that emotion has already gained ground in conventional “hard” news reporting to the extent of becoming a new journalistic value (Pantti, 2010). Moreover, Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) found an emerging body of scholarship, which highlighted the growth in subjective and confessional journalism. This means that professional journalists increasingly take on the role of subjective actors or embodied chronicles of events to include personal opinions and self-disclosure in their news coverage. Interestingly, this role is particularly upfront when journalists report on disasters and crisis, demonstrating that journalism practices are not monolithic but able to accommodate to socio-political context without precedence (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

#### 2.2.4 The ethical struggle of health-related news coverage

The trends of new media influenced many fields of community life, including public health (Gollust, Fowler & Niederdeppe, 2019). Whilst health remains, from a supplier perspective, a leading news category for public consumption (Chang, 2012), health-related news coverage has no protection from the journalism maelstrom. Professional journalists who urgently need to inform citizens about health concerns cannot count on the undivided attention of their audience; they have to compete with the rest of the news providers to earn it (Randerson, 2016). However, prior research identified recurrent problems in health-related news coverage, including inaccuracies, errors of inference, omission of background information, and a tendency to exaggerate or sensationalize health threats that might elicit unnecessary public fears (Chang, 2012). Further research on media health representation revealed journalists’ struggle to get their stories right in ways that are fair, diversified, and truthful towards minority voices facing health inequalities (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Scammel, Karapu & Nikora, 2008). In crisis situations, journalists are encouraged to stay within well-

worn reporting channels or routine procedures in the construction of news that might be unfitting to the realities of the world and further deepen the marginalization of certain populations (Hodgetts et al., 2008).

Moreover, scientists acknowledged journalists' uneasy position of being essentially the pipelines through which experts talk to each other and keep abreast of recent findings (Nelkin, 1995). This is especially true in the midst of a crisis when specialized knowledge has not ripened to the point of being vetted. Yet news coverage often revolves around creating and exploiting oppositions, such as diametrically opposing life with the threat, or the reality, of death (Seale, 2003). Hence, a perennial complaint of scientists is that journalists fail to deal with the idea of false equivalence – that is, being able to report on an event when the latter is not necessarily framed as a binary picture (Nelkin, 1995). They also criticized journalists' tendency to impulsively report on and prematurely disclose scientific facts that are still half-baked from the perspective of accepted protocols (Nelkin, 1995). After all, nature has its secrets and unearthing its mysteries in ways that are valid and true is a slow, careful, and methodological process – one that contradicts journalism's stopwatch culture in the digital age (Reich & Godler, 2014; Stengers, 2018). Scientists further blamed journalists to magnify events and overestimate or sensationalize scientific discoveries (Nelkin, 1995). According to Pettersen (2005), this partially stems from their restricted knowledge of the scientific and medical discourse. Arguably, science becomes more palatable when reported as a revolutionary breakthrough. But journalists' focus on drama, aberration, and controversies are prone to lend credibility to unproven cures or underreport ways to prevent the spread of disease in health-related news coverage, which could itself become a source of risk in a crisis (Pettersen, 2005).

During times of uncertainty and pervasive fear, scholars attributed different roles to journalism, such as fostering social solidarity, national identity, and creating active self-governing citizens (Levine & Thompson, 2004). For Murphy, Ward, and Donovan (2006), journalists should not adopt a “gung-ho” attitude and think they can pursue their civic roles and the core tenets of ethical journalism simultaneously because aiming at both will end up achieving neither. Instead, journalists should reaffirm the principle of truth-telling – accurately and thoroughly report the facts of an event to unravel its roots – without being concerned with the gains or losses it might occasion on one's civic culture (Murphy, Ward & Donovan, 2006). In other words, if journalists compromise truth-telling in their coverage for fear of social condemnation or jeopardizing the interests of minority groups, they fail to provide citizens with the needed information to critically assess and rationally apprehend the

fog of a crisis.

Thomas and Senkpeni (2020) specifically documented journalists' tough role to follow ethical parameters amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The outbreak not only spread physically but also digitally, hindering responsible and helpful journalistic coverage while feeding hearsay that proliferates faster than the virus. Whilst this crisis might feel like an opportunity for mainstream news to win back or increase the public's confidence, journalists remain perceived as the least trusted source of information regarding the pandemic (Ferraresi, 2020). However, somewhat ironically, a recent report revealed traditional media has been the most-used news source in times of the coronavirus pandemic (Ofcom, 2021). Arguably, it is the combination of a perceived distrust and continuing reliance upon traditional news by the public that led to an "infodemic", which can lead people to make unwise choices and policymakers to adopt inadequate or harmful measures that may put individuals' lives at risk (Zarocostas, 2020, p. 676).

Against this background, Thomas and Senkpeni (2020) urged the formulation of specific guidelines informed by both professional journalists and health care ethics – such as privacy and intrusion – to ensure epidemic news reporting is performed sensitively, responsibly, and respectfully. This is particularly relevant during the coronavirus pandemic when death occurs in public spaces like hospitals and are no longer wholly private matters (Duncan, 2019). Likewise, Mauri-Ríos, Ramon-Vegas & Rodríguez-Martínez (2020) highlighted the prominence of codes of ethics as a self-regulation tool in times of public health crisis to carry out ethical and responsible coverage.

Yet other scholars disagreed, arguing traditional ethics cannot compete with the digitalization of journalism accelerated by the pandemic. Miczo (2021), for instance, found that online news articles published in the early phase of the pandemic were shifting to include more non-traditional features, such as the use of humor, which does not hold up well to ethical scrutiny but encourages a distorted version of the pandemic instead (Miczo, 2021). Moreover, although international ethics codes converge on principles that could be qualified as universal tenets, journalists are not necessarily engaged in the same endeavor, traveling towards a shared goal (Birkhead, 1989). This is because the current state of ethical journalism is largely fragmented and, metaphorically, resembles a normative archipelago of islands that illustrates the diversity, rather than unity, of journalistic performance (Charon & Ridel, 1994; Ward, 2016).

### **2.3 Ethical journalism in the digital age: towards a new mindset?**

When scholars discuss a rework of ethical journalism, they often get stuck between two polar impulses. Some hold tight to the view that pre-digital ethical guidelines are equally effective in the new media ecology (Belsey & Chadwick, 1992). Others nod their heads in agreement that ethical journalism needs radical conceptual reform – fresh principles embedded within a universal code of journalism ethics on how to operate online or make use of online resources. The discussion pertaining to the universality and particularity of journalistic ethics occupies a central place in academic literature. Ward (2016) advocated for a new mindset for ethical journalism, one that counters the pervasive metaphor of absolutism that our beliefs need foolproof and entrenched foundational principles. He called such a mindset “pragmatic humanism”, according to which ethical norms and standards are inherently fallible and evolving to fit a digital reality (Ward, 2016, p. 36). In his view, ethical journalism should be recast as a fair, open-ended, and cross-cultural discourse at the heart of which evolution, enrichment, and fair negotiation take place.

Ward (2018) further suggested an integrated approach to developing journalistic codes of ethics whereby journalists share flexible general principles that can be realized in different ways depending on a country’s media culture and the form of journalism. Berglez (2013) held a similar stance and urged traditional news organizations to adopt more globalized and uniform reporting practices to regain their social relevance and the public’s trust in the digital age. Likewise, Herrscher (2002) considered a universal code of ethics desirable but stressed its potential danger as it might bestow leading news organizations in the western world a free hand to impose a line of discourse in which their values are unequally granted around the world.

Yet to be plausible, a call for universal ethical standards must reconcile with a context-dependent relativistic logic: the cognitive frames of reference and habitual news practices within the context of the nation-state. Existing research preoccupied with identifying and articulating collective norms and standards that fit the digital age indicated how ideological, cultural, and socio-political factors are critical obstacles for a certain kind of similarity or even universality in the characteristics of journalistic behavior (Plaisance, Skewes & Hanitzsch, 2012). Moreover, philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre have, for a long time, supported individuals’ moral responsibility to enact ethical decisions. The existentialists, in particular, rebelled against conformism in the newsroom and believed ethics is a matter of free and personal choice. They called on journalists to live “authentic” lives – stay true to themselves, follow their inner conscience, and resist institutional red tape (Holt, 2012, p. 3).

Similarly, Merrill (1995) argued that adherence to collective, group-oriented codes of ethics is unfitting amidst an increasingly superficial and media-saturated world because journalists apply ethical values in a variety of ways to give meaning to what they do. Journalists' commitment and freedom to make choices instead would, in his view, guarantee ethically more defensible journalism (Merrill, 1995).

Though using existential thoughts as an attempt to find ethical direction in modernity has been contested for its lack of ethical guidance and motivation for action (Adorno, 2013), a widely accepted digital journalism ethics has not yet been introduced. Given each country shapes and tempers a particular value system at its discretion, no uniform trends or consensus appear to exist as to how journalism can fine-tune ethical journalism of a bygone era to a new reality (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2015). Therefore, it remains puzzling if traditional news organizations, in practice, stick to an old mindset of pre-digital ethics or embrace a progressive one instead that best suits the messy and complex digital era.

## **2.4 Contribution**

Overall, there is a strong tendency by academic scholars to highlight the controversies and problems of ethical journalism in the digital age, including from the perspectives of journalists themselves who struggle to deliver ethical and responsible news coverage. The literature review also points towards a broken pre-digital consensus on the state of journalism ethics and an unceasing debate as to whether one needs to reconsider journalistic norms and standards in tandem with the ever-changing media scene in a globalized world. Yet what one needs – and what appears missing – is a more sophisticated and pragmatic understanding of what ethical journalism truly means in a world of open and ubiquitous publication. Filling this gap is important to lay the groundwork for further research on the future of journalism. Therefore, this study will explore how leading international news organizations, in their online media, approach ethics in the context of an ongoing global health crisis, which has made the coronavirus pandemic one of the most difficult stories for journalists to cover.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter expounds on the research design to answer the research questions. It justifies the choice of a qualitative approach and the selection of three traditional news organizations from which the data is collected. It further explains the methodological execution of the exploratory case study and CDA to examine the organizations' journalistic codes on the one hand, and the discursive construction of ethical journalism in their online news media, on the other. These methodologies aim to unravel leading international online news media's approach to ethical journalism in the digital age. Concurrently, it aims to find out whether the selected organizations reach a consensus on the handling of ethics in a world of unfettered barriers to publishing.

#### **3.1 Research design**

##### **3.1.1 Qualitative approach**

Considering the unsuitableness of a quantitative research design to capture the denotative and connotative meanings in textual data (Brennen, 2017), this study employs two qualitative research methods: an exploratory case study and CDA. In social sciences, qualitative research is a broad umbrella term for an array of strategies and techniques that aim to understand situations and interactions in their uniqueness as part of a particular social context (Flick, 2018). Aspers and Corte (2019) defined it as an iterative process in which deeper meaning is achieved by making distinctions and interpreting empirical material. A qualitative approach fits the current study because the research question requires a systematic inquiry into news organizations' *modus operandi* in complex and nascent settings. Moreover, rather than merely asking about what people say they do; it seeks to explore what people actually do – how journalists actually report on the news from an ethical standpoint – to deliver insights that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or interviews. Qualitative research thus enables the researcher to get at complex layers of meaning in contemporary online news media and discern patterns of inclusion or exclusion of traditional ethical norms and standards. The study's findings are inductively derived from the data, which, in this case, takes the form of non-reduceable texts.

Although no consensus exists on the characteristic traits of qualitative research, scholars generally identified the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Tracy, 2019). Hence, it is important to acknowledge the potential biases or subjectivities that might impact the study and monitor them as to how they may influence the collection and interpretation of data. Rejecting the notion that news is simply a collection of objective facts, this study also recognizes that a news organization's – as much as an

individual's – approach towards ethical journalism is culturally determined and subject to evolutionary change (Hänksa-Ahy, 2011). Hence, the findings should not be assumed as exhaustive or taken as gospel truth. Instead, they serve to provide clarity on the relevance of and news organizations' approach to ethical and responsible journalism in the digital age.

### 3.1.2 Selection of leading international news organizations

This study takes an international perspective to examine online news media from an ethical lens. It selected three leading news organizations headquartered in different countries – namely, the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC. The findings will derive differences and commonalities across the organizations, which, in keeping with the literature review, allow to confirm or reject assumptions as to whether a consensus exists on the handling of ethical journalism in the digital age. These organizations have been selected on various grounds. First, they share a set of western cultural and social norms, a similarity used here as an indicator for an “international” news culture. This prevents the study to derive obvious findings due to societal and media cultural differences. The choice for a western context is explained by a continuing western hegemony in the way one understands journalism on a global scale (Hanitzsch, 2019). Notwithstanding the disservice this hegemony is doing to other regions of the world, examining the journalistic field without any sort of ethnocentric bias is, epistemologically speaking, not feasible. In fact, the global news media system is largely owned by western corporations which keep influencing and contributing to the unevenness of information flows (Hanitzsch, 2019). The asserted crisis of traditional journalism may thus be, at least partially, a crisis of democratic institutions in parts of the Western world. Moreover, the American, British, and Australian media systems enjoy relatively similar press freedom, legal restrictions, and market economies, which makes them somewhat similar when compared to the rest of the world (Ashley, 2015).

Secondly, though news consumption is becoming more of a digital affair, traditional news organizations retain a certain tenacity for which audiences are reluctant to venture far from (Nelson, 2020). Accordingly, there is theoretical ground to assume that the digital revolution did not eclipse the relevance of these organizations, making an inquiry into their approach towards ethical journalism today still more pertinent. Thirdly, all three organizations have been selected by virtue of their long-standing reputation and distinction on a national and international scale. The *NYT* represents a pivotal institution in American democracy and continues to hold its gravitas as a global industry leader for traditional newspaper circulation (Tracy, 2020). Likewise, the BBC constitutes the world's leading public service broadcaster,

reaching a record global audience in 2020 (BBC, 2020). It represents Britain's strongest and most valuable brand (BBC, 2021). The ABC also plays a unique role in Australian life and continues to strengthen the footprint of its services across the Asia-Pacific region (Vincent & Walsh, 2019). Overall, these organizations are considered leading players in the Anglo-Saxon media world (Ashley, 2015). Their shared English language also makes the data collection and analysis more accessible and coherent.

### **3.2 Sub-research question 1: An exploratory case study**

In light of the first sub-research question, this study examines the current editorial and ethical values and standards each aforementioned organization preaches and abides by. This is relevant considering prior research has not recently explored the substance of journalistic codes and guidelines vis-à-vis the new digital journalism reality (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2015). Exploratory research is a good approach when insufficient studies exist on a particular topic, which the researcher wants to better comprehend (Wu, Stvilia & Lee, 2017). Among the variety of methods for exploratory research, the case study is particularly pertinent when a holistic, in-depth investigation of an individual unit is required to better understand a research problem (Zainal, 2007). As such, it provides an opportunity for the researcher to gain a detailed appreciation of each organization's codes of ethics in their natural form before analyzing their application in health-related news coverage. Exploratory case studies are generally performed for answering "what" types of questions and seek a thick description of a contemporary bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Moreover, Yin (2018) suggested that multiple cases are useful to demonstrate different perspectives on a complex issue. Appendix A illustrates the three cases, which correspond to the current codes and guidelines of the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC, respectively. They have been purposefully and systematically retrieved from each organization's corporate website and within a specific time period. The choice of a non-random purposive sampling maximizes reliability and consistency in the data collection process and ensures each case is relevant to answer the first sub-research question (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Case studies, however, remain a challenging and controversial social science endeavor since no specific requirement exists to guide a case study research (Yin, 2018). Its lack of rigor and robustness as a research tool has been the target of much criticism. Yet, it also represents an advantage for the researcher who has a free hand to tailor the design and data collection procedures in light of the research question (Baskarada, 2014). When a multiple case study design is performed, Yin (2014) suggested using the logic of replication, in which

the researcher replicates a specific procedure for each case. With this in mind, the chosen analytic strategy for gathering information on the selected cases is twofold. In line with Creswell and Poth (2017), the first phase entails generating a description of each case by identifying specific issues and themes. This within-case analysis enables the researcher to identify the values and standards each organization ascribes to ethical journalism. This is followed by a comparative analysis to uncover patterns of similarities and differences on the normative underpinnings of ethical journalism across the three cases. This phase is interpretive because the researcher can make assertions on the overall meaning assigned to ethical journalism and clarify whether the codes of ethics are in some ways homogeneous (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This might allude to a consensus on the handling of ethical journalism between the news organizations, at least in principle or writing.

Yin (2014) called the researcher to be mindful when reviewing documents because they might not accurately reflect reality. This applies to the ethical and editorial codes and guidelines, which by and large have not been systematically and consistently revised to mirror the current digital era. Hence, it is worth mentioning that the researcher's intent is neither to generalize nor to deliver conclusive findings. The explorative case study is considered instrumental here: a research strategy that provides background knowledge for later investigation (Stake, 1995). It is undertaken to explore the content of specific journalistic codes and guidelines to set the tone for further inquiry and establish the analytic framework for analyzing ethical journalism in practice in health-related news coverage.

### **3.3 Sub-research question 2: A critical discourse analysis**

In light of the second sub-research question, this study examines online health-related news coverage from the *NYT*, BBC, ABC through CDA. The latter methodology is deemed the most appropriate for three main reasons. First, CDA is chosen over other qualitative methodologies because, while focus groups or interviews explore individuals' perceptions of ethical journalism, the focus here is directed to the discursive dimension of representations and how these are strategically constructed in the news coverage (Huckin, 1997). The sole focus on language also directed the choice for CDA rather than its multimodal counterpart. Secondly, CDA relies upon a constructivist ontology of social sciences. It holds the view that social reality is contingent upon and constructed by social actors where language both shapes and is shaped by wider processes within society (Amer, 2017). In this manner, news coverage does not passively report upon the world but is imbued with meanings, perspectives, and beliefs that bring the world into being. CDA thus takes the larger social context into account

in the production and interpretation of textual data, which enables the researcher to consider the wider, digital context when exploring discursive practices in news coverage. Thirdly, unlike other forms of textual analysis, CDA is an implicitly moralistic approach to analysis, an aspect derived from the word “critical” (Graham, 2018). It is concerned with denaturalizing the language to identify uses (or abuses) of power that are perpetuated by and through discourse. It thus enables to shed light on the ways journalists deploy discursive strategies to push their own agenda to exert dominance in health-related news coverage. This is interesting considering professional journalists, as elite members within media organizations, have privileged access to discursive and communication resources that bestow them with influence and hegemony over the actions and minds of others (van Dijk, 1993).

Furthermore, according to Herzog (2016), to be critical is to assume a normative viewpoint outside of the criticized material, which is here taken to be the values and standards identified through the exploratory case study. In other words, the codes of ethics – which the news organizations hold themselves accountable to – serve as a normative point of reference to assess how journalists in their coverage deploy ideological and linguistic processes for particular ends. Although these values and standards are culturally contingent or may change historically, relying on them prevent the findings to reflect an external, subjective position.

Given the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches with which scholars have apprehended the critical dimension of CDA, a clarification of the meanings that the current literature assigned to this methodology is necessary. Scholars traditionally defined CDA and its critical stance as an analytical endeavor aiming at revealing the linguistic-discursive dimension of social and cultural phenomena and developments (Fairclough, 2001; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this sense, the term *discourse* has been conceptualized in a dialectical relationship of reciprocal co-construction with social reality in that it becomes a way of talking about and understanding the world. Following this reasoning, this study conceptualizes language as a constructive mediator and a form of social practice to critically analyze how discursive processes in news coverage take part in the shaping of ethical journalism. In particular, its interest is in news discourse – that is, the role and contribution of linguistic features and structure in the construction of ideas in online news media (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). For Bednarek and Caple (2012), studying news discourse is feasible and important because it is highly accessible, easy to collect, and individuals spend a significant amount of time consuming it. As a result, news coverage bears a significant influence over individuals and even more so as they constitute, in part, a primary vehicle for the delivery of health-related information to the public (Van Slooten, Friedman & Tanner, 2013).

In line with the attention CDA has traditionally invested to capture opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, authority, and control in texts (van Dijk, 1995; Machin & Mayr, 2012), this study intends to reveal the strategies in online health-related news coverage that seek to shape the representation of people, actions, and events in ways that construct ideological positionings and power relations. This way, CDA enables to grasp the meaning potential that lies behind the techniques employed by professional journalists in their daily crafting of the news discourse. Concurrently, this study addresses Bednarek and Caple's (2012) concern that insufficient focus is given to the ideological aspects of news coverage in critical linguistic analysis. It also concurs with Cotter (2010) who contends that drawing attention to the discursive practices in news coverage increases one's understanding of how the digital media reconfigured the literal use of language in traditional news settings from an ethical standpoint.

### 3.3.1 Sample

A corpus of 60 health-related news coverage published on behalf of the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC, was selected for CDA. More specifically, 20 news coverage were chosen per news organization as units of analysis with a word count in the 600 to 1.350 range each (for a complete list of the collected data: see Appendix B). With this word count range, the researcher selected long-form news articles only, meaning articles with larger amounts of content that allow for greater scrutiny and interpretation (Longhi & Winques, 2015).

Purposive sampling guided the choice of genre of the news coverage. The researcher sampled "hard" news exclusively covering the coronavirus pandemic and left out editorial and opinion articles. Traditional "hard" news was deemed the most insightful to investigate as opposed to the subjective, sensationalist, or offbeat nature of "soft" news. They are characterized by a high level of newsworthiness as they cover timely, important, and consequential topics such as the coronavirus pandemic (Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, Brennan & Howard, 2020). In fact, the sample of news coverage satisfies most of the newsworthiness requirements identified by Harcup and O'Neill (2017) – the so-called news values, such as *Conflict* (i.e., stories on controversial topics, crisis, or warfare), *Magnitude* (i.e., stories sufficiently significant and impactful), and *Bad news* (i.e., stories with particularly negative overtones).

Moreover, as mentioned in the literature review, crisis situations create high levels of uncertainty and time pressure, making it challenging for journalists to exercise rigor in verifying the authenticity and validity of their stories before publication. Nevertheless, despite

finding themselves at the center of an emotionally loaded and complex playing field, journalists still have an ethical responsibility to act as accurate and critical reporters on health matters (van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes & Vliegenhart, 2017). This prompted the researcher to purposefully select news coverage on the coronavirus pandemic since this topic is likely to deliver innovative and thought-provoking findings on the pursuit of ethical journalism today.

Purposive sampling also guided the choice of source and the time period for retrieving the news coverage. The researcher only relied on the corporate websites of the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC for reasons of reliability, trustworthiness, and simplicity purposes since their websites have a special “COVID-19” edition providing full coverage and overview of this crisis. Retrieving news coverage from a similar type of source across the three organizations also safeguards consistent and systematic data analysis. The researcher verified each coverage featured original reporting and could be traced back to one or multiple journalist(s). This was important with regard to the BBC, which does not typically provide bylines in its articles. The time period for data collection is limited to one year starting from the first outbreak of Coronavirus in the countries where the news organizations are headquartered. According to the timeline of key events in the spread of the virus published on the organizations’ corporate websites, the United States, UK, and Australia have had their first Coronavirus case reported in January 2020 – though the exact day differs between them (Taylor, 2021; BBC, 2020; Handley, 2020). Hence, the researcher purposefully selected information-rich and relevant news coverage between January 2020 and January 2021. The results of this research, however, cannot be generalized considering the limited sample size and the international scale, uncertainty, and the seeming perennial nature of the coronavirus pandemic.

### 3.3.2 Operationalization

The 60 news coverage on the coronavirus pandemic were divided into three categories based on the news organization they derive from to facilitate comparison. To grasp an in-depth understanding of online news media’s approach to ethical journalism, two rounds of analysis were performed. The relatively short length of the news coverage facilitated the process of reading and analyzing one article multiple times.

Following Machin and Mayr (2012), the first round consisted of segmenting and reassembling the data into meaningful findings by systematically applying a toolkit in each coverage consisting of five steps. The first step – word connotation – analyzes the basic choice of words, how they invoke a particular feeling or impression in the text in addition to

their literal meaning and help place certain events into a particular framework of reference. By linking these connotations to the journalists' intentions, the researcher can explore how and why certain contentions are used to convey a persuasive message or support an argument. The second step – overlexicalization – identifies reiteration and abundance of words that are similar or semantically related and play an important part in establishing textual relevancy, language style, tone, and rhythm. The researcher can grasp how journalists, by catching the reader's attention, underscore particular happenings they selected as significant or newsworthy. The third step – suppression– entails detecting terms that the reader might expect to be included but remain absent because the journalist deliberately or unintentionally omitted them. It looks at what information the journalist left out or added in the storyline and what ideological work this does. The fourth step – structural opposition – seeks opposing classes of concepts or “ideological squaring” indicating which side is being overly accentuated or implicitly attributed the characteristic of being “good” or “bad” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 41). The final step – lexical choices and genre of communication – identifies levels of authority and co-membership with the public. It exposes whether journalists in their news coverage pursue power and influence over others and/or promote an ideology of sameness and equity instead. A color code distinguished these five tools while conducting the analysis. The findings obtained intend to highlight types of discursive practices that are foregrounded or backgrounded in the news coverage and reveal how journalists make lexical choices to achieve communicative aims in an (un-)ethical fashion. It will also reveal the similarities and differences in the way online news media from different news outlets approach ethical journalism.

The second round of analysis examines the significance of these discursive practices from the vantage point of the organizations' ethical values and standards identified through the case study and the guidelines on how these ought to be applied. It will provide an answer to the research question and discuss whether a consensus exists across the three journalistic traditions in the way ethical journalism is practiced and understood.

### **3.4 Reflexivity**

The research design is systematically applied and described in detail, making it sufficiently transparent for replication. Yet, the study's reliability and validity – establishing the rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data obtained – are limited. Considering the researcher is the instrument providing interpretation and common sense to the data, an objective stance is not preserved and the soundness of the results is hardly generalizable

(Silverman, 2011). The findings are not applicable beyond the scope of the chosen organization and news coverage. They are also exclusively informed by the contingent and situated encounter of the researcher and the research material. Hence, the results considered (critically) relevant here might be dismissed as extraneous by different researchers who, following the same analytical process, might not deliver similar conclusions. Results are indeed embodied in our ever-changing personal narratives, which are influenced by culture, time, place, and history (Mackay, 2017). The researcher is currently embodied in Western culture and thus, the data is interpreted from a Western perspective. Acknowledging one's place of interpretation is important to make the analysis stronger, more democratic, and honest (Mackay, 2017).

Moreover, for both the explorative case study and CDA, the researcher applied a clear research framework with explicit parameters to safeguard logical reasoning that is consistent and compelling enough to defend the study's conclusions. Since both qualitative approaches investigate what they claim to investigate, the research procedure leads to the accurate observation of reality, enhancing construct validity in return (Gibbert, Ruigrok & Wicki, 2008). Limitations are alleviated insofar as possible by avoiding over-interpretation and falsifying initial hunches about the data to enhance the study's credibility.

### **3.5 Research ethics**

The data collected from the corporate website of the news organizations are publicly and freely accessible by using the university credentials to log in when necessary. Hence, the researcher is not required to obtain informed consent from potential research participants and less concerned with avoiding deceptive practices when designing this study. Yet the corpus of online news media covers a sensitive and uneasy topic. Moreover, since the news articles contain the names and opinions of private individuals interrogated by the journalists, the researcher needs to preserve their anonymity and confidentiality to minimize discomfort or potentially damaging effects. Indeed, there remains a level of ambiguity concerning whether personal information in the public domain can be considered available for use for any purpose, including research (Harriman & Patel, 2014). This becomes particularly problematic when it concerns vulnerable groups who might be unaware of the extent to which their information could be disseminated or used (Harriman & Patel, 2014).

## 4. Analysis results

To present the results of the analysis insightfully, this section is divided into two main subsections. First, it exposes the ethical and editorial values and standards of the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC identified through the exploratory case study. Secondly, it presents the findings obtained when applying the CDA toolkit across the sample of health-related news coverage in the form of four discursive practices. This section is followed by a discussion of these discursive practices from the vantage point of the codes and guidelines of the three news organizations to reveal how leading international online news media approach ethical journalism in the digital age.

### 4.1 Exploratory case study results

The exploratory case study provided an inside portrait of the selected news organizations that shows the current editorial and ethical values and standards each preaches and abides by as inscribed in their respective journalistic codes.

Starting with the *NYT*, it strives to preserve *editorial independence* and *integrity* to deliver premium quality and reliable journalism. It calls its members to seek the unvarnished truth through factual *accuracy*, mature professional judgment, and a commitment to corrections of errors. Professional journalists are further bound to the ethical value of *respect* to acknowledge today's diverse world when reporting the news and *impartiality* to protect the brand's reputation for *strict neutrality*. Since they are their own principal fact-checkers, their reporting should be free of any whiff or bias, maintain an open mindset to ensure it treats others *fairly* and openly as well as disclose different perspectives regardless of party, sect, or interests involved. This is underscored to make sure the public distinguishes the *NYT* as a news organization recognizing and respecting the vastness and diversity of the global audience it serves. Interestingly, the code recognizes the limitations of the stated principles as a result of the world constantly changing with the rise of multiplatform journalism. It concedes to the impossibility to formulate an exhaustive list of values and standards and thus, to the inability to point staff members to the ethical course in situations that may potentially, but unforeseeably, give rise to conflicts of interests.

The BBC is bound to the Royal Charter, which sets out the public purposes of the Corporation and safeguards its *independence* as regards editorial decisions. In exercising the right to freedom of expression, the BBC ensures the *integrity* of its news is not blemished and encourages journalists to be curious and critical. Given the variety of public services the BBC is offering worldwide and across the UK, its ethical journalism standards are presented in an

elaborate, extensive, and detailed manner. Consistent with the Charter, *trust* constitutes the foundation of the BBC. The latter is committed to the core value of *due impartiality* in all its output, which requires journalists to refrain from taking sides and present a breadth and diversity of views without preconceptions or bias. The prefix “due” means impartiality must be appraised vis-à-vis the subject and nature of the content in news coverage as well as the likely audience expectation. Yet being impartial does not require absolute neutrality. It does not rule out reporting on controversial topics, tell the audience where a particular argument sits in a debate; nor does it preclude journalists to deliver evidence-based judgments. Moreover, the BBC seeks to establish *truth* and *accuracy* in its output through specialist expertise, professional judgment, and clear analysis. The code also gives particular focus to the values of *harm and offense* and *privacy*. Accordingly, professional journalists should avoid causing unjustifiable offenses and respect individual’s private lives. Lastly, special responsibility towards vulnerable groups, including children, is further emphasized to guarantee their dignity and voice are protected and heard to deliver *fair* and *honest* coverage.

In the same spirit as the BBC, the ABC broadcasts and publishes comprehensive and innovative content to inform, educate, and entertain its audience. In keeping with its editorial policies, *editorial independence* and *integrity* are presented as inseparable and essential tenets to guarantee the trust and respect of the community. ABC journalists have a statutory duty to ensure *accuracy* and *objectivity* in their assertions of facts to maintain the credibility of their statements. A commitment to accuracy is yet contextual and depends on the accessibility of verified locations and sources reasonably required in given circumstances. It also includes a willingness to acknowledge errors, swiftly correct them, and clarify ambiguous or misleading information. Moreover, the editorial policies underscore the need to equip audiences with diverse sources of reliable information and contending opinions. Accordingly, journalists’ judgments about *due impartiality* must be guided by the hallmarks of *fair treatment*, open-mindedness, and a balance that follows the weight of evidence. This guarantees no significant range of sources and claims are deliberately ignored or under-represented in news coverage. Additionally, the principles of *privacy* and *harm and offense* echo those of the BBC. Respectively, they call journalists to weigh up the public interest in the disclosure of private information and carefully assess the reporting of content that could reasonably be affronting. Journalists further have the responsibility to protect children from potential harm in every output. Finally, the values of *fair treatment* and *honest dealing* require journalists to justly attribute information to its corresponding source without favoritism or misrepresentation.

The case study, though purposely compact and broad, suggests there is a consensus in

principle across the three news organizations on a framework of values and standards for ethical journalism today, not least to protect a free and democratic society. They must above all guarantee accountability and maintain allegiance to citizens and the larger public interest to establish trust and credibility in providing the news. *Accuracy* remains the foundation upon which journalists pursue the truth in a practical sense with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Likewise, the principles of *independence*, *objectivity*, and *impartiality* are at the forefront of each code; encouraging the plurality of minds and voices and stimulating the intellectual diversity necessary to provide a forum for public criticism and compromise. While these principles are not latter-day, their significance in the organizations' journalistic codes demonstrates contemporary journalism is still very much rooted in a pre-digital logic for responsible, ethical journalism. In fact, values and standards extending beyond familiar boundaries and pertaining to an increasingly inter-connected media system – such as interactivity, multimediality, or immediacy – are absent in the examined codes. Even the notion of “digital” or “online” journalism was not mentioned or elaborated on. This echoes research by Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj (2015) who found a lack of interest and consistency across 99 codes of ethics around the world to develop new ethical guidelines with the emergence of digital journalism. It also renders Hindman's (2017) suggestion to mingle old-age values with digital metrics less feasible and a potential redefinition of journalism ethics more intricate.

Caught between the legacy of their past and technological developments, the organizations' apparent lack of adjustment to an online journalism world, at least in principle, might well play a part in the existential crisis of traditional journalism discussed in the literature review. In other words, there are no clear values in the codes reflecting the new priorities and goals that would map onto the relationship between print and online journalism or help organize news production within the confounds of continuous deadlines. Thereby, the epistemology of journalism may unlikely change unless the foundations of traditional news production are profoundly transformed.

Moreover, incongruities across the three news organizations call into question the flexibility, and ultimately, suitability of journalistic codes as a landmark for the implementation of best practices in a world upended by new digital capabilities. The *NYT* did concede that the ease of the Internet challenges professional neutrality. It also recognized the impossibility to formulate principles that would capture all potential scenarios. Yet a comparable acknowledgment of the networked digital environment in which traditional newsrooms operate has not, or hardly, been articulated in the codes of the BBC and ABC.

Moreover, contrary to the *NYT*, the foregoing organizations did not incorporate guidelines on how to report scientific studies, though scholarly research deemed such guidelines essential in times of crisis (Herrscher, 2002). Yet, the BBC and ABC, counter to the *NYT*, provided detailed principles specifying, amongst others, journalists' ethical responsibility towards vulnerable groups and children in every output. Their guidelines also offer professional journalists an invaluable reference on how to report on controversial issues, individual victims, and in times of conflict and emergencies. In this respect, the BBC and ABC might well provide clearer guidance to journalists on what ethical standards to look for when reporting during a crisis like a pandemic; but whether this premise holds true needs to be confirmed through CDA.

## **4.2 CDA results**

### **4.2.1 Discursive practices**

Data analysis revealed four main overarching discursive practices across the three news platforms. First, a discourse of expertise and authority was prevalent and coherent with the subject matter of the news coverage. Yet it revealed implicit kinds of power relations and interests exercised and negotiated by the journalists from the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC. Secondly, a discourse of “us” versus “them” constructed the online news media as fair-minded in appearance when, in reality, they tended to reproduce existing stereotypes in the public discourse. Thirdly, a discourse of amplification and overstatement outwardly demonstrated a certain dynamism and readiness from journalists to report the news. Craftily, however, it exaggerated the portrayal of people, actions, and events – giving the reader a distorted picture of the pandemic while allowing journalists to harness ideological viewpoints. Fourthly, the news coverage hinted at a discourse of camaraderie whereby journalists assumed the role of a fellow friend to better identify with their readers and effectively communicate certain credos or belief systems to them.

#### *4.2.1.1 Discourse of expertise and authority*

A discourse of expertise and authority was prevalent across the three news platforms of news coverage. It was made explicit through journalists' strong dependency upon scientific actors and their specialized knowledge to enlighten the public on both the substance and implications of new scientific discoveries at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. This dependency was particularly reflected in journalists' use of factual and technical language to describe the properties of COVID-19, as reflected in the following extract:

This site, known as a furin cleavage site, allowed the virus to hijack an important enzyme that operates in the human body. The enzyme snips open the spike protein at this point, causing it to open out and reveal hidden sequences that help it to bind more tightly to cells in the human respiratory tract (BBC [20]).

The overlexicalization of academic and executive titles in every coverage, such as “executive director” (*NYT* [6]), “Professor” (BBC [15]), and “Virologist” (ABC [4]), gave a certain weight, gravity, and credibility to the news stories while duly attributing the reported information to – what is ordinarily considered to be – reliable and trustworthy sources. In this regard, the coverage of the ABC repetitively used quotidian verbs like “he said” or “she replied” to attribute direct quotations to expert sources. Such a profusion of personal testimonies made the news coverage more passive, descriptive, and event-centered – placing ABC journalists in the role of observers that safeguards an objective tone of reporting (Patterson, 2000). Yet it also suggests the absence of an evaluation and assessment, informed by evidence, on the subject at hand from the journalists. This might potentially hamper the reader’s ability to form an opinion and draw any conclusion from the given facts. Moreover, certain expert voices were routinely consulted as if the stories were not sufficiently unique to require different types of expertise. While journalists usually do not find the “expert rolodex” very useful, it seemed that the ease of access to specific sources steered the content of ABC’s news coverage. In fact, previous research found that journalists were more inclined to select familiar sources during a crisis because they cannot find the time to validate different stories from different experts (van der Meer et al., 2017). However, by relying on the same sources multiple times, ABC journalists are likely to impose certain expert judgments and perceptions of reality upon their readers while suppressing the full range of perspectives necessary to get the full picture of the contentious debate surrounding the pandemic.

Though the *NYT* and BBC similarly attributed direct quotations to expert sources in their coverage, their narratives came closer to an investigation than those of the ABC. Indeed, journalists from the *NYT* and BBC regularly adopted an interpretive style of reporting that evaluated, contextualized, and speculated scientific findings. This was evidenced by the repetition of “This is why” (BBC [11]) and “This is due to” (*NYT* [13]) at the outset of multiple sentences, demonstrating journalists’ greater emphasis on the why-question and thus, the “meaning” of news beyond the facts (Salgado, Strömbäck & Aalberg, 2016). This echoes previous research on the increasingly competitive media environment traditional journalism operates in, which led interpretive journalism to suit the quest for audience maximization

because it generates more attractive and original news content (Soontjens, 2019).

Additionally, it demonstrates journalists' endeavor to provide a comprehensive, in-depth, and accurate account of complex problems.

However, interpretive journalism also thrusts journalists into the role of analysts and judges, moving them from silent skeptics to vocal cynics (Soontjens, 2019). This way, they can skillfully add new meanings to their content in a manner that a descriptive style of reporting would not allow. This is exemplified by the usage of phrases like "It's no wonder that (BBC [14]) or "It seems impossible that" (*NYT* [8]) and evaluative adverbs, such as "unfortunately" (BBC [19]) and "seriously" (*NYT* [13]), indicating the journalist's attitudes and opinions, which are likely to influence the reader's train of thoughts. Likewise, recourse to modal auxiliary verbs like "can", "should" and "could" constituted a significant linguistic property in the coverage of the *NYT* and BBC enabling journalists' voice to take the form of signaled comment or analysis about the propositions made. The extract "If only we could go back to life the way it used to be" (*NYT* [9]) demonstrates how modality constitutes personal as well as institutional stance markers. It also represents a tool to maintain interaction with readers by triggering their inner thoughts and self-reflection, as reflected in the following extract: "The findings of the Covid Symptom Study are stark and this should be a sharp reminder to the public, including to young people, that Covid-19 is indiscriminate and can have long-term and potentially devastating effects" (BBC [13]).

The confident and imperative tone in the previous extract also constituted a lexical genre of communication commonly found in the coverage of the *NYT* and BBC; though not a standard practice in those of the ABC. By stating "wear a mask, keep your distance" or "get a flu shot" (*NYT* [8]), journalists became no more informative but prescriptive in their use of language. The suppression of reference to any formal expert sources and the serious tone enabled journalists to unilaterally – yet tacitly – command and instruct readers to be mindful and vigilant. While such directives might not necessarily cause harm, it suggests a power relation exercised and negotiated by the journalist on behalf of the news outlets. In other words, journalists are capable to assume the role of scientific experts themselves to influence the reader's beliefs. This view was also emphasized in the headline "No, Mouthwash Will Not Save You From the Coronavirus" (*NYT* [14]), which is worded as self-evident and irrefutable, portraying the outlet with the knowledge and proficiency to know and speak the truth.

Furthermore, the discourse of expertise and authority was informed by structural oppositions across the three news platforms. These portrayed each outlet as essential fact-checkers and frontrunners in the news industry while stressing the amount of false

information regarding the Coronavirus on social media platforms. To illustrate, the *NYT* employed the caption “digital detox” (*NYT* [16]) in the context of social media use, an alliteration connoting the hazardous and unhealthy nature of such interactive technologies. It subsequently added in bracket “You Know You Need It” to reassert and validate its point, which the reader is more likely to believe and take as manifest truth. In a similar vein, the BBC warned that “social media falsely claims the vaccines contain animal produce” (BBC [18]), inciting the reader to be alert yet making fake news appear to originate from these social platforms, only. As regards the ABC, it devoted a complete article to discredit conspiracy theories (ABC [10]) and stated that “family text groups have become a hotbed for pseudoscience” (ABC [9]) to emphasize the detrimental aspects of messaging applications that risks undermining the efforts by the government to alleviate the threats caused by the pandemic. Hence, by placing social media in a negative light and suppressing the fact that false information can proliferate in online news media from traditional outlets as well, the reader is encouraged to view the content from the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC as more truthful, first-rate, and a safety net against misinformation.

#### 4.2.1.2 *Discourse of “us” versus “them”*

A lexical genre of equality and diversity was underscored across the three news organizations’ coverage. The use and repetition of the personal pronouns “we”, “us” and possessive determiner “our” invoked a sense of inclusivity, solidarity, and proximity between the journalist and the reader who both appear on an equal footing. Their strategic inclusion makes the reader experience satisfaction and contentment because he or she might potentially feel acknowledged by the journalist. This is exemplified in the following extract: “But as we turn a page on our calendar into June, it is fair to say that Covid-19 has been with us now for a full six months” (*NYT* [9]). Yet such a feeling also makes the reader unconscious these pronouns and determiners echo the journalist’s opinions which the reader is enticed to agree with, as exemplified in the following three extracts: (i) “Our patchwork and uncoordinated response has produced more than 100,000 deaths; surely we can do better” (*NYT* [9]); (ii) “We can’t count on herd immunity to keep us healthy” (*NYT* [9]); (iii) “It looks like most of us will have to wait a while longer before normal life can resume” (BBC [19]).

Moreover, the three outlets gave due attention to minority voices and vulnerable groups in their coverage, convincing the reader of the culturally diverse and impartial mindset of the journalists. Indeed, the *NYT* [1, 2, 4], BBC [3, 5, 10], and ABC [12, 19] often sensitized their readers upon the current health disparities, racial profiling, and domestic violence

brought and reinforced by the pandemic. Yet a more thorough consideration of the articles revealed news outlets' ability to strengthen inequalities instead of solely identifying or seeking to alleviate them. For instance, an article in the *NYT* addressed the anxiety and debate over the city's Chinatown in the spread of COVID-19. The sole reliance upon testimonies from Chinese people sharing their fears with an overall frightful tone – accentuated by the words “dangerous”, “alarming”, and “state of panic” (*NYT* [1]) – gave the impression that the city's Chinatown was the epicenter responsible for the spread of the pandemic and therefore, a threat to other boroughs. This was also evidenced by the same article's headline: “New York braces for Coronavirus: ‘It's inevitable’”. The latter is rather general and did not insinuate a specific focus; yet the coverage's body revolved around the city's Chinatown only, encouraging the reader to believe these caused New York to have to “inevitably” brace itself for the coronavirus pandemic. The suppression of non-Chinese viewpoints reinforced this view. While this has the potential to harm readers who affiliate with China and its people, it can also wrongfully inspire others to further create and perpetuate stigmas against Chinese individuals.

In a similar vein, coverage of the BBC addressed the issue of “why some racial groups are more vulnerable” than others (BBC [5]). The headline is again rather general, open to discussion but the storyline's overlexicalization directed all of the reader's attention upon the income inequalities of “African Americans” and “Black US households” (BBC [5]). The BBC journalist created a structural opposition here, prompting the reader to believe racial disparities are of prevalent concern overseas, only. An additional example from an ABC news coverage advised readers on how to behave following the government's recent activation of emergency plans. One advice called the reader to: “Go down to the Chinese Restaurant, go out to the football or the Grand Prix or the netball” (ABC [5]). Though the overall message is meant to encourage the public to go about its ordinary business, no proper context was given to the statement “Go down to the Chinese Restaurant”. Hence, no straightforward relationship could be drawn between “the Chinese Restaurant” and the stigmatization against various populations in the Chinese-speaking world amid the pandemic. This ambiguity and imprecision potentially prevent readers to fully realize the misconception that Chinese food presents a risk of contamination and, instead, foster their thoughts that Chinese restaurants were – in some ways – related to the spread of COVID-19.

The foregoing fallacies are not widespread across the news coverage but do exist and ought to be mentioned because they are not conspicuous at first blush. They demonstrate how a flattering discourse touching upon inclusivity might not necessarily be sincere and can lack

credibility between the lines of news articles, including those from traditional, distinguished news outlets. In this respect, professional journalists can fuel prejudiced knowledge and ideologies through the content of their writing, obstructing the values of *fair treatment* and *harm and offence* in return. By stimulating the audience's consciousness of psychological distance between ingroups ("us") and outgroups ("them"), journalists might influence the reader to take sides and perceive individuals of a certain race and ethnicity with the condition and quality of Otherness. The latter interweaves with Hall's (1997) perception of the media as a source of cultural pedagogy, a co-creator, and a product of the dominant cultural order. This order functions as a symbolic frontier between the "normal" and the "deviant", sending those who are in some ways different – the Other – "beyond the pale" (Hall, 1997, p. 258).

#### 4.2.1.3 *Discourse of overstatement and amplification*

The analysis revealed a discourse of overstatement and amplification across the three news platforms which, outwardly, made the reading process more vivid and dynamic, teasing emotions out of the reader. This coincides with previous research that cynical and negative news is often the kind of news the public is interested in (Trussler & Soroka, 2014). Nevertheless, the discourse suggested that the three news outlets covered the pandemic in "the worst possible way", overstating many of the fears of society itself. Though it was not expected that news stories on the pandemic would be positively covered; nor was the observation that the dataset repeatedly invoked the specter of war in discussions about the coronavirus pandemic. This rendered the news stories overly bleak and depressive, inciting the reader to experience a vicarious thrill, feel alienated, disempowered, and even hostile to learning about the world. Hence, in the articles from the *NYT*, fighting the pandemic became "fighting a war" (*NYT* [9]), the staff in state and city hospitals were equated to "front-line troops" (*NYT* [9]), and pharmacists were characterized as "private militias" (*NYT* [15]).

Likewise, BBC journalists frequently alluded to the lexical field of the war by employing words like "bunker" (BBC [1]), active verbs like "fighting" (BBC [10]) or "battling" (BBC [2]), and by assimilating masks, social-distancing, and self-isolation to "weapons against coronavirus" (BBC [10]). As regards the ABC, its coverage made analogies to the war by describing the pandemic as a "ticking time-bomb" (ABC [12]) for Australia. Yet contrary to two foregoing outlets, it also portrayed the virus as a natural disaster that inevitably impinged upon humankind. This was exemplified by the words "swamped" and "inundated" (ABC [3]), which described the crushing situation in hospitals due to an overwhelming number of patients in wait for intensive care. In this respect, ABC journalists

might be more realistic and sober-minded in their discussion of the pandemic compared to the *NYT* and BBC's heavily militarized language. Certainly, the coronavirus crisis is a pan-human challenge requiring exceptional collective mobilization; yet evoking images of war might well offend the reader, causing him or her traumatic stress responses or unnecessary discomfort. More so, prior research on the coronavirus outbreak demonstrated how media-fueled distress can create public panic and in turn, lead to a global shortage of facemasks or overtax healthcare facilities as they deal with a greater influx of concerned patients (Garfin, Silver & Holman, 2020). Therefore, news articles play a major role in mitigating potential risks of crisis escalation (van der Meer et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, the *NYT* and BBC recurrently employed a sensational and hyperbolic tone in their narratives to overrepresent the severity of the pandemic through the frequent use of intensifiers (e.g., "dramatically" (BBC [11])) and extreme quantifiers (e.g., "hundreds of thousands" (*NYT* [18])). Furthermore, the enumeration of quotes and the lack of pausing points were a discerning feature of the ABC's coverage, making the genre of communication and pace of the storyline sound overly dramatic and expeditious. Readers can only absorb so much information at a time and, considering the sensitive topic of the coverage, the reader might feel submerged and unreasonably frightened. In this regard, the coverage of the *NYT* and BBC had a clearer structure with different sub-titles, improving the readability and the reader's comprehension of the storyline in return. Yet this does not mean their punctuation was flawless. As shown in the following extract, clever usage of punctuation can wield a lot of power as well, enabling journalists to transfer their anger, irritation, or urgency to the reader and encouraging the latter to feel or think in a certain way about a particular issue: "But how do you hit a virus? Who's to blame? Who's the guilty party? Who do you tweet at? Covid-19 doesn't have a Twitter account." (BBC [1]).

The discourse was further evidenced by the amplification of specific words and fractions of quotes through underlined words, bold typography, and catchy headlines in nearly all coverage. While this technique effectively grabs the reader's attention on specific issues and aspects of public affairs, it is also disposed to articulate the journalist's viewpoint and perceived salience on the topics of the day. As McCombs (2005) explained, journalists amplify words to tell us both *what* to think about and *how* to think about a certain issue. For example, a BBC coverage underlined in bold and large typography the following: "Bill Gates never said this about a vaccine" (BBC [7]), inciting the reader not to think otherwise while emphasizing the certainty of the journalist's claim. By sidelining particular views and bringing others to the forefront, journalists have a powerful role to decide on the allure of

news reading and determine how a story needs to be recalled. Such competencies influence the focus of public opinion and epitomize – in McCombs’ (2005) view – the interventionist and agenda-setting role of the press. Though this role is an inadvertent outcome of reporting the news and cannot be abdicated or sidestepped, it implies journalists’ ethical responsibility to transfer the salience of topics rightfully and equitably. In this respect, scholars stressed the importance to monitor this role, especially when journalists have the power to cherry-pick the sources that get a voice in their coverage and in turn, an opportunity to shape the evolution and magnitude of a crisis as well as its effect on society (Wallington et al., 2010).

#### 4.2.1.4 *Discourse of camaraderie*

Through an informal, direct, and engaging style of reporting the news, the dataset suggested a discourse of camaraderie inciting the reader to identify the journalist as a companion or close friend whom he or she can trust and rely on for comfort. Several discursive strategies were discovered to reach this observation.

First, throughout the dataset, journalists often addressed the reader directly to give him or her advice, warnings, support, and hope in the form of a one-way conversation. For example, a journalist of the *NYT* guided readers on how to fathom the findings of a scientific research paper, stating: “It’s important to maintain a healthy skepticism [...] one shortcut that can sometimes help you learn how to read a paper like a scientist is by making a judicious use of social media” (*NYT* [7]) and “Let’s hope for a treatment, a cure, a vaccine. Be patient. We have to pace ourselves” (*NYT* [9]). Likewise, a BBC article helped the reader navigate through an isolated routine during the pandemic, specifically when the latter affects our memory: “Deliberately reflecting on your day each evening can help you consolidate your memories. You could even write a diary.” (BBC [14]). Another example from an ABC coverage encouraged the reader to stay optimistic despite recent scientific findings that the virus can live up to 28 days on surfaces before starting to lose its potency: “We’ll probably be a cleaner society at the end of this for the greater good, hopefully” (ABC [2]). All these extracts share a pro-active tone whereby journalists exhibit a commitment and willingness to support and reassure, rather than solely inform, the public. The reader is positioned as a listener and the journalist as an essential protagonist who actively engages in his or her life to ensure the latter remains safe, conscious, and meaningful. In other words, through a discourse of camaraderie, news outlets position themselves as indispensable entities for an individual’s upgrowth and well-being, especially during times of adversity.

Secondly, journalists often incorporated intimate details of their personal and

emotional lives in their narratives. Particularly in those of the *NYT* and BBC, journalists used the personal pronoun “I” together with laden words to communicate their feelings about the pandemic, such as “I was shocked” (*NYT* [17]) or “For my part, I’ve been feeling less stressed by the lockdown” (BBC [8]). The inclusion of personal stories also made news coverage appear more intimate and confidential. A good example of this was provided by a journalist of the *NYT* who explained in detail how he turned to psychology experts for their advice after realizing too much screen time during lockdown was affecting his mental health (*NYT* [16]). Of course, journalists are still human and the strain of suppressing normal feelings in times of crisis may not be an easy task. Previous research even confirmed the prevalent role of emotions in conventional “hard” news genre. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020), for instance, demonstrated how technological advancements in the digital age inspired journalists to be more personally and emotionally engaged in the production of news. Likewise, Coward (2013) acknowledged the rise of “confessional journalism” (p. 91) and a shift in ways of presenting information that privilege personal voice alongside a broader democratization of opinion.

Still, such elements of subjectivity and privacy can be interpreted as a threat to the conventional ideals of the journalist as an impartial, passive observer because they erase the sense of formality and emotional restraint one might expect from the traditional press. Moreover, these elements give the impression that a fellow friend is narrating a story rather than a professional journalist reporting the news. This renders the discourse of camaraderie an effective linguistic device encouraging a rapprochement between the journalist and the reader – one that can make the latter oblivious of the coverage’s influence upon his or her perception and interpretation of social realities.

## 5. Discussion of the results

Despite the digital age exerting a growing pressure upon journalists to follow patterns of behavior that might go against their professional ethics, the case study demonstrated the absence of online journalism ethics in the codes of the *NYT*, *BBC*, and *ABC*. This arguably obstructs any adjustment of traditional journalism practice to technological developments with new formats and storytelling modes that engage audiences in more contextualized and navigable news reporting. However, it also indicates a consensus across the three news organizations on the continuing relevance of pre-digital ethics in the digital age. Put differently, ethical journalism of a bygone era still constitutes an essential landmark for traditional news outlets to leave an ethical and responsible trace on their products while navigating through the winds and tides of technological change.

Nevertheless, as traditional news organizations uphold a pre-digital mindset in principle, ethical shortfalls were discovered in their online news media. CDA uncovered discrepancies between the values and standards expected to be upheld by the journalists and what was implemented in practice. For example, the discourse of expertise and authority indicated a fine line between the exercise of mature professional judgment and journalists' personal opinion in the coverage of the *NYT* and *BBC*, specifically. Though the discourse strategically positioned these outlets as skilled and reliable entities, a prevailing imperative and commanding tone in the narratives hinted at the journalists' thoughts and viewpoints. These subjectivity and emotional cues are at odds with the *NYT*'s ethical principle of *strict neutrality* and the commitment it shares with the *BBC* to maintain *editorial independence* and *(due) impartiality* in every output.

The same rationale goes for the discourse of camaraderie. Journalists from the *NYT* and *BBC* often resorted to a colloquial, melodramatic style of reporting to directly converse with their readers, transmit emotions, and personal experiences to them. As a result, their news articles were not sufficiently dispassionate but prone to influence and mislead readers instead. The discourse thus highlighted journalists' failure to set aside their personal views and maintain a professional detachment. Arguably, this would be of greater concern for the *BBC* whose impartiality guidelines specifically stress the importance for journalists to stay neutral on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy of national or international significance, such as the coronavirus pandemic. As regards the *ABC*, its articles were essentially descriptive and thus, more amenable to exercise *editorial independence* and deliver the news according to the recognized standards of *objectivity*. However, the lack of

interpretation might also indicate a constrained open-mindedness from the ABC journalists that conflicts with important hallmarks of impartiality in the organization's guidelines.

Furthermore, through a discourse of "us" versus "them", discrepancies were foregrounded on the implementation of the principle of *fair treatment* across the coverage of the three news organizations. Such discrepancies exposed journalists' competency to (mis-)represent concrete facts at their sole discretion. By suppressing certain viewpoints and accentuating others through overlexicalization and structural opposition, journalists were prone to reproduce existing stereotypes in the public discourse. Certainly, the suppression of stereotypical cognitions is a daunting task. A cultural perspective suggested that journalists fall back on stereotypes – even unwittingly – not necessarily to harm but to make stories resonate with the audience's expectations and when events are unfamiliar or uncertain (Lasorsa & Dai, 2007). While this risks undermining news organizations' culture of equality and nondiscrimination, readers might potentially be deprived of a diversity of sources necessary for an accurate understanding of the pandemic.

Moreover, the discourse of overstatement and amplification was prevalent across the dataset and illustrative of a negative-centric press; arguably supporting scholarly views on the media mutating from being a watchdog into a hyper-critical "feeding frenzy" (Maier, Jansen & von Sikorski, 2019, p. 104). Nevertheless, the discourse specifically challenged the normative underpinnings of the BBC and ABC. Indeed, at the difference with the *NYT*, the BBC and ABC's *harm and offence* principle requires journalists to be extremely sensitive and give due ethical consideration to topics involving tragedy and loss of life. Yet CDA revealed an overly exaggerated, frightful tone in their narratives predisposed to provoke gratuitous feelings of anxieties and resentful displeasure to readers. Despite journalists' efforts to convey the reality of the pandemic, their propensity to overstate and amplify negative events risks harming or offending individuals in ways prohibited by the values and standards for ethical journalism. Yet it also means the BBC and ABC's additional guidelines on how to report in times of (public health) crisis did not provide clearer directives to the journalists; nor did it make the coverage objectively more "ethical" to those released by the *NYT*.

However, it would be unreasonable to assume that every ethical pitfall in the news coverage was premeditated by the journalists to mislead their audience. As scholars pointed out, the Internet's architecture is considered a bane for the practice of ethical journalism in the digital age. Chari (2019) even argued that new communication technologies are directly or indirectly implicated in aiding unethical journalism practice. Hence, a coverage lacking sensitivity or overlooking the full range of contending opinions might well derive from

journalists' inexperience to cope with the new dynamics of works – the pressure to “hit the deadline” – in lieu of a deliberate attempt to create power relations and inflict a certain ideological viewpoint upon readers.

Yet one might also interpret journalists' discursive choices conflicting with traditional ideals for ethical journalism as “tools of the trade” they purposely devised to re-engage public interest in social issues or simply survive in the digital age. In other words, journalists embracing a more personal, intimate style, and tone of storytelling might potentially indicate an attempt to find their way through the rough seas of technological change. After all, there is empirical evidence to assume journalists are given *carte blanche* to reconcile their practices with digital technologies as their organizations' codes of ethics remain deep-seated in a fusty media era. As Deuze (2019) argued, journalism is (a form of) creative work and the digital age might well have stimulated journalists' creative spirit and imagination to craft new angles for a story or unconventional ways of covering it to better suit an increasingly connected, competitive, and ubiquitous media environment.

Nonetheless, despite the observed discrepancies between what is written down in the codes of ethics and implemented into practice, it must be acknowledged that journalists also exhibited a certain commitment to conform to, and not entirely diverge from, their organizations' standards and values. Indeed, it would be unjust to render the health-related news coverage under study merely unethical, deceitful, or something the public should abstain from. For instance, the discourse of expertise and authority also highlighted journalists' determination to establish a regime of truth and a detailed portrayal of the pandemic. It also revealed an extensive analysis of the facts on the coronavirus pandemic by the *NYT* and the BBC and the proper attribution of scientific studies across the three news platforms. Moreover, despite a notional “us” versus “them” discourse, one may interpret the inclusion of minorities in the news coverage as journalists' endeavor to bring silenced voices to the fore and treat everyone with respect; or even an attempt by the BBC and ABC journalists to conform to their specific ethical responsibility towards vulnerable groups. Additionally, the discourse of camaraderie demonstrated journalists' fundamental role in supporting individual's learning and understanding of the world, a sense-making activity bringing a certain ordering to the seeming ambiguity and randomness of events while allowing journalists to build a rapport with people of all ages in times of uncertainty, loneliness, and fear.

In light of the above, it can be concluded that leading international online news media's approach to ethical journalism today is still very much rooted in a pre-digital media

era. Hence, ethical journalism is not a “dying art” and a pre-digital mindset, as opposed to a progressive one, continues to influence traditional journalism practice in a multi-media landscape. Certainly, there remain question marks over the future of ethical journalism. Yet this should not necessarily lead one to agree with scholars asserting that the essence of traditional journalism is “under siege” or approaching an inevitable “tipping point” (Harcup, 2020). In a similar vein, this should not make traditional news outlets' obstinacy to hold fast to traditional journalism ethics wholly “unethical” or a notorious reality. Leading international online news media are definitely not immune to ethical pitfalls with the declining importance attached to verification and fact-checking in the Internet age, but neither are they worthy of one’s ignorance as they still constitute vital information lifelines for the public to stay tuned with the realities of the world. Hence, this study provides cause for optimism for those allegedly suffering from a “crisis of traditional journalism” *ennui* or fatigue considering journalists have not completely discharged their commitment to social responsibility, public interest, and editorial standards. Perhaps, one should reappraise the cynical views and stark diagnosis some scholars advocated in the literature review to determine whether these truly constitute valuable reasons to give up *all* hope on the future of traditional journalism ethics.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how leading international online news media approach ethical journalism in the digital age. From an international perspective, this study first identified the current ethical and editorial values and standards the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC preach and abide by through an exploratory case study. Results suggested a consensus in writing on the continuing relevance of traditional journalism ethics in the digital age as these constituted the backbone of their respective codes of ethics. However, the unique Internet attributes were absent across the three journalistic codes. The omission of digital journalism ethics was construed as indicative of the organizations' struggle, if not failure, to accommodate traditional ethical thinking to new communicative conditions.

Secondly, this study analyzed how the *NYT*, BBC, and ABC implemented their values and standards into practice in their online news media covering the coronavirus pandemic. The researcher employed CDA to explore the linguistic cues and discursive strategies foregrounded and backgrounded in the news discourse. This shed light on the ways journalists from each outlet adhered to – or deviated from – the pursuit of ethical journalism. The analysis exposed four main overarching discursive practices unveiling power relations and ideological positionings exercised and negotiated by professional journalists – namely (i) a discourse of expertise and authority, (ii) a discourse of “us” versus “them”, (iii) a discourse of amplification and overstatement, and (iv) a discourse of camaraderie.

These discursive practices, when examined from the vantage point of the values and standards for ethical journalism identified in the case study, enabled to conclude that leading international online news media's approach to ethical journalism in the digital age is still very much rooted in a pre-digital media era. This finding renders scholarly hopes for a widely accepted (digital) journalism ethics framework – for the time being – a distant reality. Yet its implications are problematic considering the discrepancies between the ethical duties of the journalists in writing and what is implemented into practice. Indeed, CDA exposed several ethical pitfalls across the coverage of the three news organizations. Arguably, as journalists operate under perpetual fear of being “scooped” by competitors, the imperative to publish instantly gets in the way of verification ethics and shunts the core tenets of traditional journalism to the backburner.

Nevertheless, the results did not suggest that news organizations' continuing dependency upon a pre-digital mindset for ethical journalism was wholly inimical to the production of ethical and responsible news. Indeed, the discursive practices did not overshadow evidence of journalists' genuine efforts and willingness, across the three outlets,

to abide by their codes of ethics in the digital age. This challenges scholarly assumptions asserting ethical journalism is vanishing or becoming redundant as a result of new media technology (Ferrucci, 2019). Moreover, it suggests that, even in times of crisis, journalists remain – to a certain extent – faithful to the social responsibility theory of the press, which calls on the media to provide the public a truthful, comprehensive account of the day’s events and a forum for the exchange of criticism to build a more populist and tolerant society (Gunaratne, 1998).

The findings of this study are affected by limitations that future research could draw upon. First, the results cannot be generalized beyond the scope of the selected news organizations. The same rationale can be applied to the restricted sample of online news media and its exclusive focus on the coronavirus pandemic as a health-related issue. Future studies could explore other types of traditional media, such as television and radio news, to understand their approach to ethical journalism in the digital age and compare it to the findings of this study.

Secondly, this study was conducted amidst the pandemic with a velocity of news stories without precedence despite much uncertainty on the novel Coronavirus. Further investigation could replicate this study once the pandemic ends with a larger, steadier base of content to explore whether news organizations’ approach to ethical journalism in online news media corroborate or challenge the study’s conclusion.

Lastly, existing literature provided avenues to tackle the limitations of CDA, which allegedly suffers from a fully-fledged methodological deficit (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019). Considering CDA is a manual study of texts, scholars stressed the confines of the human brain’s capacity, which cannot absorb an infinite amount of information nor detect all levels of subtlety and nuance in language use. To overcome these practical barriers, scholars suggested combining CDA with topic modeling, an automated text-mining tool for large corpora that helps transcend the limits posed by CDA (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016; Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019). Future research could consider this combination for more systematic and rigorous operationalization in the study of (health-related) online news media.

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## Appendix A: Ethical and editorial codes and guidelines of the three news organizations

<i>Case Subject</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Time period of retrieval</i>
<b>Case study 1: the NYT</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Editorial standards and ethics, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical Journalism Guidebook</li> <li>• Guidelines on Integrity (revised Sept 25, 2008)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Company mission and values</li> </ul>	The NYT corporate website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="https://www.nyt.co.com/company/standards-ethics/">https://www.nyt.co.com/company/standards-ethics/</a></li> <li>• <a href="https://www.nyt.co.com/company/mission-and-values/">https://www.nyt.co.com/company/mission-and-values/</a></li> </ul>	Retrieved in April, 2021
<b>Case study 2: the BBC</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The BBC's Editorial Values and Standards</li> <li>- The Royal Charter</li> </ul>	The BBC corporate website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines">https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/charter.pdf">http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/charter.pdf</a></li> </ul>	Retrieved in April, 2021
<b>Case study 3: the ABC</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Editorial Policies (revised Jan 14, 2019)</li> <li>- Editorial Guidance (revised March 26, 2021)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accuracy</li> <li>• Attribution/Anonymity of Sources</li> <li>• Differentiating between factual reporting, analysis and opinion</li> <li>• Harm and offence</li> <li>• Impartiality</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	The ABC corporate website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="https://edpols.abc.net.au/policies/">https://edpols.abc.net.au/policies/</a></li> </ul>	Retrieved in April, 2021

## Appendix B: CDA data collection

### *The New York Times*

	<b>Title News Coverage</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Publication Date</b>	<b>Updated version</b>
1.	New York braces for Coronavirus: 'It's Inevitable'	J. Goldstein & J.E. Singer	Jan 27, 2020	N/A
2.	Coronavirus, a Fire and Anxiety in the Chinese Community	A. Salcedo	Jan 30, 2020	N/A
3.	They Recovered From the Coronavirus. Were They Infected Again?	A. Mandavilli	Feb 29, 2020	July 22, 2020
4.	Black Coronavirus Patients Land Hospitals More Often, Study Finds	R.N.C. Rabin	May 23, 2020	N/A
5.	Amnesia Nation: Why China Has Forgotten Its Coronavirus Outbreak	L. Yuan	May 27, 2020	Aug 19, 2020
6.	Older Italians Warily Eye Young Crowds, Fearing 2 <sup>nd</sup> Coronavirus Wave	E. Bubola	May 29, 2020	N/A
7.	How You Should Read Coronavirus Studies, or Any Science Paper	C. Zimmer	June 1, 2020	N/A
8.	How Many People Have Been Infected	D.G. McNeil	June 1, 2020	N/A
9.	Six Months of Coronavirus: Here's Some Of What We've Learned	J. Mortensen	June 18, 2020	N/A
10.	Coronavirus Is a Crisis. Might It Also Narrow Inequality?	E. Porter	June 25, 2020	N/A
11.	Coronavirus Doctors Battle Another Scourge: Misinformation	A. Satariano	Aug 17, 2020	N/A
12.	Why Does the Coronavirus Hit Men Harder? A New clue	A. Mandavilli	Aug 26, 2020	Aug 27, 2020
13.	Why the Coronavirus More Often Strikes Children of Color	R.N.C. Rabin	Sept 1, 2020	Sept 11, 2020
14.	No, Mouthwash Will Not Save You From the Coronavirus	K.J. Wu	Oct 21, 2020	Nov 17, 2020
15.	U.S. Says Virus Can't Be Controlled. China Aims to Prove It Wrong.	J.C. Hernandez	Oct 30, 2020	Nov 17, 2020
16.	It's Time for a Digital Detox. (You know you need it).	B.X. Chen	Jan 8, 2021	Jan 15, 2021
17.	How Beijing Turned China's Covid-19 Tragedy to Its Advantage	L. Yuan	Jan 22, 2021	Feb 26, 2021
18.	Covid Survivors With Long-Term Symptoms Need Urgent Attention, Experts say	P. Belluck	Jan 23, 2021	N/A
19.	Pregnant Women Get Conflicting Advice on Covid-19 Vaccines	A. Mandavilli	Jan 28, 2021	Feb 2, 2021
20.	Which Covid Vaccine Should You Get? Experts Cite the Effects Against Severe Disease	D. Grady	Jan 29, 2021	Jan 31, 2021

## The BBC

	<b>Title News Coverage</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Publication Date</b>	<b>Updated version</b>
1.	Coronavirus: A problem unlike anything else Trump has faced	J. Sopel	March 9, 2020	N/A
2.	Li Wenliang: Coronavirus kills Chinese whistleblower doctor	R. Gray	March 17, 2020	March 18, 2020
3.	Coronavirus: Domestic abuse calls up 25% since lockdown, charity says	J. Kelly & T. Morgan	April 6, 2020	July 22, 2020
4.	Coronavirus in South Africa: The lull before the surge?	A. Harding	April 10, 2020	N/A
5.	Coronavirus: Why some racial groups are more vulnerable?	C. Ro	April 21, 2020	N/A
6.	Coronavirus: Immune clue sparks treatment hope	V. Gill & R. Buchanan	May 22, 2020	N/A
7.	Coronavirus: Bill Gates 'microchip' conspiracy theory and other vaccine claims fact-checked	J. Goodman & F. Carmichael	May 30, 2020	N/A
8.	How lockdown may have changed your personality	C. Jarrett	July 29, 2020	N/A
9.	Why a face shield alone may not protect you from coronavirus	R. Gray	Aug 7, 2020	N/A
10.	Is a 20-second handwash enough to kill Covid-19?	S. Dowling	Aug 21, 2020	N/A
11.	Why children are not immune to Covid-19	M. Fernandes	Sept 3, 2020	N/A
12.	Covid-19: How to travel safely on the bus, train and subway	R. Fisher	Sept 7, 2020	N/A
13.	Long Covid: Who is more likely to get it?	J. Gallagher	Oct 21, 2020	N/A
14.	Lockdown has affected your memory – here's why	C. Hammond	Nov 16, 2020	N/A
15.	Why cities are not as bad for you as you think	M. Keegan	Dec 1, 2020	N/A
16.	Can you still transmit Covid-19 after vaccination?	Z. Gorvett	Jan 3, 2021	Feb 24, 2021
17.	Covid-19: Baby's mother issues mottles skin warning	C. Jones	Jan 7, 2021	N/A
18.	Covid: Fake news 'causing UK South Asians to reject jab'	S. Kotecha	Jan 15, 2021	N/A
19.	How effective is a single vaccine dose against Covid-19?	Z. Gorvett	Jan 15, 2021	Feb 18, 2021
20.	How will Covid-19 evolve in the future?	R. Gray	Jan 20, 2021	Feb 9, 2021

## The ABC

	<b>Title News Coverage</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Publication Date</b>	<b>Updated version</b>
1.	Human-to-human transmission of new coronavirus reported in China	E. Schumaker	Jan 20, 2020	N/A
2.	How long does coronavirus last on surfaces?	S. Lyons	Jan 28, 2020	Feb 1, 2020
3.	Coronavirus, SARS and flu experts compare the differences between the diseases	S. Scott & N. Sas	Feb 11, 2020	Feb 11, 2020
4.	Coronavirus: What happens when a COVID-19 pandemic is declared?	S. Scott & P. Timms	Feb 25, 2020	Feb 25, 2020
5.	Coronavirus COVID-19 emergency plan has been activated by the Government. Here's what that means for you	O. Willis	Feb 28, 2020	N/A
6.	Media faces challenges in covering coronavirus outbreak	D. Bauder	March 2, 2020	N/A
7.	Fact Check: Trump's coronavirus response plagued with misstatements	J. Fishel, E. Thomas & L. Lantry	March 27, 2020	N/A
8.	How does coronavirus COVID-19 compare to flu?	O. Willis	March 20, 2020	March 20, 2020
9.	As coronavirus fears grow, family group chats spread support but also misinformation	A. Bogle	March 20, 2020	March 21, 2020
10.	Sorry, conspiracy theorists. Study concludes COVID-19 'is not a laboratory construct'	K. Holland	March 27, 2020	N/A
11.	The race for a COVID-19 vaccine: Fast, but fast enough?	C.E. Nunneley	April 1, 2020	N/A
12.	The coronavirus threat among the homeless is a 'ticking time-bomb' for Australia	C. Moodie	April 5, 2020	April 5, 2020
13.	As coronavirus sparks anti-Chinese racism, xenophobia rises in China itself	M. Walden & S. Yang	April 8, 2020	N/A
14.	We've never made a successful vaccine for a coronavirus before. This is why it's so difficult	J. Khan	April 17, 2020	April 17, 2020
15.	How herd immunity may protect us from COVID-19	P. Amin, M. Abdelmalek & L. Bruggeman	May 21, 2020	N/A
16.	Government warned of coronavirus 'missed opportunity' to protect migrant communities before Victorian spike	S. Dalzell	June 23, 2020	June 24, 2020
17.	Emergency doctor with coronavirus who was put on ventilator speaks out	N. Daly, A. Ballinger & M. Wearing	Aug 20, 2020	Aug 20, 2020
18.	Virus that causes COVID-19 survives up to 28 days on surfaces, Australian scientists find	S. Scott	Oct 11, 2020	Oct 12, 2020
19.	More than eight in 10 Asian Australians report discrimination during coronavirus pandemic	M. Walden	Nov 1, 2020	Nov 1, 2020

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<b>20.</b> Coronavirus border restrictions led to an outback ordeal for this Adelaide couple	K. Hughes & E. Boisvert	Jan 5, 2021	Jan 6, 2021
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