An investigation into the learning of journalism ethics by early career journalists in the workplace

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Glossary

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| COJ | Certificate of Journalism (Reach qualification) |
| Editors’ Code | Editors’ Code of Practice |
| IFJ | International Federation of Journalists |
| IMPRESS | Independent Monitor for the Press |
| IOJ | Institute of Journalists |
| IPSO | Independent Press Standards Organisation |
| Johnston Press | Now JPI Media |
| JPI Media | Formerly Johnston Press |
| NCTJ | National Council for the Training of Journalists |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| NQJ | National Qualification in Journalism (NCTJ qualification) |
| PCC | Press Complaints Commission |
| Reach | Formerly Trinity Mirror |
| SOE | Society of Editors |
| SPJ | Society of Professional Journalists |
| TM | Trinity Mirror, now Reach |

Abstract

This study considers how early career journalists, located in the British provincial press, learn occupational ethics in the workplace in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press. It draws on a review of literature about teaching and learning of journalism ethics in Britain, and also on interviews with early career journalists and those with responsibility for managing their training. It concludes that early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace from their Community of Practice and through exposure to formal and informal learning opportunities, but the nature of that learning is under-developed and informal influences on journalists’ understanding of ethical conduct are not properly recognised. Formal learning is heavily influenced by a single training organisation, the National Council for Training Journalists, which has been slow to adequately address journalism ethics through its curriculum despite repeated government inquiries into press conduct, and although ethics was introduced as an explicit area for study following the conclusion of the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, it is predicated on the understanding of the Editors’ Code of Practice and the regulatory framework which the British press aligns itself towards. This narrow interpretation of journalism ethics constrains early career journalists’ understanding of wider ethical considerations through formal learning opportunities. Informal learning of journalism ethics is located through their participation in a Community of Practice where they gain a broader understanding of occupational ethics through legitimate participation in that community as they move from the periphery to full membership via their interactions with colleagues and also with the wider local community, where the desire to be trusted in the production of news shapes this understanding. The absence of formally facilitated reflective space where informal learning of journalism ethics could be identified as such and consolidated in the understanding of the learner means that the informal learning experiences are not recognised as such. As a result, early career journalists conflate occupational ethics with an observance of a regulatory code and do not fully recognise wider considerations as matters of journalism ethics.

Introduction

This study considers how journalists learn ethics in the workplace. It investigates what is understood by journalism ethics by early career journalists, how they gain that understanding, and the nature of the key influences on the process of learning that understanding, taking as its context the British press

The starting point for this study can be traced back to 2011 when Prime Minister David Cameron commissioned a public inquiry, to be chaired by Lord Justice Brian Leveson, with a remit of looking at the culture, practices and ethics of the British press (Hansard, 2011). In his subsequent final report to what became the Leveson Inquiry, Lord Justice Brian Leveson cites David Cameron’s speech to parliament which set out the context in which the inquiry came into being (2012, p. 3):

In recent days, the whole country has been shocked by the revelations of the phone hacking scandal. What this country—and the House—has to confront is an episode that is, frankly, disgraceful: accusations of widespread lawbreaking by parts of our press: alleged corruption by some police officers; and, as we have just discussed, the failure of our political system over many, many years to tackle a problem that has been getting worse.

Cameron was referring to a series of poor ethical practices which had become a feature in some sections of the British press including the hacking of murdered teenager Millie Dowler’s mobile telephone by Glen Mulcaire, a reporter for the *News of the World* (Edwards, 2010; Hansard, 2011).

The inquiry began collecting evidence in August 2011, and the report was published in November 2012. It concluded that there were many positive things to be said about the British press, particularly local and regional newspapers, but it also reported a list of poor ethical practices including failing to respect individual privacy and dignity, unlawful or unethical acquisition of private information, unlawful or unethical treatment of individuals, inaccuracy and inaccessibility, and unacceptable treatment of critics and complainants (Leveson 2012, pp. 473-483). The report itself runs to 1987 pages across four volumes and is supported by a website which includes copies of the evidence given to the inquiry. It could arguably be described as one of the most thorough investigation into practices of the British press ever seen. It makes a number of recommendations, including the formation of a self-regulatory regime which has greater control over the activities of the industry.

As Thomas & Finneman (2014 p172) point out, the British press has a long history of resistance to accountability and regulation, viewing it as a threat to press freedoms which sit at the heart of democracy. It also has a long history of poor behaviour which had prompted Government-led investigations. The Leveson Report itself notes that there have been three Royal Commissions into the conduct of the press since the end of the Second World War, and two reports published by a committee chaired by Sir David Calcutt in the 1980s (Leveson 2012, pp. 195-216; pcc.org.uk, 2014).

It is not the intention of this study to scrutinise in any great detail the content of the Leveson report, other than to establish the nature of concerns as they relate to the ethical conduct of journalists working in the British press. Indeed, the scope of the Leveson Inquiry is such that it could fuel hundreds of PhD submissions.

It is not the intention of this study to consider the development or learning of journalistic ethics in the British broadcast sector, firstly because broadcast industries operate under a different regulatory regime to print industries and operates to a different set of imperatives which drive ethical conduct. Secondly, the training of broadcast journalists has travelled down a different path to the print industry, with the emergence of sector specific training structures including the Broadcast Journalism Training Council and the BBC Finally, broadcast journalism was not the focus of the Leveson Inquiry, which concentrated on the culture and ethics of the British press. The learning of journalism ethics by broadcast journalists would doubtless make for an interesting study, but this would take it way beyond the scope of this particular thesis.

Nor is it the intention of this study to consider the learning of ethics by journalists working in the emergent web-based news industries, by this I mean those working for independent web-only publications. In part this was because this sector was not a focus of the Leveson Inquiry, but also because early scoping discussions with practitioners in this field revealed that many had started web publications as entrepreneurial ventures after a career in either the press or in broadcasting and this sector was too new at the start of my fieldwork to be able to identify early career practitioners who were learning their understanding of journalism ethics. The complexity of this developing area of news production would also make it an interesting area of research for future work into how journalists in this sector learn ethics, but again this would have led me way beyond the scope of this study which is to look at the learning of ethics in the British press in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry.

As it relates to this study, Leveson was simply a starting point which prompted personal reflectivity.

I had been a journalist at the time of the previous inquiry into press conduct, chaired by Sir David Calcutt QC, and his recommendations, which were published in 1990, led to the formation of the Press Complaints Commission, which continued to act as a self-regulatory body until 2014 when it was disbanded post Leveson (pcc.org.uk, 2014; Wilson, 1996, p. 20). My memory of the Calcutt Committee and its impact on me as a journalist however was surprisingly hazy. I recall local National Union of Journalists’ meetings where resistance to statutory regulation and interference in press freedom formed the basis of discussion around the PCC, and also the statement made by Government minister David Mellor that poor journalistic behaviours meant that journalists were ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’, political rhetoric which made for good headlines, but were less meaningful for those of us in the industry (Bingham, 2007, p. 79). However, what was more striking was what I did *not* recall, and that is any systematic training in what the Press Complaints Committee was and how we as practising journalists were meant to interact with it, nor do I recall any teaching and learning in journalism ethics offered either through my initial journalism training nor as a journalist working for large regional newspaper organisations. It was in taking a long view of journalism while reflecting on the Leveson Inquiry report that this struck me. I had moved into academia as a journalism lecturer in 1993, and knew that the higher education community, in developing journalism undergraduate programmes, paid attention to teaching ethics, and journalism ethics had indeed become a recognised field of research, yet the extent to which journalism as a sector had moved forward in training its practitioners in good ethical conduct I was less sure about. Put simply, the industry had reached the point where a fifth inquiry into press conduct had been deemed necessary, and I wanted to know what was going on in the industry in supporting the learning of journalism ethics.

As I started to structure my thinking around this, a clear research aim emerged, I wanted to know how journalists, newly recruited to the British press, at an impressionable point in their occupational learning journey, learn their ethical behaviours: How do early career journalists learn occupational ethics in a post-Leveson environment? By learning, I mean how do those new to the occupation travel from the point of entry where the concept of ethical practice is little understood to a point where they have a good understanding of the values and ethical constructs which guide their occupational activity and enable them to make sound ethical decisions with confidence.

This overarching aim developed into a number of research questions, the rationale for which, and research methodology, I set out in Section 1 of this thesis. Section 2 addresses the fieldwork undertaken and my findings from an analysis of data gathered.

Firstly, I wanted to understand what early career journalists are taught in terms of journalism ethics, and in doing so, consider the development of the teaching of journalism ethics. The Leveson Inquiry was the fifth government sponsored review of journalism practice and behaviours since the 1947 Royal Commission on the Press which at that time considered concerns raised about accuracy of reporting as one of its lines of inquiry. In 1962 there was a second Royal Commission on the Press which looked at the economic factors which impacted on the newspaper industry which was dominated by three major proprietors, and the effect this had on the quality of news outputs. The third Royal Commission was held in 1974 which considered editorial standards and the need to protect editors from proprietorial interference, recommending a written code of practice. Failure to improve editorial standards led to the Calcutt Committee in 1989 (Leveson 2012, pp. 59-60). A common strand running through each of these enquiries was the ethical conduct of journalists, in particular in relation to issues such as accuracy, resisting proprietorial pressure, acting in the public interest and invasion of privacy. Government sponsored enquiries are high profile and costly events, therefore it is not unreasonable to ask what the newspaper industry had done in the intervening periods to teach journalists occupational ethics. I acknowledge here that there was a political dimension to each of the public inquiries, and newspaper ownership and industrial structures came under intense scrutiny. It is not the intention of this study to consider these factors other than how they relate to teaching and learning of journalism ethics, and there has been much work done on the history and politics of the press which cover the context in which these inquiries were held for example, Cole and Harcup (2010), Conboy (2011), Curran and Seaton (2018), Franklin (1997), Keeble (2005) and McNair (2009).

In Chapter 1 I focus on the development of teaching and learning in journalism ethics in Britain, and how Government inquiries may have shaped this, on the basis that the long view may give some insight into how journalism ethics is taught in a post-Leveson environment. This is an area which has not previously been given a great deal of attention and an initial scoping of literature about how journalists learn ethics in Britain revealed something of a fallow field. It was in reading between the lines through looking at the development of journalism education and training in general that it became apparent that firstly, little attention had been paid to the teaching of journalism ethics by the newspaper sector, and secondly, while academic researchers considered ethics and newspaper culture, there was a scarcity of serious academic work on the teaching and learning of occupational ethics in the workplace. This suggested that research in this area would be able to make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge, and an important one.

Thomas is one of a small number of academics who looked at the teaching of journalism ethics in the higher education sector. She points to the importance of teaching and learning of journalism ethics in journalism degree programmes as having two facets. Firstly the public needed some assurances that they could rely on the credibility of journalists, and a curriculum which included journalism ethics would go some way to building public confidence, and secondly, journalists themselves needed to understand the importance of being trusted to operate effectively as the watchdogs of the public sphere and to defend truth, honesty, objectivity, privacy and press freedom (Thomas, 1998). Thomas situates ethical agency in the individual journalist, and points to the challenges in mounting an effective defence of press standards in the face of editorial pressure without understanding the ethical dimensions and arguments, particularly against a backdrop of falling newspaper circulation where a sensational story can add thousands of readers. Journalists need the tools to resist news desk demands for stories which require ethically dubious practice, and the acquisition of these tools requires the learning of journalistic ethics. Thomas made this observation 20 years ago:

Spotting the issues and promoting sound debate to arrive at well-balanced decisions is the ethical responsibility of every single journalist. Defending these decisions will become more and more difficult as a market-driven journalism expands. The ability to find and defend ethical standards must be acquired and promoted within the institutions where journalists learn their professional skills.(Thomas, 1998, p. 136)

Her argument continues to have validity; however, it is predicated on her signalling the importance of formal facilitated teaching of journalism ethics through institutionally located programmes in the higher education sector. When she was conducting her research, journalism degrees in the UK were a relatively new departure, and as discussed in Chapter 1, they have since proliferated with a greater number of people entering the occupation via a journalism degree. However, as my own research identifies, irrespective of this growth in the provision of higher education programmes in journalism, there are a number of routes into journalism as an occupation. New entrants into journalism come from higher education programmes to industry-body sponsored courses, located at level 7 to level 3 on the UK Regulated Framework for Qualifications, offered by universities and colleges and also by private training providers, and from programmes with a range of approaches to teaching journalism ethics. The one common space where entrants to the occupation converge is the workplace, this is the career starting point held in common irrespective of the personal educational journey taken to reach that point. Literature reveals a paucity of research into early career work-based learning in journalism, in particular a lack of research into the learning of journalism ethics in the workplace, and it is here that this thesis contributes new knowledge and understanding.

As this study investigates the learning of ethics, Chapter 2 turns to consider the nature of this learning with a focus on learning in the workplace, setting out key constructs which are used in a later analysis of fieldwork to evaluate the learning of journalism ethics, in particular drawing on Eraut’s work on experiential learning (Eraut, 1994, 2008, 2011) and Lave and Wenger’s Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2019; Wenger, 2008). The analysis of fieldwork using the constructs set out here can be found in Section II.

Harcup, a former journalist, now a journalism academic, in his book *The Ethical Journalist* makes the point that to be good journalists, practitioners need to reflect constantly on what they are doing and question critically their own practice, particularly with regard to ethics, in order to learn from their experiences. He observes that everything journalists do have in some way an ethical implication, from covering local school events to international crises (Harcup, 2007, p. 6). To explore Harcup’s point on the value of reflection Chapter 2 also looks at the work of Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988) who developed ways of thinking about reflection on practice and its place in learning. It sets out their constructs, which also provide a framework for analysis of data which is later discussed in Chapter 10.

One aspect which emerged early in the fieldwork was that the community within which early career journalists operated impacted on their learning of ethics in a significant way, and Chapter 3 discusses conceptualisations of community to help explain some of my findings. It considers community from the point of view of a community of journalists within which early career practitioners find themselves, and also from the point of view of the journalist being a member of a geographical community who they perceive themselves to be writing for, and the importance of each of these conceptualisations of community on their learning of ethics. This is explored using data gathered in the fieldwork in some detail in Chapter 9.

In examining how journalists learn ethics, I also consider how the term ‘journalistic ethics’ is understood and where those understandings are drawn from in Chapter 4. If we accept that there has been unethical practice as identified by Leveson, then it is worth considering whether there are gaps in how ethics is taught, or whether there a lack of guidance on what constitutes journalism ethics. In the words of Kelvin MacKenzie, the former editor of *The Sun* – a mass circulation national populist newspaper in the UK:

Ethics? As far as I’m concerned that’s that place to the east of London where people wear white socks. (MacKenzie in Sanders, 2008, p. 14)

While this is a somewhat frivolous definition of journalism ethics, it was made by a senior editor of a national newspaper at the time, and indicates that there were historic attitudes among senior executives in some sectors of the British press which were dismissive of serious debate about what should constitute good practice in the years prior to the Leveson Inquiry, attitudes which had the potential to create a hostile organisational environment where there were constraints on individual agency in terms of ethical behaviours and on the learning of good practice. One way of evaluating the impact of organisational environment on the learning of journalism ethics is to consider how the British press understands the term, and how that understanding is shared with early career journalists This is evaluated as a theme throughout Chapters 7 to 10.

The overarching aim of this study is to consider how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace. This can be broken down into four distinct research questions:

RQ1 – what is the nature of prior learning of journalism ethics that early career journalists engage in before beginning work in a newsroom?

RQ2 – what is the nature of the learning of ethics which early career journalists are exposed to in the workplace?

RQ3 – how does the community within which early career journalists operate impact on the learning of journalism ethics?

RQ4 – how is the learning of journalism ethics reinforced through reflection on practice?

This can be summarised as what do they know before they start working as a journalist, what and how do they learn while in a newsroom, and how do they recognise what they have learned (do they know they have learned ethics)?

Chapter 5 sets out how each of these research questions have been arrived at and the methodological approach taken to gathering data.

While the initial research question arose out of a personal reflection, it was never the intention to use an autoethnographic methodology. Too long has passed since I was in a newsroom, and any reflection on the past which might be brought into the frame may well be based on unreliable memories. I am particularly interested in what is happening in the ‘now’, and therefore my approach to data collection and fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with early career journalists in situ and also with training managers. The Leveson Inquiry looked at the practices of the British press, and therefore the context of this study is the British press. As newspaper journalists in Britain normally begin their careers in the provincial sector – that is on local or regional weekly or daily newspapers in the ‘provinces’ as distinct from the national newspaper sector - this is where the participants in this study were located. It is widely understood that the provincial press holds different characteristics to the national press (Franklin, 1997, pp. 220-221; Tunstall, 1983), and the term is “…contiguous with the definition of ‘local paper’” (Matthews, 2017, p. 2).

It should be noted here that research interviews took place in each journalist’s own place of work in newspaper offices around Britain, and I am grateful for a bursary awarded by the Association for Journalism Education which supported travel in order to conduct these interviews.

Section II of this thesis turns to an analysis of the fieldwork and the data collected, taking each of the four research questions in turn. An analysis of the data is considered by research question, and key findings are drawn together in the concluding chapter.

Section 1

Chapter 1 History of the development of journalism ethics education

Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how early career journalists learn ethics in the British Press. If we accept that Leveson highlighted a continuing issue with how journalists understand ethics in an occupational context, then research into how the industry supports teaching and learning in ethics has a value. As this chapter will discuss, teaching and learning in journalism in the United Kingdom has developed down a very particular path, influenced heavily by the 1947-49 Royal Commission on the Press, which in turn took into account pre-existing in-house journalism training in reaching its conclusions and recommendations. It considers the history of journalism training and the impact of public inquiries into journalistic conduct on that training, with a particular focus on the development of teaching and learning in ethics in order to bring contextual background to the contemporary debates around how journalists learn ethics. As I hope to demonstrate, contemporary teaching and learning is the product of the history of journalism education in Britain and the root of some of the issues now being deliberated within the industry can be traced back to omissions and missed opportunities in its historical development. Literature reveals that current practice is a direct consequence of attitudes to teaching and learning which consolidated in the 1950s which have since changed little. The context of this work is the British newspaper industry, covering the period from the turn of the 20th century, when journalism education was being developed, to present day.

An initial scoping of literature reveals that little has been written about teaching and learning structures which focus on journalism ethics - it gained little attention as an issue prior to the 1947-49 Royal Commission on the Press, was overlooked when a national training scheme emerged in the 1950s, and it was only with the wider establishment of journalism as a subject area in British universities in the 1990s that attempts were made to bring it into any journalism curriculum. In investigating how early career journalists learn ethics now, this study considers the nature of the learning to which they are exposed, and attempts to take account of formal learning programmes as well as learning from the community in which they are located. To better understand how journalism ethics is positioned in education and training structures currently, some consideration of the historic development of the subject is illuminating as it helps to explain what emerges as an area which is not fully developed within the newspaper industry.

Development of the teaching of journalism in Britain pre 1949

Literature, including consideration of reports to government inquiries, and also interviews with senior industry practitioners, indicate that there are formal and informal structures associated with the teaching of journalism in Britain. Some of the developments in teaching journalism have come about through the development of industry bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Journalists and the National Union of Journalists, which have called for interventions to support improvements in journalistic standards (Benson, 2017 in interview; Gopsill and Neale, 2007, p.11). Other developments emerged following government inquiries into the industry, for example the formation of the National Council for the Training of Journalists as a result of the first Royal Commission on the Press (NCTJ, accessed 2020).

Hunter discusses the tentative foundations of journalism education in Britain through the development in the 1880s of representative associations. Reporters felt there was a need for a professional body and informal groups of journalists began to band together to discuss matters relating to their craft, for example the Manchester Press Club which founded in 1883, which led to the formation of the National Association of Journalists in 1884. This later became known as the Institute of Journalists, and is the oldest organisation representing journalists in the UK (Hunter, 2011, p. 8) [[1]](#footnote-1).

The end of the 19th Century saw the rise of the educated working class and greater demand for newspapers. The new readers demanded stories which were accessible to them, and the commercial press was happy to supply this (Hampton, 2004, p. 84). This environment impacted on the type of journalist stepping forward to work in the sector, and with an educated working class, newspapers began to be populated with school-educated recruits who had not benefited from the University liberal arts programmes which only a wealthy elite could afford. Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury derisively described Alfred Harmsworth’s (later Lord Northcliffe) *Daily Mail* in 1896 as a newspaper “written by office boys for office boys” (Hampton, 2004, pp. 88-89).

It is at this point, where the emerging bodies representing journalists in Britain such as the fledgling Institution of Journalists and the National Union of Journalists were attempting to host rudimentary journalism education via a system of expert speakers at meetings (Gopsill & Neale, 2007, p. 12) that the United States of America had begun to establish journalism as an academic and technical field of study[[2]](#footnote-2) (Keeble, 2001b, p. 235). By the turn of the 20th century, the American press was formally teaching its employees how to be journalists, and the transatlantic influence was finding its way into British debates and lectures.

French (2007, pp. 44-45) notes that at this time, there was also a movement towards professionalization of trades and industries, but the approaches taken on either side of the Atlantic were very different. In Britain and Ireland, the social structures leaned towards the creation of professional bodies (the IoJ was formed through a Royal Charter in 1890) whereas in the US professionalisation came about through the development of university education. The approach to professionalisation in the US is one factor behind the successful development and establishment of its higher education programmes in journalism by 1900, in that to gain a degree became a mark of the professional, whereas the looser structures created by the IoJ, and the National Union of Journalists - which came into being in 1907 - were distracted by wider remits beyond education, including pay, working conditions, and freedom of expression with a suspicion of the connotations behind the term ‘professional’ (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003, p. 541).

It was against the backdrop of developing trade organisations and US training influences that a magazine writer and editor Arthur Lawrence decided to put together a training manual for journalists in the UK in 1903 – *Journalism as a Profession*. Lawrence writes in the first person and his chapters include advice on how to get started in the newspaper industry and alludes to in-house training.

The small provincial newspapers provide the best training ground for the reporter…(who) will obtain a thoroughly “all round” experience…. (Lawrence, 1903, p. 148)

Lawrence does not explicitly refer to any training in ethics for journalists. However, there is an underlying sense that journalists are expected to follow a personal moral code in line with Victorian libertarian ideal. He frames journalism as a profession here with the implication that training has importance in the establishment of a professional identity, and also explicitly acknowledges experiential learning as a fundamental part of that training.

Alfred Harmsworth, as owner of the then new tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* contributed a chapter to Lawrence’s book. His idea of the journalist is somewhat at odds with that of Lord Salisbury’s office boy, and here he advocates a good liberal education, and life experience, for journalists – training through life:

I should start him as a reporter. As a reporter he will learn tact, the management of men, and the need for energy and accuracy. If he is under a good editor every quality for success that is in him will be discovered and developed. (p. 173)

Harmsworth here is making an early reference to learning from the community of practice. As I explore in later chapters, Lave and Wenger (1991) helpfully conceptualise how a community of practice impacts on learning, and here Harmsworth is looking at the editor as a key influencer on the development of the journalist. There would appear to be acceptance then that learning from experience and from peers was the norm in Britain at the turn of the 20th century, and while acknowledging the value of learning from experience, Harmsworth had also seen first-hand the introduction of US journalism training, which had been developed in the US University and College sectors, and advocated bringing journalism education to Britain to supplement on the job training. While history tells that formal college training in Journalism in Britain did not become properly established until the 1950s, and university programmes in journalism were not commonplace until the 1990s (Russell & Eccles, 2018, p. 10) it is interesting to note that it had been advocated by a leading newspaperman at the turn of the century.

It is not possible to turn out the finished journalist at school; but it is quite possible to give a course of twelve month’s training in the technicalities that will save an immense amount of time afterwards.(Harmsworth in Lawrence, 1903, p. 182)

Harmsworth talks about learning technicalities, and disappointingly, the text does not expand on what is meant by this. It is probably safe to interpret technicalities as referring to the structuring and writing of a story, rather than learning which centres on the moral and ethical dimensions of the work, as discussion of such is absent throughout Lawrence’s work.

A.G. Gardiner, editor of the London based Daily News from 1902 to 1919, at the Institute of Journalists’ annual conference in 1908 also advocated the expansion of the curriculum in Universities in Britain to facilitate good journalism, and Sir Robert Donald, editor of the Daily Chronicle from 1902 to 1918 said in support: “We need classes or schools of journalism which give prominence to the training and development of the journalist as a writer” (Hunter, 2011, p. 17).

However, Harmsworth’s notions of professionalisation through formal educational structures struggled to gain traction. As Aldridge notes, there were concerns that professionalisation would cede some element of control of entry into the occupation to employer-controlled organisations, which was against the philosophy of the representative organisations at that time. (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003, p. 541) Against this backdrop, education and training often found itself competing for attention. It could be argued that this distraction may have led to a missed opportunity to introduce and formalise a college curricula for journalism training in Britain in parallel to developments in the United States – where the development of ethical thinking in journalism became well established in a curriculum alongside technical training in journalistic writing and production. The NUJ in Britain did adopt a Code of Conduct in 1936, where it encouraged its members “to maintain good quality of workmanship and high standard of conduct” but this was not part of any formal training structure and was not applicable to those who opted not to join the union (Gopsill & Neale, 2007, p. 335).

While this thesis is not intended to be a detailed comparative study into the transatlantic systems of journalism education, it is worth noting the divergent approaches when reflecting on the 20th century teaching and learning of journalism ethics in Britain, particularly as there were several early failed attempts to establish journalism programmes in British universities at the same time that journalism education gained a foothold in the US. As journalism as an academic discipline developed in America, so did debates around what constituted journalism ethics, as universities provided a platform for research into different facets of occupational activity, largely free from the influence of unions and employers. There was a lack of such a platform in Britain throughout much of the 20th century, which might explain the necessity of government sponsored public inquiries into the ethical conduct of British journalists – there was no other facilitated space for such discussions.

Leading newspaper executives had tried to establish journalism in Britain as an area for undergraduate study, and A.G. Gardiner, editor of the *Daily News* from 1902 to 1919, believed there was a role for British universities in the teaching of journalists. At the IoJ annual conference in 1908 in Oxford, he said universities should “…give more definite encouragement to men to take up journalism… the more the Universities widen, modernize and humanize their culture the more they will benefit journalism,” (Hunter, 2011, p. 16). This perhaps hints at the potential for universities in Britain to provide a platform for discussions about journalistic culture, including ethics. While the IoJ agreed a curriculum for a Diploma in Journalism at the University of London in 1908, and the programme eventually established at the end of World War One, the onset of World War Two brought it to a premature and permanent halt. There was no formal organised teaching and learning in journalism, or journalism training, in Britain from that point until the formation of the National Council for Training Journalists 13 years later.

Rather than invest in developing university-based journalism education, which was not accessible to many young people wanting to be journalists, newspapers had begun to develop their own in-house training during the 1920s and 30s, though this largely consisted of learning through working alongside established journalists on the job. This training was informal, and there was a wide range in the standard of recruits, ranging from 16-year-old school leavers to university graduates. While there are indications that journalists undertook some training in writing, there is no evidence which points towards teaching and learning in journalistic ethics relevant to the occupation. Indeed, the lack of consideration of ethics in the work-place may have in part been responsible for complaints about lack of journalistic accuracy, unhealthy proprietorial influence over news content, and the blurring of boundaries between advertising and editorial, which ultimately led to political pressure for an inquiry into press standards in 1947 (Ross, 1949).

In summary, the first half of the 20th century saw the development of academic study and training in journalism in the US, and despite attempts to bring a scholarly approach to the teaching of journalism in Britain, this was unsuccessful. While there are no guarantees that academic study in journalism would have included learning in journalism ethics, there is a strong likelihood that this would have emerged as part of a journalism curriculum, in part because of the example set by American institutions, but also because moral philosophy was a long established field in liberal arts programmes in Britain, and may well have influenced any direction taken by newly created academic fields. By 1947 and the first Royal Commission on the Press, training for journalists in Britain was ad hoc with no set curriculum, and at the vagaries of the employer. What was firmly established was a principle of learning on the job, which is still a dominant feature in the 21st century in Britain. As I discuss more fully later, the continued dominance of work-based learning as a means of training journalists meant that in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, the workplace became, by necessity, the locus of this investigation.

The influence of the 1947-1949 Royal Commission on the Press

It is not the intention of this dissertation to look in any detail at the 1947-1949 Royal Commission on the Press, other than how it relates to the development of journalism training and education. Its brief was fairly broad in that it looked at press standards, and its key recommendations centred around the development of some form of ombudsman (the General Council of the Press)[[3]](#footnote-3) where complaints about press standards could be aired.

While the Royal Commission, chaired by Professor W.D. Ross, considered the standards of journalism in the British press, following concerns about accuracy and truthfulness of journalistic copy, it also looked at the historic training of journalists. It took the view that it was necessary to do this in order to understand why complaints about press standards had risen to a point that politicians felt a public enquiry was necessary. This theme is revisited by Leveson in 2012, when he took evidence from the Association of Journalism Education as part of his enquiry into early 21st century press standards. (Frost, 2012a)

The first Royal Commission made a number of recommendations around enhancing journalistic standards, including the formation of a General Council of the Press, and it suggested that this body might – in addition to considering complaints about the press - take responsibility for the recruitment and training of journalists. The report notes that the industry had adopted a “somewhat haphazard” method of recruitment and training of journalists, with a number of newspapers employing junior journalists who had not achieved a secondary education or a School Certificate standard of education, and whose training varied across newspaper groups where trainees were left to “pick up knowledge” where they could – essentially, experiential learning within a community of practice. The Commission chair, Sir William Ross – a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, paints a picture where work-based learning is the norm, and any structured pedagogy might appear non-existent.

A boy will commonly spend six months, and often longer, in the newspaper office as a telephonist or copy-boy, and then, if he shows aptitude, be sent out with an older man to learn a reporter’s work. Some offices large enough to have several juniors in training at one time depute a senior journalist to give them general instruction in the technique of journalism and generally to supervise their work…..the length and thoroughness of the training varies from office to office….there is no recognised level of proficiency which the junior is required to reach before he is accepted as a trained journalist.(Ross, 1949, p. 166)

Lave and Wenger (1991) developed a construct to examine learning in the workplace, which is referred to as Communities of Practice. This is discussed in detail in chapter 2, however, it is worth mentioning here as they argue that occupational learning happens in the workplace through interactions with other members of that workplace community, as the new starter, the learner, moves from the periphery to full membership of that community, with the learning happening as a product of that journey. What Ross appears to be describing above is an industry reliant on the community of practice to teach new journalists, in the absence of any clear set learning goals.

Ross’ report sets out its concerns on the nature of journalism training and suggests a syllabus that the General Council for the Press might adopt. It does not specify journalistic ethics as something to be included in the curriculum, and this is arguably a lost opportunity to influence the development of journalism education. The Royal Commission had been looking at press standards, following serious complaints about lack of accuracy in stories, political bias, and a failure to separate news from comment with the potential to mislead the reader, and therefore it is not unreasonable to expect that ethical conduct was worthy of consideration. The National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) adopted the majority of the Commission’s recommendations when constructing its syllabus, and perhaps had occupational ethics been indicated as a necessary component in any future curricula by the Commission, and this idea adopted by the NCTJ, the industry might have a more secure understanding of what is meant by journalism ethics in the 21st century.

The only organised approach to journalism training pre 1950 to be mentioned in the Royal Commission report, was offered by the Kemsley newspaper group which included the national newspaper the *Sunday Times*, and regional newspapers in Newcastle, Sheffield and Manchester. The proprietor Viscount Kemsley had developed the Kemsley Editorial Plan which his employees were encouraged to engage with, and although the date of its inception is unknown, it is described in the Commission report as “a scheme where senior staff undergo training at the company’s headquarters before cascading that learning to junior staff”. Again, this is a system predicated on learning in the workplace through interaction with the community of practice (Ross, 1949, pp. 167-168).

Kemsley developed a training handbook to support his programme, first published in 1950 after the conclusion of the Royal Commission, as *The Kemsley Manual of Journalism*.

The Kemsley Group’s Deputy Chairman Lionel Berry, writing about the recruitment and training of journalists in Kemsley (1954, p. 387) observed that there were no formal methods of training for journalists. “It [journalism] is beyond question a professional occupation but it is one which has hitherto found its recruits in a casual and unorganised fashion …such training as the recruit to journalism has hitherto received has been dependent rather on the whim of some friendly editor, or sympathetic senior, and on the individual assiduity of the recruit himself.” A sentiment no doubt that the Kemsley Editorial Plan attempted to redress.

Berry lists the courses developed by the Kemsley Group, with the focus on providing training for existing employees, including “..junior executives…” and “…senior reporters and subeditors…”, however the curriculum was very practical in its orientation, and training for juniors, newly recruited journalists, consisted of learning through shadowing existing reporters.

Kemsley did establish a three year diploma course at the Technical College in Cardiff, but the normal age of entry was 18, and students had to commit to evening classes for five hours a week, a commitment which some working class recruits would find difficult to honour. While the Kemsley Plan in part sought to widen the education of the Group’s employees in general terms, it also attempted to train its staff in writing technique, the structures of government, and law as it applied to journalism. There is a notable absence in the *Kemsley Manual* on the training of journalists in ethics, however, there is a pervading sense that journalists should follow a personal moral code – in line with the post-war mood. For example, W Hadley – editor of the Sunday Times from 1932 to 1950 - contributed a chapter on *The Editor* in which he sets out three loyalties he feels an editor must possess. The first is a loyalty to his proprietor, secondly to his staff, and finally to his readers.

Of all the rewards that can come to an editor, the greatest is their trust; It is at once the recognition of faithful service and the most precious asset a newspaper can have. But public trust has to be won. The readers’ first feeling is apt to be suspicion: it is slowly that confidence grows. The honest newspaper, like the honest man, is reluctant to declare its rectitude. It will be judged by its conduct. If it prints the news without twist, if inadvertent errors are frankly corrected, if comment is fair, then readers soon begin to give their trust and in time, give it generously.(Hadley, W in Kemsley, 1954, p. 59)

Hadley is promoting the idea that a journalist should be perceived as an upstanding citizen, an honourable person, someone with honesty and integrity, placing ethical agency firmly in their hands. However, there is a tension here, as when he refers to trust he has commercial imperatives in mind in that trust leads to consumer loyalty where the readers give generously, no doubt through increased newspaper sales. It is also interesting that the first loyalty is to the proprietor, with the readers coming a poor third, somewhat constraining personal agency when viewing it through the lens of journalistic ethics. As Gopsill and Neale (2007, pp. 232-233) note, this tension, between the demands of the proprietor and the desire to have individual journalistic agency in determining what was “honest”, led to the National Union of Journalists’ Code of Professional Conduct, which the union ratified in 1936. In looking at 21st century learning of journalism ethics, this study undertook interviews with early career journalists, as will be discussed later, and when asked what they felt was the biggest challenge facing journalists at the time of the interviews (2017-2018) many said gaining the trust of the reader. Hadley’s observations 75 years earlier are again resonating in post-Leveson newsrooms, and while 21st century journalists in this study did not demonstrate explicit awareness of the commercial benefit of being trusted, increased readership was an implicit aim.

The Royal Commission published its report prior to Kemsley’s training manual becoming available, though the Kemsley Plan itself was already in existence and discussed by the Royal Commission. The Commission report refers to the plan as combining technical training with academic study and deemed it valuable in enabling all journalists from diverse backgrounds to extend their education and keep pace with the world within which they operated. However, it also recognised that to extend such a plan on a national scale would require strategic oversight by the industry as a whole, and recommended that industry bodies including the Joint Editorial Committee of the Newspaper Society, the Guild of British Newspaper Editors, and the National Union of Journalists should be encouraged to collaborate to put forward a national scheme for all training journalists in the UK, which included a broad educational curriculum (though the detail of this was not specified).

Development of journalism education post 1950

The implementation of the recommendations of the Commission’s report have since been held up to criticism on a number of counts. Major recommendations around the development of a widely based training programme for journalists was ignored. The Commission had wanted to see the formation of a General Council for the Press, which it had indicated should take ownership of training and press standards, however, the General Council took six years to come to fruition, and when it did become established, its remit was limited to that of a complaints tribunal with no effective power of sanction, and no responsibility for training. The vision set out in the Commission for a body which led an industry charge towards structured training and improved journalistic ethical practice had been forgotten. (O'Malley, 1997, pp. 130-131)

Curran and Seaton (2018, p. 464) observe that the Royal Commission had wanted to steer the industry towards developing a broad based education “…as a way of fostering a public interest culture among journalists” a suggestion which they note “…fell on stony ground”.

…press controllers wanted only narrow journalism training that produced a compliant but competent workforce. (ibid)

The industry response was to set up the National Advisory Council for the Training and Education of Junior Journalists in 1952, (it changed its title in 1955 to the National Council for the Training of Journalists) (NCTJ, 1960, p. 5). The *NCTJ Handbook of Training* (1960), in its chapter, “A Short History of the Training Scheme”, cites the Royal Commission’s report as one of the drivers behind its inception. However, it also points to calls from the IoJ in 1890 and the NUJ in 1946 as being influential. “By 1950 it was quite evident that majority opinion within the newspaper industry felt a national training scheme for journalists to be desirable,” (NCTJ, 1960, p. 5).

The NCTJ developed a vocational training programme which ignored the broader liberal education which had been suggested by the Commission and instead its programme focussed on developing writing technique, shorthand speed, an understanding of government structures, and the law as it applied to journalism. Consideration of ethics was ignored, and obedience to the demands of news desk encouraged. Had the broader liberal education of that period been embedded, Curran and Seaton note, then philosophy and ethics would probably have found their way into the curriculum. “In the event, journalism training continued to impart a narrow range of skills and knowledge, and to foster an unquestioning attitude” (Curran & Seaton, 2018, p. 464).

When considering the development of teaching and learning in journalism ethics – or in this case the absence of it – the first NCTJ governing body is revealing. It included on owners and managers of regional and national newspapers in England and Wales, members of the Guild of British Newspaper Editors, and representatives from the NUJ and IoJ. By 1953 there were two education representatives, one from the Ministry of Education (an HM Inspector) and a member of the Association of Principals of Technical Institutions. Neither were given voting rights, and neither had expertise in journalism as a subject area. (NCTJ, 1960, p. 6) There was no representation or advocacy from the University sector. Editors and newspaper owners were concerned with the practicalities of producing newspapers and there was no authoritative voice urging consideration of wider thinking and the development of an ethics curriculum – this might have led to the questioning attitude Curran and Seaton assert they wished to avoid. The select nature of the board might arguably have inhibited discussion around a wider educational curriculum and the inclusion of ethics as a study area, and the direction set by this inaugural board had a lasting impact in that the NCTJ did not introduce journalism ethics explicitly into its curriculum until after the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, as a review of its programme information indicates, and as stated in an NCTJ press notice in late 2012 (NCTJ, 2006b, 2012, 2016a).

In 1958 UNESCO conducted international research into journalism training *A Worldwide Survey on the Training of Personnel for the Mass-Media* (UNESCO, 1958). It took evidence from national representatives of journalism training organisations, and Burton W Marvin, Dean of the William Allan White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas in the United States, reported that more than 600 American universities offered courses in journalism, and while many of the courses were part of wider liberal arts programmes, more than 130 were designed with the primary aim of educating and training journalists, with 35 of these programmes aimed at graduates (Marvin, B. W. in UNESCO, 1958, p. 101).

Marvin cites one particular programme at Medill University in Illinois, started in 1938, which encompasses both undergraduate and graduate training through a five-year plan where in the final year students concentrate on professional courses in journalism which include consideration of ethics and journalistic responsibility. He also notes that at The William Allan White School of Journalism, a student in the final stages of the programme takes a course in *Editorial Problems and Policies* which discusses real cases relating to ethics and responsibility in journalism (p. 107). Ethics as a subject of study for journalism undergraduates is explicitly stated and had been part of the American journalism college culture for a number of years at the time of the report.

According to a follow-up UNESCO Department of Mass Communications report in 1965 Professional Training for Mass Communication, in the post war period, university education in journalism had extended widely in the United States, Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Canada, Japan and Latin America, even into some areas of Asia and Africa. However, work-based learning was still the preferred training mechanism in Western Europe, and particularly in Britain and much of the Commonwealth. One of the report’s authors E. Lloyd Sommerlad, described this form of training as “learning by doing” and singled out the NCTJ as an example of a training organisation which facilitated this approach (Sommerlad, E. L. in UNESCO, 1965, p. 9).

Sommerlad made an important point about the difference between the two approaches, in that a University programme provides full-time training in preparation for entry into journalism as an occupation, whereas on-the-job training was for those already employed. He argued that while a University journalism education was not without its flaws, in that it was costly and students might be slow to arrive at some of the technicalities required to function well as journalists, the graduates had a broader educational background and maturity which was useful in the early years of their career. Graduates could learn the technical understandings in practical workshops to satisfy the needs of industry (p. 9).

The two UNESCO reports, from 1958 and 1965, describe how university programmes in journalism were rooted in liberal education, where philosophy and ethics are part of the curriculum. However, the opportunity to adopt parts of this system in Britain were not picked up by the NCTJ, and the University sector at that time did not begin to develop journalism undergraduate study despite its relatively long history in the US.

UNESCO’s 1958 report collates testimony from international media training organisations, and when turning to look at the UK newspaper industry, consults the fledgling NCTJ with a report from Howard C Strick, the body’s Executive Officer. Strick acknowledges that there were two potential routes into journalism, the in-house training system, or via a University or college programme, and he is dismissive of the value of the University route.

If the university is the headquarters, control and atmosphere will be primarily academic, however many advisory committees of journalists there may be or however much time the students spend outside their colleges. Where training is built around the individual newspaper office, for example by an apprenticeship system, academicians will be the outsiders and advisers, the newspapermen themselves retaining ultimate control. (Strick in UNESCO, 1958, p. 202)

Strick continues:

In an industry such as the press, where practical and sober realism is sought after and is frequently considered as the antithesis of the academic, the theoretical and the reflective, this distinction may well turn the balance between acceptance and rejection of any proposed training project. Without support from the harder-headed members of the industry, any such project will have to struggle for survival, if indeed it is not fore-doomed.

This suggests that the decision to exclude academia and the reflective approach to practice was a conscious one; hard-nosed newspaper editors simply would not buy into a system which strayed from the narrow requirements of the newspaper office as they saw it. Few in the industry had had a university education themselves, which no doubt influenced this decision. Strick’s language in his report is somewhat revealing when he talks about “control” – and the desire for newspapers to control what the employees would learn which resonates with Curran and Seaton’s earlier observations about fostering unquestioning attitudes in trainees, and Hadley’s notions about the primacy of journalistic loyalty to the proprietor. This hints at an atmosphere in the British press at the time where there was resistance to external influence and a focus on internal control, perhaps as a reaction to the attempts to curb press behaviours via the Royal Commission. What resulted was an NCTJ training programme, launched on 1 October 1952, which was inward looking, and sought to train journalists only in the fundamentals of journalistic technique. Initially, trainees had to be working in the industry with an employer prepared to sponsor them through the training programme by way of a formal apprenticeship, where learning from the community of practice was an expectation. (NCTJ, 1958)

An early NCTJ training manual, in setting out its objectives and characteristics, goes as far as to denigrate university education in Journalism, and in particular singled out the University of London Diploma, which ran from 1919 to 1939, as being unfit for purpose in Britain at that time.

The British newspaper industry has always, rightly or wrongly, suspected such training of being too theoretical; and rather than endeavour to re-start such a system after the end of the war in1945, the industry organised instead its own Training Scheme. The main difference between the two methods is that the “School of Journalism” system accentuates the theory and the educational background whereas the British system, based on apprenticeship in a newspaper office or news agency, puts the emphasis on vocational training “on the job”.(NCTJ, 1960, p. 9)

This approach has had lasting importance. As this study discusses later, an analysis of fieldwork I conducted in provincial newspaper offices in 2017 and 2018 signalled a continued dominance of the NCTJ in formal learning mechanisms, and while apprenticeships are no longer universally required, all journalists were expected to have completed some form of NCTJ programme as part of their journalism training. When considering how journalistic ethics is learned, then it is necessary to go back to the training route taken by the individual, the locality of that learning. The majority of journalists from 1952 onwards in the UK came through the NCTJ system, which taught the craft of interviewing and writing, and ignored a curriculum which, had academic influence been included, might have encouraged broader thinking around ethics and philosophy, a common feature in the liberal arts-based university programmes.

In the 1960 NCTJ Handbook for training journalists, it states that in Britain, the training scheme was offered at 500 newspaper companies and news agencies around the country where apprenticed journalists were supported under the supervision of their editors. They attended day release programmes at one of 20 further education colleges where they studied a range of subjects including English language, shorthand, current affairs, newspaper law and the British constitution (NCTJ, 1960, p. 2).

The aim was to provide egalitarian training, made available to all junior journalists employed in newspapers or in news agencies and the handbook continues to make an argument for moving the training of journalists away from the University sector:

In many other countries the training system results in two classes of journalist – the privileged, or fortunate, or qualified, who has been to a School or Faculty of Journalism; and the un-privileged, or unfortunate, or unqualified, who possibly through no fault or deficiency of his own, has not. The Journalists’ associations in Britain attach importance to this essential democracy of the Training Scheme. (NCTJ, 1960, pp. 10-11)

This championing of the NCTJ’s democratic philosophy was disingenuous and implied that journalism trainees in Britain were very lucky to be in a classless training system, though subtly ignoring the fact that, according to the social science researcher Jeremy Tunstall, national newspapers tended to recruit mainly graduates from liberal arts programmes anyway, with elite backgrounds, who were then trained on the job. (Tunstall, 1971, p. 56; 1996, p. 142) It also ignored the fact that the NCTJ programme was developed in consultation with the industry and encouraged observance of principles agreed by newspaper owners, who arguably might not have a vested interest in the development of ethical approaches to journalism.

While education in ethics did not form part of the NCTJ syllabus in the 1950s, the NCTJ Handbook, designed for trainers and editors, did emphasise the importance of instilling accuracy into the training journalist and that the principle of accuracy “…should be hammered home at every opportunity” (NCTJ, 1960, p. 27). Other than this short mention, there is no other reference to ethical practice, either in the formal NCTJ syllabus or list of suggested seminars editors were encouraged to facilitate for trainees. (NCTJ, 1960, pp. 25-39)

The 1965 UNESCO report *Professional Training for Mass Communication* updates the 1958 publication *The Training of Journalists*. It identifies a number of advances in training in journalism and notes the importance of university education in equipping journalists to work at a higher level.(UNESCO, 1965, p. 7)

The report notes a continuing tension between the need to train journalists in technique as well as ensure a high standard of general education with an understanding of social responsibility and again points to the development of two disparate teaching models, one based in universities (by 1965 journalism programmes could be found in universities in America, Russia, Japan, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Canada) the other based in media institutions where journalists learn on the job, and is critical of the resistance of those countries which relied only on vocational training, including Britain (p. 8-9).

The report makes the point that society needs well educated journalists who are properly trained and have maturity in their approach to their role in society, and questions whether this can be fully developed through journalism training schemes such as the NCTJ in 1965, because of the age and lower educational qualification of trainees, and lack of a broader higher education. It advocates universities working in partnership with mass media industries to continue to develop high level education and training. There are no guarantees that university programmes would have developed a curriculum which considered journalism ethics, however, the university sector’s history in liberal arts and philosophy, and the potential for sharing research with academic cousins in the US, does suggest a strong likelihood this would have been the case.

Tunstall (1971) investigated specialist journalism newsgatherers, including political journalists, their role, power, responsibility, and how they carried out their work. As part of this study, he looked at journalism recruitment and training. He found that there were no reliable figures relating to the educational background of journalists prior to his study. His research indicated that in specialist journalistic fields (politics for example) about 30 per cent of the journalists were university graduates from a range of academic disciplines. National newspapers including The Times and The Guardian had recruited graduates for many years, but there was little evidence that this practice was widespread (p. 58).

Tunstall noted that by the 1940s training and education of journalists had become institutionalised in universities, most notably the US but also including Japan, some areas of Eastern and Western Europe and in Latin America.

In Britain, however, nothing comparable existed. A great difficulty in training recruits for journalism lay in the lack of answers to basic questions, such as: What are recruits to be trained for? Who shall teach them? What shall be taught? How will recruits be motived to learn? (Tunstall, 1971, p. 58)

He too was critical of the UK response to the 1947-49 Royal Commission, the resultant NCTJ training scheme was “…modest…” and had been set up “…belatedly and half-heartedly…” and emphasized shorthand in a way that was “…entirely provincial”. He noted that there were some improvements through the 1960s where the NCTJ programme developed into a three-year apprenticeship system with block release training at technical college, and minimum educational entry qualifications for recruits. (p. 59)

Tunstall noted that the introduction of the Industrial Training Board, established in 1968, brought the printing and the newspaper industry under one umbrella – which had its key focus on the printing industry – and this inhibited the framing of journalism as a profession because of its association with the print trades. The NCTJ focus on shorthand, law for journalists and practical exercises “…defined journalism primarily in white-collar or clerical terms”, not as a professional career. (Tunstall, 1971, p. 60)

Tunstall’s research indicated that by the 1960s work-based experiential learning was viewed as the most important mechanism for training journalists in the UK. There was the NCTJ programme which had developed short block release courses, trainees had to be working for an established newspaper or agency to be able to access the training. However, most of the learning was undertaken by work-shadowing more senior journalists, or in tutorials with a senior member of the editorial team, evidence of the importance placed on learning within a community of practice. Tunstall describes the early months of work-based learning in some detail, where shorthand technique was viewed as very important, and where journalists learned news values, house style, and how to structure a story, but mention of a curriculum which considered ethics was absent (Tunstall, 1971, p. 61).

Training and occupational identity

Tunstall’s comments point towards a tension in the developing identity of the journalist, which could well have impacted on the type of training and education the industry would have been prepared to support – if framed as a trade, then on the job training underpinned by industry sponsored programmes would be deemed appropriate, if a profession, then consideration of university located education would come into focus – in alignment with recognised professions such as law and medicine.

It is not my intention to look at occupational identity in any great detail as it is a broad topic way beyond the scope of this particular thesis, but it is worth mentioning as it may in some part explain why the newspaper industry held onto its work-based learning approaches over University located journalism programmes. Oliver Boyd-Barrett, an academic at the Industrial Sociology Unit at Imperial College, London, refers to the structure of NCTJ training in 1970 as part of his work looking at the professionalisation of journalism. (Boyd-Barrett, 1970, pp. 181-201) He was considering the difficulties posed in aligning journalism to frameworks which described professionalism, in particular that posited by Ernest Greenwood in 1966 in his work The Elements of Professionalisation (Greenwood, 1966), which postulated five major attributes which had to be satisfied in order to categorise an occupation as a profession. These were: a systematic body of learning, professional authority and autonomy, sanction by the professional community for misconduct, a system of ethical codes, and a professional culture.(Greenwood in Boyd-Barrett, 1970, p. 181)

Greenwood explicitly identifies a system of ethical codes as a mark of a professional culture, something which was absent from the newspaper industry in Britain at that time. Indeed, Journalism in Britain in the 1950s did not exhibit the major attributes as defined by Greenwood, and while in 21st century Britain there are features such as a system of ethical codes, and various curricula for journalists offered through university, the NCTJ and other training organisations, features such as professional authority, individual sanction for misconduct and a professional culture are still absent. Defining the occupational identity of the journalist is an area of intense academic debate in its own right, and it is not the intention of this study to develop it further other than to accept that the use of the term ‘professional journalist’ is contentious. During my fieldwork associated with this study, one senior manager picked me up on using the term ‘profession’, making the point that journalism is a craft, not a profession.

People talk about journalism as a profession and I much prefer what I as a young journalist was brought up to believe, it is not a profession. You do a deal of legal training to be a solicitor, or medical training to be a doctor, you can’t compare journalism to that. It is a craft. A set of skills that are actually fairly easily learned by people who are of good general intelligence, and less esoteric than medicine or whatever. (anon, personal interview)

There is a sense of anti-intellectualism here in reference to how he positions journalism, evident through his conceptualisation of professionalisation as a function of higher levels of study than that afforded journalists. The senior manager also refers to what he had been told in the 1980s as a junior journalist, his occupational identity being framed by his own community of practice who were themselves inducted into journalism in the 1960s and earlier. This legacy understanding of the occupational identity of the journalist appearing to have become embedded in the community and passed on to subsequent generations.

Academic literature which refers to the British press does use the term ‘profession’, but often it is a linguistic device to describe the occupation. Jeremy Tunstall, for example, in his research around media occupations, refers to journalism as a profession but doesn’t define his understanding of professionalism. (Tunstall, 2001)

Similarly Deuze (Deuze, 2019; Deuze & Witschge, 2018) discusses the professionalisation of journalism without fully defining what he understands by the term ‘profession’. He does cite features common in professions and journalism globally, and having an ethical code is one of those features. Aldridge and Evetts (2003) note that professionalisation of an industry is generally understood as a form of control, either through using a professional membership ticket as a controlling device, which can be withdrawn for poor behaviour, or through recruitment to the industry only via sanctioned routes which identify the practitioner as a professional. The occupational ideology of the journalist is one of “entrenched individualism”, the maverick who avoids control, which does not align with traditional understandings of a “professional” (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003, p. 550).

This idea in itself is contested as journalists have long been subject to the control of their employers, the newspaper publishers who have profit in mind. In looking at how journalists learn ethics, and have developed ethical understandings as a community, then it is worth noting the impact of a strategy of deliberate avoidance of professionalisation, certainly in the post war period. While the notion of entrenched individualism captures the popular romantic notion of the journalist this may have stifled debate about the development of professionalising structures which journalists could have used to challenge newspaper proprietors if encouraged to act unethically. For example, a professional structure developed for journalism may have developed a code of practice which individual journalists would have been expected to formally adopt as a condition of registration within that structure, and they would be able to cite their professional registration in the face of requests from employers which brought them into conflict with the code. The IoJ and the NUJ did have codes of conduct but there was no requirement to register membership with these organisations as a condition of working in journalism. This is still the case. Engineers asked to use substandard materials and take short cuts in the construction of a bridge would point contractors to their professional code and registration as a constraining influence on poor practice, the professional registration shifting the balance of power when ethical considerations become evident.

Boyd-Barrett (1970, p. 182) said that journalism pre 1970 failed to fully satisfy any of Greenwood’s criteria to qualify it as a profession, and also noted: “…there is no single, universal, binding code of ethics”. Aldridge (1998, p. 124) also notes that journalism lacked the qualifying characteristics of a profession, and said that a mark of a professional is the ability to do the job in hand regardless of personal feelings, and that while for a police officer this translates into remaining calm when dealing with roadside accident, in journalism, it often becomes “…doing something you don’t believe in”, and as the Leveson Inquiry found, this also translated into doing something ethically unacceptable such as blagging and phone tapping. The resistance to adopting professionalising structures, and failure to consider journalism as an intellectual occupation in alignment with fields such as engineering and medicine, may have hindered the development of more robust learning structures around journalism ethics.

As Strick’s comments had illustrated (UNESCO, 1958) there was a suspicion of academia and its potential to impact on journalism training, an attitude which continued to resonate with the senior manager interviewed in my fieldwork. More starkly, Paul Dacre, editor of one of Britain’s major national newspapers The Daily Mail until November 2018, denigrated journalism academics in a speech to the Society of Editors in 2018 as “mainly left-wing Professors of Journalism”, describing journalism degrees as “ludicrous” (Linford, 2018), evidence of a continuing discomfort with university involvement in journalism education more than 50 years after the formation of the NCTJ. Dacre is critical of the academic community for its scrutiny of his ethical conduct as editor of *The Daily Mail*, and sensitivity to academic criticism might account for some of the tension between the industry and the university sector when looking at where journalism education is located.

It is in taking account of the tension around the term ‘profession’ when applied to journalism that I consciously use the term occupation, and refer to occupational ethics when discussing journalism ethics, rather than reference professional ethics. Senior practitioners of journalism avoid identifying themselves as professionals, the occupation misses some of Greenwood’s key identifiers of a profession, and there continues to be resistance to full acceptance of journalism as a degree programme appropriate to the needs of the industry, positioning journalism education firmly as occupational training rather than at the higher level of undergraduate education. Also, journalists are not licenced and there is no sanction for failing to adhere to or align with codes of practice. As discussed later in Chapter 4, there is a code of practice which newspaper journalists are expected to work to, but this is voluntary.

Development of journalism education post 1970

The NCTJ training programme as of 1969 had been largely unchanged since 1955, other than the introduction of ‘block release’ courses in 1965, (intensive training periods offered at one of six centres nationwide, for trainees attached to provincial or non-national newspapers), set up to supplement work-based learning. The 1962 Royal Commission had not made recommendations on the training of journalists at this point (Boyd-Barrett, 1970, p. 186). Any teaching of occupational ethics would have to come via in-house (mainly NCTJ) training, and as it did not form part of the NCTJ curriculum at that time, and as there was no Editors’ Code of Practice in place - this only came in 1991 (Editors' Code Committee, 2020) – it is likely that for the majority of early career journalists, journalism ethics was not taught. If one is to consider personal ethics and any discussion around personal agency, it is worth bearing in mind that in 1967, the NUJ reported that there were 1.37 senior journalists to every junior (in training) journalist, almost a third of journalists were aged between 16 and 23, with almost 15% aged 20 or under (Boyd-Barrett, 1970, p. 192).This is a period when young journalists were at an impressionable age, learning their occupational behaviours from those around them, along with any unwritten code which might govern personal agency. Entry qualifications for journalism was five O-levels (level 2 on the British National Qualification Framework) and two A-levels (level 3), though some graduates did enter journalism. Boyd-Barrett notes that there were specialist block-release courses at colleges for graduates entering the occupation, but the atmosphere was one of mutual wariness:

…there is a certain amount of hostility shown by lecturers towards graduates, and by graduates towards the training they receive. Few of the lecturers themselves are graduates. They, in common with many journalists, tend to associate graduates with academics, and believe that few graduates make satisfactory employees, particularly on the provincial press, for whose needs the NCTJ mostly caters. (p. 192)

This is in contrast to the United States at this time, which showed that 30% of the members of the Association for the Education of Journalists – journalism lecturers roughly equivalent to the NCTJ teachers in Britain - held doctorate level degrees, 84% masters level, and 92% bachelors level. And 58% of journalists working on daily newspapers were graduates, of whom half studied journalism to graduate level (p.194).

Establishing journalism as an undergraduate programme in British universities was problematic as it was felt to be too vocational a subject to be welcome on academic campuses.

The grounds for this criticism become apparent on inspection of the content of NCTJ courses. The subjects include press law, local government, English, shorthand, and specific journalistic skills. (Boyd-Barrett, 1970, p. 193)

This does not constitute Greenwood’s “systematic body of learning” which he deemed important in professional education, and the teaching of ethics is absent.

Ten years after Boyd-Barrett’s work, McBarnet, looked at recruitment and training in journalism in the then newly instituted journal Media, Culture and Society (McBarnet, 1979, p. 181). He describes journalism as a “discipline” for which journalists needed training:

… a discipline that is rooted in the handed down “wisdom” and experience of generations of newspaper journalists.

Again, this signals the continued reliance on work-based learning within a community of practice. His paper on journalism education and training came immediately in the wake of the publication of the report from the third Royal Commission on the Press (1974-1977), which was critical of the lack of progress made in the recruitment and training of journalists since the 1947-49 Royal Commission.

The 1974-79 Commission itself noted that it was the third Royal Commission in 30 years to look at journalistic conduct. While the first RCP (1947-49) considered concerns around press standards due to the concentration of ownership and lack of training, the Second RCP Royal Commission on the Press (1961-62) looked at economic and financial factors which were affecting the industry as a result of newspaper closures. However, by 1974 there were concerns that there was a “consistent bias of the press against the Labour Party and the trade union movement” which led to the formation of the 1974-79 Commission (McGregor, 1977, p. 2 s1.5).

The final report of the Royal Commission in 1977 notes that journalism training had improved since 1949, but there were criticisms from a number of public bodies, including the Police Federation, the Institute of Public Relations, the Trades Union Congress, and the Catholic Church, about a lack of background knowledge and proper understanding of public structures in the press (McGregor, 1977, p. 171) – in essence, criticism over the accuracy of reporting.

McBarnet (1979, p. 183) is critical of the training structures for journalists which were heavily influenced by the journalism unions the National Union of Journalists and Institute of Journalists, and by the 1970s, organised by the Printing and Publishing Industry Training Board, which approved the standards by which the NCTJ continued to operate. He said that restricted access to training programmes, while ensuring that there were jobs for those completing the programmes, meant that the NUJ’s hostility to elite entry by graduates, did restrict access to graduates. McBarnet discussed the focus on practical skills-led training, with the insistence on shorthand, which was predominant, and expressed concern at how this approach was restricting new recruits in their capacity to think freely about situations they encountered:

It can be seen that the sum effect of training schemes, as presently constituted in the UK at least, is to rear a passive press liable to uphold the status quo. Link this to the source of the training in the industrial structure of a profit oriented press, and one can begin to recognise patterns of private ownership leading to a particular form of training in turn leading to a particular form of journalism which favours society as it is. (McBarnet, 1979, p. 193)

When viewed through the lens of learning journalism ethics, this is an interesting point. A “passive press” is unlikely to pose much of a challenge to democratic structures, a point made by Pickard (2020, p. 37) albeit in relation to the press in the US in the 21st century. McBarnet’s point also has relevance today in that training in the UK continues to be rooted in industrial structures.

It would appear that the 1975-77 Royal Commission on the Press was another missed opportunity to move journalism education forward in terms of giving any consideration towards learning occupational ethics.

The Commission report noted that training and education of journalists, particularly senior journalists, fell short of what was needed, and it recommended the provision of advanced professional (sic) education for journalism as “a major priority”, though it failed to specify what it expected by way of a syllabus for senior reporters, which might go some way to explaining the lack of industry engagement with this suggestion. It also recommended that basic training should be enhanced to include more knowledge of local and central government, public administration, political, industrial and social affairs but missed the opportunity to include occupational ethics in its suggested curricular enhancements. It did suggest a common training and recruitment framework for print and broadcast journalism to aid mobility across different journalistic platforms which were emerging in the 1970s (McGregor, 1977, pp. 181-182 ) but this was not taken forward.

Growth of journalism education post 1990

In 1998, Barbara Thomas, an academic at the Institut fur Politische Wissenschaft at the University of Hamburg published research into the teaching of ethics to journalists in the UK – it is one of very few historic accounts which look at this topic – and her account of journalism training pre 1970 ties in with the picture painted by Tunstall, in which journalists learned through newsroom experience rather than higher education programmes.

For a long time, the education of journalists in the United Kingdom took place exclusively in newsrooms. Learning by doing, without any regulation of what the young journalists had to learn, was the generally accepted practice. (Thomas, 1998, p. 137)

Thomas’ work is useful in that it bridges a twenty-year gap since Tunstall’s study and is one of very few studies which takes as its focus the teaching of journalism ethics in Britain in the 1990s. It covers the period during which the Calcutt Committee met to discuss press standards in the wake of public concern about journalistic behaviours.[[4]](#footnote-4)  She makes the point that in a commercialised media landscape, there was the danger that ethics in journalism could be perceived as a “luxury”. However, to retain the credibility and trust of the public sphere, media industries had to constantly work to gain and maintain trust of their audiences in an arena where that trust is frequently challenged (p. 136). She adds that it was the responsibility of the industry as a whole to maintain ethical standards.

Journalists themselves are often made to confront ethical dilemmas which emerge from the different concepts that prevail in the profession. We might even say that it is a part of journalism to live with ethical questions because underlying ideas, like freedom of the press, objectivity, truth, honesty or privacy, might conflict. Being familiar with the main issues of a responsible journalism means finding our way through the thicket of details of individual cases where decisions are necessarily made. Spotting the issue(s) and promoting sound debate to arrive at well-balanced decisions is the ethical responsibility of every single journalist. Defending these decisions will become more and more difficult as a market-driven journalism expands. (p. 136)

Thomas is signalling here that individual journalists need sufficiently equipping to respond to ethical dilemma in a responsible way and be able to marshal a defence of the actions they choose to take in what at times can be complex situations. Thomas was writing 15 years before the Leveson Inquiry into press standards, but her words were prophetic, in that sectors of the British newspaper industry ignored the need for sound debate and well-balanced decisions, leading to deep concern about press standards via the Leveson Inquiry. Thomas asked whether journalism training and education in Britain was fit to meet the demands for sound ethical practice and whether journalists, when faced with an ethical dilemma, would be able to withstand the pressure from their employers to act in an unethical manner. In looking at how journalists learn ethics today, this is a point I wanted to explore further by seeking to find out how journalists are currently supported in developing an understanding of what is ethical and how to act appropriately.

At the time of her study, the NCTJ continued to dominate training and education for journalists working in the print industry. She noted that industry required short and cost-effective practical education without additional academic content, and this made the NCTJ programmes popular with employers. By 1995, there were a small number of university programmes which incorporated the NCTJ syllabus into postgraduate diplomas, and which built on academic studies at first degree level, often in other fields of study. These were popular with students because where students had to fund the programme themselves, they needed quick results which would lead to employment. However:

As the universities are dependent on the numbers of students they register, and are in competition with other universities, their orientation to the expectations of potential or prospective students plays an important role. These conditions have led to rather homogenous syllabuses, within which universities and colleges have a reduced freedom to shape the teaching, according their own understanding of what is necessary. (p. 137)

This homogenous syllabus she refers to draws heavily on the NCTJ programme to inform content, and Thomas found that, even in postgraduate programmes, between 50% and 80% of the teaching focussed on practical skills. In addition, students would study national and local government, law and shorthand, with a very small part of the programme given to the examination of media industries and philosophies, where there would be the potential for ethics to be discussed. In investigating where journalism ethics was located in the curriculum of these emerging higher education programmes, she conducted interviews with eight staff who were teaching journalism on these programmes, and asked their opinions on the ethical standards in journalism in the UK and their ways of teaching ethics. She reported a discourse which lacked a sense of importance over the teaching of ethics, where the aim of the teaching courses was to equip students to meet the demands of the employer. In discussing the aims of their courses with Thomas, she noted that ethics was not mentioned, which she interpreted as signalling its low priority within the curricula (p. 139).

The development of reflective practice in journalism students was mentioned by only a few experts, and only one discussed the importance of critical analysis of society in journalism teaching, she quoted the anonymous interviewee:

“So, it’s a slightly different breed of journalists that we are hoping to produce. The kind of people who will no longer passively enter an organisation that has very clear conventions, that have been laid down over many, many eras, but someone who is prepared with reflection to be a little more subversive and in that way to be able to create the ways of reporting and reflecting the life around them.” (Thomas, 1998, p. 139)

When Thomas turned to the question of how her interviewees taught ethics, she discovered two key approaches. One was concerned with teaching the ability to do the right thing in a given situation, the other teaching the ability to reflect, to think about their behaviour so that in any given situation they can make up their own minds about practical ethical questions.

“…in the main [they] want to achieve a competence of reflection which ought to develop a consciousness about the conditions and structures that determine the performance of the individual professional. The orientation to, or the searching for, guidelines or binding norms or values is of no great importance.” (p. 141)

This notion is important, as it implies that while industry might develop a code of practice which it expects journalists to follow, teaching the code is not sufficient to develop a journalist with sound ethical judgement, a better approach might be to teach reflective analysis which embraces wider thinking. The importance of reflection in learning will be discussed in a later section.

Thomas asked how ethics was represented in the syllabus and found that the NCTJ had a major role in setting the curriculum. While individual institutions might explore wider academic issues, where they sought NCTJ accreditation for their curriculum, they found themselves restricted in what they could teach. One interviewee described the NCTJ as “very old-fashioned” with a very limited view of what journalism education should be. Thomas found that of those institutions which took part in her study, all had modules which looked at the media through an academic lens, for example modules titled *media analysis* or *media and society*, where ethics might be addressed in line with the interests of the particular lecturer.

The NCTJ does not suggest a specific subject called ethics, but it demands that ethical aspects are installed in everything, and that the students acquire a knowledge of the code of practice of the Press Complaints Commission.(Thomas, 1998, p. 142)

The PCC came into being as a result of the Calcutt Committee in an attempt to improve the self-regulation of the press, and this is evidence that the PCC Code has found its way into the journalism educational curriculum. However, there is a difference between teaching a code and teaching a journalist to think ethically - this is explored more in Chapter 4 – and the NCTJ approach to curriculum requirements was restrictive. Thomas’s research was conducted in 1995, but 11 years later, in 2006, NCJT guidance to institutions, including universities, seeking accreditation to run their courses did not appear to have moved on. Its Accreditation Standard and Information Pack (subtitled Working in Partnership with You to Train and Develop the Journalists of Tomorrow) did not require ethics to be covered, and missed the opportunity to encourage institutions to engage journalism students in wider thinking of ethical issues (NCTJ, 2006a, p. 40). As Frost pointed out in his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry in his capacity as Chair of the Association for Journalism Education, he had evaluated the NCTJ syllabus and curriculum in preparation for his submission to the Inquiry in 2011, and had concluded that even at that point “there was no specific mention of ethics”. (Frost, 2012b, p. 9)

This is an important omission as careers guidance officers have for a long time directed students wishing to become journalists towards NCTJ programmes as a major route into the occupation.[[5]](#footnote-5)  NCTJ training was framed as being the main way into journalism, the gold standard of training for anyone wanting to be a journalist. The point here is that early career journalists in 2006 were guided down a training route which did not include robust study of journalism ethics. With so little attention paid to ethics by an influential training organisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that occupational ethics was brought under close scrutiny by Leveson in 2011.

As recently as 2016 the British government’s careers advice pages, (accessed on 3 March 2016), directed those wanting to work in journalism towards NCTJ qualifications (National Careers Service, 2016) and although in 2020 this page had been updated to include mention of university programmes in journalism, NCTJ qualifications were still given a high profile (National Careers Service 2020).

Some of Thomas’ experts in her 1998 study gave detail on the teaching of journalism ethics that they built into the curriculum irrespective of NCTJ guidelines, with a number committing substantial time to discussing ethical issues. However, they met resistance from students who saw the course as a means to gaining journalism employment and didn’t understand the need to study reflective thinking. One interviewee stated:

“…journalism students tend to come into this course with a kind of notion that all they need from the course is to acquire practical skills that can then lead them to get employment in the industry. In a sense you can’t blame them because that is what the industry itself emphasises.” (Thomas, 1998, p. 142)

Thomas encountered some frustration among those she interviewed about the constraints placed upon them by the NCTJ’s influence on the curriculum in accredited institutions. Where staff had wanted to expand the curriculum in some institutions they had been discouraged. One interviewee told Thomas:

“We are really constrained in terms of the development of the course by the NCTJ…. I have accreditation meetings with them which drive me crazy. Because I say to them: ‘What do you think about ethics? Or what do you think about teaching some of that or some of this?’ and they say: ‘Oh, wasted time, don’t do this’.” (p. 143)

The reference to teaching ethics being a waste of time does rather point to it being dismissed by the NCTJ as being somewhat irrelevant, and while this is testimony from just one interview, it does align with the absence of ethics from the NCTJ curriculum at that time. Other interviewees told Thomas that they were investigating the teaching of journalism ethics in the United States in the University sector, to bring it back into their own institutions, echoes of attempts to broaden the British approach instigated a century earlier.

Thomas (p. 144) concluded that while ethics was beginning to enter the curriculum in journalism education in the 1990s, there was no systematic approach to teaching ethics in Britain, with her experts citing an ‘as it comes up’ approach in common – confronting ethical topics as they arose in discussion with students during practical workshops. She felt that the practical nature of the courses, the lack of opportunity in the curriculum to teach ethics, the lack of British teaching materials and the expectation of students had contributed to a low level engagement with teaching and learning in journalism ethics in general.

Ethics had found its way into the university and college syllabuses, and there was a willingness to teach it.

Although notions of responsibility do not normally form part of the general aims of the education of journalists, the intensity with which the experts plead for the necessity of the competence of reflection as a teaching aim demonstrates how strongly they perceive the problem. (Thomas, 1998, p. 145)

Thomas concluded that conditions for developing journalism ethics education were not encouraging as the NCTJ continued to dominate curricular development, particularly in industry focussed degree programmes with their emphasis on learning how to do the job rather than reflect on practice and ethical behaviours.

Keeble makes a similar point, and states that learning on the job was a fundamental part of journalism training which brought with it tensions between those who had come through industry sponsored training programmes and those from the university sector. (Keeble, 2001b, p. 235)

Keeble notes the prevailing view of training journalists was that while it is acceptable to be able to talk about how the job should be done, unless a journalist could actually tackle a challenging story then they were useless.

That was the dominant view in the industry at the beginning of the twentieth century. It remains largely the same at the start of the twenty-first. There have been slight changes. Training courses have developed with the support of newspaper managements and trade unions. They have even spread into the learned corridors of universities. But mutual suspicion persists between the press and academia (Keeble, 2001b, p. 235)

According to Keeble, by 2000 there were 100 undergraduate journalism programmes in the United Kingdom, and 95 per cent of new recruits to journalism were graduates, although not necessarily in journalism (p. 236). He also notes that 40% of new entrants into journalism begin their training on local newspapers, receiving on the job training in addition to that received on their undergraduate programmes, underlining the continued importance of the workplace in the learning of journalism, including any learning of occupational ethics practice (p. 238).

Frith and Meech (2007) observed that at the turn of the 21st century, teaching and learning in journalism had become established in Universities as well as through the industrial training programmes, but routes into journalism as a career via journalism degrees was not straightforward. They noted that while the reality was that journalism was becoming a career for graduates, editors were resistant to labelling it as a graduate career.

The perceptual confusion this involved was focused on the nature and quality of university journalism courses and, more generally, on the very idea of academic media studies. (Frith & Meech, 2007, p. 271) Frith and Meech said that there was “ideological suspicion” of the development of journalism programmes in higher education, which was partly a matter of generation, and partly concern that journalists were becoming increasingly middle class as a result of the shift towards graduate recruitment. They cite Jeremy Tunstall’s 1996 work in looking at the background of journalists in the national and provincial press, where he found that in the 1960s most people entered as teenage indentured apprentices. By 2000 these people were occupying senior editorial positions, and were sceptical of new ways of doing things (Frith & Meech, 2007, p. 139). The concern about middle class drift appeared to stem from the suggestion that academics were not part of the real world and therefore could not properly prepare graduates for what the role of a journalist involved.

One common response to this situation is to argue that while university-based learning of some sort may now be necessary for journalists, it’s still really only on the job training that matters (Frith & Meech, 2007, p. 140). If this is the case, then there is an argument for locating the learning of journalism ethics in the workplace.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Frith and Meech go on to cite guidance to those wanting to go into a career in journalism from bodies including the Newspaper Society, the Newspaper Proprietors Association, and the Guardian Media Guide, which urged people to avoid media studies degrees in its editions between 1998 and 2003:

Most journalists over 30 tend to agree with Roger Scruton [a contributor to newspaper columns] who said: “Media studies course content is sub-Marxist gobbledegook and courses are taught by talentless individuals who can’t get jobs in the media, so they teach instead. There’s nothing to learn except by way of apprenticeship on the job.” (Fisher, P and Peak, S (eds) (1998) The Media Guide. London, Fourth Estate, in Frith & Meech, 2007)

This resonates with Keeble’s point about a mutual suspicion between the industry and academia, and also with Dacre’s dismissal of journalism degrees as “ludicrous”, signalling an ideological antipathy towards intellectual criticism of journalism by a defensive industry (Keeble, 2001b, p. 235; Linford, 2018). Frith and Meech suggested that many people in positions of power in journalism in the UK post 2000 were dismissive of the idea that the academic study of journalism had anything to do with preparing students for journalism careers (p. 141).

Baines and Kelsey note that at the time of the Leveson Inquiry in 2011, there was a continued resistance from the industry to fully embracing the potential of the academic field to add value to journalism education.

In British journalism there is a fault line of suspicion, defensiveness and anti-intellectualism which is evident in repeated disparagements of media and journalism studies as legitimate disciplines and this fault line is often reflected in an uneasy relationship between those who teach journalism practice and those who teach journalism – and media – studies. (Baines & Kelsey, 2012, p. 33)

They argue that there is a danger in the failure to deliver wider sociological education as part of a journalism curriculum, and this can “deprive some journalism students – and educators – of the tools they need to analyse the crisis which led to Leveson” (ibid p. 33). Not only does the anti-intellectual climate stifle the development of the individual journalist’s capacity to give proper consideration to ethical dilemma then, but it also constrains mechanisms which might enable a robust reflection on practice across the industry at a higher level.

At the time Thomas was conducting her research in the mid-1990s, the Guild of Editors – an industry body which represented senior editorial staff – was putting forward an alternative to the NCTJ training scheme. It used as its framework the National Vocational Qualification scheme, and in its proposal document, *Tomorrow’s Journalist – The “white paper” on Editorial Training*, published in October 1997, it attempted to set out an experiential learning programme for those wanting to enter all sectors of the media industry in a “fast-changing” environment (Gillan, 1997).

Guild of Editors Chair Crawford Gillan said in his introduction to the paper: “I believe these proposals represent a real opportunity for all sections of the media industry – newspapers, periodicals and broadcasting – to get their act together”.

The paper sets out as one of its main aims for the training programme:

It must incorporate mandatory elements so that no trainee – whatever his or her pre-entry education – can proceed until basic knowledge of other areas of the business (for example, in a newspaper context, advertising, sales, marketing or production) have been acquired. Every trainee should be required to attain minimum standards in key subjects such as essential English usage and grammar, law and ethics (including the PCC Code of Practice).(Gillan, 1997, p. 4)

It is noteworthy that ethics is specifically mentioned here, describing a move towards a more holistic training for working in media industries set against the narrow newspaper journalism focus of NCTJ training.

NVQs had some nationwide acceptance, though there was resistance from those organisations routed in the history of the NCTJ. Keeble (2001 p. 238) mentions NVQs being firmly established in the Eastern Counties Newspapers by 2000, where they ran as work-based learning programmes, but in 2007 journalism NVQs were taken into the NCTJ framework according to industry website holdthefrontpage.co.uk (2007).

After offering a viable alternative to NCTJ training for almost ten years, the Society of Editors, which had been formed out of a merger between the Guild of Editors and the Association of British Editors in 1999, brought journalism training back under the umbrella of the NCTJ which had not revised its curriculum to include specific mention of ethics. The article on holdthefrontpage.co.uk goes on to clarify the difference between the NVQ and NCTJ courses and there is a specific reference to the learning of ethics under the NVQ system against an absence of mention under the NCTJ scheme.

It was not until after the Leveson Inquiry (which reported in 2012) that the language of NCTJ programmes includes specific mention of ethics, and the merger with the NVQ programme in 2007 would appear to be a missed opportunity on the part of the NCTJ to foreground the importance of journalism ethics in its own programmes. Following the introduction of the Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice[[7]](#footnote-7), the NCTJ did signpost the Code, but it was not until 2013 that its syllabus had changed to make explicit reference to teaching ethics, albeit a small part of the law for journalists’ programme(NCTJ, 2012). It had taken more than 65 years after the first Royal Commission’s recommendations to reach this point.

Baines and Kelsey (2012) noted that while there was a requirement that on accredited journalism programmes students learn relevant industry-body codes of practice education programmes are “at best heavily informed by, at worst limited to, such codes” (p. 33). They make the point that occupational ethics should consist of more than an observance of codes.

They continue:

While codes of practice are useful in some respects, there is a danger that they define – and confine – the boundaries of journalistic ethics. If it is not in the code, it may not be regarded as an ethical issue. (ibid p. 33)

They cite a colleague from Newcastle University’s Business School Stewart Clegg, who spoke on strategy, organisations and society at a School summit in 2012 (unpublished) where he said: “It is as if all that is needed is to know the right rule in order to do the right thing: ethics becomes a question of following the rules.” As Baines and Kelsey note, when the rules run out, there are still moral decisions to be made. This point helped shape the direction of my research questions, as in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, I realised I wanted to know what they understand by the term journalism ethics. Whether journalism ethics teaching and learning is located within higher education or the workplace, the nature of that teaching and learning is important to this thesis. Journalism ethics built around the observance of a set of rules is different from ethics derived from reflection on practice built around response to ethical challenges as they arise. Sources of understanding what is meant by journalism ethics are considered in Chapter 4, building on Baines and Kelsey’s observations that journalism ethics is about more than codes of practice.

At the time of the Leveson Inquiry, the NCTJ dominated journalism education as a major national training scheme, which had influence in the university sector where journalism degree programmes sought NCTJ accreditation. According to an NCTJ annual report, in 2014 there had been 1,607 students enrolled to sit journalism diploma exams at one of 39 NCTJ approved centres in the UK, running 78 accredited courses (NCTJ, 2014, p. 3). Taking account of students on both accredited and non-accredited programmes, the NCTJ administered 14,818 of its examinations/assessments throughout 2013-14. The NCTJ syllabus by 2014 included for the first time explicit reference to teaching the PCC Code of Practice.

A consideration of the historical development of journalism education prior to the Leveson Inquiry is important because of the dominance and influence of the one training organisation, which was set up initially by the newspaper industry following a Government inquiry in 1947 It was supported by the National Union of Journalists, and also supported by industry bodies including the Society of Editors. Perhaps because of the dominance of industry owners in the supporting structures for the NCTJ, academic input was stifled, and innovation in curriculum development constrained, restricting the possibility of including the teaching of ethics in its curriculum.

Niblock suggests the stifling of innovation in the curriculum to include ethics was a deliberate strategy rather than accidental negligence, and comments: “Some editors may feel journalists who are well read in media criticism may lead them to question editorial policy,” (Niblock (1996) in Keeble, 2001b, p. 236). Her comments were made in the context of cautioning media studies graduates not to expect an easy entry into journalism training posts as they faced a form of inverted snobbery from editors who did not want to encourage staff with critical approaches to their occupational endeavours.

Current position

In a Reuters’ Institute study led by Thurman (2016) 700 British journalists from print and broadcast industries were interviewed in December 2015 about their educational history and employment. The report noted that in the five year period between 2011 and 2015, 64% of those entering employment in journalism had a bachelor’s or master’s degree or other university level education in journalism or a related field, an increase on the preceding five year period of 13% (51%). The figure of 41% of all those in the occupation holding some form of higher education qualification in journalism in the UK is evidence that there has been a shift towards embedding journalism education and training in the University sector, a subtle move towards professionalisation (Thurman et al., 2016, p. 35)

Thurman et al advise caution in interpreting the increase in journalism graduates as being an indicator that they are able to impact on behaviours in newsrooms. Thurman’s survey asked participants who had worked in journalism for more than five years about the impact of journalism higher education, and while many said it was now useful in helping them gain employment in industry, it was less useful once they had begun working in newsrooms. Such an assessment is in line with the views of many academics who study the sociology of journalism and talk about the relative invariability of newsroom culture, which helps explain “uniformity and conformity among news workers” and provides those workers “with defences to withstand pressure for change” (2016, p. 36 citing Singer (2004) pp. 838-856). This suggests Dacre’s dismissal of journalism degrees, made in a speech as late as 2018, had some resonance across the industry (Linford, 2018).

Thurman et al’s study is useful in that it signals changing educational routes into journalism – one which, in the early years of the 21st century, is dominated by graduate entry, with a significant proportion of journalists having studied journalism in some form via a higher education programme. However, it takes us only so far, in that it does not address the curricular content of the higher education programmes or pose the question about how occupational ethics might have been learned. It is this gap which I hope to address through the research questions at the heart of this thesis. My participants in this study validate Thurman et al’s observations to some extent in that all except one early career journalist interviewed was a graduate, and the majority had undertaken some form of journalism qualification at degree or masters level.

Ironically, all participants in this study had been required to undertake the NCTJ diploma, or complete an NCTJ accredited programme, prior to being offered a job in a newsroom, irrespective of whether they had completed a degree which had a journalism component, underlining the importance which continues to be given by industry to the NCTJ. The only exception was one early career journalist who entered the occupation aged 18, and was undertaking the NCTJ diploma while working as a journalist following an apprenticeship model. Russell and Eccles (2018, p. 11) observe that there is a continuing tension between academics and practising journalists where those in industry remain unconvinced that university courses can adequately prepare early career journalists for the demands of a newsroom, and that only accredited courses can sufficiently prepare them in the practical skills required, a position which resonates with the findings of my own study.

When referencing accredited courses, in the context of the British press, this means an NCTJ accredited course taken prior to entry into a newsroom - there is no other journalism training course universally recognised by the British press for training journalists. (There is a training programme developed by Reach (formerly Trinity Mirror) which is offered to their own employees as an alternative to the NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism programme, but this is an in-house journalism training scheme, only offered to journalists once they have been employed in a newsroom and is currently not recognised on the NQF.)

By the time the Leveson Inquiry sat, there was a general sense that while there were pockets of excellence in teaching journalism ethics – largely in the university sector, it had not made sufficient impact on practice in some sectors of the industry, and the NCTJ had not done enough to promote teaching and learning in ethics. Petley (2012) reviewed a number of submissions to the Leveson Inquiry: Leveson held three seminars with invited speakers, to prepare his team for the inquiry by gaining a better contextual understanding of the British press. Professor Brian Cathcart, a founder of the Hacked Off Campaign – a pressure group concerned with the problem of phone hacking by the British press – raised concern about the training of journalists in one seminar on 6 October 2011. He was discussing the definition of public interest in the context of how the standard journalistic defence to invasion of privacy tends to be that the story was ‘in the public interest’.

It’s a sorry reflection on the state of journalism that many practitioners say they are uncertain about public interest. As a teacher, I’m inclined to wonder about the education and training that lies behind this, and it is a simple fact that the NCTJ has never taught ethics. (Cathcart in Petley, 2012, p. 530)

While there have been some curricular developments at the NCTJ since its formation in 1951, to encompass the introduction of mention the Press Complaints Commission and its Code of Conduct in the wake of the Calcutt Commission in the 1980s, it is widely felt by those who deliver NCTJ training that ethics was not given appropriate prominence pre-Leveson. Petley cites the evidence presented to the Leveson Inquiry by the Association for Journalism Education in support of this view (Petley, 2012, p. 531).

Because of the dominance of the NCTJ in the field of journalism training in the UK, it is worth considering briefly the nature of the NCTJ courses in as far as they deliver teaching in journalism ethics currently to evaluate how the courses have changed in light of the Leveson Inquiry.

As of May 2020, the NCTJ website lists three types of courses. The first is a level 3 apprenticeship, registered with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (a government-approved body for oversight of apprenticeships). This is an entry level qualification which ‘junior journalists’ undertake while working for a news organisation by way of day release classes at a college under the Government’s apprenticeship agreements. The second is a level 3 Diploma in Journalism (NCTJ, 2020a), which the NCTJ states is “…the qualification that editors look for when recruiting a trainee journalist” (NCTJ, 2020b). This is offered either as a stand-alone programme offered at further education colleges or at specialist organisations such as News Associates, or through accredited BA and MA programmes at HE institutions, and students complete this qualification prior to getting a job with a news organisation. The syllabus followed through the apprenticeship or direct entry route is the same, and each type of programme leads to the level 3 Diploma in Journalism, see figure1.

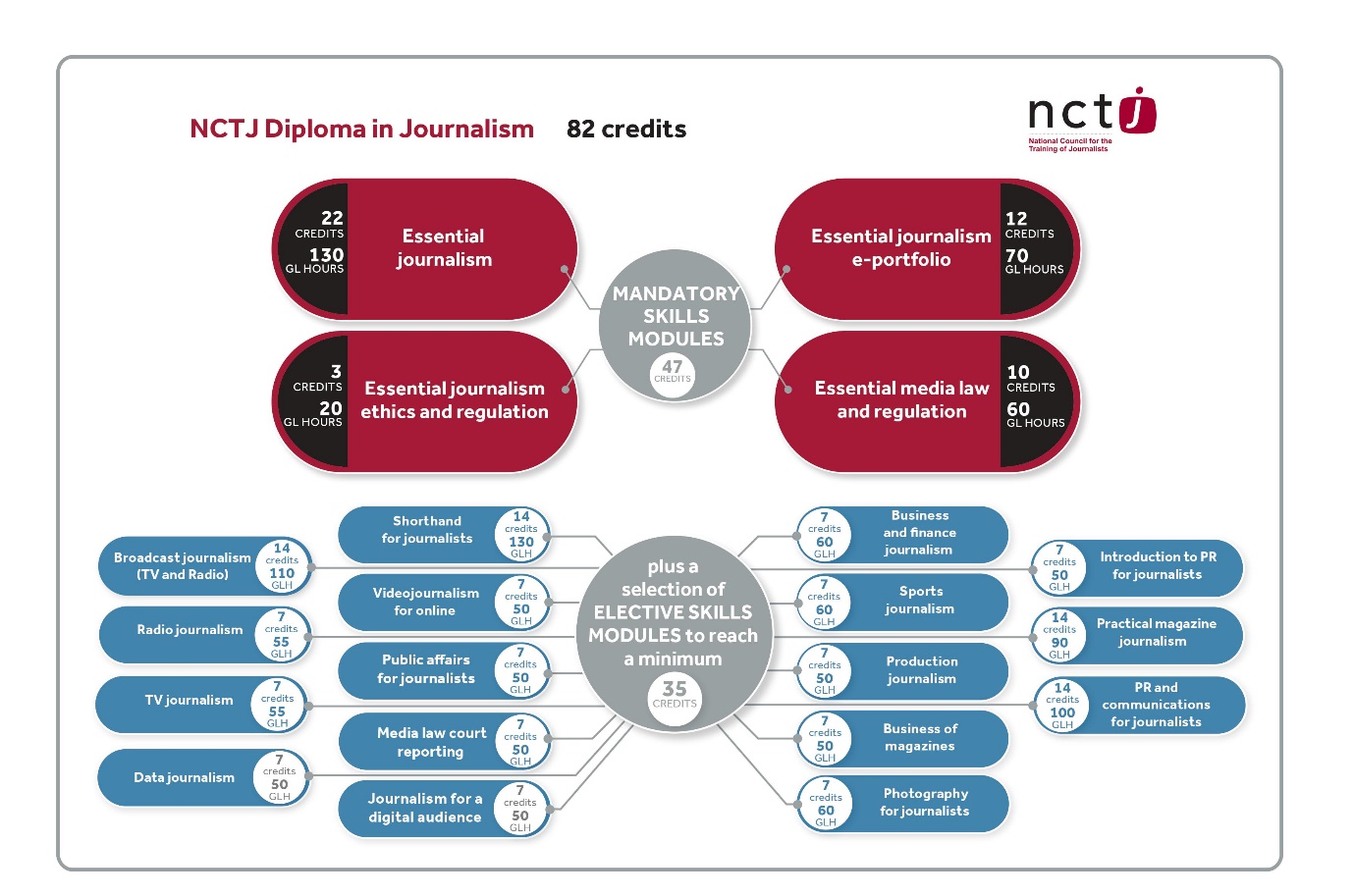


Figure 1 Curriculum for the NCTJ Diploma in Journalism (NCTJ, 2020a)

Essential journalism ethics and regulation is specified in the course outline and carries 3 credits out of 82 credits – carrying the lowest credit rating of all modules across the programme. The NCTJ website which sets out the programme outline does state:

This module does not seek to engage in a debate around moral philosophy. It is intended to bring forward ethical issues faced by journalists in their day-to-day work and how they might be resolved.(NCTJ, 2019a)

There is a clear focus on learning the Editors’ Code of Practice in the syllabus, and the programme outcome does also state that learning on this module is applied through the practice modules, however, what is revealing is the relatively low credit given to this area of study. The focus on “ethical issues faced by journalists” suggests that the approach is reactive, that is the learning is about what journalists need to be able to identify an issue when it presents itself, in order to act appropriately, and takes the Editors’ Code as its frame of reference in determining what is an ethical issue. For example, when covering a death, journalists are faced with an ethical dilemma over how to ask bereaved family members for photographs. While there is merit in understanding the Editors’ Code, as will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4, teaching and learning in journalism ethics could be about more than this (Frost, 2016; Harcup, 2020; Zelizer, 2017), and could take a proactive direction by asking reflective questions about the role they play within a community, for example in giving a voice to sections of the community who struggle to be heard. It could also take account of issues such as plagiarism, which the Code overlooks, where journalistic copy is taken from other publications and reproduced. The Code also lacks a clause which would protect a journalist who made a stand against an instruction from a newspaper executive which might be unethical, something which the NUJ had called for (NUJ, 2013) yet because of its narrow focus on teaching the code, the NCTJ misses the opportunity to address this issue too.

The third qualification offered by the NCTJ is the National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ), “…the industry’s professional qualification that trainee journalists with at least 18 months employment can take to achieve senior status as a journalist” (NCTJ, 2020c). [[8]](#footnote-8) To be able to take the NQJ examinations, candidates have to be working as journalists and be supervised by a nominated trainer within their organisation. It is not a qualification which can be offered through educational institutions, and is industry sponsored. At the time of this study, the NQJ was undergoing revision, and in 2019 was registered on the National Qualifications Framework as a level 6 programme. The NQJ requires candidates to complete an online portfolio of journalistic work with reflective commentaries, and to pass exams in media law and ethics, and in journalistic practice.

The difference between the pre-2019 level 5 and the current level 6 versions of the programme is that there are more than 500 learning hours attached to the level 6 programme, with 200 attached to level 5, and the nature of the journalism practice exams have changed. In relation to journalism ethics, the difference lies in the titling with the pre 2019 module titled Media Law in Practice, with the module offered from 2019 titled Media Law and Ethics in Practice, elevating the importance of ethics (NCTJ, 2016b, 2019e). In relation to ethics, both syllabi state that students should be able to:

Demonstrate and apply knowledge of the Editors’ Code of Conduct (sic) and the European Convention of Human Rights in respect of privacy issues.

Gather information for publication taking into account all relevant laws, regulations and codes of conduct

Write and prepare stories for publication, ensuring material for publication conforms with relevant laws, regulations and codes of conduct

Work at all times to ethical principles and in a manner which would be regarded as fair.

Both sets of specifications state in the advice for examiners that in assessing the exam scripts, candidates must:

… demonstrate through their answer that they know the law and the Editors’ Code of Practice well enough to state it and can apply it with confidence and clarity.

An evaluation of the NCTJ’s syllabus suggests that its interpretation of what is understood by the term journalism ethics is shaped by the Editors’ Code of Practice. The extent to which the NCTJ syllabus shapes the understanding of early career journalists’ interpretation of journalism ethics is something which this research intends to explore, whether early career journalists frame ethics as something which centres on the Editors’ Code, or whether they have developed a broader understanding of what ethical practice should be.

According to Benson (2017 in interview) and Gow (2018) Trinity Mirror had operated its own senior qualification, the Trinity Mirror Certificate (TMC), for a number of years and its regional editors at newspapers throughout the country were given the choice over whether they put their early career journalists through the NCTJ’s National Qualification in Journalism or the Trinity Mirror Certificate. However, from March 2018 all early career journalists within the company were required to complete a new Trinity Mirror seniors’ qualification the Certificate of Journalism (Tobitt & Mayhew, 2018). Benson (2017), who at the time of interview chaired the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee and was also the director of Trinity Mirror’s regional newspaper division, said that TM were frustrated with the inflexibility of the NQJ which did not have sufficient agility to change its syllabus in response to a sector impacted by rapidly changing technologies. The COJ tailored its expectations of candidates dependent on their role, with sports journalists no longer required to complete shorthand exams, and with a greater focus on their ability to manage tools designed for multi-media environments. Gow (2018) said that the rationale for change was that the COJ needed to

…reflect not only the tasks trainees were now carrying out in newsrooms, but also the different roles and requirements of news gathering in a digital era, and the ethos and ethics we wanted them to exhibit.

Gow gives little detail about what is understood by ‘ethics’ in this article written for an industry-facing website media.com though she does reference the Editors’ Code as being important.

At the time of writing then, journalism has become established as a subject area within the British university sector, where the curriculum on journalism ethics is dependent on the focus taken by individual institutions, and in some is predicated on the NCTJ accreditation arrangements, with its focus on press regulation and the Editors’ Code. Anyone seeking employment in the British press as a journalist is required to have undertaken some form of NCTJ programme, either via an accredited BA or MA, or directly through the NCTJ pre-entry diploma. In order to be recognised as senior journalists, trainees employed by some of the major newspaper groups are also required to complete the NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism, with the exception of those employed by Trinity Mirror (now Reach plc) who since March 2018 are expected to complete their in-house COJ. The NCTJ diploma, the NQJ and the COJ frame ethics via reference to the Editors’ Code of Practice.

Summary

This chapter sets out how journalism education has developed in Britain with a particular focus on the development of education and training in journalism ethics.

Leveson catalogued much poor practice in the British Press in his report in 2012 and had this been an isolated inquiry into press conduct then it might have been possible to explain poor behaviours in the industry as something of an anomaly. However, there had been an unprecedented number of public inquiries into press conduct since 1947, all focusing on concerns about unethical behaviours. Taking the long view, it is not unreasonable to ask how teaching and learning in journalism ethics has developed over the intervening period.

This study intends to investigate how journalists learn ethics in the newspaper industry in post-Leveson Britain, but to understand what happens now, it is important to understand the journey taken to reach this point. Later chapters look at the impact of the community of practice within which early career journalists work on the learning of journalism ethics, and as that community has learned its ethical understandings over time, drawing on collective memories and values, then historical developments of those learning structures does impact on how learning happens in the 21st century.

What literature reveals is that there has been a long history of resistance to academisation of journalism throughout the 20th century, despite examples of journalism in higher education emerging globally, with journalism ethics emerging in the University sector as a field of study. While there is an argument that good journalism is rooted in practice, good practice might have benefited from academic scrutiny and dialogue, particularly in the field of journalism ethics. It is difficult to identify what impact academic insight might have had on journalistic behaviours had journalism been supported and acknowledged as a legitimate subject for development in higher education when the notion first arose in the inter-war period. However, had journalism degrees become established earlier they would have offered an alternative to the NCTJ programmes which had the monopoly on journalism training for the British Press post 1950.

The monopolistic environment meant that the curriculum for training journalists was not rigorously challenged, and ethics was overlooked as something which early career journalists needed to learn in any detail. It is only in recent years with the development of higher education programmes in journalism that journalism ethics has begun to emerge as a topic for study, and expertise in this area developed to the point that legitimate academic representation through Megone (2012) and Frost (2012c) on occupational ethics as they relate to journalism could be made to the Leveson Inquiry.

Because of the lack of rigour in the historic approach to teaching and learning in journalism ethics, it is perhaps unsurprising that Leveson identified poor ethical behaviours in some sectors of the British Press and called for statutory regulation of the sector. Whether statutory regulation is the solution is a highly contested notion – to date only one body, IMPRESS, has been recognised by Royal Charter as a press regulator, and the majority of local newspapers in Britain have not aligned themselves with IMPRESS but with the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), which has not been recognised by Royal Charter. Disappointingly, what emerged from the Leveson Inquiry – to give it its full title, an *Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press* (note the explicit mention of ethics in its remit) – were discussions about regulation of the press, and while ethical conduct was scrutinised, the inquiry failed to focus on one important point, how that ethical conduct was learned. If there is an expectation that journalists in Britain should behave ethically, then surely the teaching and learning of journalism ethics deserved some consideration.

One point which does emerge from the literature is that because of the varied nature of journalism education – through degree and post-graduate programmes, and vocationally orientated diplomas - the one common space for learning journalism is the workplace. Suspicion around how a journalism degree programme might equip a candidate wanting to work on a newspaper may well be the constraining factor when editors are looking for new recruits, but what does seem to be apparent is that the majority of early career journalists who begin working in the British Press are encouraged to undertake some form of journalism qualification within the first few years of entering the occupation, either through the NCTJ’s National Qualification in Journalism, or if working for Trinity Mirror (now Reach) the Certificate of Journalism – irrespective of whether they hold a degree in journalism or a related subject area.

This makes the workplace an important learning space, and it is here that this study intends to make its focus. To understand how ethics is learned in a post-Leveson environment, this study intends to establish how journalists learn ethics in the workplace.

Chapter 2 Teaching and learning in work-based settings

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, the workplace is the common learning space for early career journalists in Britain, and this provides a potentially powerful locus for the learning of ethics. The normative understanding of this workplace is that it is an open-plan newsroom which is shared with other journalists, where conversations between colleagues are typically held across the desk. The management of newsrooms tends to be hierarchical, with the reporters managed by news editors who in turn report to the editor – in smaller newspapers, the news editor and editor may be the same person. Early career journalists typically report to news editors, who set their daily working agenda and discuss how a story should be approached, a model observed in the fieldwork which underpins in this study. Newsroom structure and operation is well described in ethnographic studies of newsroom culture by, among others, Cottle (2007) Franklin (1997, 2006) Tuchman (1978) and Tunstall (1971). Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009, p. 61) discuss newsroom structures and also point to a number of studies on the routinised nature of news work - which is of itself an area of intense academic study – and this routine also resonated in the interviews conducted in my fieldwork. It is not my intension to focus on newsroom structure and operation other than how it impacts on the learning of journalism ethics – to do so would be to stray too far from the aim of my research, and in addition, ethnographic research into newsroom culture clusters around its impact on news production (Cottle, 2007) rather than teaching and learning. It is sufficient to note at this stage that participants in my study worked in newsrooms with a recognised hierarchy, to established news production routines. How the learning of journalism ethics happens within newsrooms through participation in news production is particularly relevant to this study.

To understand the nature of learning within that space, it is useful to consider some of the theories of learning and this chapter explores how they might offer a way of understanding how early career journalists learn ethics in workplace settings. It considers cognitive learning and the work of Bandura (1986) and his work on the learning of ethics, that is how the individual learns and makes sense of their particular context. It also looks at reflective and experiential learning and the work of Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988), that is how the individual learns through experience and reflection on that experience. The impact of the community in which learning happens will also be considered, making particular reference to Eraut (2000), Boud (2005) and also Lave and Wenger (1991) and their work on social learning.

When considering these learning theories, the context of this study needs to be born in mind, and that is the learning of journalists newly engaging in their career, at an important formative period, in newspaper newsrooms where their understanding of occupational behaviours are influenced by their colleagues and managers. Bandura offers a way of understanding how the individual journalist makes meaning of the concept of occupational ethics, Kolb and Gibbs offer a framework for considering how the experience of journalism practice shapes learning, and Boud expands on their work to explore the impact of reflection on that experience, particularly in learning occupational behaviours and defining what could be understood as journalism ethics. Lave and Wenger provide a construct which allows exploration of the impact of the community in which journalists find themselves on their understanding of ethics, while Eraut’s typology of workplace learning presents a way of identifying and evaluating the learning opportunities early career journalists are exposed to when considering their learning of occupational ethics.

Cognitive Learning

According to Schunk (2014, p. 3) “Learning is an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience.” This is a useful definition in relation to this study, which was prompted by the Leveson Inquiry into press conduct, the behaviour of journalists.

Behaviourist theories of learning focus on learning through response to external stimuli, and the depth of learning is a reflection of the reinforcement of those stimuli (Schunk, 2014, pp. 29-73). When thinking about the learning of ethics, the nature of the learning stimuli may be important. Albert Bandura, a Canadian clinical psychologist, noted that people learn new actions through observing others and it was not necessary to perform the actions to learn them, nor was it necessary to undergo reinforcement of the stimuli to have learned by observation. Bandura formulated a comprehensive theory of observational learning that he has expanded to encompass acquisition and performance of diverse skills, strategies and behaviours (Schunk, 2014, p. 184). In the context of this research then, when looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, the extent to which the observation of others impacts on that learning may have importance.

Bandura A, (1986) in Schunk (2014, p. 187) states:

Learning is largely an information processing activity in which information about the structure of behaviour and about environment events is transformed into symbolic representations that serve as guides for action. (p51)

According to Schunk this is interpreted as learning occurring through either actively doing (enactively) or through observation (vicariously). This is underpinned by a key assumption that people see themselves as agents in their own lives – they have agency – which has as a central plank the notion of self-regulated learning “or the process whereby individuals activate and sustain behaviours, cognitions, and affects which are systematically oriented towards the attainment of goals” (2014, p. 189).

Bandura took as a focus for some of his work the learning of ethical behaviours, and how personal agency impacts on the learning of moral thinking through the application of social cognitive theory, particularly relevant when considering how early career journalists learn ethics. His argument is that individuals develop their own standards and understandings of what is right and wrong and judge themselves against those standards.

They do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. (Bandura, 2002, p. 102)

However, Bandura continues that where there are sufficient “situational inducements” to behave in an immoral way, people can choose to either behave in accordance with the situational inducement or to choose to exert self-influence and behave in line with their internal moral compass.

People do not operate as autonomous moral agents, impervious to the social realities in which they are enmeshed. Social cognitive theory adopts an interactionist perspective to morality. Moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences. (ibid)

Therefore, when considering cognitive theory approaches, people learn from experience and also observation, which is regulated by individual understandings of right and wrong but also by the influences of those they interact with. In the context of how early career journalists learn ethics, this raises questions around what they are learning through their experiences and observations, how they are influenced by those they are working with, and whether they have sufficient autonomy to bring into focus their own understandings of right and wrong. This perhaps points to the importance of newsroom community with which they are associated as part of the learning process, the decisions and actions of their peers in shaping their understanding of what ethical journalism means, and the extent to which they are able to challenge authority should they be asked to do something which sits outside their understanding of what is right.

In framing a methodology for understanding how journalists learn ethics this is helpful as it leads to questions about how they are influenced by those around them, to what extent their experiences and observations shaped their understanding of journalism ethics. As will be discussed later in some detail, it became apparent in this study that early career journalists were influenced by their peers in the workplace in determining their ethical approaches to work.

Experiential learning

The Greek philosopher Aristotle discusses the gaining of wisdom through experience – Phronesis - which Baines and Kelsey (2012 p 34) define as: “…a practical ethical form of knowledge, always grounded in experience and context”. It foregrounds the “common sense” of the agent, which in the context of their study was the working journalists.

They continue:

[Phronesis] is primarily dialogical – it comes from discussion and argument, it melds inquiry with value and reflection and a programme for action. It calls on theory and practice, but Aristotle resolves and synthesises theory and practice within praxis where actions taken are uniquely shaped by practical wisdom. (Baines & Kelsey, 2012, p. 34)

This takes the concept of learning a step beyond Bandura to encourage reflection on practice to shape understanding through a continuous cycle of reflexivity: learning is not just about knowing and understanding, but also about shaping future practice

To put phronesis into a framework for experiential learning it is useful to look at the work of Kolb and Gibbs. In 1984, Kolb drew on earlier work of cognitive learning theorists, in particular social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s work in the 1930s, around the importance of experience in learning, and attempted to codify the stages in experiential learning as they applied to learning through work. Kolb’s work itself has now become widely accepted as a foundation stone in modern thinking on experiential learning, and the Kolb cycle is frequently posited as one of the key models for consideration in any discussion of experiential learning (Segers et al in Dochy, 2012, p. 55; Kolb, 1984).

According to Kolb, experiential learning…

…pictures the workplace as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities. (Kolb, 1984, p. 5)

Kolb drew heavily on cognitive thinking when constructing what is now known as the Kolb Cycle of Experiential Learning where he illustrates that learning was a process, not a mechanism for arriving at outcomes, and it is a continuous process. “Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learning” (Kolb, 1984 p 27).

His theory is based in the idea that we have concrete experiences, which are reflected upon, and out of these reflections grow new abstract concepts which are tested through active experimentation which in turn lead to concrete experiences. Impacting on this cyclical learning is the environment in which the learner is posited.

Kolb attempted to explain the impact of environment on experience through what he described as the “Prehension Dimension”, learning through apprehension versus comprehension. He described apprehension as a subliminal awareness of the surrounding environment, what is seen, heard, felt, against comprehension where there is a deliberative attempt to make sense of concepts through the construction of order (p43). Kolb also described a “Transformation Dimension” to the theory, with transformation of understanding of experience through intention and extension. He illustrates this by using the analogy of a rose. He transforms his apprehension of the rose intentionally by studying its colour and fragrance but transforms the experience extensionally by picking it up and accidentally pricks his finger, further extending his apprehension.

Learning, the creation of knowledge and meaning, occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas. (Kolb, 1984, p. 52)

The relationships of the dimensions within the Kolb Cycle are given visual representation in figure 2.

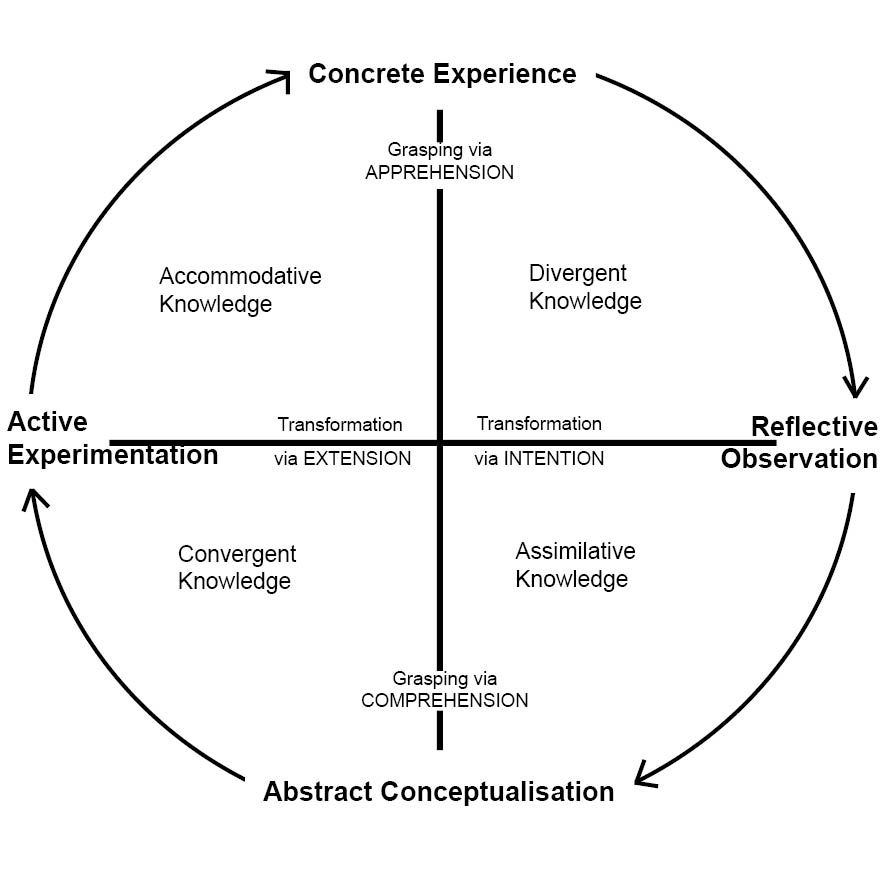


Figure 2: Kolb Cycle of Experiential Learning: Structural Dimensions Underlying the Process of Experiential Learning and the Resulting Basic Knowledge Forms (Kolb, 1984, p. 42)

Kolb places four different types of knowledge gain within the matrix created in Figure 2. Where we have a concrete experience and begin to reflect on it, we are influenced by the environment and divergent knowledge emerges which stimulates new thinking, taking us round into the assimilative knowledge form which draws on reflection and the development of new concepts through conscious grasping of comprehension. In turn this drives the learner to actively experiment, using the convergence of ideas and knowledge, and the transformative effect of extension, through to accommodative knowledge where the new ideas become concrete experience and the creation of a new environment.

One of the norms of journalism learning is that new entrants are expected to learn through experience and observation but what is notable by its absence in literature – and which resonates with the findings of this study - is the role played by reflection on practice. One part of the Kolb cycle which is of particular interest then is Reflective Observation and how this is enacted by early career journalists. In 1988 Gibbs extended the work of Kolb and emphasised the importance of reflection in learning through experience.

It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations which enable new situations to be tackled effectively. (Gibbs, 1988, p. 9)

He also makes the point that it is not sufficient to simply enact to learn from that action, nor is it enough to think about that action. The depth of learning is dictated by the level of reflection about that experience. He builds on Kolb’s “Reflective Observation” through the creation of his “de-briefing” sequence (Figure 3) which is sometimes referred to as the Gibbs Reflective Learning Cycle.

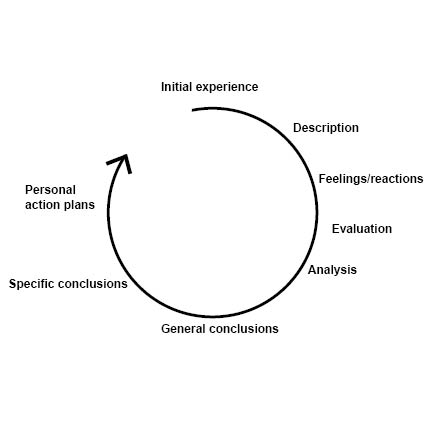


Figure 3: Gibbs’ debriefing sequence following the experiential learning cycle (Gibbs, 1988, p. 47)

Gibbs takes learners through a sequence of describing their experience and asking them to reflect on their reactions and feelings and evaluate what was good or bad about that experience. From there, learners need to analyse the experience to make sense of it in general terms and reach conclusions which are specific to the learner which can be used to action plan further learning.

Reflection in learning

It is important to consider Kolb and Gibbs as they both underline the need for reflection when learning through experience, and it is necessary to create the opportunities and environment for reflection on learning. This resonates with Pitman and Kinsella who stress the importance of reflective space for the development of ethical thinking in a professional context. They discuss the different types of learning in professionally oriented activity, that is the learning of the basic knowledge, and the learning of technical and practical knowledge. However, this is also accompanied by the learning through experience and the wisdom gained through practice which they argue can either lead to positive affirmative action through doing what is best, or to a practice “grounded in fear” where there is an attempt to protect self-interest

… knowledge can lead one from doing what is morally responsible to doing only that for which one might be held accountable. Taking phronesis seriously as a significant form of professional knowledge holds potential for promoting the former, and for counterbalancing what seems to have become an emphasis on the latter, in professional practice. (Pitman & Kinsella, 2012, p. 171)

This suggests that space and guidance on the reflection of practice in the context of ethical conduct is important, to ensure that decisions are made because there is a positive culture where doing the right thing is celebrated, rather than a negative culture of acting in a particular way out of fear of doing the wrong thing. When looking at how early career journalists learn ethics then, one facet to this inquiry needs to consider how the newspaper industry provides those reflective spaces when looking at the learning of industry specific ethical development.

According to Segers and Van der Haar (in Dochy, 2012, p. 54) David Boud’s work has been highly influential in developing ideas around reflection on learning. He took the work of Kolb and expanded on the importance of reflection in any experiential learning setting and helped reinforce thinking around the structures necessary to facilitate this. Boud’s model firstly suggests that the learning experience is a collection of behaviours, ideas and feelings. He suggests:

One of the most important ways to enhance learning is to strengthen the link between the learning experience and the reflective activity which follows it. (Boud et al., 2005, p. 26)

He then sets out a three stage reflective process, where at stage one, the learner returns to the experience and describes it as objectively as possible, attempting to stand back from the immediate post-experiential observations to bring clarity to the remembrance. At this point it is also important to note feelings, and as Boud notes, feelings may be positive or negative, dependent on the experience itself, and are very much personal to the individual (ibid p. 27).

Stage two is where the learner is expected to attend to these feelings. As Boud suggests:

Even though our emotions and feelings are a significant source of learning, they can also at times become barriers. Depending on the circumstances and our intentions, we need either to work with our emotional responses, find ways of setting them aside, or if they are positive ones, retaining and enhancing them. (ibid p. 28)

He emphasises the importance of developing confidence and self-belief through the process of attending to feelings, and cites as an example a geology student who needs to learn a positive response to being outdoors in the field in order to carry out basic technical tasks. This analogy may not work as well when looking at the learning of journalism ethics if attending to feelings leads to Bandura’s situational inducements to accept immoral behaviours as the norm – that is addressing feelings through the lens of cognitive reasoning to become comfortable with making ethically dubious decisions. There is clearly merit in attending to feelings around experience as part of the reflective process, though arguably there may need to be guidance as to how feelings are used in learning in order to avoid rationalisation of poor behaviours, and the extent to which such guidance is made available to early career journalists is worth exploration

Data from the fieldwork provides an example of a tension between examining feelings as a source of learning and the potential for situational inducement to dismiss feelings of discomfort as a personal flaw which needs attention. Journalists find interviewing people who are bereaved difficult, and while some families welcome the opportunity to give a public tribute to the person who has died, many families request privacy (Duncan & Newton, 2010, p. 439) During my fieldwork, an early career journalist had felt uncomfortable pursuing a family who had been bereaved, they had told her they didn’t want to talk to the press. Her employer later ridiculed her for not securing the interview. The early career journalist in fieldwork talked about examining her feelings, and said she felt that she had done the right thing in walking away from the family, but also felt bullied by the employer when she was told she needed to ‘toughen up’ . Her examination of her feelings at that time were insufficient on their own in facilitating a clear understanding of journalism ethics, as her personal feelings were at odds with those of her employer – a national press agency – and she needed guidance as to which set of feelings she should be paying attention to. (This particular case is discussed in more detail in section II.)

Boud’s final stage of reflection is to re-evaluate the experience, linking the more developed thinking back to the original experience. Here he proposes four aspects to this process: association – where new concepts are linked to the original experience; integration – where new concepts are evaluated to determine whether they are meaningful and useful; validation – what Boud describes as “reality testing”, whether our new thinking around the experience can be usefully applied in similar circumstances; and appropriation – the point at which a decision is made to change practice as a result of reflection on the initial experience (ibid pp. 30-33).

Boud then suggests that out of this reflection should emerge new perspectives on the experience leading to changes behaviours and understandings, and application of that new understanding. The extent to how this is facilitated with early careers journalists is little understood, however, and more recent work signposts a potential lack of reflection in journalistic learning as problematic, hinting that it might perhaps account for some of the poor ethical practice which led to Leveson. The early career journalist mentioned above had no frame of reference in making sense of her own feelings when they came into conflict with the demands of her employer. In terms of this study then, consideration of the work of Kolb, Gibbs and Boud signal that one area to explore in fieldwork is the role played by reflection on practice in the learning of journalism ethics, and how reflection is facilitated.

Baines and Kelsey looked at frameworks for journalism education post Leveson with a focus on the learning of ethics in the context of political reporting and allude to a lack of facilitated reflection. They argue that journalists need to develop frameworks for reflecting on their practice.

Incorporating critical frameworks into journalistic education provides the reflexive, philosophical and theoretical tools of thinking necessary for developing the future of journalism practice beyond Leveson. Theory and practice are not separate binary entities; they are interlinked, interrelated and interdependent. Their binary separation is an artificial conflict that suppresses intellectual thinking for the convenience of ideological interests that pre-Leveson, went unchecked in their control of media production. (Baines & Kelsey, 2012, p. 32)

Baines and Kelsey go on to state that they believe new journalists with a more robust appreciation of ethical thinking could have a positive impact on journalism in Britain and could “redirect journalism away from the production tendencies of top-down pressures and the persuasions of ethically disinclined practices” (p. 32). Whether reflection on practice has made its way into the newsrooms of the early careers journalists in the post-Leveson environment, however, is not certain.

As noted earlier, learning through experience is a long-established norm in journalism, and therefore is worthy of consideration through the lens of experiential learning constructs, with a particular focus on the mechanisms for securing learning through reflection. Fieldwork for this study then was designed to surface data about how early career journalists learn occupational ethics through their practice and experiences in the workplace, and the part played by reflection on practice in that learning process.

Community of Practice

Boud discusses learning from the perspective of the individual making sense of their experience, however, the environment where that experience is first encountered also needs to be considered. Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave made what is now regarded as a seminal study of workplace learning where they argued that situated learning – that is learning in the workplace and within specialist communities – was complex and was impacted by workplace culture, physical environment and social interactions with colleagues at a number of levels. They formulated a concept which has become understood as Communities of Practice, which attempts to take account of how learning happens and how it is impacted by environment and daily interactions within the boundaried space of a clearly defined workplace (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The premise underpinning the concept is that in a workplace, the new starter aims to become fully integrated in the knowledge and practice of the work community, and their journey from the periphery of the community to full integration through engagement in work activity is where the learning happens. They refer to this as “legitimate peripheral participation” – terminology not meant to describe a type of learning but to suggest a way of understanding learning.

By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of the community. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29)

Their study is particularly useful in the context of this investigation, as they looked in some detail at apprenticeships in a variety of industries, and the interactions of the apprentices with various facets of the ‘community’ in which they were located. They had previously observed a general confusion over what constituted apprenticeship and how learning happened within apprenticeship structures, which led to their main body of work in this field (p. 31). As discussed earlier journalism is an industry which embraced an apprenticeship type model operated by the NCTJ in the aftermath of the first Royal Commission into the Press. Some application of the theories developed by Lave and Wenger, and later by Wenger (Wenger, 2008) may be useful in throwing some light on learning in newsrooms, in particular on the learning of journalism ethics.

Lave and Wenger identified key features inherent in learning in the workplace through the process of legitimate peripheral participation: the individual, who becomes transformed through participation; participation itself which moves from the periphery to the centre through practice; knowledge which is specific to the community and integral to the transformation of the individual from the periphery to the centre; and the social world to which the individual belongs and in which they participate (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 121-123).

Wenger (2008, pp. 4-5) develops this thinking into a framework useful in investigating learning. He states that learning is a social activity which had four components – learning as doing (practice), learning as experience (meaning), learning as becoming (identity) and learning as belonging (community). When taken together they can be understood conceptually as the framework with which to understand a community of practice.

He cautions that in this context, the community of practice needs careful definition, as it is more than the sum of its two halves (community and practice) – a residential community is not a cohesive unit which could be defined as a community of practice, and practising a musical instrument is not necessarily a community endeavour. He identifies three key dimensions of practice which define a community of practice: there has to be mutual engagement in actions to which the community is committed; there is engagement in a joint enterprise which has meaning to the community; and there is a shared repertoire, a shared understanding and language connected with the enterprise (Wenger, 2008, pp. 72-73).

Fuller (in Hughes et al., 2007, p. 21) observes:

For Wenger, then, the difference between a community of practice and any social network is that social relations are formed, negotiated and sustained around the activity that has brought people together.

A more recent definition suggested by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner[[9]](#footnote-9) simplifies the concept:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.(2019 : accessed 26.4.19)

The concept is not without its critics. Fuller notes that issues raised in response to the concept emerged when academics began to apply it to workplace learning research (Fuller in Hughes et al., 2007, pp. 21-27). She observes that critics tend to take as their starting point areas of the concept which are not fully explored in Lave and Wenger’s original work.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004, p. 14) for example felt that Lave and Wenger’s original attempts to define community required a more nuanced approach. Lave and Wenger initially focused on learning in small tight-knit groups through their illustrative vignettes around the work of medical insurance assessors, but Hodkinson and Hodkinson argue that there are broader perspectives of community which can be useful, and use as an example the primary school headteacher, who is both a member of the community at her/his school but is also part of a community of headteachers. They suggest that the broader conceptualisation might be referred to as situated learning or learning as social participation, with Lave and Wenger’s original description of small tight-knit organisational structures as a community of practice. Fuller (in Hughes et al., 2007, p. 23) argues that this misses the point that when looking at the concept of a community of practice, there has to be a container within which the community is located and any researcher using the construct has the task of defining what is within the container and what sits outside, about where the boundaries need to be drawn. Fuller references Danish researcher Claus Elmholdt who looked at the community of practice in the learning of ICT and made the point that there was a distinction between a situation that a practitioner might find themselves in and the learning that happens at that nexus, and the situatedness of that person within a community which has a bigger impact on how that learning is understood within the contingent social and historic structures (Elmholdt, 2004, p. 82).

The debate about the definition of the community and the location of learning within it is particularly pertinent to this research project, as when fieldwork began, it became clear that initial perceptions of where the community of practice operated as a mechanism for situated learning were not entirely accurate. I had initially framed the community of practice as being centred on the newsroom from which the early career journalists operated, however, they discussed learning ethical understandings and behaviours from their readers and the geographic community within which they were located, as well as from their peers in the newsroom, which required some reconceptualization of what ‘community’ might mean in terms of a learning space for journalists. This is discussed in some detail in later chapters. In essence, taking account of Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s reservations about the limitations of Lave and Wenger’s original construct, it is clear that when discussing a community of practice, care needs to be taken over defining the community and how learning happens within the complexity of its structure.

Michael Eraut (2002, 2007) steers away from using communities of practice as a construct to evaluate learning arguing that they are not sufficiently stable, and subject to disruption of redundancy and staff turnover. He does however acknowledge the usefulness of identifying the situatedness and context within which the learning happens. Eraut focusses on early career learning and how this happens and stepping out of the situated approach allows for consideration of prior learning, formalised work-based learning opportunities, and individual responses to a range of external stimuli. His work will be discussed later on in this section, and using this alongside the construct of the Community of Practice may be helpful in adding a deeper understanding of how learning of ethics happens in newspaper offices.

Fuller and Unwin (2003) point out, as an additional criticism of Communities of Practice as a construct, that the notion of learning from experts while on the trajectory from the periphery of the community to the centre does not account for the impact early career staff have on established colleagues, where they are bringing new knowledge and understanding into the workplace with them. A good example of this in the journalistic context is the sophisticated understandings of new technology which early career journalists bring with them often far exceed the knowledge and understanding of news editors and editors who are more recently having to relearn their craft in the light of rapid technological changes. Thornton (in Franklin & Mensing, 2011, p. 135) looked at journalism internships in the United States and concluded that interns were frequently engaging in the role of teacher with more senior staff, and cited interns as reporting “….so I taught some of the people how to use stuff like Twitter or cool Internet tools or things that I’ve kinda learned about.” (ob cit p. 138) This certainly suggests a different model to that propounded by Lave and Wenger in their earlier work, and suggests that there is more than one trajectory in any learning journey, not just the move from the periphery to the centre.

There is a further consideration when looking at Lave and Wenger’s notion of learning from experts while travelling from the periphery to the centre, and that is an assumption that the knowledge base held at the centre is sound. As the Leveson Inquiry clearly signalled, the newspaper industry’s understanding of what is ethical is problematic, and if early career journalists base their learning around pre-existing understandings of what is ethical, drawing on the collective community wisdom in their journey from the periphery to the centre of the community, then it is inevitable that poor practice will be perpetuated with each successive intake of new staff and this pattern is irredeemable.

Stephen Billett has conducted extensive research into experiential learning across a broad section of Australian industries and reinforces Lave and Wenger’s point that socio-cultural encounters in the workplace have an important impact on the learning of work.

Learning throughout working life, as in professional development, can be understood in terms of participation in work activities and conceptualised as a negotiated (i.e. relational) interdependence between the social and personal factors. That is, learning is the process in and through which workers interact with the social experience they encounter in their workplace. (Billett, 2008, p. 40)

He states that social experiences gained earlier in life shape how a person constructs experiences in a work setting, however, they continue to learn in the work place through the interpretation of their social interactions in that environment, and the social interactions in the work place are an important part of learning through experience.

Workers need to engage in the socio culturally derived and supported practices that make up the workplace in order to secure the knowledge required for work. While this necessity drives workers' learning and participation, the social practices that make up the workplace require workers to secure the purposes and goals of the workplace. In this way, workers' needs and practices of ongoing learning are interdependent with the goals and practices of the workplace. (Billett, 2008, p. 41)

This suggests that while the learner may bring some personal socio-cultural experience to their learning of the workplace, the development of the workplace is to some extent interdependent on the learning and growth of its workforce. As Fuller and Unwin noted this is a weakness in Lave and Wenger’s construct in that it doesn’t account for this, but it may have some relevance to this study in that if, as Leveson suggested, the British press should set as its goal a better system of regulating ethical behaviours, then that goal may shape the nature of learning of occupational ethics, particularly for early career journalists.

In his later work Wenger (2008) emphasises that a community of practice has fluidity and there is room to accommodate change within the construct, while recognising the basic properties of a community of practice as being something which has shared mutual engagement in a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire (p. 73). In the context of this thesis, it offers a useful framework within which to evaluate the learning of journalism ethics, and still make room to address reservations around the construct. As identified earlier, learning from peers is ingrained practice in the British press. Practitioners bring into the newspaper newsroom a range of experiences, with or without any formal prior journalism training, and where there has been some form of training there is no national curriculum. Therefore, there can be no assumptions made about understandings of journalism ethics prior to working in a newsroom, and indeed it is the intention of this study to shed some light on how that learning happens. Normative understanding of the newsroom suggest that it would be predisposed to Wenger’s notions of mutual engagement (Wenger, 2008, pp. 73-77) in that here people are engaged in activity which they discuss with each other and on occasion jointly contribute towards. For example, a news editor might issue an instruction to a junior reporter to cover a story, and the reporter might seek advice from a colleague about the best person to interview to add colour to the story.

The extent to which this practice operates, of course, is something that this study intends to discover, but it is not unrealistic to assume that mutual engagement is present at some level. News production is a joint enterprise, and it is the joint enterprise which Wenger argues keeps a community of practice together – the collective process of work helping define the community itself (op cit. pp. 77-82). He notes that the joint enterprise is not necessarily about the core function of the job itself – in this case news production – but about the other processes which contribute to an ability to undertake the core function, such as making the workplace habitable for themselves through their interactions with colleagues, and learning new networks which enable them to undertake their job more easily. Finally, Wenger states that the third dimension of a community of practice is a shared repertoire (op cit. pp. 82-84). Translating his understandings of insurance claims processing – the focus of his original work - into newspaper journalism, there is specialist language which indicates shared repertoire, such as ‘splash’ to mean lead story, ‘by-line’ to indicate who has written a story, and so on. Many of these terms have entered common parlance, and it is not necessary to be working in journalism to have passing familiarity with them, but they hold special meaning to journalists. The importance of shorthand as a means of notetaking is also an indicator of shared repertoire.

As my fieldwork goes on to demonstrate, these factors which would indicate a community of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger were evident, were present in the newsrooms where my participants were located, and worthy of exploration as a means to understanding how learning of journalism ethics happens in the context of early careers practitioners.

Meltzer and Martik (2017, p. 218) argue that Communities of Practice is a useful framework for studying journalism as the term ‘journalism’ itself can be difficult to define. There is reluctance by practitioners to frame it as a profession, particularly as there are a number of academic and educational routes into journalism work, but it has rules, protocols and structures which make it more than just a job, and the types of workplace range from large corporations to small independent publications. Despite this disparity, this collection of scattered and diverse practitioners constitutes a defined group that overwhelmingly follows a set of rules and standards that have survived through tradition. Understanding journalists as communities of practice helps us reconcile these characteristics that are seemingly at odds and gives them a recognisable shape and form (op cit).

Meltzer and Martik’s observations are helpful as the early career journalists who were interviewed for this study were drawn from a wide range of educational backgrounds and worked across different types of newsrooms from the large daily to the small weekly newspaper. Regardless of the size of the newsroom, there is an expectation that the individual journalist will strive to move from the periphery to the centre of their community, learning along that trajectory. The components of a community of practice are also held in common, regardless of the type of newspaper, in that journalists are learning by doing, gaining meaning through experience, developing their identity as they become journalists, and develop a sense of belonging to the newsroom they work within. There is also mutual engagement in a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire.

In the context of this thesis, in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace, gaining some understanding about what they learn, how they learn through their daily encounters with colleagues and who influences that learning on their journey to full membership of their community could throw light on an area which has not previously been explored.

Early career learning typology

Eraut considers the ‘how’ of learning in the workplace He looks at different forms of non-formal learning evident in work-based settings, as opposed to ‘formal’ learning which tends to be organised, leading to an award, and led by a teacher or trainer (Eraut, 2000, p. 115). Lave and Wenger’s model of social learning is to some extent predicated on the notion that people learn through social interactions and much of this is non-formal learning. Eraut states that at one extreme of non-formal learning there sits deliberative learning, where learning happens through a review of previous activity, or through engagement in decision making, perhaps by planning individual learning goals. At the other end of the scale is implicit learning where the memory makes links with previous experiences, rather than through deliberative planned activity. He also describes a third type of non-formal learning, reactive learning located somewhere between the two where there is a near-spontaneous reflection on previous experience, learning independent of conscious attempts to learn.

Implicit learning plays a significant role because (1) people are often unaware that they are learning through the work they do, and (2) the word ‘learning’ weakens awareness of informal learning modes through its close association in respondents’ minds with formal class-based teaching (Eraut, 2000 in ; 2007, p. 404).

This means that although early career respondents were mentored, or supervised, they did not necessarily recognise this as a formal learning structure. In order to construct a useful framework for investigating the ‘how’ of learning in the workplace, therefore, Eraut developed a typology around whether the activity early career staff were involved in had as its main objective working or learning. He also recognised that there were some activities which were part of work processes were also learning activities and also contributed to learning processes. This led to a typology of three categories, see Figure 4.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Work Processes with learning as a by-product | Learning Activities located within work or learning processes | Learning Processes at or near the workplace |
| Participation on group processes  Working alongside others  Consultation  Tackling challenging tasks and roles  Problem solving  Trying things out  Consolidating, extending and refining skills  Working with clients | Asking questions  Getting information  Locating resource people  Listening and observing  Reflecting  Learning from mistakes  Giving and receiving feedback  Use of mediated artefacts | Being supervised  Being coached  Being mentored  Shadowing  Visiting other sites  Conferences  Short courses  Working for a qualification  Independent study |

Figure 4: A typology of early career learning (Eraut, 2007, p. 409)

Eraut notes that when asked about where their learning was located, respondents to his research reported to a high degree that it was through engagement with work processes, but the success of this learning was dependent on the quality of relationships in the workplace.

Working alongside others allows people to observe and listen to others at work and to participate in activities; and hence to learn some new practices and new perspectives, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and to gain some sense of other people’s tacit knowledge. (Eraut, 2007, p. 409)

Eraut’s observations have implications in the context of early career journalists learning ethics. As has already been noted, normative learning cultures in newsrooms centre on learning from others but if the formation of professional identity is influenced through this process, then arguably ethical behaviours are also influenced to some extent by working alongside others. This in turn underlines the importance of experienced staff having the right understandings of journalistic ethics because of their potential to impart on junior colleagues those understandings at the point when they are constructing for themselves their occupational identities.

Although respondents to Eraut’s research identified work processes as the primary mode through which learning happened as a by-product, this underline’s his point that there is a tendency towards a lack of awareness of informal learning opportunities, particularly through learning processes, while task based activity was viewed as a key opportunity for learning. He found that in nursing, engineering and accountancy, where his research was based, there was a lack security around some of the learning processes such as coaching and mentoring as they were not necessarily clearly labelled or signposted either to the early career learners or the experienced staff who informally undertook these roles. In terms of the learning activities, they were identifiable and embedded in processes undertaken in each of the fields he observed. They were also evident in short opportunistic episodes. In particular, being able to ask questions about tasks, seeking out people who they could develop networks with and learn from, and giving and receiving feedback were held to be important (Eraut, 2007, pp. 410-417).

In understanding how early career journalists learn ethics then, gaining some understanding of how their experience maps across to Eraut’s typology would be useful, and some insight into whether there exist structures to enhance workplace learning around support and opportunities for learning and the development of a positive learning culture.

The work of Wenger and Eraut ties in with that of Deni Elliott, a researcher into the teaching of media ethics, and the Eleanor Poynter Jamison Chair in Media Ethics and Press Policy at the University of South Florida. She argues that journalism ethics is something which is learned, and those who you work with are influential in the how and what around ethics is learned:

Some people think of ethics as a personality trait: you either have ethics or you don’t; you learned the right things to do from parents or church, or you didn’t...In truth, making ethical choices is a skill that gets better with experience. (Elliott, 2013, p. 23)

She likens the learning of making good ethical decisions to learning to play a sport, it is a developmental process which requires practice.

In this fast-changing digital age, when everyone with access to the Internet can be both a publisher and a consumer of mass communication, and many news organizations feel intense pressure to do whatever’s necessary to attract audiences and money, it’s more important than ever for media professionals to cultivate and exhibit high ethical standards. (Elliott, 2013, p. 23)

Elliott uses the analogy of learning to speak to describe the learning of ethics – learning as a sequential process, dependent on environment, and where excellence can be encouraged and fostered by peers.

She describes three phases of moral development:

* the early stage where people do what they are told to do and feel powerless, working to protect themselves from harm
* the middle stage, where people recognise their power to do good but within a structure defined by roles and codes around what is ethically right
* the later stage, where people recognise that they are responsible for their own decisions, and not bound by authority figures and codes.

Morally sophisticated decision making takes time and effort. Most choices do not require this kind of careful calculation, but people who have matured to this level can recognize an ethically complex situation where they encounter it (Elliott, 2013, p. 26).

The middle stage of moral development as described by Elliott resonates with the work of Wenger, as the role of the community in the development of ethical thinking comes into play, and also Eraut’s thinking around the importance of the workplace in shaping professional identity. Elliott discusses how during this middle stage – which is often referred to as the conventional stage as this is level on which most people operate – people look to their peers and rules in deciding on the ethical merit of a situation. She gives the example of someone working in an office who needs to understand how the place functions, who makes decisions, who it is necessary to get along with, in order to get the job done and adds:

Where young media professionals who are new to an organization encounter an ethical dilemma, their good impulses can be stymied by lack of knowledge of “the system” or fear of speaking out of turn. Learning the office culture is a key part of learning to make good decisions. (Elliott, 2013, p. 26)

This perhaps underlines the merit in using the pedagogical constructs of Lave and Wenger’s Communities of Practice and Eraut’s Typology of Workplace Learning in developing this investigation, which has at its centre the key question of how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace. It signals the importance of office culture when considering how journalists learn to manage ethical dilemma.

Summary

In looking at how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace then, this chapter shapes my research questions, in particular RQ2, 3 and 4

In looking at RQ 2 (what is the nature of learning of ethics undertaken to which early career journalists are exposed in the workplace?) Bandura’s ideas about cognitive learning through practice and observation are useful when considering what is learned. Bandura addresses learning through practice and observation, and in the context of my work, this is practice as a journalist dealing with ethical dilemma, and observation through looking at how others handle journalistic dilemma. It also allows for consideration of how early career journalists define journalism ethics in terms of what they learn – that is the difference between what they understood of journalism ethics before joining the workforce, and what they understand through their workplace encounters, and also consideration of the role played by any situational inducement on what is learned, pressure exerted on journalists to frame ethics in a particular way.

When turning to RQ 3 (how does the community within which the early career journalist operates impact on the learning of journalism ethics?), Lave and Wenger’s work on communities of practice, and the nature of learning as early career journalists move from the periphery of an occupational community to full membership are useful in providing a construct through which to examine workplace learning. The nature of learning in the workplace is also examined through the lens of Eraut’s early career learning typology which helps explicitly identify where learning opportunities are located.

RQ4 (how secure is the learning of journalism ethics?) takes the points made by Kolb, Gibbs and Boud on the importance of reflection on practice in consolidation of learning from experience and prompts some investigation into how reflection on the ethical dimension of journalistic work is facilitated.

Attention to these ideas about learning in the workplace allows for rich consideration and exploration of the research question at the heart of this thesis, into how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace, adding new knowledge to an area of research which has to date been under-explored. Chapter 5 further signposts how pedagogical literature has informed my methodological approaches.

During fieldwork, it became apparent that the community within which an early career journalist operated was important in their learning and deserved deeper consideration. Chapter 3 now turns to look at this.

Chapter 3 Conceptualising Community

Introduction

Etienne Wenger (2008) argues that the community the learning is located within impacts directly on the shape of that learning. As became evident in the fieldwork conducted for this study, the term ‘community’ held special meaning to early career journalists, and the community at different loci influenced understanding of journalism ethics in its practical application. This chapter theorises ‘community’ and discusses how literature suggests it has the power to influence learning and where that influence is located.

The methodology of the study is discussed in detail later, but it should be noted that when seeking early career journalists to participate in this research, they were not found working on national newspapers but were located in local newspapers serving a defined geographic population, a particular community. To some extent this was serendipitous, as it became apparent that participants in the survey viewed their community as important when considering the ethical standards to which they were held, something which might not be as apparent on national newspapers where the ties to the community are less obvious and less binding.

Community is a contested term, and its meaning differs dependent on context. Equally, the conceptualisation of community journalism, that is the place and relationship of journalism within a community is also fluid. Therefore, it is useful to define the community and explore the characteristics and boundaries of that community.

If journalists operate within some form of community of practice as conceptualised by Wenger (2008), then it is worth considering how far that community of practice extends and whether it is possible to reconceptualise Wenger’s notions to embrace additional learning spaces beyond the newsroom – that the wider community beyond the newsroom is a legitimate space for learning. These considerations are important when looking at how journalists learn ethics as arguably the wider community is actually part of the journalists’ community of practice in as much as they form part of the workplace, the daily routine of the journalist, with the potential to influence journalistic agency.

Once the concept of community has been theorised in the context of this research, then it becomes possible to consider the extent to which the community might influence the learning of ethical behaviours.

Community as a concept

The definition of community is context dependent, appearing in bodies of literature related to widely differing fields including anthropology, geography, social science, medicine and architecture. It is also a vast area of study, and consideration of the many conceptualisations of community would take this thesis well beyond its stated aim, which is to investigate how journalists learn ethics. However, it is useful to look at some of the sociological perspectives of community in order to derive some understanding of the journalists’ position within a community, and an exploration of how community might impact on the learning of journalistic ethics.

Cohen (1985, p. 11) states that it is a term which is “bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener”, but which when brought into social science as an area for study causes “immense difficulty”.

Historic definitions, some which continue to pervade thinking in some academic areas, discuss community as a function of shared geographic space, for example the ‘local community’, or shared activity such as the cycling club (Delanty, 2003). These definitions are useful to a point when looking at journalism and its place within a community, but they take us only so far.

Lauterer (1999, p. 83) had been teaching local journalism in the US higher education sector when he stated:

Wrestling with this definition for years, I can only conclude that ‘‘community’’ is a contested notion, and that there are degrees of authentic communityness, ranging from intense to pretty shallow.

Lowrey et al. (2008) attempted to theorise ‘community’ and conducted an analysis of mass communication literature to derive some understanding of its meaning. They proposed that a community was a process, in that it negotiated “shared symbolic meaning” and that it had structure. Community can be where you have people who have negotiated meaning and interest in common, and which can include those who reside in a local authority boundaried geographical area, for example (by virtue of a shared understanding of council tax policy) but can also be where that shared interest has no geographical boundaries. A shared interest in the taxation of beer – perhaps among the brewing industry and real ale aficionados – is a community through its shared understandings. If we accept Lowrey et al’s argument, community is dependent on the structures which encourage its shared understandings, be it a newsletter, meetings or a web page. This is worthy of note because historically, the local newspaper has been defined by its geographical area of interest, but web-based economies have begun to erode the relationship between geography and readership yet continue to serve identifiable communities. See Hatcher and Haavik (2014).

Studdert and Walkerdine (2016, p. xii) conceptualise community as a function of activity held in common, something which is shared:

Not a thing created out of people happening to share a location or interest but a set of processes and practices, actions that are constantly moving and changing, continually creating and transforming the communal. The term we use is ‘communal being-ness’, the action of being in common. (ibid)

This is a useful framing of community as it allows for the fluidity of geographical boundaries which extend exponentially in a world where communication is global and shared interests constantly come in and out of focus as trends emerge and fade.

One of the arguments extended by Studdert and Walkerdine is that the term ‘community’ is a historic concept which has tended to be romanticised by post-modernists (2016, p. 8) where it refers to the rural, feudal, pre-industrial communities which became fragmented in the industrial revolution. They point to Tonnies (2001) who suggests that the term ‘community’ can only be a historic construct as it centres on the reflection of past occurrences not the here and now, and while this is a contested notion with limited utility when discussing the place of journalism in a community, Wenger (2008, p. 83) does suggest shared history as a key principle underpinning a community of practice in that is shapes a shared repertoire of meaning in a workplace.

Studdert and Walkerdine suggest that the meaning of ‘community’ requires rethinking in order for it to be useful as a sociological tool with which to analyse current behaviours. They discuss community as communal being-ness, and communing, rooted in the interactions of relationships through participation in activities in common. This is because relationality and sociality involve actions and movement, being and becoming, and are therefore never a static thing (2016, p. 29).

When Studdert and Walkerdine discuss sociality, they do so in the context of sociality being a way in which we interact with each other as human beings, and sociality itself as a cornerstone of being-ness (2016, p. 31). They see the interplay between people with the infinity of actions and reactions as a defining feature of community. In the specific context of the journalist then, their interactions with those they deal with as part of their daily work - be it the person who rings in to complain that vandals have smashed gravestones in the local cemetery or the volunteers they interview about a charity fundraising event - by default give them the qualifying feature of sociality. They become part of that communal being-ness through their very actions and reactions.

Studdert and Walkerdine usefully signpost the work of sociologist Hannah Arendt, who conceptualised the notion of ‘being-ness’ as a product of social action in a public space (Arendt, 1958).

As we act in public, our being-ness emerges through these actions and is recognised and sustained communally as ‘who we are’, as ‘who I am’ and as ‘who you are’. Sociality in this world is therefore a ceaseless action of becoming ‘common’, our being-ness always a jointly constructed being-ness: ‘I recognise you’ and ‘you recognise me’. Or to put it another way, ‘ I contain you and you contain me’. (Arendt, 1958, p. 37)

In journalism, this might translate as ‘I am the local reporter’ and ‘you are my reader’, and ‘we work together in the production of news’.

This notion also resonates with Wenger who sees identity – being-ness – as an important factor in a community of practice. He discusses identity as one of the cornerstones of social learning in the context of learning changing who we are and creating “personal histories of ‘becoming’ in the context of our communities” (Wenger, 2008, p. 5).

Studdert and Walkerdine discuss the importance of the shared space, as identified by Arendt, in the concept of community, whether the space is actual or virtual. They point to a lack of understanding of the importance of shared space as one of the reasons behind the failure of communities to thrive, simply because the platforms to develop being-ness through sociality may be absent (2016, p. 217).

This is a complex notion but at its heart are three key factors which conceptualise community. Firstly, community needs sociality, people who interact; secondly, they have something around which they interact, a locus for shared understandings and meanings; thirdly, they need a place in which activity can happen. Arguably, if one of the three factors is withdrawn, then we can no longer define what we have as community or ‘communal being-ness’ in any real sense. If journalism is one of the facilitators of a place where interactions can happen, then when considering it within the complex matrix of ‘community’, it has importance. While this might sound a little abstract when considering how journalists learn ethics, it is worth remembering that the Cairncross Review came into being to address concerns about the erosion of local journalism and the subsequent potential for the weakening of democratic process, a clear ethical concern (Cairncross, 2019) . Pickard (2020) points to the erosion of democracy in the US as a function of the closure of local newspapers, the loss of place for legitimate democratic activity.

The Cairncross Review was tasked with looking into the sustainability of the local newspaper industry which has been severely impacted by the emergence of digital media platforms offering more effective environments for advertisers, and the preponderance of ‘fake news’ promulgated by online environments. While on the surface, it might seem that this is unrelated to a discussion of community, the background to the inception of a government review is concern that local democracy is not well served where platforms to facilitate robust discussion and the holding of power elites to account are eroded. One of the considerations that the Cairncross Committee had been tasked to investigate is:

The likely impact on consumers of a reduction in high quality news provision, particularly in local areas and the regions, in terms of democratic and social engagement, and the role of other information sources, such as local authority newsletters in the provision of local news (Hancock, 2018)

In relation to the discussion on community as a construct, it can perhaps be argued that when a local newspaper is closed as it is deemed no longer financially viable, one of the places where discussion of public affairs can be facilitated is lost, weakening the notion of communal ‘being-ness’ unless other mechanisms emerge to facilitate the sociality around meaning in common. The loss of good local journalism weakens social democracy, and although this might appear tangential to the focus of this study, it signals the importance of the newspaper as part of a community which is wider than the newsroom in which journalists are located. As Mathews (2020, p. 11) noted when interviewing people who had seen their local newspaper close “life is harder” without it.

Studdert and Walkerdine’s conceptualisation of community as a function of activity held in common is helpful, in determining where a journalist is located in relation to a community their definitions allows for wider discussion of the nature of that community It aligns with Wenger’s conceptualisation of a community of practice where members learn through the experience of activity in common.

Community and journalism

Any attempt to conceptualise the relationship of journalism within a community in the context of this study is going to be problematic, in part because the relationship between members of a community is fluid and dependent on the nature and context of the agents engaged in that relationship, and also because of the duality of purpose of the newspaper. While early career journalists may be inclined to valorise their role as champions of social good, at their core, newspapers are businesses with a remit of making money, often for shareholders sat at some distance from the geographical location served by a particular newspaper title. When it comes to discussing community membership through activity held in common, it is worth remembering that the activity may be viewed as the production of news in order to serve a readership, or it could also be seen through the lens of producing a saleable commodity for company executives.

Duality of purpose

British academic Rachel Matthews discusses newspapers as having a duality of purpose and acknowledges that the notions of community and journalism are complex. From the perspective of the loyal reader, the local newspaper is where they keep up to date on events that concern them such as council meetings or summer fairs (Matthews, 2017).

…served up by teams of journalists who are themselves perceived as embedded in those areas, dedicating their hours to solitary attendance at countless ‘parish pump’[[10]](#footnote-10) events. (ibid p3)

It is clear here that this is the place of ‘being-ness’ where information is shared. When journalists do their job well and create and share interesting and informative copy that people want to read, they are facilitating community, indeed it might be argued that the newspaper is a cornerstone of that community. However, Matthews argues that this leans towards being a “mythology”, a romantic notion derived from fond remembrances of former journalists. She cites the memoirs or Richard Stott, a former journalist and editor of national newspapers, as an example. He trained on a local newspaper the Bucks Herald in the 1960s, and in his memoirs he refers to Phil Fountain, the former chief reporter of the Herald, in terms which resonate with Studdert and Walkerdine’s conceptualisation of being-ness (Stott, 2002).

He loved Aylesbury and he knew it inside out. Local councils and courts were meant and drink to him. Immaculate shorthand note, (sic) all the councillors and the coppers at his beck and call, the holder of 1,000 borough secrets. (Stott, 2002, p. 90)

Matthews argues that while this might be the understanding of journalism that some hold, the reality is that the community served by journalism is itself a commodity for the imperative of making money.

…profit is the principle around which all other elements of the newspaper – including its name, content, relationship with the reader and, significantly social standing – are organised. Such is the power of this principle that it has governed the centrality the provincial newspaper claims for that ill-defined notion of ‘community’, despite the fact that the commercial structure of the business model can precisely undermine this position. (Matthews, 2017, pp. 4-5)

She states that a narrative around the local newspaper serving the good of the community developed during the twentieth century, a notion which is perpetuated through the training of journalists which positions them as to their purpose with little mention of the commercial imperative underpinning their labour. Serving the public good continues to dominate as an “ideological justification” in the 21st century, and Matthews suggests that the rhetoric around the public good “has been used to shore up the social legitimacy of what is in fact a highly commercial product” (ibid). Pickard (2020, p. 176) describes this as “capitalism’s corrosive impact”. This resonates with the fieldwork which underpins this study, in that none of the early career participants in the study, when talking about their role, referred to the need to make money for their newspaper owners, but to serving a community in which they were located. Their commercial awareness was not evident.

Nielson makes the point that while news publication is funded by the advertising it carries, the advertisers themselves have no loyalty to the news brand. Their sole remit is to sell the products they are advertising, they do not see themselves as investing in a social product (Nielsen, 2020). Not only are journalists producing copy for the purpose of making money for their newspaper owners, but the major source of income, the advertisers, care little about the journalism then. The interest of the advertisers is in the community of readers is only so far as it can sell them something, they have little interest in the ideological purpose of a publication and its role within that community.

Tensions around the duality of purpose of newspapers was in part the focus of the first Royal Commission on the Press 1947-49 (Ross, 1949). It considered concerns around ownership where provincial and national newspapers found themselves consolidated into groups, with questions then about their ability to serve and represent their communities against a backdrop of business targets.

Matthews cites research by historians Michael Bromley and Nick Hayes who noted that the centralised and remote ownership of newspapers detracted from claims that they were a “local watchdog”. Additionally, presenting a wide range of content in the newspapers was simply a way of attracting a larger audience which was then commoditised. (Bromley and Hayes 2002 in Matthews, 2017, p. 6)

…The irony is that the relationship between newspaper and community, which might best be described as adventitious, has developed to have such significance for those within and without the industry. In particular, the extent to which news workers see serving the good of the community as part of their professional ideology must be recognized. There is no doubt that for the thousands of often poorly paid and overworked journalists working in local and regional news rooms, the idea that they are serving some sort of public good has motivated them to continue in what can be a thankless role. (Matthews, 2017, p. 7)

Matthews’ comments point towards journalists assuming a number of conflicting positions within the complexity of a community construct. On the one hand, the newspaper itself forms part of the structures of place, it exists as a locus for activity and also as a provider of space where meaning can be shared. At the same time, it uses those colonisers of place – the reader – to vaunt its importance as a community structure and a place where advertisers would be well served to market their commodities. At the same time, the journalists engage in being-ness within the construct of the community and facilitate access to the space for sharing and consolidating community discourse. The more engaging their work, the wider their network through being part of their community, the more likely they are to attract others to their space, bringing in a bigger audience for commodification. Complex indeed.

A survey conducted by the Worlds of Journalism Study – a global academic initiative which collected data on how journalists operated in 67 countries and took place from 2012 to 2016 – asked participants (working journalists) about key influencers. Around 27,500 journalists participated, answering a range of questions about their working life. One question asked to what extent they were influenced by advertising considerations in their work. There was a wide range of responses, with around 63% of journalists in Thailand and Sudan reporting that advertising considerations were “extremely influential or very influential”, against 1.5% in Finland and 2.5% in Canada. Of the 612 participants in the survey from the UK 13.9% said that advertising considerations were extremely or very influential. In the same survey, 44.6% of the participants from the UK said that feedback from their readers was extremely or very influential. (Worlds of Journalism 2018) This is certainly not a picture where the journalists would appear to be perceiving advertisers to be more important than readers.

Indeed, Lauterer (1999, p. xv) makes the point that local newspapers have an important role to play in a community, where provision of space for community discourse is at the heart of a successful and valued title, but which can be eroded where there is a preoccupation with profit.

While it might appear easy to be cynical about the positioning of the newspaper within the community as something which harvests community constituents in the pursuit of profit, the decline of the local press since 2000 has seen scores of newspapers close down because they had become unprofitable. In 2017 alone, 40 newspapers closed according to industry magazine UK Press Gazette, which has been monitoring the decline in the local press (Kakar, 2018 accessed 17.7.18). Readers have drifted to alternative online sources of news, and advertisers had followed them in a stark reminder of the business imperative which underpins the newspaper’s *raison d’etre*.

Those journalists who continue to work in local news perceive their work to be of value. It is not the purpose of this thesis to consider the why of this. A pragmatic argument might suggest that the provision of space for being-ness to thrive has to be financed and the function of the newspaper within the structures of community has sufficient merit for it to be accepted as a legitimate space where the activities of a community can be shared.

Journalism and its position within the community

The value of a newspaper as a force for ‘community good’ began to emerge in the late 19th century when its function shifted from providing a platform where educating texts were distributed to one which performed a representative function for a society which was increasingly becoming educated. Matthews (2017, pp. 80-81) cites the Leeds Mercury, the forerunner of the Yorkshire Post as campaigning for a better sewage system in 1849 following a cholera epidemic. Underpinning the shift in focus at the time were changes to the electoral system which meant that following the 1884 Reform Act, two-thirds of men could vote, giving the newspapers a new purpose of “reflecting the views of the voters rather than educating those who had no direct stake in the democratic purpose.” (ibid)

Shifts in ownership and the impact of the Reform Act led to a provincial press in Britain which was independent of political influence, and titles such as the Manchester Guardian – the forerunner of The Guardian newspaper were established, which quickly gained a reputation of campaigning on behalf of its readership, its community.

Taylor points to an incident in Cambridge where the local press established its function as community watchdog. In an editorial on 2 January 1892, under the sub-heading “about ourselves”, The Cambridge Daily News, announced

We have justified our existence, and shall be content to continue to render to the burgesses of this ancient town such support as we may deem necessary in the interest of the good government of the borough. (Taylor, 2006, p. 408)

The incident which led to this declaration centred on abuses of power by the University of Cambridge which had retained residual legal rights to imprison women found on the streets of the town after dark. The women were summarily tried without representation on charges of prostitution and imprisoned in a jail on University grounds. A number of cases caused consternation among the burgesses of the town who were powerless to intervene, and a lessening of the University’s power over town institutions only came about after a sustained newspaper campaign on behalf of those wrongly imprisoned. The case gained national notoriety, and Taylor asserts that this is among the earliest of examples of a local newspaper acting as a positive force for a local community (Taylor, 2006, pp. 412-413).

Media historian Martin Conboy also recognises the late 19th century as the point at which local newspapers shifted from an educative to a representative role. At the same time there were ongoing concerns about the commercialism of the press and the effect of advertising, but also an emergence of a platform for public dialogue – Studdert and Walkerdine’s ‘place’ - albeit the two in an uneasy coexistence (Conboy, 2011, p. 9).

Conboy attempts to define local newspapers and in doing so consolidates their duality of purpose, acknowledging their business remit, but also signposting their function as providing space for community discourse.

Through the twentieth century, local newspapers had played a profitable part in the articulation of local politics and local identities as well as providing the typical first step on the career ladder for many aspiring journalists (Conboy, 2011, p. 179).

There is a substantial body of work emanating from the United States on local journalism and its relationship to its community, and while the geographical and political context differs in its detail, there is sufficient similarity in the structures and situation of local journalism between the UK and US for there to be merit in some of the American academic discourses. Pickard discusses this is some detail (2020). However, when reading American work in this area, it is necessary to understand that what is meant by ‘local journalism’ in the UK, is referred to as ‘community journalism’ in the US. Whatever is appellation, the characteristics of community journalism are held in common, where the journalism is located either within a defined geography or within an area of special interested, and there is a degree of championing that locality.

Wilson Lowrey et al (2008) conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of American academic outputs which made reference to community journalism in an attempt to define what is understood by the term and the nature of the relationship between community and journalism. Lowry discuss an attempt by academics at the Emerging Mind of Community Journalism conference in February 2006 to construct a definition of community journalism. They state that while the conference was unable to come up with an all-embracing definition, it was able to identify characteristics of community journalism.

Community journalism is intimate, caring and personal; it reflects the community and tells its stories, and it embraces a leadership role….(and) is accountable to the community it serves (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 276).

This extends the ‘watchdog’ definition into something more proactive and community centric.

Hatcher (2009) reinforces this notion:

A community-focused approach to journalism should not be seen as supplanting the watchdog role of the journalist, but instead as enhancing the orientation of journalists towards citizens. (p 307)

Hess and Waller (2020, p. 576) describe local journalists as ‘civic custodians’ “in that they play a powerful role in shaping community identity and connection at the intersection of political, cultural and social realms” and promote a shared understanding of ‘common good’.

Lowrey et al interrogated mass communication literature over an 11-year period from 1996 to 2007 looking for mentions of community and news media in an attempt to distil a more definitive explanation of the term ‘community journalism’ from existing scholarship. His team suggested that ‘community’ be understood as being a function of geographical location, and of shared meaning, for example a community of anglers or musicians.

They suggest that there are two dimensions in defining a construct of community journalism, structure, and community “strongly tied to the concepts of negotiated shared meaning and geographical location.” (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 287)

And that there is a scale to which journalism is part of the community dependent on three factors, firstly the degree to which journalism makes visible the community structures such as the local parish council or the village hall; secondly the degree to which journalism encourages different viewpoints; and finally the degree to which it represents its community. As I will discuss later, an analysis of data derived from my fieldwork revealed an alignment with Lowrey’s observations, and early career journalists interviewed would recognise his construct.

Lowrey further makes the point that when conceptualising local news, the question to be asked is not whether a newspaper interacts with its community, but the extent to which it practices community journalism, such is the complexity of the relationship between community and journalism (ibid 276).

If Lowrey’s scale is applied historically to Taylor’s Cambridge case study, it could be argued that The Cambridge Daily News was establishing its position within the community through revealing complex community structures associated with the University and town Burgesses for better public understanding of the local power dynamic, it was allowing a diversity of viewpoint, and attempting to explain to community members some of the problematic constructs around the University’s position, arguably helping to develop some community cohesion in support of voices which would otherwise struggle to be heard. It is an early example where the importance of journalism within community can be identified, which carries an ethical dimension.

Lauterer (1999) also offers a number of ways of positioning journalism within the community. Local journalism helps maintain notions of civic pride and encourages engagement in democratic structures (p 19-20), local newspapers develop a sense of place for its constituents (p 83) and support communities when they have to negotiate change (p. 88). They are “part cheerleader”, but they also write the first draft of history too (p. 90). He argues that there is a fundamental connection between a local newspaper and its community which is a product of its shared history.

A community newspaper cares about its community in a supportive, positive, nurturing way. The paper’s own birth, history, development, welfare and future are inextricably bound up with the history and future of its community. (ibid p. 261)

Underpinning Lowrey and Lauterer’s attempts to explain the relationship between the community and its newspaper is an assumption that much is revealed through what is published. However, Hess and Waller (2020) argue that the relationship can also be built on what is left out. They discussed the use of silence by a small Australian publication in stifling right wing hate speech by depriving racist organisations a platforms of publicity – a role which Hess (2016) refers to as “civic custodians”, where legitimate debate was promoted but bigotry was filtered out in the local newspaper. Hess and Waller used as their case study racist protests at the building of a mosque in a small Australian township, and to a lesser extent, participants in this study, as will be discussed in Chapter 9, chose to exclude stories where they felt their community would be lessened or hurt by the publication, for example sexual details from a suicide case. The relationship between the local journalist and the community then can be constructed around what is not published as much as that which is.

A special relationship

Paul Robertson, former editorial director of Trinity Mirror North East, argues in Mair et al (2013, p. 145) that there is a special relationship between local journalists and the community they serve, which is often under appreciated.

During the Leveson Inquiry, the public would have been forgiven for thinking that all journalists are cheating, uncaring reprobates out to destroy anyone and everyone. Nothing could be further from the truth. The vast majority are hard-working, passionate about their jobs – determined to expose wrongdoing and uncover injustice but, equally importantly, to promote and support the local people and communities they serve.

If there is a special relationship between community and journalism, and it sits within the framework proposed by Lowrey et al, then it is worth exploring the extent to which the relationship plays out at the local level, and where journalism ethics is located within that relationship. The potential for the relationship between the journalist and the community to provide an opportunity for learning ethical behaviours is something which has not previously been explored, and in framing RQ3 (how does the community within which the early career journalist operates impact on the learning of journalism ethics?) it allows for the term ‘community’ to take account of not only the community of journalists who are located within the workplace, but the community as conceptualized by Lowrey.

John Hatcher and Emily Haavik investigated the relationship between journalism and community in Norway where community journalism is diverse but valued. Norway’s government is highly devolved with budgetary power seated at local rather than national level. The geography of Norway is such that communities are widely dispersed, and many are remote. It is not unusual for family members to move abroad for work, but family ties are strong and there is a desire for local news among expats to the extent that there is a strong subscription model emerging in Norwegian community newspapers, many of which have circulation figures of around 2,000 (Hatcher & Haavik, 2017).

Their methodology was to interview journalists working in local, community newspapers about the relationship with their community and how they define news and found that cultural heritage was important both in the local and national sense.

This…reinforced journalistic news values that embrace a community-focussed orientation. These journalists described themselves as community members first and journalists second. (Hatcher & Haavik, 2017, pp. 149-150)

They cite Skogerbo (1997, p. 100) who describes Norway as a country with “a virtual forest of local newspapers that cover relatively small geographic areas and which address the public in their capacity as locals”, with the emphasis on the newspaper as an integral member of the community they write about.

While the Norwegian newspaper industry may appear very different from the local news industry in Britain, there are some fundamental similarities. Hatcher and Haavik noted that journalists took pride in their communities and understood their histories (ibid pp. 151-153). This sense of pride and shared history resonates with the findings from the fieldwork which are discussed in a later chapter, but is also relevant in any discussion of Wenger’s social learning theory where shared history and language is an important consideration in work-based learning in a community of practice.

Hatcher and Haavik cite work by Christians (2004) who looked at communitarianism and media ethics in an African context, and argued that it was important for journalists to consciously see themselves as members of a community when making ethical decisions. As Hatcher and Haavik note though: “This argument challenges the journalistic norm of objectivity that asks journalists to operate from a position outside their community and removed from any influence.” (p. 151)

This is an important point, as objectivity, the requirement to be unbiased and neutral in reporting events, simply presenting the facts, has been a cornerstone of journalism for much of the 20th century, however, Foreman (2010, p. 90) and Ward (2015, p. 290) note that objectivity has been abused and has given a platform to the powerful and corrupt. Foreman argues that reporting truthfully does not equate to reporting objectively. This then might suggest that journalists working within a community can legitimately frame themselves as part of that community, representing the community’s standpoint truthfully, and ethically without the requirement of objectivity.

Hatcher and Haavik signpost Norwegian academic Host (2012) who states that Norwegian newspapers are less likely to take on the role of watchdog and challenge local government in a robust way, perhaps because of the journalist’s close alignment with its community, of which local government is an integral part.

This extended to other types of news, where Hatcher and Haavik found examples of local papers not covering “bad news” as they felt it was not what the community wanted to read. Again, this resonates with some of the findings from the fieldwork in this study where journalists wanted to be perceived as reflecting their community in a positive light (see analysis).

The journalists at *Lillesands-Posten* said there was a murder in their community and even though everyone knew who had been killed and who was charged, the paper resisted naming the person facing the charges. One rationalization for a decision like this, cited by multiple journalists, was that because the bigger papers would have already reported on the murder story, everyone already knew the name anyway. The editor at Fjuken referred to this sensitivity to community wishes as an “ethic[al] standard very high” because of the close connection to the community (personal communication, June 2, 2010). She said it is mostly a good thing “because we have to learn to be a human.” (Hatcher & Haavik, 2017, p. 156)

Hatcher and Haavik’s observations are useful in that they signal that journalists appear to be renegotiating their ethical values in terms of their relationship with their communities, and what it means to serve their communities as local journalists. The *Lillesands-Posten* journalists were exhibiting a care for the community at what was a painful time, manifest through the maintaining a silence which was dictated by the circumstances, this is at odds with journalistic norms, particularly in the UK, where there is an expectation that someone charged with murder would be identified in any news report – the right to do so enshrined in legislation, for example the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Section 52A.

The potential pitfall of too close an allegiance to the community then is partisanship when difficult challenges emerge, and a focus on positivity rather than robust coverage of difficult news, an observation also made by Hess and Waller (2020). The community in Lillesands is impacting on ethical decision making, over whether a story should be given exposure, and if so, in what way it should be handled. Hatcher and Haavik’s study also noted that when journalists were working in larger organisations they felt more empowered to take the role of the community watchdog, and although they were criticised by some sectors of the community, they felt it important to retain credibility as journalists (p. 160).

Journalists in smaller, more remote communities said they would never report on negative issues and in the few incidences in the past when they had, the reaction from the community was immediate and harsh. There was, as would be expected, passionate debate among the respondents about whether backlash from the community should influence journalists’ news decisions. (ibid p. 160)

Clearly decisions over what is ethical and right in terms of news coverage is impacted by the community in which journalists are located, and whether journalists see themselves as distant reporters of events or members of the community, of which they themselves are representatives. Community newspapers have often framed themselves as community champions, and participants in my own study discussed how the community they served impacted on their ethical decision making, their learning of ethical values - this is covered in a later section in more detail. When looking at teaching and learning structures to which early career journalists have traditionally been exposed, there has been no mention of the place the journalist holds within the community as a learning opportunity, nor of sensitivity to what the readers and members of a community do or do not want to read. The emergence of discussions about not wanting to offend a community, and self-censorship of news coverage because “the readers don’t want to see this” is new in the British local media. This was unexpected and emerged from the fieldwork.

Discussion of the community as an influencer in understanding ethical practice became apparent when beginning to transcribe early interviews. The questions used in fieldwork were designed to throw light on the extent to which Wenger’s communities of practice was being enacted in the newsroom, and in framing the question prompts which were used in semi-structured interviews with early career journalists, it was Wenger’s conceptualisation of communities of practice which initially served as the primary influence on their construction. Early career journalists were guided to talk about who influenced them in their understanding of ethics, and what was uncovered was that Wenger’s construct when applied to journalism extended into a wider meaning of community which impacted on the learning of ethical behaviours and values. Literature which takes journalism and community as its focus did not therefore shape the methodological approach to fieldwork, however, it is useful in making sense of what the data gathered during fieldwork was signalling.

Conclusion

Community and the journalistic position within community, are not easy to define. When considering Wenger and his conceptualisation of a community of practice, community is bounded by work activity. In the case of a health insurance worker, the focus of his original work, this is the office complex within which this work is located.

What became evident in an analysis of fieldwork was that Wenger’s conceptualisation of a community of practice was insufficient on its own to explain and examine how early career journalists learn from the community in which they are located. The community of practice for the journalist extends beyond the boundaries of an office building to take account of the work they undertake within their wider community, and it is for this reason that consideration of literature which takes as its focus the relationship between journalists and their communities is useful. Studdert and Walkerdine’s conceptualisation of community allows consideration of the journalist’s place within a wider conceptualisation of community. Lowrey et al’s scale helps evaluate the extent to which journalism is part of community and may allow for some understanding of the individual journalist’s perception of their own place within the complex journalism/community matrix. If we accept that participation within community is important in learning, then it is useful to explore more fully the exact nature of that community, where it is located, what the membership of that community is comprised of, and how activity within community impacts on the learning of journalism ethics.

Chapter 4 Journalism Ethics

Introduction

The community within which a journalist works may be an important influencer in their early career learning. However, while learning from others is an important consideration for journalists, when looking at how they learn ethics, it is important to also consider the nature of the information presented to them about what constitutes ethical journalism, how it is made available to them, and how it is used in their early career learning. This chapter will look at the different ways ethics is framed for journalists, and the material available to help early career journalists shape their thinking about what constitutes ethical journalism. It helps in part to inform RQ 2 (what is the nature of learning ethics undertaken to which early career journalists are exposed in the workplace?) by considering various approaches to exploring what journalism ethics might mean.

Defining journalism ethics

It is clear from literature that journalism ethics it is not something which is easy to define in absolute terms.

There are a significant number of texts which put forward different perspectives applying classical philosophical ideas in an attempt to settle on what journalism ethics is. Conversations are located in metaethics where the meaning behind words are analysed to judge their moral implications, normative ethics which considers accepted norms and their impact on ethical behaviours, and applied ethics which takes normative understandings and applies them to specific fields and dilemmas, and it is in the field of applied ethics that discussions about journalistic practice and standards are largely located (Peck & Reel, 2013, p. 6).

Conversations about what traditional philosophy can offer to those working in journalism by way of guidance can be found here, as Kantian and Utilitarian approaches can be useful when faced with real life decision making in the journalistic context (Frost, 2000, pp. 6-7; Peck & Reel, 2013, p. 7; Sanders, 2008, p. 17). Kant’s “categorical imperative” puts the emphasis on the individual and suggests that one should act in such a way that your action can be applied universally, put simplistically only do to others what you would have done to yourself. This is not without its challenges - Kant acknowledged that in order to operate the categorical imperative one needed a moral education in order to reason through ethical dilemma (Peck & Reel, 2013, p. 13) and this does to some extent shape this particular study in that it raises the question as to how moral education and notions of individual agency play out in the journalistic workplace. Also as Harcup notes (2014, p. 15) although individual journalists do have some agency to make decisions about their actions and could apply the Kantian categorical imperative, they are actually not autonomous moral agents and work within organisations which have as their goals profit and increased circulation which may bring them into conflict with notions of personal morality.

Utilitarian philosophy propounded by Bentham and Mill takes a different standpoint and suggests that the best course of action is one which creates the greatest good for the most people (Peck & Reel, 2013, p. 15). As Sanders points out, Utilitarian philosophy takes the conversations around journalism ethics in the direction of consequentialism by asking who benefits and how they benefit from the actions of the journalist (Sanders, 2008, p. 20). Again, this could be problematic for the journalist in its application as it requires the “good” in the “greater good” to be defined, which is not always straightforward. When considering this in the context of a community within which local journalists operate, awareness of Utilitarianism might be helpful where the journalist positions themselves as part of that community with a desire to operate in its best interests. Without wishing to discuss my findings in any detail here, it is worth noting that participants in this study, when talking about the way they framed their news stories, did so from the point of view of wanting to champion their community, which resonates with aspects of the Utilitarian approach. However, Utilitarian ethics on its own is not sufficient to define what journalism ethics is.

There is an important discussion around the application of the Kantian/Utilitarian dichotomy in a journalistic context and the operation of a newsroom, and in future work I might focus on this more strongly, however in relation to this study it is less useful as in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics. I am interested in their perspective of ethics, what they think ethics might be, and their application of their ideas, rather than any philosophical analysis of their ethics, a constructivist approach. Again, without wanting to anticipate my findings, early career journalists in this study conflated ethics with observance of a code of practice, with little awareness or application of classical philosophy. As discussed in Chapter 7, only one participant in this study recalled studying ethical philosophers, and they said it wasn’t useful to them as a code of practice had primacy in framing what journalism ethics was. Therefore, to pursue this topic further would take this dissertation in a different direction, and perhaps constrain discussion of the perspective of the early career journalist.

Aldridge (1998, p. 124) discusses ethics in terms of values, making little distinction between ethics and values, and argues that those working as journalists define journalism in terms of an occupational ideology, where there are shared values established from within the occupation. Therefore, it might be expected that it is within the occupation that early career journalists might look for that which shapes ethical understandings and values. Deuze (2005, p. 447) looked at the occupational ideology of the journalist across international contexts and noted that where journalism was referred to as a profession, occupational ethics was identified as one of the core pillars. However, while both signalled the importance of ethics in the professionalisation of journalism, neither Aldridge nor Deuze offered a definition of journalism ethics itself.

Ward (2019, p. 1) defines journalism ethics as the “responsible use of the freedom to publish…the study and application of the norms that should guide responsible public journalism” but acknowledges the challenges in defining “responsible”.

While it is not the intention of this study to investigate how personal morality impacts approaches to journalistic work, as this would take it in a completely different direction and into the field of moral philosophy, Aldridge’s work does signal that identity is important to the practising journalist, and that when practitioners frame themselves as journalists they do so as champions of their community where a good opinion of them matters. While journalism in Britain may not satisfy the norms of a profession, as discussed earlier, the 21st century has seen the emergence of new discourse around the notion of professionalism through which practitioners gain cultural capital (Bourdieu as described by Thomson in Grenfell, 2012, p. 69) through self-identification as a journalist.

It is a discourse of self-control, even self-belief, an occupational badge or marker which gives meaning to the work and enables workers to justify and emphasize the importance of their work to themselves and others (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003, p. 555).

Being ethical forms part of this identity, though again, here, Aldridge and Evetts do not define what ethical means in the context of the journalist. The focus of this study is the development of understandings which relate to the work of the journalist, and while it is worth noting that some participants in the study did refer to their own personal moral code when discussing their understandings of journalism ethics, there was also an awareness that journalism ethics was a ‘thing’ – reified, made real, within the context of the newsroom and the work of the journalist. However, when looking at what is understood by the term itself, it is hardly surprising that academics and practitioners struggle with a single definition as there are a number of potential interpretations which can be drawn upon.

According to Christians et al. (1998, p. 7), cited in Frost (2000, p. 1), ethics is:

The liberal arts discipline that appraises voluntary human conduct insofar as it can be judged right or wrong in reference to determinative principles.

This is a useful starting point when trying to understand meaning in terms of journalistic conduct as it neatly points to two key facets: firstly, that ethics is about what is right or wrong, and secondly, it signals that some form of framework might be necessary within which to make the judgement of whether something is right or wrong. This suggests a positivist approach to understanding ethics, using a framework to which reference is made when having to make a decision over whether to publish a particular story. Making decisions about what is right and wrong is not easy, and in the context of journalism, there are blurred lines. For example, running a ‘kiss and tell’ story by the former girlfriend of an unmarried premiership footballer giving lurid detail about his bedroom preferences might be seen as an unwarranted intrusion into his privacy, while publishing a similar story about a married MP who had previously been campaigning in Parliament on a family values platform might be viewed as good investigative journalism; the latter may be of public interest, the former merely interesting to the public, and a framework which guides a journalist through the decision making process may well be useful.

Foreman (2010, p. 17) states that while ethics is a set of moral principles which are guided by some form of written or unwritten code, ethics also requires action, that is people have to first of all make a decision over what is right and wrong, and also determine to do that which is right. He cites Keith Woods, of the Poynter Institute, who very neatly encapsulates the journalist’s dilemma:

Ethics is the pursuit of right when wrong is a strong possibility. (Woods, 2006)

Woods is also signalling here that ethics goes beyond codes and is about value judgements. When journalists hacked Millie Dowler’s telephone – behaviour which led to public outcry and the formation of the Leveson Inquiry as discussed earlier - the “strong possibility” was located firstly in that technology existed to enable them to hack the phone, and that in so doing, they would get a good story ahead of their competition. The right thing was simply not to hack the phone and work at the story from a different angle – the wrong was evidently too easy and too tempting. The decision to hack the phone was made without consideration of the impact of their actions on the police investigation or on the Dowler family.

Ward (2015, p. 13) notes that journalism ethics is a subset of applied ethics in general, in that its guiding principles are rooted in ethical philosophy and understandings of morality:

Ethics is concerned with all forms of good conduct. Journalism ethics is concerned with good conduct of one kind – good journalistic conduct.

Aidan White, Founder and Director of the Ethical Journalism Network, an international organisation which monitors global approaches to journalism ethics, evaluated more than 400 codes of conduct adopted by journalism organisations worldwide, and identified five key values associated with ethical journalism:

1. Accuracy – no deceptive handling of factual information
2. Independence – the work should be the journalists and not on behalf of governments or organisations
3. Impartiality – it is necessary to recognise there is more than one side to a story
4. Humanity – a journalist is expected to show humanity and be aware of the consequences of what is published, and that it can cause harm, for example reporting hate speech or publishing disturbing images from accidents.
5. Accountability – acknowledge when mistakes are made and correct them. (Ethical Journalism Network, 2019),

White’s point is that there are many codes – some are highly prescriptive, some are based around value judgements, and all are applied within specific political contexts. Underpinning the codes are common values which are the identifiers of ethical journalism. However, the existence of more than 400 codes of conduct globally does suggest that defining what is meant by journalism ethics and identifying the values can be challenging. Clearly, early career journalists trying to make sense of occupational ethics would benefit from guidance on what constitutes good journalistic conduct, and generally this falls into three broad areas, texts on philosophy and ethics, codes of practice and case studies.

This chapter will now look at each of these in turn to explore their potential to support early career journalists in learning to make good ethical decisions. In later chapters, how early career journalists made use of such guidance is evaluated.

Academic texts

There are two types of text which relate to ethics. There are the texts which refer to ethical philosophy, whereby tools to evaluate any given situation are debated, for example Bentham’s “felicific calculus” – the happiness measure – or Mill’s greater good. Sanders (2003), one of the early writers in Britain on journalism ethics, advocates gaining an understanding of the classical philosophers in order to develop a framework within which to make good ethical decisions. She acknowledges that in the midst of a news story breaking, it is unlikely that the journalist will stop to consider in any detail what Kant, Aristotle or Mill might have to say about how it should be covered but having an understanding of the basic tools to make judgements about what the ‘right thing’ is in any given situation leads to the making of better ethical decisions.

Knowing what others have thought can help sharpen reasoning and enrich the moral imagination. (Sanders, 2003, p. 24).

Foreman (2010), Frost (2000), Horner (2015) Keeble (2001a), and Sanders (2003), have all produced text books concerning journalism ethics, and include chapters looking at classical philosophies, underlining their importance in giving the journalist the sharpened reasoning upon which they can draw when facing journalistic dilemma. This is particularly useful when faced with something unfamiliar. As is discussed later when analysing interviews with early career journalists, new dilemma does emerge which isn’t necessarily covered in occupational codes to which they are expected to adhere – and it is in these situations that an understanding of philosophical arguments might be helpful. In addition, these texts also each present case studies to prompt thinking around issues including reporting on race, privacy and suicide for example, and texts such as these are used in journalism undergraduate programmes to support learning (Frost, 2014).

Journalism ethics as a topic of debate, as we have seen, is not a recent development, and indeed Ward (2015, pp. 63-65) notes that discussions around truth, objectivity and impartiality were evident in the 18th century, but text books designed to help form ethical thinking specifically aimed at developing journalists are a relatively recent addition to academic bookshelves. At the point when I was starting to consider methodological approaches to this study, I interviewed Professor Chris Frost (2014) who was chair of the National Union of Journalists’ Ethics Committee at that time. We discussed resources available to early career journalists in shaping their understanding of ethics, and he said one of the reasons he wrote his first textbook on journalism ethics was simply because he needed material to support his own lecture series for his students – there was very little to which he could refer them which looked specifically at journalism ethics. He said the NUJ had formed an Ethics Committee in 1986 and did debate and publish their findings on ethical issues, but the union struggled to get the NCJT (the dominant training body) to build ethics education into their syllabus at the time and as journalism as a subject area was still in its infancy in the higher education sector in the UK, this left the union with few avenues through which to exert its influence over any curriculum in journalism ethics.

At the time of the interview, Frost had been chair of the NUJ Ethics Committee since 1994 and was a founder member and Chair of the Association for Journalism Education (AJE) and Professor of Journalism at Liverpool John Moores University. It was in his capacity of Chair of the NUJ Ethics Committee and also as Chair of the AJE that he gave evidence to the Leveson Inquiry (Frost, 2012b; Stanistreet & Frost, 2012). It is here that he gives some detail about the development of resources to support learning in journalism ethics, and identified that prior to 2000, students would have needed to either look at texts which discussed ethics in general rather than through the lens of journalism, or turn to books produced in the US which looked at journalistic ethics in the American context (Frost, 2012b, pp. 6-7).

Frost’s first book on journalism ethics was published in 2000 and was the first in Britain to cover this topic, though others followed shortly afterwards (ibid). Frost (2014) noted he had evaluated journalism texts used by the NCTJ at that time and found that ethics “…was limited to just three pages on the PCC[[11]](#footnote-11) Code of Conduct. If you look back before that and try to find any evidence of ethics being taught, discussed in any serious way outside the NUJ, you wouldn’t find it.” By 2000, the PCC was largely discredited as a regulator anyway, as it was widely held as toothless in terms of its capacity to constrain press behaviours, despite the Culture Secretary David Mellor in 1991 stating that the PCC was “the last chance saloon” for the British Press in the wake of the Calcutt Commission report (Hagerty, 1992, p. 26). The NUJ had constructed a Code of Professional Conduct in 1936, and while its main focus was on industrial relations and interactions between journalists and their employers, it did state “A journalist should fully realise his responsibility for everything he sends to his paper or agency” (Gopsill & Neale, 2007, p. 233). The current NUJ code differs vastly to that of 1936, and will be discussed later, but it is notable that the NUJ code was not highly visible in any texts outside those issued by the Union, as noted by Frost.

The three pages Frost was referencing were located in *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*, published by the NCTJ, which has seen a number of editors throughout its 25 editions (to date), and an analysis of its most recent edition (Hanna & Dodd, 2020) does suggest that although there is now a whole chapter dedicated to press regulation the focus is on understanding codes of practice and how to avoid breaching codes, rather than on making sound ethical decisions. This is an important point, because as will be seen later in an analysis of interviews with early career journalists, when asked what key texts they used to learn ethics, the majority of respondents said *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* – it is an influential text yet limits its discussion of ethics to an interpretation of codes.

As *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* emerged as a dominant text to which participants in the fieldwork referred, and as it is the key text signposted by the dominant training organisation the NCTJ, some analysis of the development of its content in reference to ethics is somewhat illuminating particularly because of its influence on generations of journalists on their understanding of what is lawful, and also as an adjunct, how journalism ethics should be framed (see figure 5).

Figure 5 The representation of ethics in *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Edition | Year | Authors1 | Publisher | Ethics  Indexed2 | Ethics mentioned in text and context3 |
| 1 | 1954 | Leonard C J McNae | Staples Press, London | No | No |
| 2 | 1963 | Leonard C J McNae | Staples Press, London | No | No |
| 3 | 1967 | R M Taylor | Staples Press, London | No | Yes p 175 mention of the Press Council  P180 mentions public right to complain on grounds of ethics though no code of ethics developed. |
| 4 | 1969 | R M Taylor | Staples Press, London | No | Yes, as edition 3 |
| 5 | 1972 | R M Taylor | Staples Press, London | No | No. Press Council mention now moved to an Appendix (A) p235-243 |
| 6 | 1975 | R M Taylor | Crosby Lockwood Staples, London | No | No. As edition 5. |
| 7 | 1979 | Walter Greenwood,  Tom Welsh | Granada Publishing Limited, London | No | The section on the Press Council is absent entirely. There is a mention that there is a Volume 2 which expands on Volume 1, but this was never published |
| 8 | 1982 | Walter Greenwood, Tom Welsh | Butterworths  London | No | As edition 7 with a section on Privacy |
| 9 | 1985 | Walter Greenwood,  Tom Welsh | Butterworths  London | No | As edition 8 |
| 10 | 1988 | Walter Greenwood,  Tom Welsh | Butterworths  London | No | As edition 9, with mention of the Press Council on p45 but only as a passing reference |
| 11 | 1990 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworths  London | No | As edition 10 |
| 12 | 1992 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworths  London | No | Mentions for the first time the Press Complaints Commission in the context of the Calcutt Commission, and in relation to privacy p236-237. It focusses on creeping infringements on freedom of speech and not on ethics of journalism |
| 13 | 1995 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworths  London | No | Booklist refers to privacy and to a text Media Freedom and Media Regulation, Association of British Editors, Gild of Editors, International Press Institute 1994. Whether any students follow this up is debatable.  PCC Code is mentioned in passing in relation to jigsaw identification of juveniles pp34-35 and in relation to privacy p267 |
| 14 | 1997 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworths  London | No | As 13th edition. p39 mentions PCC in context of jigsaw identification of juveniles. |
| 15 | 1999 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworths | No | As 14th edition. |
| 16 | 2001 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | Butterworth Lexis Nexis (NCTJ)  Note, first mention of NCTJ as publisher | Yes  Under Ethics, says See Code of Conduct | Yes. Whole new section on Codes pp379-385  P379 “A number of codes of conduct attempt to encourage or enforce ethical standards in the media” However emphasis is on observance of codes rather than ethical understandings |
| 17 | 2003 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood | LexisNexis  (NCTJ) | No | Yes  P441 “A number of codes of conduct attempt to encourage or enforce ethical standards in the media”  P443  “this code sets the benchmark for those ethical standards.” |
| 18 | 2005 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood,  David Banks | Oxford University Press  (NCTJ) | No | Yes as 17th edition  P381 and  P383 respectively |
| 19 | 2007 | Tom Welsh,  Walter Greenwood,  David Banks | Oxford University Press  (NCTJ) | No | Yes as 17th edition p 435 |
| 20 | 2009 | David Banks,  Mark Hanna | Oxford University Press  (NCTJ) | No | Yes p 17 |
| 21 | 2012 | Mark Hanna,  Mike Dodd | Oxford  (NCTJ) | Yes | Yes, p4 refers to ethics being under scrutiny, p19 refers to PCC and mentions Leveson inquiry |
| 22 | 2014 | Mark Hanna,  Mike Dodd | Oxford  (NCTJ) | Yes | Yes, p4 “Journalists’ ethics are under increasing scrutiny. The observance of ethical codes should be an integral part of how journalists operate, to help produce respected, fair journalism and preserve freedoms.” |
| 23 | 2016 | Mark Hanna,  Mike Dodd | Oxford (NCTJ) | Yes | As 22nd edition. Refers to “codes of ethics”  Again, a chapter on regulation |
| 24 | 2018 | Mike Dodd,  Mark Hanna | Oxford (NCTJ) | Yes | As 23rd edition |
| 25 | 2020 | Mike Dodd, Mark Hanna | Oxford (NCTJ) | Yes | As 24th edition with addition of chapter entitled *Journalism avoiding unjustified intrusion* which examines ethical aspects of privacy |

Notes: 1. Historically, authors were senior newspaper journalists and trainers, assisted by a panel of legal specialists, until David Banks, Mark Hanna and Mike Dodd who have all worked in the industry and University sector.

2. Indicates where ethics is specifically mentioned in the index, and also captures similar terms such as morality, conduct, or regulation.

3. Notes where ethics is specifically referred to in text, the context of the reference, and the page numbers.

As identified by Frost, there is very little mention of ethics *in McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* prior to 2000, and scant mention prior to the Leveson Inquiry. It begins to be given more space from 2014 onwards, but the discussion is not framed around thinking about how to do the right thing, but about the Editors’ Code and how to avoid breaching it. It must be borne in mind that *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* was originally conceived to help post-war journalists navigate reporting restrictions, which does have an ethical consideration – one of guarding the freedom of the press to report fully on matters of importance. As McNae himself explains in the foreword to the first edition, it was built around a 1938 work by G F L Bridgman who had compiled The Pressmen and the Law at the request of the National Union of Journalists, which was updated towards the end of the war in conjunction with Ruskin College and the War Office. Bridgman and the NUJ gave permission for McNae and the fledgling NCTJ (then the National Advisory council for the Training and Education of Junior Journalists) to update the work, which has been updated on a rolling programme of successive editors ever since (McNae, 1954). Its history might explain why the structure and content remain largely unchanged from edition to edition, and it is perhaps unfair to expect it to develop a new field in discussions of ethics except for the point that the NCTJ and successive editors were not unaware of the concerns aired at a number of public inquiries into press conduct, particularly around breaches of privacy, and later editions do point to regulatory codes. Nor did the NCTJ publish any material supplementary to *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* which focused on journalistic conduct, which might have teased out ethical understandings. It might be argued that there were a number of missed opportunities to strengthen ethical approaches to journalism throughout the book’s history, particularly as it is the dominant text used in training journalists, and was certainly the only text identified by early career journalists in fieldwork which will be discussed later.

As the starting point of this study was the Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards, which prompted me to question how journalists learn ethics, the nature of materials to support learning in how to act ethically might have been a factor in the industry’s approach to ethical conduct. Journalists practising in the early years of the 21st century learned their craft in the late 20th century, and if recommended texts to support this learning gave only a few pages over to journalism ethics – and at best referred to a Code of Practice - then not only is the individual journalist impacted by a lack of guidance on how to make the right decision, but arguably, the press as a sector is the poorer too as its collective understandings are not sufficiently well informed.

Certainly, post-2000 there has been a number of texts developed in the UK which discuss journalism ethics and offer guidance on how to make the right ethical decision, for example Harcup (2007, 2020); Keeble (2008); McBride and Rosenstiel (2014). More recently, texts are emerging which attempt to take account of the challenges presented by the online environment where journalists have to be able to work across different platforms and also have some understanding of good practice on a global stage, for example Bugeja (2019); Ess (2009); McBride and Rosenstiel (2014). Each debate what is understood as good practice and offer some scaffolding as to what is ethical journalism. Bugeja (2019, pp. 1-4) suggests that each individual journalist should develop their own personal code of ethics to take account of the context within which they operate – whether working for a large media organisation or operating as a freelance writer in an online environment. This is a useful approach to journalism ethics, the development of an individual code, however, his text runs to more than 300 pages, and while worthy in as much as it carefully guides students through numerous ethical philosophies and considerations for constructing a personal code, it is complex. I would hazard that few journalists entering the occupation would have the stamina or discipline to complete the exercises which lead to the construction of their own code. In addition, they might find it challenging should they ever have to cite their own code as a reason for refusing to take a particular line in a story in discussion with their editor.

In summary, there was very little material upon which to draw pre-2000 which offered journalists in the UK guidance on occupational ethics. Texts have started to emerge post-2000 but were largely designed for use on journalism programmes in higher education. One area which this study considers is the extent to which these texts inform learning of occupational ethics in the workplace, and the questions used in semi-structured interviews with early career journalists were designed to prompt reference to what they perceived as key texts which shaped their understanding. As I discuss more fully in Chapter 7, data from this study revealed that the key text recalled by participants was *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*, with very little awareness or recall of other work.

Codes

The second broad area of guidance concerns reference to codes. Codes can be backed by Act of Parliament or Government, for example the OfCom Broadcasting Code, overseen through an industry-agreed self-regulatory arrangement such as seen with IPSO, promoted by trade organisations such as the NUJ code, or somewhere across this spectrum. There are a number of codes in operation in the UK, drafted and monitored by a range of organisations, the majority of which are self-regulatory in nature and dependent on members of the body to which they are ascribed abiding by them. They include the National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct (NUJ, 2019), the Editors’ Code (2019), the IMPRESS Standards Code (IMPRESS, 2019a), the Al-Jazeera Code of Ethics (Al-Jazeera, 2019) the Reuters Handbook which includes a section on journalism standards (Reuters, 2019) and the Bordeaux Declaration, a set of principles adopted by the International Federation of Journalists in 1954 intended to form a “**bedrock of the IFJ's uncompromising stand in defence of a quality and ethical journalism” (2019).**

**Codes of practice have the potential to offer scaffolding around which journalists can build their understanding of occupational ethics – what is permissible and what is not – and in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, the part played by industry codes in that learning has to be considered. An observance of codes signals a positivist approach to understanding good practice.**

Some of the codes which relate to journalistic conduct are sector dependent, and it is not reasonable to expect a journalist working on a local newspaper to be familiar with the detail of the Al-Jazeera Code of Ethics, nor indeed the OfCom Broadcasting Code, which are primarily aimed at broadcast journalists. The National Union of Journalists is a union which represents journalists from all sectors, but while membership is not universal in that many journalists opt not to take up union membership, its code is publicly available and has informed academic thinking about journalism ethics through the work of Frost (2000, p. 35) and Harcup (2007, pp. 129-131) for example. According to its website, the NUJ has extensive membership in Britain, with representation in the majority of the British press (Off, 2014), and early career journalists who are members of the NUJ, or who work in newsrooms where there is NUJ membership, may be aware of its guiding principles, see Appendix 1. The IFJ represents journalists on global platforms including the United Nations, and therefore it is possible that the Bordeaux Declaration is familiar to early career journalists. The Editors’ Code of Practice – which was first proposed in 1990 - was redrafted in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry and adopted by IPSO, which regulates the majority of the local newspaper industry (IPSO, 2019), see Appendix 2. IMPRESS was also founded in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, and is recognised by the British Government as a regulator, though its membership tends to be smaller web-based independent news organisations (IMPRESS, 2019b), its code is located at Appendix 3. Dependent on the type of publication where early career journalists are based, then it is to be expected that they will be familiar with either the Editors’ Code or the IMPRESS Standards Code.

When looking at how early career journalists learn ethics then, there are codes which set out what ethical journalism means.

However, the reliance on codes to inform ethical practice is not without its problems. Sanders argues that codes can be viewed as lists of dos and don’ts, and as such they are not useful in promoting ethical behaviour, but are in danger of becoming “…window-dressing by an industry anxious to avoid legislation…” (Sanders, 2003, p. 139).

Frost also notes that codes serve a public relations function but cautions they can “add an aura of respectability and fairness without necessarily forcing any real need for responsibility” (Frost, 2000, p. 101). In other words, as long as they exist the public can have confidence in the press, but should the press behave badly, there is nothing attached to the codes themselves to compel the industry to reform.

Both Frost and Sanders were discussing codes prior to the Leveson Inquiry when the British Press subscribed to the now defunct Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice[[12]](#footnote-12) During the Leveson Inquiry, the press was criticised for paying insufficient attention to following the code. In his report, Leveson noted that journalists were under pressure to meet unrealistic commercially driven targets which led to a culture where the Editors’ Code was undermined (Leveson 2012, p. 719). He noted that there was a failure to monitor compliance with the Editors’ Code by the Press Complaints Commission and advised “it is essential that stringent codes of conduct and systems of accountability are developed and implemented” (ibid p. 730) signalling his appreciation for the use of codes to control behaviours, albeit backed by mechanisms to ensure compliance. This also signals that the utility of a code in setting expectations of ethical behaviour is dependent on how complaints about breaches of the code are managed. Hacked Off, a pressure group which campaigns for greater accountability in the British Press, noted that the PCC system of arbitration hid the extent of complaints because its mediation process led to complaints being withdrawn before they became noted as a matter for censure. (2014)

One aspect of this study into how early career journalists learn ethics in a post Leveson environment then, is to consider the role codes play in that learning, aligning to RQ1 and 2 which considers what is learned about ethics prior to entering the workplace, and what is learned in the workplace. As will be discussed later in Section II, all participants in this study actively made reference to the Editors’ Code as their reference point for good journalistic practice. When asked what they understood by journalism ethics, each participant cited the Editors’ Code. While this awareness of the Editors’ Code is to be welcomed, the reliance on the code in framing ethical understandings is also problematic on a number of counts.

The Editors’ Code is the responsibility of a discrete body called the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee which has as its sole remit construction and maintenance of the Editors’ Code. The committee, while including lay membership, is predominantly made up of senior editors active in the British press (2019, p. accessed 2.9.19) with as its prime remit the maintenance of a “proper balance between protecting the rights of the individual and the public’s right to know”. This is somewhat limited when looking at journalistic ethics as it doesn’t account for issues such as encouraging the representation of minority groups in the press, or promoting gender equality, or engaging in lobbying activity around concerns about the promulgation of fake news. It might be argued that these are the responsibility of other organisations, but they all have an ethical dimension and relate to wider journalistic conduct and therefore it is not unreasonable to expect the Editors’ Code Committee to encourage active engagement in such areas. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics in the United States, for example, has as two of its cornerstones seeking truth and minimising harm – values which are not explicitly stated in the Editors’ Code and which change the tone of an organisation from one which is attempting to protect itself from criticism by the public (for example the Editors’ Code in the UK), to one which strives to champion its readers and protect them from poor practice (the SPJ Code of Ethics in the US) (SPJ, 2019). In addition, as membership of the Code Committee is predominantly senior journalists, there is little opportunity for externality in the development of the code to take a different approach. As of September 2019, only three of the 15-member committee were lay members, and of these, one was a former journalist. None of the lay members were ethicists.

Therefore, in formulating an understanding of journalism ethics, the Editors’ Code only takes early career journalists so far. In addition, it is not adopted by all sectors of the British press. It is used by the Independent Press Standards Organisation which expects its membership to adhere to the code. IMPRESS members operate to a different code, but the membership base here constitutes small independent, often online-only news organisations, not the mainstream British press.

The naming of the code – the Editors’ Code – signals that the owners of the code are managers, senior executives, rather than the journalists themselves. This titling convention points to the agency around the operation of the code lying not with the individual but their organisation’s management. In the United States, the SPJ flags that the code belongs to the professional journalist, the individual. As discussed earlier, journalism in the UK is viewed as an occupation rather than a profession, however, that should not detract from where ownership of a code of practice should be located.

Analysis of fieldwork, as discussed in Section II, signalled that there was no awareness of codes other than the Editors’ Code which could impact on journalistic practice in Britain. No-one mentioned the NUJ or IFJ codes – both of which have meaning in the UK context. Participants in the fieldwork also conflated “IPSO Code” and the “Editors’ Code” in the terminology they used. This is perhaps understandable in that the participants in the fieldwork all worked in the regional press in Britain where the newspapers are members of IPSO, which has adopted the Editors’ Code. None of the participants mentioned the rival IMPRESS code, perhaps because this is not the code they work to.

As observance of the code in the UK is voluntary, there are no formal sanctions which apply to the individual journalist for breaching the code. In occupations such as medicine and law, where a practitioner breaches their code of practice, they can have their licence to practice withdrawn – a powerful sanction which encourages understanding and observance of good ethical practice. While this might not appear to be relevant in the context of this study, it is worth considering that personal sanctions which have the potential to be career damaging raise the stakes in terms of incentivising the learning of good ethical conduct.

While it might be argued that codes are important in giving a positivist framework to learning ethical thinking, there is an additional problem where there is overreliance on an adherence to codes, and that is they don’t necessarily equip the early career journalist to make the right judgement around emerging dilemma where a constructivist approach based on inquiry and reflection might be more appropriate – enabling thinking around that which isn’t covered in the codes. For example, a new field of dilemma arises in the use of photographs taken at the scene of an incident by a bystander, when to ignore them makes their publication look tardy, yet to use them unchecked puts the journalist at risk of using fake or inappropriate images. A point noted by Garcia-Aviles (2014, p. 259) is the tension between being first with the news and the need to be accurate. The Editors’ Code does not help in making a decision over whether to use the photographs – while some learning of classical ethics may provide the right philosophical and logical arguments with which to make that decision. Perhaps Mill’s “greater good” would indicate that a local paper might not publish graphic images where they could be easily seen by children and cause distress. Of course, this is very much dependent on the structure of the code, and the SPJ principle of “minimise harm” might be useful in dealing with this particular dilemma, but it is difficult to construct a single code which could be applied in all circumstances. Codes on their own do not necessarily promote good behaviours, and the Editors’ Code does not encourage equality and diversity in news coverage – stories for example which would encourage and foster community cohesion.

There is a section on the Editors’ Code which covers discrimination, but it is from the viewpoint of avoiding pejorative reference to an individual’s ethnicity, gender or disability rather than a positive encouragement to ensure that all sectors of society have equal access to the potential advantage afforded by representation in news and feature stories (Editors' Code 2019, p. section 12). Indeed an article in *The Sun* newspaper was complained about over the language used in its reference to refugees, and while IPSO argued that *The Sun* was not in breach of the Editors’ Code, IPSO found itself under scrutiny from equality and diversity experts over its decision. (Bowcott & Ruddick, 2018) Put simply, adhering to a code doesn’t always align with the notion of good ethical practice and when considering how early career journalists learn ethics, one aspect to explore is, if they are taught codes, what else are they taught to equip them with sufficient understanding of ethical practice to enable them to make the right judgement call when the unexpected arises, or through the identification of news agendas which are under-represented.

Tony Harcup makes the case that ethics goes beyond codes and editorial guidelines (Harcup, 2020). He signals that issues which concern citizenship and representation, which are often central to public debate, have an ethical dimension, and are difficult to code for yet should be part of the conversation of the ethical journalist. For example, Hess and Waller investigated the role of a local paper in Australia in shaping debate about the development of a mosque in the town, which had prompted extremist views and hate speech. Here the local paper steered local discourse in a more positive direction, serving as a “moral compass” for the town (Hess & Waller, 2020, p. 1). There is a clear ethical dimension to editorial decisions made in this example, where representing diversity and connecting audiences in a way which achieves a common good was important, but in the UK context this is not encouraged through regulatory codes. Zhang (2017, p. 1188) notes another dimension to the ethics of the representation of diverse voices, in that sectors of a community can be overlooked and become voiceless where news production becomes too inward looking and fails to take full account of those they purport to represent.

Ironically, the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, according to its Chair Neil Benson, avoids using the term ‘ethics’ when referring to the Code – the committee itself recognises that there is more to ethics than a regulatory code, and therefore it is perhaps unreasonable to expect the Editors’ Code to do more than provide a framework for regulation. In interview for this study, Benson said that ethics was routed in academia and was recognised as a substantial discipline which journalists were not equipped to navigate – they needed pragmatic guidance on how to conduct themselves to a high standard in a way which was accessible and useful:

Journalism ethics is a phrase that I’ve learned that I should always avoid. We tend to not talk about ethics in terms of the Code Committee, but we talk about standards, because ethics is, I think a more theoretical thing. We talk about standards that are supposed to apply to the actual working life of a journalist…The Editors’ Code is supposed to be about helping journalists to know how to behave while doing their job. (Benson, 2017)

He added the committee had never claimed the code was an ethical framework. As will be discussed later, participants in this study identified the Editors’ Code as their main source of journalism ethics, irrespective of the intention of the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, and perhaps there is something here around how the codes are presented to early career journalists as learning resources which explains their particular framing of the code.

In summary, codes offer useful scaffolding for understanding what the industry deems to be good practice, but their value is dependent on how they were constructed, and on their own are of limited use in that the guidance is limited to what is embedded in the code, and that where they specify what is not permitted, they may not necessarily promote innovation and enhancement of approaches, and cannot account for dilemma which newly emerges. Rather than providing guidance for the teaching of good ethical behaviours for early career journalists, they may perhaps only set out what is and isn’t permissible - standards to which they are expected to work - a much narrower resource for learning.

Case studies

Learning by example is a long-established educational norm, pointing to a constructivist approach to learning through inquiry and study of what went before. To enable journalists to understand interpretation of codes and applications of philosophy, there is a category of texts which offers consideration of case studies, which apply ethical thinking to dilemma by way of giving students illustrative examples. These include works by Dodd and Hanna (2018) Harcup (2007) Foreman (2010) and chapters of works mentioned earlier by Frost (2016) and Sanders (2003). Both IPSO and IMPRESS publish findings on complaints on their website with the rationale behind their decisions, and both offer guidance around interpretation of codes.

Bugeja (2019) for example makes extensive use of case studies in encouraging the formulation of a personal code of ethics, channelling the reader through a series of dilemma and posing the question ‘what would you do?’.

The website of the Editors’ Code Committee includes extensive guidance on how to interpret each section of the Code and illustrates this with the use of examples drawn from cases presented to IPSO. The trade press including Media Guardian, UK Press Gazette and holdthefrontpage.co.uk regularly feature cases where complaints have been made about ethical conduct and these are easily available to early career journalists wanting to learn by example (Bowcott & Ruddick, 2018; Ponsford, 2017; Sharman, 2019).

However, where examples are discussed in academic texts and online, early career journalists are required to actively seek out this material, and the extent to which they do so is something which the fieldwork attempted to evaluate; if they are learning ethical understandings by consideration of case studies, or rulings made by regulatory bodies, then where and how do they access those examples?

Summary

Literature points to three types of material to support the learning of journalism ethics – texts on moral philosophies and occupational ethics to shape ethical decision making, industry codes and case studies. In looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, the first observation is that there is material available to help shape ethical thinking. However, philosophy on its own takes the learner only so far in that while it provides technique for reasoning, it often deals in abstracts, codes provide occupationally relevant guidance but are limited in that they do not always account for emerging dilemma, and examples are useful to enrich discussion around philosophy and codes but are less helpful in isolation.

One example which emerged during fieldwork which illustrates the limitations presented by reliance on one source of information about what is ethical became evident when an early career journalist talked about an inquest they had attended. A man had hanged himself in woodland close to his home, he was an EU immigrant who had struggled to find work which had resulted in depression to the extent he took his own life. The journalist struggled to decide whether it was in the public interest to cover the story. On the one hand the code cautions about intrusion into grief and shock, and it was this precept which the journalist used to shape their decision – they decided that to publish a report of this particular inquest would be upsetting to his family and that there was no wider public interest in the case to over-ride that decision, following the guidance embedded in the Editors’ Code. However, had the journalist taken a wider view of what was ethically right and stepped beyond the code, they might have seen the story as an opportunity to expose hardship faced by immigrant workers in their area, giving them a voice, the ethical dimension here being the representation of a minority group within that community. Consideration of case studies where an inquest serves as a starting point for a community campaign to improve the lives of local people might also have been useful in shaping the direction of the report from the inquest, and served as a template for reporting on a difficult situation for the ultimate benefit of the community. Reference to the code alone meant that some of the ethical dimensions of the story were overlooked.

The extent to which the different types of material are used - and how their use is encouraged in the workplace - by early career journalists has previously not been fully explored. It is investigated in the fieldwork for this study in consideration of RQ1 and RQ2, with the intention of throwing light on what early career journalists use to shape their understanding of occupational ethics.

Chapter 5 - Methodology

Introduction

As set out in earlier chapters, there are three areas to take account of when considering the overarching research aim of this study, which is to investigate how early career journalists working in the British press learn ethics in the workplace.

The first is the nature of learning of ethics prior to the journalist entering the occupational community, that is the influence of any undergraduate or postgraduate programme on their understanding of journalism ethics, or the influence of any journalism training programme followed before being employed as a journalist.

The second consideration is the nature of learning that takes place within the workplace; the form that takes, whether it is formally facilitated learning or informal learning; and who the key influences on this learning are and how that influence is exerted.

Finally, it is important to consider how the learning is reinforced and consolidated in the workplace, and where reflection on practice is located.

This chapter sets out the research approaches taken, the nature of the data required to inform this investigation and why that data is valid in this context, the most appropriate methodology for gathering that data, the data sampling strategy, and the mechanisms used to analyse the data.

Research Approach

To gain a deeper understanding of the learning experienced by the early career journalist, it is necessary to adopt primarily qualitative research approaches.

Grey (2018, p. 162) sets out the role of the researcher in the context of qualitative inquiry as one where the aim is to gain a deep understanding of that which is the focus of the study, using naturalist approaches where the research question can be considered in context-specific settings. It can be argued that journalism offers the context, and the environment within which early career journalists work, the settings. Qualitative approaches are not without criticism and are seen in some fields as lacking the robust nature of the quantitative methodologies, where data can be measured and manipulated, and neat graphical interpretations presented. However, Hansen and Machin make the point that methodology is simply a way of addressing relevant research questions, and that often a number of approaches are necessary.

… there is no single ‘best’ method for media and communication research, and…to encourage an eclectic approach that keeps an open mind on which methods – quantitative or qualitative – are most suitable for the research problem at hand, *and* which appreciates that that combination of several methods can often achieve more and better illumination of a research problem than a single method applied in isolation. (Hansen & Machin, 2019, pp. 6-7)

The context of their work is within the field of media and communications and they draw on the work of Jensen (2012) who argues that there is validity in taking different methodological approaches to examine different aspects of a research question in this field, what he describes as a “realist” framework where quantitative and qualitative approaches converge (Jensen in Hansen & Machin, 2019, pp. 7-8).

Hansen and Machin divide media and communications research into two broad areas, one which is aimed at investigating media content and the second which has as its focus people and their actions and behaviours. The former type of enquiry lends itself to content and discourse analysis, however, they suggest that suitable strategies for investigating the actions and behaviours of those at the centre of an enquiry might include the use of surveys, individual interviews, observations, ethnography and focus group work (2019, p. 23). As this inquiry is looking at how early career journalists learn ethics, it falls into the latter of Hansen and Machin’s categorisations, where the focus is on people (the journalist) and their actions (their journalistic activity and also their learning) and behaviours (their ethical approaches to their work). The data required in order to respond to the research questions underpinning this study comprises of information about the nature of learning of journalism ethics, where it is located, what it is comprised of, and who is involved in the learning process. It seeks to establish how formal and informal learning opportunities shape the learner’s understanding of occupational ethics, and the impact of the community in which the learner is located on that understanding. This type of data, as Hansen and Machin signal, could be surfaced using a range of qualitative approaches. I chose to use the semi-structured face-to-face interview, but before considering why this was the most appropriate tool for my own study, it is perhaps necessary to explain why some of the other qualitative approaches they suggest were not foregrounded.

The questionnaire or survey can be a useful qualitative tool where participants are asked to answer structured questions. However, as Hansen and Machin explain (2019, pp. 62-63), while questionnaires are useful in collecting contextual data, such as gender, ethnicity, age, place of study, qualifications, curriculum studied, etc, and indeed this information was captured in my own study through a questionnaire as part of the research approach, they are less useful in exploring perceptions with any reliability as they capture a snapshot of one moment in time. For example, a question which asks early career journalists who the key influencer on the learning of ethics is, might elicit the response “the training manager”, simply because they have just finished their first training programme where ethics was covered. Asking the same question again three months later, when the new journalist has had to grapple with ethical decision-making through every-day activity, the answer is unlikely to be the same as their influencers may well be colleagues or their news editor. While interviews might also provide snapshots, they afford the opportunity for discussion around the answer, giving it context.

Bertrand and Hughes (2005, pp. 69-70) state that questionnaires are an efficient and low cost way of gaining responses from a large number of participants, however, they are problematic tools where the questions themselves are insufficiently clear and unambiguous, and where the respondent does not necessary understand the question or may not choose to answer honestly. Also:

They provide simple answers to simple questions, so they cannot help to establish thick description or to understand process or social context. (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005, p. 69)

Priest (2010, pp. 72-74) also notes that there are problems inherent in question structure, for example in asking loaded questions, steering the respondents’ answers through the very order of the questions themselves, inadvertent bias through careless question construction, and making meaning out of responses to unreliable questions. Additionally, as Grey (2018, p. 343) points out, the researcher isn’t in the position to ask follow up questions, to gain deeper understanding of the meaning of the respondent, when the questionnaire is the primary research tool. The format of questionnaires leads the respondent towards short answers which are easily captured and doesn’t allow for conversational follow-up questions which allow for interrogation of concepts which may surface.

From a practical viewpoint, questionnaires have limitations where there is unlikely to be a large sample-size, as is the case with the early career journalist. In order to gain meaning from responses with any degree of reliability, the sample needs to be sufficiently large and broad (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005, p. 70). As discussed in Chapter 6, there were challenges in securing participants in this research project, with limited numbers of appropriate and willing participants – the number of participants being too low to make the use of a survey or questionnaire limited as a data gathering tool.

Ethnography is a methodology initially developed in the anthropological field and uses observation and participation as the key tools. (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 279) As Hansen & Machin note (p. 61), ethnography is useful in the study of media production, and the institutional cultures which shape media production processes.

If we wish to understand the production processes behind the creation of [a] news report we would not simply ask a journalist what they did, although this would be one important source of data. We would also need to look at what kinds of values and ideas the journalist has about what they do, the journalistic culture in which they have emerged and work, and also the processes and practices they use to produce that news report. (pp. 61-62)

They discuss ethnographic observation as enabling the discovery of what people do rather than what they say they do and their work is particularly useful as they cite as a research example a project which investigated the changes in the use of photojournalistic material with a view to improving teaching and learning around visual design in news production. The research aims in their work with photojournalists were similar to this project in that it was looking at an aspect of journalistic practice and the teaching and learning of that practice. Hansen & Machin used a combination of interviews and observational fieldwork “…extensive talk and watching” (p. 80) where they took notes on practice, approaches and attitudes of photojournalists, an evaluation of which allowed them to surface new information about this field of work which they felt would have been overlooked through the use of a questionnaire.

There are some criticisms of this method. While it allows for a deeper understanding of context and attitudes which underpin learning, the researcher is inevitably part of the research in any ethnographic approach, and it is difficult to tease out the impact the researcher has on that which is under study. The question arises around whether the fact that someone is watching and note-taking changes the behaviours of participants, and whether the personal context and background of the researcher inform their understanding of that which is observed (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 80). As Altheide and Johnson (2013, p. 405) note it is difficult to completely account for the presence of the ethnographer in any observational research, and it is equally difficult to avoid the context of the researcher informing their understanding of that which is observed – in other words, there is a degree of reflexivity in any observational research. Altheide and Johnson advocate transparency around the context of the researcher in any ethnographic outputs to ensure that readers fully understand the origin of insights shared.

Our experience suggests that researchers should accept the inevitability that all statements are reflexive, and that the research act is a social act. Indeed, that is the essential rationale for research approaches grounded in the contexts of experience of the people who are actually involved in their settings and arenas. (Altheide & Johnson, 2013, p. 406)

An ethnographic and observational approach would lend itself well to this study, however, even setting aside the need to account for the place of the researcher in the research, there are more pragmatic limitations to the adoption of this methodology, and they are access to participants and time constraints.

Silverman (2010, p. 203) distinguishes between two types of settings, the closed or private setting where access has to be negotiated via a gatekeeper, and the open or public setting where access is freely available. As my research focusses on learning in the workplace, it would be difficult to justify any setting as public, as the data sought would reference the workplace and those who inhabit that space, and therefore access would need to be negotiated. Silverman also distinguishes between covert access, where the subject of the study is not aware that they are being observed, and overt access where the subjects are informed and agree to participate in the study. My research aims to gather data from journalists about their personal learning experiences and therefore covert access is not appropriate, and each participant in this study gave informed consent to their participation.

Bertrand and Hughes (2005, p. 146) note that gaining access to an institution where the focus of your research is located can be problematic. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 50) state that an understanding of the research setting is important in aiding the identification of the gatekeepers, and in negotiating access to research participants. As a former journalist myself, I had contacts in newspaper groups around the UK who could be approached about access to their early career journalists, however, early enquiries about the possibility of locating observational ethnographic research within a newsroom quickly ruled this approach out. As the question is very specifically around the learning of journalistic ethics, permission to observe early career journalists for long periods would be necessary in order to observe in a naturalistic environment their handling of ethical dilemma and any learning gained through such encounters. In the daily routine of a journalist, ethical dilemma may not be a frequent happening, and it could take weeks of observational fieldwork before any meaningful interaction is encountered. In scoping the possibility of longitudinal observation, advice given to me was that gatekeepers would be unwilling to allow this because of the impact on relatively small newsrooms of an observer, and their potential to interfere with the routine of the individuals under observation. As Hammersley and Atkinson note:

Whether or not they grant entry to the setting, gatekeepers will generally, and understandably, be concerned as to the picture of the organization or community that the ethnographer will paint, and they will usually have practical interests in seeing themselves and their colleagues presented in a favourable light…Gatekeepers may therefore attempt to exercise some degree of surveillance and control, either by blocking off certain lines of inquiry or by shepherding the fieldworker in one direction or another. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 51)

There was also concern that members of the public who journalists would themselves be interviewing would need to give their consent to the process being observed. As ethical dilemma over the coverage of stories can be located in situations where the journalist wants to publish something against the wishes of the focus of their story, any direct observation of the negotiation of this issue had the potential to impact on the issue itself. Initial scoping of potential for an ethnographic approach therefore suggested that gatekeepers would not be willing to allow an observer into their newsrooms for extended periods, nor would they be likely to allow observation of the activity at the heart of the research, the learning of ethics through practice. They would, however, be more willing to allow early career journalists to be interviewed – this was one factor in the decision to adopt the semi-structured interview as the primary research tool.

The second limitation to an ethnographic approach was time constraints. As a part-time researcher, being able to commit to sustained observational fieldwork in such a way as to record participants’ interactions around the learning of ethical behaviours – where the learning points were likely to be infrequent – was not practicable.

One approach which can form part of the ethnographic tool kit, and is widely held as a valid qualitative research tool is the semi-structured interview, or “qualitative interviewing” (Mason, 2018, p. 109). This approach allows for longer form answers and conversations which addresses some of the limitations of the survey and also, as Priest (2010, p. 101) notes, semi-structured interviews are more practical than field observations in that they can be scheduled at a time which is suitable to both parties, and it is possible to manage the direction of a conversation instead of waiting for events to occur to illustrate what is going on. Also:

…[it] is much more flexible than survey research because it can go in different directions depending on what the interview has to say…

Patton (2015, p. 426) states that interviews are useful for finding out that which cannot be observed, and that the purpose of the interview is “to allow us to enter into another person’s perspective”. As Grey suggests, the intent of an interview is to understand the experiences of the interviewee, their “opinions, attitudes, values and processes” (Grey, 2018, p. 379), which makes it an appropriate tool in this particular study.

Mason (2018) characterises the semi-structured interview as having four core features:

* There is an exchange of dialogue, often face-to-face
* The style of the exchange tends to be informal, conversational, though Burgess’ description of this methodology as “conversations with purpose” (1984, p. 102) illustrates the point that there is direction to the conversations in order to ensure that data around the research question is appropriately collected, a point also made by Bell. (1999, p. 138)
* There is a thematic approach to the questions, but the questions are there to guide the researcher and allow the interviewee to talk freely – in this way surfacing the unexpected directions
* The perspective taken is one dictated by the situation and context. As Mason states, “the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus to that situated knowledge can be produced”. (2018, p. 110)

As this research is trying to make sense of the learning experiences of the early career journalist, and each experience will be unique to the participant, it is not possible to predict what they will say in response to questions, or say what the follow up questions are likely to be, and as Priest signals, here the semi-structured interview as a tool should allow for the individuality of experience to be captured. Mason suggests that knowledge can be viewed as situational, that is it is context dependent, and the qualitative interview can allow for the interviewee to talk about their specific experiences and understandings. In developing my methodological approach to this study, it was with Mason’s core features in mind, and the overarching research approach adopted is one of qualitative inquiry, using face-to-face interviews with participants in the workplace, using question prompts to guide “conversations with purpose”. This is supplemented with a questionnaire to capture contextual information about the participant, including prior educational experience, see Figure 6 included later.

Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine how journalists learn ethics, but this needs to be unpicked further and teased into clear research questions to be addressed through qualitative methodologies which will yield data to enable an analysis of the nature of the learning and the key influences on that learning. There are four key research questions which aim to address learning of journalism ethics, which are set out below. Figure 7, set out later in this section, maps the questions used in interview to the research questions.

RQ1 - What is the nature of prior learning of ethics that early career journalists engage in before beginning work in a newsroom?

Eraut discusses learning as being formal and non-formal. Formal learning has the following characteristics: there is a learning framework, a learning event or package of some kind, a designated teacher, the learning leads to some form of certification, and there may be externally-set expectations on that learning. Non-formal learning lacks a framework, is not packaged or established around a defined curriculum, does not have dedicated teaching staff and does not lead to certification. (Eraut, 2000, p. 114) Eraut proposes a typology of non-formal learning with three classifications: implicit learning, which is lodged in the memory from historic activity; reactive learning which happens around some brief form of “near spontaneous reflection”; and deliberative learning which involves an element of systematic reflection (Eraut, 2000, p. 116). In addressing this research question, Eraut’s conceptualisation of learning is useful as it allows for consideration of learning of journalism ethics through formally facilitated journalism programmes, and also where non-formal opportunities might be located for those entering the occupation.

As set out in Chapter 2, literature suggests that formal learning opportunities for journalists may be identified in a number of situations (Banda, 2013; Burgh, 2005; Franklin & Mensing, 2011; NCTJ, 2016a; UNESCO, 1965) which include journalism and media programmes in Higher Education and vocational training delivered through programmes such as those offered by the NCTJ. Whereas opportunities for non-formal prior learning of journalism ethics may be evident through work placement and work shadowing, or through a general interest in news and news production.

While considering the ‘how’ of learning, it is important to remember why this question is significant. According to Thurman (2016, p. 35) between 2011 and 2016, 64% of those entering journalism had some form of university level education in journalism or a related field. As we have seen from the literature, journalism ethics is now formally taught in a number of higher education and training contexts, (see Chapter 1). However, as there is no nationally agreed curriculum in higher education, it is worth gaining some insight into the perception of the curricular content from those students who have undertaken some form of journalism programme. An understanding of what is meant by journalism ethics is arguably shaped by the curriculum of study, and whether it is one which addresses industrial codes or whether it encourages independent ethical thinking through the study of ethical philosophy is worthy of consideration. It is also worth gaining some insight into whether early career journalists who now find themselves in the workplace perceive their prior learning to have been useful, whether they feel it has shaped their understanding of journalism ethics in practice or whether the day to day realities and routines of work eclipses prior understandings.

Thurman’s work (ibid) conversely suggests that about a third of new journalists had not undertaken any formal learning in journalism, and therefore the question of how this constituency gain an understanding of journalism ethics is also significant as it is difficult to make assumptions here about their learning prior to starting employment.

In essence, prior learning of journalism ethics may impact on the understanding of that which is learned in the workplace, and therefore it is necessary to explore the relationship between prior learning of ethics and an understanding of ethics in the workplace.

There are a number of entrants to journalism as a career who are not a product of a journalism programme, and it is important to discover the nature of any learning of journalism ethics encountered prior to entering the occupation.

The approaches to capturing this data include a questionnaire about prior learning where participants are asked to set out their educational journey and qualifications prior to working as a journalist, the questionnaire being the most appropriate tool for harvesting this kind of data. However, it is also important to discuss prior learning in greater detail, in particular the participants’ perceptions of where ethics was located in that learning, and where they see that learning being applied through their workplace activity, and here the semi-structured interview is used to allow for the more discursive responses

RQ2 - What is the nature of the learning of ethics which early career journalists are exposed to in the workplace?

Again, seeking data about the formal and non-formal learning opportunities, this time within the context of the workplace, is a useful way of approaching this question. Early scoping of this question suggested that the news industry does offer formal journalism ethics teaching through a range of mechanisms. These include in-house and externally sourced workshops, as well as online learning packages and it is important to discover what this learning consists of, where it is located, how it is facilitated and how engagement in the learning is supported.

Less is understood about the non-formal and incidental learning opportunities to which early career journalists may be exposed. Learning through the community of practice as described by Wenger (1998) is predicated to some extent on non-formal and incidental learning taking place. Marsick and Watson cite earlier work by Marsick and Volpe which attempted to define where incidental learning happened, extrapolating six key characteristics of incidental learning:

It is integrated with daily routines

It is triggered by an internal or external jolt

It is not highly conscious

It is haphazard and influenced by chance

It is an inductive process of reflection and action

It is linked to learning of others (Marsick and Volpe (1999) p5 cited in Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 28)

The work of the journalist is one which is underpinned by a daily routine which is influenced by change and uncertainty, in that the journalist knows there is a daily workflow which includes contact with local authority officials and emergency services, and writing to set deadlines, but the absolute nature of the stories they will be working on are unknown. Each day provides new scenarios which offer new experiences from which to learn. For example, on Monday the journalist might be attending an inquest where there are ethical considerations around professional conduct and the reporting of suicide, and the following day they may be expected to interview a local business leader about the impact of a new town bypass (Fleming, 2006; Harcup, 2009). This suggests that there are opportunities for informal and incidental learning inherent in the very nature of the role of the journalist, and eliciting information from participants in this study about their routine and how they navigate ethical dilemma would throw light on the nature of their incidental learning as it relates to journalism ethics.

As it would appear that there is potential for an early career journalist to learn in the workplace, to gain a deeper understanding of the learning of journalistic ethics, then any methodology needs to be able to extrapolate the nature of that learning, and identify the formal, informal and incidental opportunities which have been experienced.

While participants in this research might find it straightforward to list topics covered in formally taught ethics classes, this does not tell us a great deal about what has been learned. However, assessing what has been learned presents a number of challenges. Asking research participants what they have learned is one approach, but this may well result in them discussing what they believe the researcher wants to hear. It may also be difficult to separate out the learning of ethics as they relate to the role of a journalist from the learning of ethics in general terms. As Eraut points out, ethnographic research into learning can be problematic because of these very issues. However, he also adds that outside the domain of political research, it is rare that research participants will deliberately try to mislead, and posing questions which are framed to elicit answers around known types of learning is one way of mitigating for participants saying what they think you want to hear (Eraut, 2000, pp. 120-121).

Eraut also identifies difficulties when it comes to getting participants to fully articulate those things which are perhaps not fully appreciated, such as incidental learning. Not only is implicit learning difficult to detect without prolonged observation, but reactive learning and some deliberative learning are unlikely to be consciously recalled unless there was an unusually dramatic outcome. In addition, potential respondents are unaccustomed to talking about learning and may find it difficult to respond to a request to do so. If they do, they are more likely to refer to formal learning rather than non-formal learning. The latter is just part of their work: solving a problem at work is unlikely to be interpreted as a learning process unless an interviewer can home in on it in a particularly appropriate way (p. 119).

To elicit data around that which has been learned, therefore, one approach is to put questions to participants which enable them to identify and discuss their non formal learning, and to be sensitive to the opportunity for follow-up questions which will tease out the nature of that learning about which they may not be fully aware. For example, asking about key influencers and influences in their day to day activity will allow participants to talk about their observations and those they encounter in their daily work, including their impact on their own understanding of what is ethical. Also, asking them why they made particular judgements and decisions in the course of their work may reveal something about the learning which enabled them to make those decisions. Without taking an ethnographic approach – the reasons for not adopting this having been discussed above – it may not be possible to gain a complete picture, as Eraut points out. However, as little is known about the learning of journalism ethics in the workplace, the data surfaced here may serve as a starting point around which future research projects can be built.

The key question at the heart of this study around the learning of ethics does make an assumption that ethics can be learned, and to some extent, it is not unreasonable to assume that most early career journalists will have some tacit knowledge of ethics. Eraut (Eraut, 2000, p. 123) cites Polyani in defining tacit knowledge as “that which we know but cannot tell” (Polyani, 1967) Elliott discusses media ethics in a similar way, stating that one common understanding of ethics is something that is known but difficult to elucidate. She makes the point:

Some people think of ethics as a personality trait: you either have ethics or you don’t; you learned the right things to do from parents or church, or you didn’t...In truth, making ethical choices is a skill that gets better with experience. (Elliott, 2013, p. 23)

She likens the learning of making good ethical decisions to learning to play a sport, it is a developmental process which requires practice, though there is a tacit dimension to it.

Morally sophisticated thinking requires being conscious of the decisions that we make and the justification that we use in making them. Doing this consistently and well takes practice. (Elliott, 2013, p. 27)

In summary then, in enquiring about how learning happens in the workplace, I intend to ask questions which will yield data about the formally facilitated learning structures which support learning in journalism ethics, and also about the non formal learning, including learning through the application of practice.

RQ3 – How does the community within which the early career journalist operates impact on the learning of journalism ethics?

This RQ is intended to elicit the extent to which there is a community of practice as described by Wenger and how this impacts on the learning of ethics. It takes into account the points made by Wenger about the importance of the social structures within which learning takes place, as discussed in Chapter 2. Wenger’s initial work looked at apprenticeships and asked key questions about why these were successful learning programmes, and suggested that there were many facets of the community in which apprentices found themselves which contributed to the learning experience (Wenger, 1998).

It is intended to tease out who influences the learning of ethics, where that influence is located and how that influence is exerted. This is an area which is little understood, and semi-structured interview questions designed to encourage the participant to talk about their daily routine, relationships with colleagues and how decisions are reached when handling stories which have an ethical dimension should allow perceptions on influences to surface.

Jewson (in Hughes et al., 2007, p. 156) discusses ‘place’, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who argued that while learning is a situated activity, the ‘situation’ is not necessarily an office and can have a number of interpretations. Jewson adds that electronically mediated channels of communication have shifted the notion of the ‘office’ further, from one that is geographically located in a fixed place to one where the location of work is more fluid (p. 161) This has implications for learning from a community of practice which is office bounded and where chance encounters with colleagues offer opportunities for picking up new knowledge and understanding.

In the collective office employees are expected to devote themselves to participation almost as much as task-based activity. Through participation in the relationships of the office, practice is driven, refined and developed. (Jewson in Hughes et al., 2007, p. 164)

If we accept Jewson’s point that there is an increasingly dispersed office culture facilitated by electronic media, then the structure and formation of the ‘community’ within which the journalist practices is also worthy of consideration, and conversation which allows some understanding of the locality of work, which can be analysed against Wenger’s indicators of a community of practice (Wenger, 2008, pp. 125-126) would be useful, with a focus on how the community structures impact on the access to and learning of journalism ethics. For example, if a journalist works in an office alongside six other colleagues, the opportunities for accumulating tacit knowledge around the resolution of ethical dilemma could well be different from that journalist who finds themself working alone at a geographical distance from their manager.

RQ4 - How is the learning of journalism ethics reinforced through reflection on practice?

If we are to accept the points made by Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988), Billett (2008), Boud et al. (1993) Boud et al. (2005) and Boud and Garrick (2001) about the importance of reflection in learning to reinforce that which is learned, then it is important to ascertain how reflection around ethical dilemma is facilitated in the workplace, how learning is consolidated (see Chapter 2) Again, this is particularly important when considering those journalists who are not products of any formal journalism education or training within a higher education setting, where reflection on practice is the norm and would have been encouraged. The semi-structured interviews should seek to elicit data on the nature of any reflective activity, what is required of the early career journalists and how they are prepared and supported to engage in such activity.

Having considered the overarching research approach and the research questions to be followed to elicit data around the question of how early career journalists learn ethics, I turn to defining the participants of the study.

Participants

As this study investigates how early career journalists learn in the workplace, the first type of participant sought were early career journalists.

The term ‘journalist’ carries a very broad meaning. It is generally held to apply to those working in newspapers, magazines, television, radio and online who seek factual information about contemporary events and present them to the wider public. In March 2015, the British government was forced to consider a definition of the word ‘journalist’ to allow it to develop law around the protection of journalistic sources. The government was suggesting that law enforcement agencies would need a warrant to access metadata about sources embedded in communications with journalists, and it therefore became necessary to define ‘journalist’. In an article in the Guardian newspaper about the legislation, Paul Farrell argued that journalists were becoming increasingly difficult to define as an entity. He said:

Trying to define journalism in law is not an easy task. The craft has taken on an increasingly amorphous form and the first response to the prime minister’s concession on metadata has been for people to ask who would be entitled to protection. It’s a little bit 1990s, but some of the questions being thrown around have included: are bloggers journalists? Do people need to be paid professionally? And would an isolated act of journalism – say, publishing a bunch of documents on a website for the purposes of the public understanding an issue better – be enough to gain protection? (Farrell, 2015)

At the time of writing, the legislation Farrell was discussing had not been approved and the definition arrived at not published. This is unsurprising as the Reuter’s Institute, a journalism think tank based at Oxford University, asked 500 members of its Fellowship programme to define journalism and elicited as many different and disparate responses (Reuters Institute, 2016).

It would appear then that defining a journalist is not straightforward, therefore for the purpose of this study it is necessary to tightly define the type of journalist from which to draw the research sample when considering the question of how journalists learn ethics. To grapple with the definition of a journalist at this point would take this research project into a different direction, and therefore a normative approach needs to be adopted around this question.

In constructing my sample there were three parameters which I applied.

Firstly, this study focuses only on those in paid employment working in the British press. The proposal for this study came out of the Leveson Inquiry which focused on the ethical conduct of the British press. The context in which newspapers operate is very different to the way in which radio, television and internet news producers operate. The regulatory frameworks which form the basis of behavioural expectations are sector specific; broadcasters have to comply with a statutory regulatory body, and at the time of writing there was no such body for the newspaper industry; the commercial imperative is different when considering the newspaper industry, where there is fierce competition to attract advertising, active purchases and readers, set alongside public service funded and commercially sponsored broadcasting. Essentially, the community of practice in newspapers is different to that found in other journalistic producers because of the industrial structures and funding mechanisms which underpin each sector of the media.

While the term ‘the press’, which conjures images of giant printing machines churning out thousands of pages of newsprint in aircraft hangar-sized print halls, is still used to refer to the newspaper industry, as Garcia-Aviles (2014, p. 258) observes, journalists working in this sector are expected to create content for multiple platforms as part of their daily routine, including social media, websites, and audio visual hosts as well as in newsprint. Matthews (2017, p. 210), in her history of the ‘provincial’ press refers to historic news titles as “legacy newspapers” for this reason, they are about more than the newspaper yet serve broadly the same function as they always have. For the purposes of my study, which began in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, I am focussing on journalists employed in local and regional sector of the “legacy newspaper” industry, the British press, which were in existence at the time of the Inquiry and have long been established in the communities they write about – it is from this sector which I sought my sample of participants.

Secondly, the study is interested in the formative period when journalists are learning their vocational skills, behaviours and understanding. For the purposes of this research, the formative period is defined as within the first three years of starting their first job as a journalist. During this period, journalists become familiar with the structures within which they operate, have had the opportunity to learn the skills associated with their role and there is a reasonable expectation that they will have encountered ethical dilemma. They have also been able to observe peer practice and be able to reflect on their experiences in their community. To date, there has been no study looking at the exposure of early career journalists to ethical dilemma, and therefore in deciding the research methodology, it was difficult to predict with any certainty at what point dilemma would present itself, but there is a normative expectation that they would have encountered some ethical issue during their first three years. While there are a number of training routes for journalists working in the regional press, there is a general consensus that trainees take some form of senior journalism assessment such as the NQJ or COJ within three years of beginning work in a newsroom, and this informed my sample selection.

The third criterion in determining participants in this study is the place of work. The normative understanding is that newspaper journalists in the UK begin their careers in the local or regional newspaper sector, the more talented journalists progressing from there onto national newspapers (Cole in Franklin, 2006, p. 75). It is therefore reasonable to expect early career journalists to be located in the local provincial press.

To ensure that responses are representative of the sector, participants in the study were sought from the five major regional newspaper groups in the UK: Johnston Press, Trinity Mirror, Newsquest, Archant and Iliffe, and one small independent group Wharncliffe. This allowed for an even geographical distribution of participants across the UK.

These initial criteria were designed to allow for a selection of relatively homogenous early career journalists in my sample, which is desirable when looking for reliability in responses and therefore participants in this study were sampled from early career journalist working in regional newspapers in Britain.

As the fieldwork got underway, it became apparent that there was a second type of participant which would add a different dimension to the data, and this was the training manager, that is the person with responsibility for directing the learning of the early career journalist. In the course of negotiating access to early career journalists, training managers expressed an interest in the study and it became apparent that their perceptions of training mechanisms and learning structures within newspaper organisations would provide a second seam of data worthy of exploration in attempting to answer the research question.

Hypothetically, training managers are key influences on training journalists, and therefore their understanding of what is meant by journalism ethics is a valid consideration. Training managers in this context are usually senior staff within a newsroom or news organisation who are given oversight of training given to junior journalists. To ensure consistency in terms of the approach to the research methodology, each participating newspaper organisation was invited to nominate a training manager who would be willing to take part in the study. To qualify as a training manager for the purposes of the study, the participant either had to have some responsibility for directly overseeing the training of early career journalists or some influence on the development of early career journalism training programmes.

In summary the primary participants in this study were sampled from early career journalist, with secondary participants selected on the basis that they held training responsibility.

Sample size

In quantitative research, relatively large numbers of participants from a population, sampled at random, are included in the sample in order to ensure reliability in the answers arrived at, which can be generalized to a larger population. However, in qualitative research, the aim is to generate data which will lead to a deeper understanding of that being studied, and large samples are not always practicable or necessary.

According to Walliman (2016), being able to generalize from the data is not the aim of case studies.

It is rather about the quality of theoretical analysis that is allowed by intensive investigation into one or a few cases, and how well theory can be generated and tested using both inductive and deductive reasoning. (p. 40)

He adds that the sample size depends on how representative the data is of the area under investigation and careful choice of sampling parameters is as important as defining the sample size.

Therefore, when posing the question ‘how big should a qualitative sample be?’ the answer tends to be… ‘it depends’. The aim is to arrive at data which is reliable and representative.

Back (2012) states that, in discussion with his own postgraduate students, he finds himself using the ‘it depends’ response to the question of sample size.

I know they are unsatisfied with this lame response. It is the only honest one I can give because the answer to a question like “how much data is enough” is never simply a procedural matter. Rather, it can only be answered by examining how the interview data connects with the analytical framework of the project and the “truth telling” status we confer on interviews. (Back in Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 12)

Becker (2012), who has published widely on sociological methodologies, cautions that it is difficult to know at the start of the research exactly how large the sample size should be as the data, as it is being gathered, may lead you to believe that more or fewer participants are necessary to gain sufficient understanding of what is being studied. He adds that there is no ‘right place’ to stop when conducting research as there are a number of pragmatic factors (time, resources) which impact on this decision.

You will just want to be sure that when you do stop, the interviews and observations you have and what you want to say coincide, your data supporting your conclusions and your conclusions not going beyond what your data can support. (Becker in Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 15)

Bryman (2012) discusses this in terms of reaching a “saturation” point – where a researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new theories emerge. (Bryman in Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 18) He cautions that the problem is in identifying when saturation has been reached, though the more homogeneous the sample, the lower the number of participants needed before saturation can be claimed.

At the design stage of this research, it was difficult to state with any confidence how many interviews would be necessary in order to reach conclusions with sufficient confidence underpinned by data. I had set out to capture 20 early career journalists as participants and then review the data to ascertain whether further interviews were necessary or whether, at that point, saturation had been reached. There were, however, problems in securing 20 early career journalists, and only 14 interviews were secured – see subsequent discussion. However, when analysed, the responses of the 14 participants were sufficiently similar in key areas to be able to argue that “saturation” had been reached and that an argument could be made for the reliability of the data. They were supplemented with six further interviews with senior managers who held responsibility for learning in the workplace.

Data Collection

Having decided to take a qualitative approach to this body of research, then the mechanism of collecting data needs to be considered.

The interview was the key technique for data collection, using a short questionnaire and guided questions. This section considers the construction and use of the questionnaire and the design and operation of the interviews.

I require two types of data to inform the overarching research question. The first is establishing data about the participant, who they are, their educational history, and where they work. The second type of data reveals something of how they learn journalism ethics, and where this learning is located.

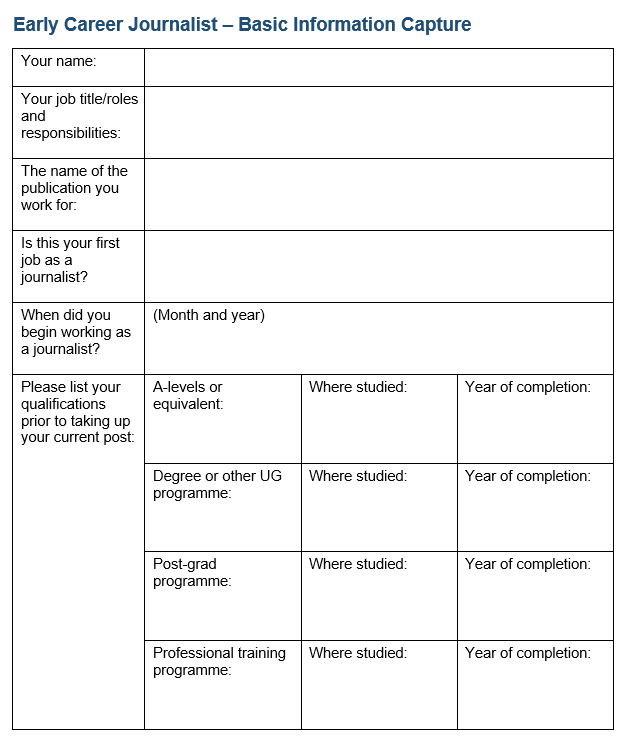
Questionnaire

Establishing information about each participant can be captured through a short questionnaire which positions the participant prior to the more detailed semi-structured interview. The structure of the questionnaire should be uncomplicated. Information sought through this mechanism includes:

1. Personal information about the respondent, including the length of time they have worked as a journalist and the nature of the work they undertake (for example, working in news, sport, a specialism, sub-editing, etc)
2. Information about their learning experiences which inform their practice (for example, whether they have studied a journalism degree, or undertaken NCTJ training)
3. Information about their employer, including contextual descriptions.

A form was used for the purposes of collecting this data, which was completed with the participant in situ. See Figure 6.

Figure 6 Form used to collect establishing data on participants in this study



Note: For the purposes of secure data storage and preserving the anonymity of participants, each participant was allocated a number which is used as an identifier on file naming protocols. They key linking the number to the participant was kept securely. All data was stored securely in line with University regulations.

Semi-structured interviews

The second part of data collection requires semi-structured interviews, on a one-to-one basis with each participant.

Mason (2018, p. 111) notes that interviews are a common tool in qualitative research.

If you choose qualitative interviewing, it may be because your ontological position suggests that people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, stories and narratives, language and discourses, experiences, interactions, perceptions, sensations and so on are meaningful properties of the social reality that your research questions are designed to explore.

Gaining insight into the learning of ethics in the workplace draws on these properties, reinforcing the notion that the interview is an appropriate tool to elicit data around the research questions.

Semi-structured interviews can be referred to in the literature as “intensive interviews”, “in-depth interviews”, and “guided conversations” (Yin, 2009, p. 110), the underpinning principle is that a conversation is developed between the interviewer and the participant. Brinkmann (2013, p. 18) notes that there is a continuum in the form of the interview as a tool for gathering qualitative data, from the highly structured to the unstructured, though it is contestable whether there can ever be a truly unstructured interview, as the interviewee will always by necessity have to ask an opening question.

As Brinkmann (2013, pp. 1-5) observes conversations are a key tool for finding out about what people think and feel about particular issues, and he argues that they are perhaps the most objective method of enquiry into human experience. However, there are inherent weaknesses to this approach in that, as Brinkman suggests, the choreography of the interview is so widely understood through exposure to interviews on television and radio, that the participants slip into their role of the interviewee sometimes too readily, and it is often in the “cracks” of the interview where the new thinking emerges rather than through the following of conversational convention.

Hansen and Machin (2019, p. 237) advocate the use of an interview guide which sets out the topics for discussion and the order in which to raise the topics. While the context of their advice is the focus group, where a number of research participants are questioned as a group, the use of question prompts in conversational interviews is not uncommon as it allows the interviewer to frame their inquiries with care and avoid putting questions in such a way that they lack clarity, or introduce bias, for example. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 117) discuss the ethnographic interview, which has an open structure and high degree of responsiveness to the flow of the conversation, using “non-directive questioning”, but even here questions are designed in order to trigger discussions in a particular area. Having structure to the interview via pre-formed questions also helps to keep the discussion relevant to the research question:

While the aim is often to minimize the influence of the researcher on what the interviewee says, some structuring is necessary in terms of what is and is not relevant. And even where what is said is highly relevant, it may be insufficiently detailed or concrete or some clarification may be necessary if ambiguity is to be resolved. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 118)

Mason (2018, p. 116) describes the semi-structured interview as a “conversation with a purpose”, and that planning the approach is important. She acknowledges that some researchers prefer to minimize the number of structured questions but finds that they would still adopt some structure to their interview format to enable a focus on the research question. She notes that the type of question used to steer semi-structured interviews is important, and where the knowledge and evidence you are seeking to explore are dependent on context, as is the case in this research project, then one approach is to ask participants to talk about specifics, about what they did or would have done in certain circumstances.

It might involve trying to ascertain people’s reasonings or judgements in certain areas by focusing on events and situations which have taken place in their lives or giving them scenarios or ‘vignettes’ to work through and respond to, rather than simply asking them their views about x, y or z. (Mason, 2018, p. 112)

This type of question is particularly useful in this study because it is trying to surface information about ethical understanding and how this is learned, who it is learned from. For this reason, questions probing what the participant would do in particular circumstances, and where they learned that behaviour/understanding, were included in the interview guide (Figure 7). For example, question three, ‘What would you do if….?’ Set out a series of scenarios commonly encountered by journalists, and some understanding of how they would deal with such a scenario would enable them to talk about ethical decision making. The piloting of these types of question in early interviews validated the decision to include them, as it was in talking through scenarios that participants opened up about the influences which guided their decision making. Question 3 was particularly successful in the field as participants generally suggested a contentious story they had to navigate and were eager to discuss how they resolved dilemma.

Therefore, a set of questions, which was used in each interview, was devised to allow participants to discuss their experiences of learning ethics while encouraging them to expand on their responses. Early questions were designed to get the participants talking about where they feel ethical dilemma is located, hence the framing of the questions around being asked to do something which made them ‘uncomfortable’. There were also prompts noted to some questions, which were used only to facilitate conversation where participants struggled with the context of the question. Ethics as discussed in Chapter 4 can be defined widely, and while putting a question about the use of a code of practice may elicit answers around what the code says, it will not easily lead to discussion around the non-codified ethical dilemma – and it was through using a more open question (Q6) that I was seeking the ‘cracks’ in the conversation that might yield new data about understanding of ethics. The sequence of questions then moved through to the learning of ethics as the participant perceives this and influences on ethical understanding.

The questions put to early career journalists differed from those put to those with responsibility for training (see figure 8), though there was consistency within each group. The questions were designed to elucidate responses to the research questions. They were structured in such a way as to encourage naturalistic responses and encourage conversation, with the questionnaire used to collect contextual information. It was useful to begin the interview process with the completion of the questionnaire as this allowed the participant to settle into the interview.

Figure 7 – Question prompts used with early career journalists to guide conversational interviews, including an indication as to how they relate to the research questions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Question Prompt | Research Question |
| 1 | Outline your current role and responsibilities with your current employer.  Who is your line manager?  Do you have a mentor? | 3 |
| 2 | Explain how you would be given instructions on following up a story, and what you do to see it through to completion? | 3 |
| 3 | What do you do if you encounter areas of contention with the story you are covering?  For example, you have attended an inquest where distressing information about the nature of someone’s death has been discussed, or you have been offered money to keep a story “quiet”, or the story concerns someone under 18 which casts them in a negative light, or you have been sent explicit pictures about a prominent person by their former partner, or you have been approached by a solicitor whose client suffers from mental health problems and who asks you not to cover his court hearing relating to shoplifting.  Who would you talk to about it? | 3 |
| 4 | Have you ever been asked to do something that has made you feel uncomfortable?  Note: uncomfortable in the sense that you felt you should not be writing about a particular subject, that it was not appropriate, or that you felt was uncomfortable. | 3 |
| 5 | What would you do if asked to write a story which made you feel uncomfortable? | 3 |
| 6 | What do you understand by the term “journalism ethics”? | 1,2 |
| 7 | Have you ever studied journalism ethics as part of your education prior to working as a journalist?  What did this consist of? (formal moral philosophies or professional case study approaches for example if needed)  Have you had to draw on this learning in your current job? | 1,2 |
| 8 | Have you taken part in any form of learning on journalism ethics that has been offered by your current employer?  If so, what form has this taken? (follow on questions if needed)  Where did you study?  What sort of materials were you supplied with?  Are you “tested” on your learning?  Do you have to pass the “test”?  How helpful has this learning been in your role?  Have you had to refer to it in any of the work you have done?  What was the most useful part of this learning?  What was missed in the learning programme that you feel you need additional training in? | 1,2,3,4 |
| 9 | Do you ever discuss ethical issues in the newsroom?  Is this formally facilitated or is it more informal “as and when it arises” conversation?  Who facilitates the discussions? | 1,2,3,4 |
| 10 | Are you ever encouraged to formally reflect on your practice as a journalist?  What format does this take?  Do you include ethical dilemma in your reflection? | 4 |
| 11 | Do you ever have concerns about the ethical behaviours of colleagues?  For example, their use of language around race and gender?  What would you do if you did have concerns? | 3,4 |
| 12 | Have you ever felt pressured to act unethically?  If so, what form did that pressure take?  How did you respond to that pressure? | 3 |
| 13 | Who would you go to in your organisation if you felt someone was pressuring you to act unethically? | 3,4 |
| 14 | Who influences you in the way you approach your tasks?  Please give information about all who have directed your understanding and approaches to your work in your current workplace. This might be a mentor for example, or your news editor.  What is your view of their understanding of journalism ethics? | 3 |
| 15 | What do you think is the biggest ethical challenge facing journalists in the UK today? | 1,2,3,4 |
| 16 | Is there anything else you would like to add? |  |

Note, these are question prompts and not every line of each section was used where topics had been covered in naturalistic conversation earlier in the interview, or the conversation had taken a particular direction which was worthy of exploration. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 118); Mason (2018, p. 118) note, listening and being responsive to the direction of the conversation is important in order to adapt questions to take account of the story told by the participant.

Questions prompts for training managers differed to take account of their context and their responsibility for teaching and learning, however, they were also designed to elicit information about what they understood to be journalism ethics and how learning was supported by the organisation they worked for at institutional level.

Figure 8 Question prompts for training managers and how they align to the lines of enquiry

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Question prompt | Research question |
| 1 | Please outline your current role and responsibilities. |  |
| 2 | Who do you report to? | 3 |
| 3 | Where are your training and development priorities decided?  In what forum?  Who drives the process (demand from trainees or institutional imperative?) | 1,3 |
| 4 | What do you understand by the term “journalism ethics”? | 1,2,4 |
| 5 | What is the nature of journalism ethics teaching and learning in your organisation?  Is it NCTJ, bespoke, or other? | 1,2 |
| 6 | Have you noticed a development in training in journalism ethics?  What do you relate this to?  What were the key factors which led to the development?[[13]](#footnote-13) | 1,2 |
| 7 | Are there any adaptations of journalism ethics training to take into account the context of particular newspapers?[[14]](#footnote-14) | 1,2,3 |
| 8 | Is learning negotiable? Can early career journalists influence the direction of training programmes, and learning, and how would they do this? | 1,2,3,4 |
| 9 | What is the nature of the learning space employed for teaching and learning in journalism ethics?  Is this separated from the newsroom in classrooms, is it online, is it undertaken individually or in groups?[[15]](#footnote-15) | 1,2,3,4 |
| 10 | What does the learning material consist of? How is the learning delivered?  Please outline the syllabus for the teaching of journalism ethics, and explain the materials used in the delivery of the syllabus. | 1,2 |
| 11 | Do you evaluate the effectiveness of learning in journalism ethics?  If so, how do you conduct this evaluation? | 4 |
| 12 | Do you provide opportunities for early career journalists to reflect on their experiences in the newsroom?  If so, how are these facilitated?  Is this formal reflective activity or incidental? | 4 |
| 13 | How are you supported in your own learning of journalism ethics?  Do you participate in professional networks of any kind?  Do you access specialist training in this area? | 1,2,3,4 |
| 14 | How important is teaching and learning in journalism ethics when looking at the whole training offer of your organisation? | 1,2,4 |

Research ethics

All interviews were conducted face to face and in line with the University of Huddersfield research ethics code. The detailed methodology for the fieldwork was approved by the University ethics panel and informed consent was gathered from all participants who were given written information about this study and their role in it. See Appendix 4 – permission forms which all participants signed prior to research interviews taking place.

The research was also conducted in line with the principles of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), in that the selection of participants was inclusive of different interests and I adhered to an ethic of respect throughout in alignment with BERA guidance. Gatekeepers were approached for permission to seek early career journalists to participate in this study, and once gatekeeper permission had been given, potential participants were approached. They were all given clear information about the study, while they were asked for their consent to be included in the study it was made clear that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

All interviews with early career journalists took place in their workplace, and on each occasion, a private room was provided to allow for confidential discussion. Interviews generally took an hour and were recorded using an audio recording device and were later transcribed verbatim in their entirety. All data was held securely, and electronic data stored on encrypted file storage systems. All early career participants were anonymised by name, employer and region for the purposes of discussion – because of the relatively small number of participants identification of employer or region may have led to the identification of the participant.

One participant agreed to be treated as ‘elite’ - that is their identity is tied to their job description and there would be difficulty in granting them anonymity in research outputs because of the importance of their contribution. This was discussed with them, and they signed an agreement that they were happy to be identified.

To support the fieldwork, a successful bursary application was made to the Association for Journalism Education, and participants in the study were made aware of this.

Analysis

Little is understood about how journalists learn ethics in the workplace, and as this research aims to surface concepts around the learning of ethics a thematic qualitative analysis of data was undertaken.

It is informed by Grounded Theory methodologies, which were first suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and are useful when taking a constructivist approach to analysis. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 163) note, qualitative analysis of the data is useful in initiating thinking which may lead to the emergence of new concepts, and is appropriate in the context of this study.

Hammersley and Atkinson (ibid p. 164) suggest the first task is to read the data and note concepts which make sense of it. They then describe a process of multiple re-readings to note in more depth emergent concepts which are then reapplied to the dataset as a whole. This is referred to as an ‘open coding’ approach, which Gobo (2008, p. 227) discusses as being the point from which a check list or schema can emerge which brings into sharper focus the developing concepts. This is also described as a ‘bottom-up’ approach (Urquhart, 2013, p. 38).

When applied to the data in relation to this study, the first three transcripts of interviews underwent multiple readings and an open coding approach taken where key concepts were identified by the frequency in which they surfaced and because they corresponded with previous literature. For example, there were frequent mentions of the news editor as an influencer in early transcripts, and therefore mention of the news editor in all transcripts was coded. The emergent concepts informed the schema which was then applied in coding all interview data. As more transcripts were coded, any further new code which emerged was then added to the schema and reapplied to all transcripts. This particular approach was useful in that I recognised after the first three transcripts were coded, few new codes emerged from the data, suggesting that the sample, although small, was yielding responses which were representative of the whole, and suggested that had I been able to secure further interviews with early career journalists they may not have added anything further to picture which emerged.

A complementary approach to the open coding approach is sometimes referred to as the ‘top down’ approach, or *a priori* method, as it is informed by codes from the literature (Urquhart, 2013, pp. 38-39). As the research focus is on the learning of journalism ethics, some codes were suggested by literature, for example mention of the Editors’ Code of Practice and its constituent parts were top-down coded. As is discussed later, this was a useful approach as there was an expectation that the Editors’ Code would underpin some understanding of journalistic ethics, and where and how this was discussed by participants is an important consideration when building a picture of how ethics is learned. Urquhart references Dey (1993) who argues that a mixed approach to coding is legitimate and allows for the construction of “common sense categories”.

In summary, the data was coded, a line at a time, in vivo. This allowed for the identification of groups of codes into categories, and a move to a process of selective coding which allow concepts and theories to emerge. Urquhart (2013, p. 49) cites Glaser (1978) and Strauss (1987) and describes the process as one in which groups of codes are organised, which themselves sit inside larger groups which leads to the emergence of specific themes and concepts. As will be explored in the analysis sections of this thesis, it can be argued that this was an appropriate approach which yielded new insights into the learning of journalism ethics in the workplace.

NVivo software was the tool used for the coding exercise. Anonymised transcripts were loaded into the programme and once coded, reports were generated which were then scrutinised for patterns and emerging ideas and theories.

Summary

The methodological approach to this research was qualitative inquiry. The semi-structured interview was the key tool for data collection and the research sample consisted of early career journalists defined by their place of work (British provincial press) supplemented with interviews with training managers working in the British provincial press. The methodology for the analysis of the data was qualitative thematic analysis, using a process of coding transcripts of interviews to identify emergent concepts.

Section II of this thesis now moves to consider the analysis of the data.

Section II – Analysis of Findings

Chapter 6 Fieldwork

This section will consider how the fieldwork was implemented, and key findings using the research questions to frame the analysis.

Study participants

This study looks at how journalists learn ethics in the workplace and in total, 14 early career journalists agreed to participate in this study, eight identifying as male, six as female. They were drawn from 11 different provincial publications across England, including three regional daily newspapers and eight local weekly newspapers. All had been working in journalism for three years or less, and all were expected to publish in a variety of online formats (including Twitter and for their news title’s webpages) as well as for the print publication. The participants represented three of the major British newspaper groups, Reach (Trinity Mirror at the time of the interviews), Johnson Press and Newsquest. Each participant was interviewed in their place of work however, the interviews were confidential, and each was held in a private room where they were able to talk freely. They had each been given permission by their line manager to participate in the study under the agreement that their responses would be anonymised, and the detail of their specific contribution not made known to their employer.

Senior staff with responsibility for training were interviewed, some of them at their place of work, and one senior group manager travelled to the University of Huddersfield where they were interviewed. The six training managers were representative of the three newspaper groups, and included three executive staff with national responsibility for training, one group editor with oversight of regional training and two training managers who were based in the newsroom with their trainees.

Archant, one of the four largest newspaper groups in the UK was invited to participate in the project but declined. Participants were sought from a number of small independent newspapers but responses indicated that either they were unwilling to engage in the project or did not have staff who were in scope (this was the case with Wharncliffe which had not recruited new starters for more than three years).

All of the newspaper groups participating in the project were recognised by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), a voluntary self-regulatory body formed in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry (IPSO, 2019). None of the participants were regulated by the IMPRESS, however, a scoping discussion was held with journalists at three IMPRESS regulated publications which revealed that as small independent organisations run by experienced journalists they had no early career staff. This position appears to be common across IMPRESS regulated publications as a review of their membership on the IMPRESS website signals that the majority of their membership are small hyperlocal organisations which publish online only, with small staff teams, and represent only a small proportion of UK news titles (IMPRESS, 2019b).

Challenges

Initially, the plan was to interview a minimum of 20 early career journalists as this was felt to be achievable in the timeframe of the PhD. Unfortunately, while initially all gatekeepers at both IPSO and IMPRESS-recognised titles who were approached (newspaper group trainers, newspaper editors and managers) were interested in the study, when pushed for participants a number either did not return emails or telephone calls, or had no early career journalists eligible to take part (particularly the case with IMPRESS regulated organisations). As Silverman (2010, pp. 202-206) notes, gaining access to participants in a study can be problematic where it is necessary to negotiate with gatekeepers, and this proved to be the case. All interviews were conducted between July 2017 and April 2018, and while a further two interviews were initially secured for November 2018, these were cancelled because the gatekeepers did not want to proceed further, citing time and management reorganisation as reasons.

However, it became apparent after the first ten interviews that the responses from participants were approaching saturation point, in that responses were similar and little new information emerged from subsequent interviews. Therefore, while a sample size of 14 is not what was originally hoped for, it is unlikely that further interviews would have revealed new insights.

All those with responsibility for managing training who were approached for interview engaged with the study and were interviewed. One requested anonymity, which meant that by default anonymity has had to be conferred on the majority of those managers to prevent ‘jigsaw identification’ – that is identification by deduction. One held a very senior position nationally in relation to the development of occupational ethics and agreed to be treated as an elite participant and is therefore referred to by his name, as discussed later.

Each interview was recorded using a TASCAM audio recording device and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were not to a fixed time to give participants’ space to respond to questions, however, each interview lasted about an hour.

Process

Transcripts of interviews were imported into NVivo software and coded using a combination of *a priori* and inductive nodes which enabled me to collate data around each research question.

For the purposes of this study, all participants have been anonymised and assigned first names for use in discussion. Figure 9 describes each early career journalist in terms of their context – that is type of newspaper they work for. The workplace is described either as a weekly or daily publication, but this is for convenience of labelling. All publications represented in this study had an online presence and published information online frequently throughout the day, irrespective of whether the printed edition of their newspaper was released weekly or daily. Weekly and daily titles differed in the volume of journalistic work published each day to satisfy the demands of the online and print outputs, and the number of staff required to sustain such output. Daily titles employed more journalistic staff, and early career journalists working in these environments, as will be discussed later, were exposed to larger teams of co-workers and managers within their community of practice.

Some weekly newspapers shared office space with ‘sister’ newspapers, that is a newspaper which covers a different but neighbouring geographical area and which is owned by the same company. In these instances, there were shared resources such as the newspapers sharing the same editor and news editor who had editorial responsibility for more than one newspaper title, with journalists working on one title located at the opposite side of the desk to those working on a sister title. This extends the community of practice beyond the immediate publication the journalist is working for to embrace journalists on sister publications, however, as they are both working for the same organisation and covering similar if neighbouring geographical areas, following similar routines and observing identical company protocols around training and ethical understandings, I would argue that the context functions as one community, albeit in a slightly larger newsroom than usually found in weekly newspapers where a staff team of five or fewer is the norm. This is also explored more fully later.

In estimating the size of the editorial staff team, the participants in this study worked alongside, this was a function of those present working alongside them in their main location. For example, Graham, who worked on a weekly title, shared an office with one other journalist who was referred to as the senior reporter and while he had daily conversations with the news editor, this was often by telephone with occasional face to face meetings. His immediate community was himself plus his senior reporter. This is clearly a different context to Diane who worked in a large busy newsroom on a daily newspaper.

The relevance to presenting each participant’s context in this way is to enhance the understanding of the individual, their environment and their influences when considering the data under each line of enquiry.

The newspaper group where each participant is located is not noted here, and while something might be lost by not revealing this, anonymity of participants was agreed with each. I am prepared to concede data to protect the participants and avoid connecting the organisation they worked for with individuals.

Figure 9 Anonymised and contextualised participant description – early career journalists

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Participant | Newspaper type | Size of newsroom by number of editorial staff |
| Lisa | Weekly serving a small city | Fewer than 5 editorial staff |
| Suzanne | Local Daily serving a town and its surrounding suburbs | Between 10 and 15 |
| Eddie | Weekly serving a small town, sharing an office with sister papers | Between 10 and 15 including journalists on sister papers |
| Bo | Weekly serving a small town, sharing an office with sister papers | Between 10 and 15 including journalists on sister papers |
| Penny | Weekly serving a small town | Fewer than 5 |
| Joe | Local Daily serving a large city population | More than 30 |
| Charles | Local Daily serving a large city population | More than 30 |
| David | Weekly serving a small town and based in a satellite office | Only 2 people based at the satellite office with fewer than 5 as part of the direct editorial team based in another town. |
| Lesley | Large weekly serving a city with daily digital news pages issued | Between 5 and 10 |
| Steven | Small weekly | Fewer than 5 |
| Diane | Large daily regional serving a city and number of satellite towns | More than 30 |
| Ian | Weekly serving a small town, sharing an office with sister papers | Between 10 and 15 including journalists on sister papers |
| Alina | Weekly serving a small town, sharing an office with sister papers | Between 10 and 15 including journalists on sister papers |
| Josie | Weekly serving a small town, sharing an office with sister papers | Between 10 and 15 including journalists on sister papers |

It should be noted that in a discussion of the analysis, the place of work is relevant to the discussion, and where this is the case, no name is used but the newspaper organisation they work for is identified.

One of the participants with responsibility for training agreed to be treated as an elite participant and be identified for the purposes of this study. This was Neil Benson, who at the time of interview was the Chair of the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee – which has oversight of the maintenance and development of the Editors’ Code of Practice. He had substantial experience in developing policy around occupational ethics and was a former president of the UK Society of Editors, a member of the Newspaper Society’s Parliamentary, Employment and Regulatory Affairs Committee, and Group Executive Director of Trinity Mirror. His testimony is important because of the senior positions held and his potential to direct strategy and policy. His context makes it very difficult to treat him with anonymity, and he gave his interview on the basis that he preferred to waive anonymity.\* In evaluating the potential for this study, I also conducted two interviews with key figures in relation to teaching journalism ethics. The first was an interview with Prof Chris Frost about the development of the teaching of journalism ethics in his then role as Chair of the Association of Journalism Education, and former Chair of the National Union of Journalists’ Ethics Committee. The second interview was with Tony Johnston, a director of Engage Media, a training organisation which developed specialist resources for teaching journalism ethics. The interviews were conducted following the University and BERA guidelines, and both gave consent for the interviews to be recorded and transcribed. However, they were conducted prior to the formation of the final research questions and the interview was not guided by question prompts as set out in Figure 8.

The participants with responsibility for training are set out in Figure 10, with an indication of their position in the organisation as it relates to the training of journalists and the alias given to each for use in the discussion which follows. Their employing organisation is not listed as this may act as a means by which to identify the participants. In the analysis which follows, the newspaper group which employs the participating training managers may be relevant to the discussion, and here the managers are listed as ‘anon’, and the employer is identified.

Figure 10 Contextualised and anonymised profiles of participating training managers

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name | Role |
| Geoff | Chief reporter and area training manager |
| Peter | Training director |
| Annabelle | Training director |
| Gerald | Group editor |
| Simon | Group editor |
| Neil Benson\* | Chair of the Editors’ Code Committee |

This study will now take each research question in turn, presenting and evaluating the data.

In my discussion of the data, I felt it was important to bring forward the participant voices as it was through noting carefully what they had to say that I was able to identify the emergent concepts, and as Priest notes quoting participants can be important in communicating the “insider view” (Priest, 2010, p. 173). What follows is discussion segmented by theme, with signposting to literature considered in previous chapters. I use quotations extracted from participant interviews to support and illustrate the theme, and to explain and exemplify the patterns observed, and also where the quotations may be controversial or surprising (Grey, 2018, p. 398) in such a way as to throw some illumination on the concept being discussed.

Chapter 7 Research Question 1 - What is the nature of prior learning of ethics that early career journalists engage in before beginning work in a newsroom?

Introduction

Participants in the study were from a range of educational backgrounds, however, all had been exposed to some formal journalism study prior to starting work with a news title. Half of the participants had undertaken a degree which contained in its title ‘journalism’ (journalism, sports journalism, broadcast journalism, for example), and those who had not gone down that route had completed either a post-graduate diploma (NCTJ accredited) in journalism or the NCTJ pre-entry diploma, a level three programme offered through a range of modes of study at a number of accredited centres (NCTJ, 2019c). The diploma is designed to prepare people for working in news organisations and tends to be requested by a number of large news organisations as a pre-requisite to being offered a job as a journalist. Indeed, 12 of the 14 interviewed had completed the NCTJ diploma, two participants via an accredited degree programme which prepared its students for the pre-entry exams. One candidate had completed a Masters level degree programme in journalism and had also completed the NCTJ pre-entry diploma. See Figure 11 which summarises the prior exposure to journalism education of early career journalism participants in this study.

In discussing the course content of these formal learning opportunities with participants in the study, it became apparent that the curriculum in relation to journalism ethics was highly variable – students on NCTJ programmes studied a very narrow regulatory based curriculum, and students on undergraduate journalism programmes described widely differing course content which was dictated by the area of special interest of the academic staff.

In exploring how educational routes into journalism impact on understanding of journalism ethics in more detail, this Chapter now looks at the learning experienced by graduates and also by those who followed an NCTJ accredited programme, before turning to look at how they relate to learning typologies.

Figure 11 Summary of educational routes into a career in journalism taken by participants in this study

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant | Undergraduate programme | | | PG Dip  Journalism | MA  Journalism | NCTJ  Pre-entry diploma |
| Journalism | Other | No UG qualification |
| Lisa |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Suzanne |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Eddie |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bo |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Penny |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Joe |  |  |  |  |  | \* |
| Charles |  |  |  |  |  | \* |
| Graham |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Lesley |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Steven |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Diane |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ian |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Alina |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Josie |  |  |  |  |  |  |

\*denotes participants who successful completed the NCTJ diploma examinations concurrent with their undergraduate studies as a result of accreditation arrangements.

Graduates

As Figure 11 illustrates, only half of the participants had undertaken some form of journalism undergraduate programme. Of the remainder, one had gone straight onto the NCTJ programme at 18, and the rest were from a range of higher education programmes including languages and economics. None of the journalism graduates had gained direct entry into a job in journalism, all had been required to undertake some form of NCTJ programme before being considered for employment. This perhaps signals a continued unwillingness by the newspaper industry to accept journalism degrees as appropriately equipping candidates for the occupation with little appearing to have changed since the 1950s, which resonates with literature discussed in Chapter 1. It also signals a continuing dominance of the NCTJ in the training of journalists in the regional press. It should be noted that participants were drawn from only three of the four major regional newspaper groups, however, the fourth largest, Archant, also works with the NCTJ in training its journalists, and sponsors an award for performance in the National Qualification in Journalism examinations (Sharman, 2020).

In discussing their learning of journalism ethics prior to entering the occupation, where relevant, participants were asked whether they could recall the content of their journalism undergraduate degree programmes, and how journalism ethics was taught to them. Steven said that he could not recall much about the detail of the discussions, and added:

There was a module called law and ethics, but I seem to remember it being all about law and maybe a couple of questions about the code. [Editors’ Code]

This was a view expressed by some of the other journalism graduates who also struggled to recall course content on journalism ethics, though they were all aware of journalism regulation via teaching of the Editors’ Code. In terms of sources of ethics as discussed in Chapter 4, there was very little evidence in an analysis of the interview data that classical definitions of ethics in relation to journalism were discussed. What was striking was that none of the participants raised any alternative to the Editors’ Code as being something they were aware of or operated to, for example the NUJ Code of Conduct or the Bordeaux Declaration. One reason for this could be the distance of time, the participants in the study having graduated more than two years previously had time to forget the detail of undergraduate study. Many like Steven referenced ethics as part of a module on law for journalists, and when asked what they understood by the term ‘journalism ethics’, the majority referred to the Editors’ Code – clearly conflating ethics with a regulatory framework.

Bo studied a journalism degree and also the NCTJ pre-entry programme as a post-graduate student. He said while journalism ethics was mentioned in context throughout the three years of his undergraduate programme, the majority of the formal learning on ethics as he understood it was located in a final year module and the focus was on resolving ethical dilemma:

We would be given a scenario where a journalist may have been put into a predicament about what he should or shouldn’t report on and it would be up to us, maybe as a group at times or individually, to analyse that case study and determine the different issues. (Bo)

Bo described being asked to identify the ethical dilemma and then decide what the most appropriate course of action would be. Again, this was occupationally focused learning using case studies. He was able to contrast this with the approach taken on the NCTJ diploma he undertook as a post-graduate student, where he said he was also exposed to a case study approach but drilled to pass the NCTJ exams where there was an emphasis on understanding the Editors’ Code. He said:

We got into the Code of Practice a hell of a lot there. The exams there were heavily emphasised on the Code of Practice so that teaching was necessary, not just for the exams but for the day to day of the job too. (Bo)

His description of the emphasis placed on the code and its use in practice signals to some extent the narrow interpretation of ethics in the occupational setting – understanding the Editors’ Code being paramount, and an expectation which is driven by the requirement to pass NCTJ exams.

All of the early career journalists interviewed, without exception, cited *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* as a key text used for learning the Editors’ Code.

Two journalism graduates mentioned being taught ethics by Prof Chris Frost who was a tutor at the time on their undergraduate programme and one of the witnesses for the NUJ and AJE at the Leveson Inquiry, and while neither were able to recall curriculum detail, they did articulate the importance placed on good ethical conduct in journalism. Unsurprisingly, these candidates were able to reference Frost’s work *Journalism Ethics and Regulation* (2016) as a key text, but were the only participants in the study to do so.

This is significant as there are a number of texts which support learning of occupational ethics as discussed in Chapter 4, yet the only texts cited by participants in this study were *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* and two mentions of Frost’s text. A literature search would yield a list of texts aimed at developing an understanding of journalism ethics, yet these are overlooked in favour of the NCTJ published text *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*. This clearly signals the dominance of the NCTJ in shaping understanding of occupational ethics via this particular text. As I identified in Chapter 4, an analysis of how *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* frames ethics revealed that it was through the lens of regulation and the Editors’ Code, with a few pages dedicated to discussion on the observance of the code. While there is a section on regulation which first appeared in the 16th edition in 2001, ethics is somewhat marginalised.

Journalism graduates exhibited a vagueness in terms or recollection about what they studied at university in terms of journalism ethics, and Lesley said that at University there is a tendency to forget things as you go along, simply because you are focussing on the next assignment and there is a lot to learn. However, he added that which is learned at University resurfaces when undertaking vocational training and working in a newsroom. His second point was that classroom learning was too abstract and distant from the reality of the newsroom, and it was only when faced with real dilemma as part of a working day that some of the distant classroom debates made sense.

When you have been in a newsroom, that is when it sort-of clicks in your head. When you have not been in a newsroom I did find it quite hard to imagine how I would go about something, but now I have been in a newsroom… it all clicks into place. (Lesley)

This aligns with cognitive behaviourist theories of learning as discussed in Chapter 2, in that external stimuli, through encounters in the newsroom, reinforce understanding of journalism ethics as learned in the classroom, and suggests the workplace is an important learning space.

In terms of prior learning of journalism ethics, of the participants in the study, only half undertook a journalism degree, and of these, few were able to recall detail of the curricula content. Whether as Lesley suggests there is a need to be exposed to real dilemma to understand the importance of learning ethics on an undergraduate programme, it is difficult to say as he was the only participant who made that point. What was clear was that few of the journalism undergraduates were able to recall studying ethical philosophy or any detail of their undergraduate curriculum. They were unable to cite any sources of journalism ethics other than the Editors’ Code of Practice, and the text the majority referenced was *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*, with only two making reference to any alternative text. However, all were able to recall with greater clarity the curriculum followed on the NCTJ programmes they went on to following graduation, where again there was a clear focus on the Editors’ Code. This is a key finding as it suggests that the teaching and learning of journalism ethics to which journalism graduates are exposed prior to entering the occupation, and which they recall with any clarity, is largely framed around a narrow interpretation of ethics, that of occupational regulation, with learning the Editors’ Code of Practice given prominence.

NCTJ programme

Those participants in the study who followed the post-graduate diploma in journalism undertook programmes which were NCTJ accredited and followed a curriculum proscribed by the NCTJ, embedded into validated post-graduate structures at Higher Education institutions. Some of the post-graduate diploma programmes can be taken to Masters level, but only two participants in the study followed this particular path, as identified in Figure 11. Institutions offering NCTJ accredited programmes are subjected to close oversight by the NCTJ as part of the accreditation agreements and students are normally required to pass the same diploma exams as those students who follow the stand-alone NCTJ diploma which is not embedded into a post-graduate programme. (NCTJ, 2019b)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the NCTJ route into journalism is well established and many senior managers in the industry prefer to recruit new staff from programmes they themselves are familiar with. Geoff, a senior training manager, when asked what he looked for when recruiting early career journalists, said that the NCTJ had been around a long time and was well regarded for its training in journalism practice and in law for journalists, therefore if given a choice of candidates for a post, those with the NCTJ diploma tended to be the preferred candidates. This is borne out by all early career journalists in this study, as across three major newspaper groups, they had all been exposed to the NCTJ curriculum in some format. This makes the NCTJ curriculum important in framing the understanding of journalism ethics in early career journalists as it was clearly the dominant learning programme followed by participants prior to them entering journalism as an occupation, irrespective of whether the participant was a graduate or not.

When discussing the NCTJ curriculum, all early career journalists without exception were clear that they had studied ethics as part of the NCTJ programmes, but when probed for curriculum content, the focus of this learning was around the Editors’ Code. There was no mention of developing ethical understandings broader than this so that they had tools to deal with the unexpected and that not covered by the regulations. Each participant also described teaching as an adjunct to learning law. When discussing learning ethics, participants talked about learning “law and ethics” bringing the two disciplines together. The majority referred to *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* as the key text as previously discussed.

Anomalous route

In considering the data related to prior learning of journalism ethics, there was one outlier in that Penny had not followed either a journalism degree or a post-graduate journalism course. She had been employed by her local paper directly on leaving school and was immediately enrolled onto the NCTJ diploma . Her mode of study she described as being intertwined with work, being released to attend classes at a local NCTJ centre. She described studying ethics as part of the teaching on journalism law, drawing heavily on *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*. This was supplemented by the inclusion of a programme of guest speakers from industry and she was able to recall with detail some of the ethical dilemma set out by a visiting editor drawing on his experience, and her group discussing their approaches to the problems set within the framework of the Editors’ Code. Discussion of cases to underpin understanding of the Editors’ Code was a common feature which emerged during the interviews, irrespective of whether the programme offered as a level 3 diploma or as a post-graduate course.

They gave us a lot of real life examples, we were taught on that course by a lot of people who had past experience, my law teacher in particular I thought was really good….she worked at the News of the World so there were a lot of examples there. We had a lot of past editors who gave us a lot of examples of things that they had seen happen. (Penny)

Suzanne completed an MA in journalism which was NCTJ accredited and described a similar experience to Penny in that it formed part of a law and ethics curriculum. Suzanne talked about learning “law and ethics”, and this was a common feature in all of the interviews with early career journalists in that the two subject areas were perceived as a single entity.

Eddie recalled being taught ethics through the law lectures on the NCTJ programme and sitting exams titled “media law and ethics”. He said there had been a distinct focus on the Editors’ Code as the previous year IPSO had come into being – tying the learning of the Code back to the outcomes of the Leveson Inquiry.

The new Code of Practice was something that was drilled into us to learn. The syllabus tied law and ethics together in that while thinking legally we should be thinking ethically as well. (Eddie)

The framing of the teaching of journalism ethics emerged from the data as being centred on the legality of journalistic activity rather than the morality of that activity. Penny’s description of her law teacher leading the teaching of ethics is one indicator here, and while that teacher was a former journalist who Penny valued for the experience she brought to her teaching, she was still framed as a law expert. Similarly, the common conflation of law and ethics in the data provided by early career journalists positions ethics as something aligned to law. This is reinforced by the key text which the majority of participants cited (*McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*) taking as its focus journalism law, and as discussed in Chapter 4, frames ethics as a regulatory issue.

Summary

In responding to RQ1, when considering the learning of journalism ethics prior to entering the occupation then, the data revealed a number of findings.

Firstly, not all early career journalists had completed a journalism degree, however the majority had all been exposed to some form of formal learning in journalism, in line with Eraut’s description of formal learning, prior to entering the occupation. This took the form of a learning package (a journalism degree, post graduate qualification or NCTJ accredited course), on a taught programme, which is certificated (in this context either directly by the NCTJ or via accreditation arrangements) (Eraut, 2000, p. 114).

Secondly, the nature of the formal learning is heavily influenced by the NCTJ in terms of its curriculum content and framing of journalism ethics.

Not all participants were the product of a journalism-related degree programme, and of those that did study journalism to degree level, their recall of the curriculum in relation to journalism ethics is incomplete. This is a little perplexing in that contingent to the move to establish journalism as a higher education subject might be an expectation that ethics would form an important part of the curriculum, to the extent where graduates might recall the nature of the debates. Perhaps this is a function of the autonomy afforded universities when setting a curriculum of study – there is no national debate about what should be prescribed unless a course is accredited by a professional or advisory body, very little to suggest an essential list of topics to be covered. Ironically, in the case of journalism education, where institutions are accredited in the context of journalism, this is via the NCTJ which does stipulate what should be studied, however the nature of the curriculum as prescribed does not foreground journalism ethics other than through the learning of the Editors’ Code.

It would appear that the culture around the teaching of journalism ethics which was encountered by Thomas in 1998, as discussed in Chapter 1, may not have moved very far in the last 20 years if graduates from journalism degree programmes are unable to recall with any clarity their ethics curriculum, with the NCTJ view of ethics continuing to be the dominant influence. As this study did not set out to look at the teaching of journalism ethics in the HE sector – rather looking at what journalists had learned prior to entering the occupation - it is difficult to comment further on the nature of the HE curricula for journalism ethics. My data suggests that a future study might usefully revisit Thomas’ work and ask how journalism ethics is taught on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes post-Leveson.

All early career journalists except Penny undertook some form of institutionally sponsored learning package via an NCTJ programme prior to being recruited as a journalist, which clearly signals the continued dominance of the NCTJ, and a reliance on the NCTJ’s definition of journalism ethics to frame the industry’s understandings.

The third finding to emerge from the data is that the teaching and learning of journalism ethics centred on learning around the Editors’ Code of Practice, a very narrow interpretation of occupational ethics focussing on occupational regulation. Early career journalists described a curriculum based around the Editors’ Code as part of their studies on law and ethics – about how to operate within the precepts of the Code - and which was tested through examination. There was no mention of other codes which relate to journalism ethics, for example that used by IMPRESS or as set out by the NUJ. It is not surprising that the IMPRESS code was not referenced as none of the news organisations which participated in this study were regulated by IMPRESS, all were regulated by IPSO which has the Editors’ Code at the heart of its regulatory framework. It is not known whether any of the participants were members of the NUJ – with hindsight this was a question which perhaps should have been put to them – however, the NUJ did represent journalists at the Leveson Inquiry and is held in some regard by the sector, therefore it was not unreasonable to expect at least one of the participants to reference its code as a source of ethics they had encountered formally or informally prior to entering the occupation, yet none did. This might be because their training was the focus of the discussion around learning ethics, and if prompted some would have been able to discuss the NUJ code, however, it was certainly not dominant in their thinking about what shaped their ethical understandings prior to entering the occupation.

The fourth finding was that all participants had undertaken their learning of journalism ethics in conjunction with learning law for journalists, where ethics is positioned as a matter aligned to a study of the legality of occupational activity with less of an emphasis on the morality of such work.

In summary then, prior to entering journalism as an occupation the majority of participants had undertaken some formal facilitated learning of journalism ethics, albeit via a narrow NCTJ influenced curriculum with its inherent weaknesses as discussed in Chapter 1. Penny, who had embarked on formal learning of journalism via an employer-sponsored route, had not studied journalism prior to entering the occupation, but was studying on an NCTJ programme as a condition of her employment.

None of the participants described their experiences prior to entering the occupation in terms which could be interpreted as informal learning or incidental learning of journalism ethics as discussed in Chapter 2. This may be because they were not asked the right question. They were asked about their learning prior to becoming a journalist, but not asked whether they read kiss-and-tell stories in magazine and newspapers, whether they talked about that kind of story with their family or friends in social settings, or their exposure to informal work placement in newsrooms where such discussions might have taken place – they were not led to talk about informal learning opportunities, which is perhaps a weakness in the methodology employed. However, what did emerge was a clear narrative around the learning of ethics dominated by NCTJ training around the Editors’ Code, a narrow regulatory framing.

Chapter 8 RQ2 - What is the nature of the learning of ethics which early career journalists are exposed to in the workplace?

Introduction

Having considered the nature of prior learning in journalism ethics that participants in this study were exposed to before entering journalism as an occupation, this chapter now turns to look at the nature of learning in journalism ethics in the workplace.

Participants in the study described a wide variety of formal and non-formal learning experiences around journalism ethics once they had begun working as journalists. This chapter uses Eraut’s typology of early career learning as a framework against which to evaluate the nature of that learning. Eraut’s construct around workplace learning is discussed in Chapter 2, his typology of early career learning set out in Figure 4 (Eraut, 2007, p. 409). His typology was applied to the coding of the data, and the insights learned from an evaluation of this data are set out below.

Formal learning

Learning processes at or near the workplace

Eraut (2011, p. 8) identifies four sources of formal learning which are fundamentally learning processes sponsored by or located within the workplace, and these are working for qualifications, short courses, special events and materials. He notes however that they are supported by informal learning sources such as sharing information with colleagues, and also makes the point that the timing of the learning opportunities was important, in that courses are more effective if they are delivered at the point of need.

When coding the data for analysis, Eraut’s four sources of formal learning served as nodes around which data was gathered.

Analysis of the data in this study indicates that the early career journalists were exposed to two broad areas of formal learning: training schemes for new journalists leading to a qualification in journalism and internal organisational training offered to all journalistic staff including new journalists.

These clearly map across to Eraut’s typology, the main objective of each activity is learning, these are Learning Processes.

Training Schemes

All early career journalists undertook some form of formal training following their employment with a news organisation, and followed a scheme operated by either the NCTJ or by Trinity Mirror dependent on where they were employed.

According to Tobitt and Mayhew, writing in the UK Press Gazette – a trade magazine for those working in journalism industries – there is an expectation that all early career journalists work towards completing a journalism qualification with senior exams taken after about 18 months’ experience of working in the local or regional press, and a pass in the exams leads to a promotion and pay rise as the journalist progresses to senior journalist status (Tobitt & Mayhew, 2018). Certainly, participants in this study all reported undertaking training programmes operated by their employers which led to a qualification as a senior journalist as discussed in some detail in Chapter 1.

Again, the NCTJ was the dominant training organisation which early career journalists were exposed to, and until March 2018, all major newspaper groups in the UK put their early career journalists through the NCTJ’s senior certification system, which is now known as the National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ). Trinity Mirror operated its own senior certificate (the Certificate of Journalism - COJ) and participants in this study who worked for Trinity Mirror referred to taking the in-house senior certificate the COJ rather than the NQJ.

Peter, a training and development manager for one of the large newspaper groups which engages with the NCTJ qualification, in interview set out the NQJ training system as one which consisted of short courses to prepare trainees for exams, supported by regular training meetings between trainees and senior editorial staff where individual progress towards the compilation of a portfolio of journalistic work was discussed. Peter said that learning in journalism ethics in particular was supported by an online training programme which focussed on developing an understanding of the Editors’ Code. He said he had been working in journalism for many years and had seen a change in focus on the teaching of journalism ethics post-Leveson.

I think [Leveson] concentrated minds. I think we always took [ethics] pretty seriously but you know, we are aware that there are groups out there who will be more than happy to jump on anything and I think I certainly feel that the NCTJ has taken it very seriously and has worked to incorporate ethics far more into its diploma and into the NQJ. (Peter)

This perhaps implicitly acknowledges that pre-Leveson training in journalism ethics was insufficiently foregrounded, and that current training gives the Editors’ Code a greater emphasis. It also suggests that the incentive to ensure journalists understand the Editors’ Code is one of avoiding criticism from “groups who…jump on anything” rather than because it is the right thing to do. From Peter’s perspective it also suggests a sensitivity to what he feels is unfair criticism, yet the Leveson Inquiry did expose poor ethical practice – albeit focussed on the British national press rather than in the provincial sector.

All early career journalists in interview described a formal approach to their learning with a number of opportunities to focus on journalism ethics. One who worked for a local weekly Johnston Press newspaper and at the time of the interview had just successfully completed his NQJ exams, said that the ethics syllabus focussed on an understanding of the Editors’ Code. He also noted that within weeks of starting work for Johnston Press he was required to pass an online training course on the Editors’ Code which was mandatory for all journalistic staff, not just trainees working for the organisation.

He described a level of formal support for training which operated at Johnston Press, where newspaper titles were organised into regional ‘hubs’ and all trainees were assigned to a trainer within their hub. The trainer was a local deputy editor who held formal training meetings with the trainees where they would go through their portfolios of work and discuss issues which might have arisen. In the weeks before their final exams, a senior training manager from Johnston Press ran classroom-based refresher courses to ensure trainees understood the Editors’ Code in preparation for the exam.

Another Johnston Press early career journalist working in a different part of the country described a similar approach where in the weeks before his NQJ exams he was called to a training centre for a “refresher course” to consolidate learning undertaken in the workplace.

That was really beneficial… when you are a trainee for two years, you do forget things as you go along, things you have learned at college, so to go in and have all that refreshed in your memory again when you have applied it, when you have been in a newsroom, that is when it clicks in your head. It is “oh, this is why we are doing it, this is what I should have done in that scenario, this is what I would do if doing it again”. (anon JP trainee)[[16]](#footnote-16)

The explicit reference to the refresher course as providing a space for reflection on practice does illuminate that reflexivity is not the norm in this participant’s newsroom, with discussion of ethical issues not formally addressed as a matter of routine. Newsquest trainees are also enrolled onto the NQJ programme and while they did not experience formal workshops during their training period, they were all similarly required to spend a week on the NQJ refresher programme to prepare them for their exams and which was run externally at one of the NCTJ centres. One said this was supplemented with individual tutorials in their own newsrooms.

I was sent on a week long course and that was heavily based around ethics… and prior to that I had meetings with (my editor) who would look at my portfolio that I was submitting as part of my exam. We discussed some of the ethical issues, you know, he might have asked me a few questions. (anon Newsquest trainee)

While here the trainee does mention discussing ethical issues with the editor, his responses were vague and ethics did appear to be incidental to newsroom discussions, with a reliance on the week-long course to properly consolidate understanding of ethical issues.

Early career journalists employed by Trinity Mirror are required to undertake occupational learning and at the time of the fieldwork, they had a choice of either following the NQJ or of taking the organisation’s internally developed programme, the COJ. One of the training managers interviewed described the COJ as a programme which was similar to the NQJ but said that because the programme was developed in-house, they had greater agility to change sections of the syllabus in response to editorial need, and shift focus when new occupational challenges emerged. At the time of the interview, Trinity Mirror was transitioning to a system where all trainees undertook the COJ training, and all Trinity Mirror participants in the study had followed the COJ route. The manager explained that all undertook training in journalism ethics which focussed on the Editors’ Code, supplemented by workshops run by the company’s central legal and editorial management staff on a periodic basis, training which had been in existence for a number of years.

One early career journalist with Trinity Mirror was coming towards the end of his training period at the time of the interview and described a training system which required him to pass an online course in journalism ethics at the beginning of his employment, something which is required of all Trinity Mirror journalists, and also pass a formal exam in law and ethics in order to gain his senior certificate. He was supported by formal training in preparation for the COJ exams, but this was supplemented by regular workshops and training bulletins.

We did have an IPSO training workshop the other day, that was for trainee reporters, and the editors were in there as well… Someone came from Canary Wharf, which is our central team, to deliver a presentation and guidance about IPSO and just to run through the Editors’ Code and things like that….The guy from Canary Wharf was saying this is what is happening, we need to do this and this to combat it, we need to be more aware of this and this, and then he kind of ran through how many IPSO complaints we’d had – which I can’t remember the number of, I think it was four or five – how many were upheld and thrown out (anon TM early career journalist)

He said there had been a number of these sessions since he started working for the company two years previously, and all trainees were asked to attend and were given the opportunity to ask questions to clarify their understanding. There is some complexity here in the arrangement of learning opportunities. The inclusion of editors in the briefings might suggest deliberative strategy to ensure understanding of ethical issues is located at various points in the organisation’s hierarchy, securing a better understanding within the community of practice. By doing so this provides early career journalists with well-informed resources (editorial managers) to which they could refer at local level using informal and incidental learning, mapping across to Eraut’s Learning Activities (Eraut, 2007, p. 409) . The trainee was describing formal learning through workshops to prepare him for his exams supplemented by formally arranged learning opportunities which were not related directly to his preparation for senior exams but were developing organisational understandings upon which he was able to draw later during informal discussions with managers and colleagues. This will be explored more later, but it is an important point worth noting here that he talked about complex conversations with his managers about ethical dilemma which drew on the formal learning he and his managers had experienced. This does suggest an engagement with reflexive practice in a meaningful way. In relation to Eraut then the learning processes led to enhancement of understanding through learning activity. It should also be noted at this point that the early career journalist referred to ‘IPSO’ training – he was not the only participant in this study to do so – and there is clearly conflation here between training around the Editors’ Code of Practice and the role that IPSO plays in upholding the industry to the precepts of the code.

In an analysis of the data around formal learning then, all early career participants discussed working towards an industry recognised qualification in journalism and experiencing some learning in ethics as framed by the Editors’ Code – that is through the relatively narrow lens of occupational regulation. The nature of this learning was independent of the organisation they worked for and was surprisingly homogeneous, trainees at Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press and Newsquest all articulating learning of journalism ethics via the Editors’ Code of Practice. The learning is driven by the requirements of either the NCTJ (NQJ) or the Trinity Mirror (COJ) syllabus and the need to secure occupational qualifications.

There was no reference to formally facilitated training around wider ethical issues such as providing a voice to minority under-represented communities, or the danger of social media exploitation as a channel for propaganda in democratic elections for example and this is a major weakness in the formal learning structures. This points to the narrow focus on ethics, and interpretation of what journalism ethics is, that is via an observance of the Editors’ Code, a code which was designed to inform a regulatory framework. The Code focusses on what journalists should not do, for example intrude into grief, but it does not properly address plagiarism for example, and it does not actively encourage proactive discussion on what journalism ethics might be – however, as discussed earlier, it was not the intention of the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee that it should do this. The Code itself puts forward standards it expects of journalists, and while it is right that it forms part of the learning programme on journalism ethics, it was not designed to form the basis of the entirety of this learning.

Organisational training

When considering organisational training in the context of formal learning, I refer to training facilitated by the organisation that the early career journalist is located within. When considering the impact of the community of practice on early career journalists, one factor which may influence their understanding of occupational ethics is the extent to which those they work with have sufficient understanding themselves of occupational ethics. As Wenger discussed, those new to an occupation learn their understandings of work-based policy and processes from those they work alongside (Wenger, 2008). Eraut refers to work shadowing as a learning process, and locating resource people as learning activities (Eraut, 2007, p. 409).

However, data around formal learning from the participants who are training managers suggest that one of the problematic features of the journalism training structures offered either through the NCTJ or Trinity Mirror schemes is that once a journalist reaches ‘senior’ status, there is no formal requirement imposed by either training scheme for journalists to re-engage with training at intervals following their attainment of either the NQJ or COJ. When asked about continuing professional development schemes, each senior participant confirmed that unlike law and medicine where practitioners are members of a regulatory body which requires them to undertake a number of hours of continuing professional development, there is no such structure in journalism. Therefore, update training in journalism ethics is at the discretion of the news organisation a journalist works within.

However, while there is no CPD requirement on journalists, each of the organisations which engaged with this study, Newsquest, Johnson Press and Trinity Mirror had formal training structures in journalism ethics which were a requirement of all editorial staff. Each of the training managers who were interviewed stated that update training in journalism ethics was a requirement of employment unlike any other training packages which might be offered by their organisation, for example social media management training or even law for journalists. They each cited the Leveson Inquiry as a catalyst for the development of these training packages; while two types of training package had been deployed, one built in-house by Johnston Press, the other developed by Engage Media and commissioned by Trinity Mirror and Newsquest, both focussed on developing understanding of the Editors’ Code and its deployment in practice. According to each of the participating managers, the introduction of this mandatory training was the first time journalists working for the three participating groups were required to undertake any learning in journalism ethics as a condition of employment. This is significant in relation to this research question as it is evidence of Marsick and Watkins (2001) institutionally sponsored formal learning and it was prompted by concerns raised through the Leveson Inquiry.

Trinity Mirror and Newsquest chose to purchase the training developed by Engage Media, which was set up by former Press Association training director Tony Johnston. Johnston agreed to be interviewed about Engage Media’s training and its use by the newspaper industry, and during the interview he said he had noticed a change in organisational attitude to the Editors’ Code post-Leveson. He said that while the Code had initially been adopted by the Press Complaints Commission, the industry’s attitude towards the PCC and compliance with the code had been “less than robust” (Johnston, 2017b). He gave as an example the industry’s interpretation of a clause in the code which refers to intrusions into grief or shock and states:

In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. (Editors' Code of Practice 2019)

This clause was in existence pre-Leveson and was accompanied by guidance issued by the Editors’ Code Committee which stipulated that one approach to someone who was bereaved was normally all that would be allowed. Johnston said that the problem was in interpreting what is meant by approaching someone with sympathy and discretion and before Leveson when he asked trainees how many times it was acceptable to approach someone who has been bereaved he would get a range of answers.

Some would say that the rules say that you only do it once, but I would also get a range of people who would say twice, three times, however many times my news desk tells me to do it. I would be reasonably confident now … that there is much less misunderstanding around what is acceptable and unacceptable and that at a news desk level there has been a substantial change in the way that those executives are operating on a day to day level. (Johnston, 2017b)

Johnston signals that organisational understandings of what is acceptable within the confines of the Editors’ Code have become more uniform, potentially a factor of organisational training capturing all journalistic staff, not just early career journalists. All staff working as journalists for Trinity Mirror were required to successfully complete Engage Media’s programme, regardless of whether they were new in post or had been with the organisation for many years (TM training manager). The training tool was designed to be followed online at a time to suit the journalist, and as it was independent of location and time, it offered efficiencies in updating all journalists working in the company (Johnston, 2017b). This was a clear example of organisational training where the whole community of journalists undertook formal learning in journalism ethics.

A Trinity Mirror training manager also described supplementary training which was offered to all staff in Trinity Mirror and referred to this as “pop up J School”, a rolling programme of training offered by a central training team and delivered in regional centres to up-date staff on emergent concerns and developments. An example she gave related to concerns about the dissemination of personal information on social media in the wake of the bombing at Manchester Arena when on 22nd May 2017 a suicide bomber killed 23 people at an Ariane Grande concert. The editor-in-chief of the Manchester Evening News shared his experience of covering the incident with other senior managers from Trinity Mirror. Journalists were concerned about sharing information online which could have an impact on families and friends of those who had died:

He spoke to all the editors-in-chief about why he made decisions around the MEN bombing. [At] a two-day training session for journalists, digital story tellers, … he came in and spoke for 90 minutes on why he made decisions and what the audience responses to those decisions were, what was beneficial, what the learnings were and then they did a bit Q&A with him. We videoed that talk so it could go online and anyone in the company could see it.…. The learnings from that will have informed the Grenfell[[17]](#footnote-17) coverage. (TM training manager)

Significantly though, the manager was describing a formal learning opportunity – a workshop – delivered to senior Trinity Mirror staff, which itself was shaped by feedback from the community the MEN newspaper served, an example of organisational training where emergent ethical considerations relating to a particular event formed part of the discussions.

Johnston Press also require all staff to complete an online training programme on journalism ethics as a condition of employment, and here the programme has been developed in-house and rolled out to all JP staff in Britain and Northern Ireland. This too focusses on the Editors’ Code, requiring journalists to work through case studies and successfully complete a terminal test. One training manager said that the programme is delivered in a way that staff can choose when to follow it, though their performance is monitored by senior managers to ensure that all staff pass it. Anyone newly appointed to the company is given a short time frame in which to engage with it, and participants recalled having taken it shortly after joining the company.

The organisational mandatory training programmes are important when looking at the environment in which early career journalists are learning. Trinity Mirror and Johnston Press describe formal learning which targets the entire community of journalists within the organisations where this training is deployed, not just early career journalists. Tony Johnston said that this approach to teaching journalism ethics – capturing large communities of journalists – was a new development in the industry, and as a former training director for the Press Association and a director of a private journalism training company which responds to industry need, he is well placed to make that assertion (Johnston, 2017a). When considering the construct of Wenger’s Communities of Practice, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, by securing understandings of journalism ethics within the community of practice defined by the newsroom within which early career journalists are located, this becomes part of the specialist knowledge held by that community, the shared repertoire which is an identifier of a community of practice.(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 73) This enhances the opportunities for learning activities located within work to be meaningful as it develops the knowledge base of Eraut’s resource people, so that when questions are asked there is a better opportunity for encountering meaningful and impactful responses. Also, when one-to-one support is offered, the nature of that support is informed.

In addition, trainees in consolidating their own understandings of ethics are able to draw on organisational understandings which align with their formal learning. In other words, instructing a trainee on standards is all very well if those in more senior positions have the same understanding of those standards. Where there is a different historic set of standards in play then, irrespective of what the early career journalists are taught, there is likely to be some drift in understanding when they are told by senior staff “we don’t do it that way”.

One of the facets of Lave and Wenger’s construct of Communities of Practice considers new starters to an organisation and the acquisition of an occupational identity being a learning process. The journey towards holding understanding in common with senior members of the community consolidates notions of self-identity in the learner (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 163). In the context of learning journalism ethics then, if senior members of the community are not sufficiently inducted into different attitudes towards ethical behaviours, there will be a tension in identity formation between the early career journalist who is taught one set of behaviours prior to joining the work force and the old-guard with their “we don’t do it that way” attitude. Occupational training which extends across the whole community of practice is important then in resetting occupational identities in relation to ethical practice so that understandings which are held in common are in alignment with the post-Leveson imperative. In ensuring that the occupational training around the Editors’ Code is undertaken by all members of the community of practice, then the individual identities of the old guard in relation to journalism ethics are reimagined. The impact of this is that “generational encounters” - where newcomers work to gain the understanding and language of the “old-timers” – become more meaningful because at the same time, the old guard strive to invest in their own learning to ensure their own currency in their occupational understandings (ibid p.157).

To some extent, Lave and Wenger’s generational encounters could be important here when looking at journalism ethics. As discussed in Chapter 1, education and training in journalism ethics is a developing field, and Post-Leveson there has been a focus on training in understanding the Editors’ Code via the curriculum as set out by the NCTJ. This is a relatively new development, and it is to some extent the newcomers who may have a more secure formalised occupational understanding which they bring to the newsroom where this understanding is reinforced through practice. Organisational training programmes as offered by Trinity Mirror and Johnston Press ensure the “old timers” also share this knowledge base and facilitate the whole community approach to learning.

Senior managers all spoke about strategic and organisational support for journalism learning being located at a high level. Training directors for Johnston Press and Trinity Mirror spoke about being able to steer the direction of training programmes, including those which focused on the Editors’ Code of Practice. This would suggest that the Community of Practice of journalists working within the newsrooms of these organisations are supported via institutional policy in the learning of occupational ethics. In terms of Eraut’s conceptualisation of early career learning, this facilitates learning through formal learning processes and also through learning activities located within work via the community having sufficient occupational understanding to support the learner.

One-to-one learning

In considering Eraut’s typology from the perspective of formal learning, learning processes at or near the workplace became apparent in interviews with participants in this study via individualised learning support through one-to-one discussions between early career journalists and senior staff. Early career participants each, without exception, described a formal tutorial type of system which supported their work towards either the NQJ or COJ qualification, and this consisted of them preparing examples of their work and taking them to one-to-one discussions with either their editor, a senior journalist, or a nominated training coordinator. Trinity Mirror participants referred to these meetings as quarterly appraisals, though the conduct of the meeting followed a similar pattern to that as described by participants who worked for Johnston Press or Newsquest in that trainees were expected to take to the meetings a portfolio of work, sometimes referred to as their log book, and be prepared to reflect on it through discussion.

One training manager described a distributive structure at Johnston Press where he cascaded training information and support to nominated training managers at regional level to ensure that all trainees – including those in Scotland and Northern Ireland – had easy access to training support where they could attend meetings to discuss progress and any work related issue. Johnston Press expects their training managers to have, as a minimum, quarterly meetings with their trainees to discuss their NQJ portfolio.

An early career journalist with Johnston Press was scheduled to sit her NQJ exams two months after our interview. She had previously completed the NCTJ programme at a college prior to being employed by the company, and had also undertaken the initial online training on the Editors’ Code in line with company policy, but was waiting to attend the refresher course in preparation for her final exams. She said while she understood journalism ethics, in actuality there had not been opportunities for her to bring ethical dilemma into her reflection on her portfolio, which meant they didn’t form the basis of the discussions in the one-to-one review meetings.

We build up a log book of 40 stories over the two years as a trainee reporter, and in the last few months I have been building up that log book…I have not had any sort of ethical issues come up yet, looking at my stories. (anon JP trainee)

This is a weakness in the assessment criteria associated with the portfolio approach inherent at that time in the NQJ, as the majority of trainees said that they were not guided to discuss ethical dilemma when reflecting on their work, though they were all expected to work in alignment with the Editors’ Code. This diminishes the importance which could be given to journalism ethics and misses an opportunity to use discussion of work processes to consolidate understanding and make meaning of that understanding through guided reflection (a learning activity). While early career journalists learn responses to potential exam questions through discussion of their portfolio, reflection on practice would enhance any cognitive learning. Reflection on practice is also an opportunity to recognise peer practice and make useful Bandura’s points on the value of observational learning.

According to a Newsquest training manager, policy within that company is to recruit trainees who had previously successful passed, or were close to completing, the NCTJ diploma, and that once employed, trainees were then expected to work towards the NQJ. He said he did some work as an examiner for the NCTJ assessing NQJ exam scripts, and had some understanding of the training structures around the NCTJ and NQJ and asserted that trainees were arriving at Newsquest with an understanding of journalism ethics.

Once upon a time…journalism ethics wasn’t a separate item if you know what I mean, and now it is. I know now that they are trained in it, and I also know that there will be an ethics question on the NCTJ exams as well, so they are not only being taught it they are also being tested on it. (anon Newsquest manager)

This resonates with the literature discussed in Chapter 1 in that prior to 2012, journalism ethics did not feature on the training curriculum, and the shift towards its inclusion in some form was noticeable by those who had been involved in journalism training both before and after the Leveson Inquiry. Once the Newsquest trainees were employed they then embarked on the production of their NQJ portfolio which are actively monitored, and discussed with a nominated supervisor, though the manager said that although there was flexibility around the timing of the supervision meetings to take account of the demands of the job, there was a formal appraisal point every six months. All trainees had to compile a portfolio of stories to demonstrate a range of experiences and skills – for example court reporting, sports reporting and feature writing – and they are expected to provide a reflective commentary on each submission in their portfolio.

You (sic) don’t just provide the story and say there you go, that is what I have written. Every story has space for comments. So if there was a particular ethical dilemma that had to be overcome you would put that forward in support of that particular story…Because of the types of stories that we cover, most of them, and I’m not trying to underplay this, most of them are ordinary people stories if you know what I mean. There are no, or there shouldn’t be any, ethical dilemmas. When we do have those stories where there is an ethical dilemma then that does become the subject of discussion. (Newsquest manager)

Harcup (2007, p. 6) would argue that there is an ethical dimension to everything a journalist writes, from the quotes they select to the context a journalist offers, and this is at odds with the Newsquest manager whose comments suggest an incomplete understanding of ethical dilemma. The manager does not fully take account of the potential ethical dimensions of day to day stories, or of wider ethical issues such as the under-representation of minority communities for example, an issue which could inform one-to-one discussion in training meetings. If training managers do not demonstrate an awareness of ethical issues beyond the code, then they are somewhat limited as a learning resource for early career journalists who look to them for guidance.

Bo described a culture in his newsroom where ethical issues were discussed as they were raised. This is discussed in more detail later as one of Eraut’s informal learning opportunities as a by-product of work processes, and it was a common feature which was raised by all participants in this study. In Bo’s case, he felt that the casual conversations, which usually involved his senior editor who would at a later, arranged date, be conducting his portfolio meetings, gave him sufficient opportunity to properly understand ethical issues as they arose, and an absence of formal discussion in one-to-one meetings was not something which he felt was problematic.

There are going to be times when things will crop up. You know, if me or one of my colleagues has a matter we are reporting on and there is an ethical issue, we might just openly discuss it and if it is very serious, each of us would go to (the editor) and have a little meeting, really just to see what the best course of action is. I personally think we have a good network of support here. (Bo)

This does raise a point about the ambiguous positioning of the importance of journalism ethics in relation to training in the workplace. On the one hand trainees are expected to undertake formal learning around the Editors’ Code but the structures to encourage reinforcement of understanding in this through practice are not easily apparent here. There are formal opportunities for learning in the newsroom facilitated through one-to-one discussions around a portfolio of work which is assessed at the end of the training period. However, the discussions are not guided to include exploration of ethical considerations. I would argue this is a missed opportunity. As previously discussed, journalistic understanding of ethics as surfaced through this study is centred on the Editors’ Code with little consideration of other forms of ethical thinking such as community representation, and while editors might want to test a trainee’s understanding of the code in practice, guided discussion around a portfolio of work might have presented the opportunity to bring into the frame of understanding ethical issues which are not apparent in the code.

Trinity Mirror trainees were also assessed on a portfolio of work as part of the requirements of the COJ, and meetings in support of their development are referred to as trainee appraisals. The data signalled that there was evidence of guidance around how these meetings should be conducted, and one Trinity Mirror manager who participated in this research shared the appraisal forms used in the quarterly review. These evaluated trainees on a scale of 1 (outstanding) to 5 (not performing) across a number of themes under the broad section headings of personal qualities, storytelling skills, journalism practice and business awareness. It is under the journalism practice section that trainees are formally evaluated on their understanding of occupational ethics and the form specifies that they must demonstrate that they are:

Aware of requirements of the Editors’ Code and their responsibility to adhere to it. (Trinity Mirror plc, 2017)

The manager said this was used in appraisal interviews to give structure to the training review and explained that trainees were expected to produce examples of work done in the previous quarter and demonstrate how they met each of the themes including matters relating to the Editors’ Code.

One trainee at Trinity Mirror said that in one training review he spent some time discussing a complex undercover case where he had witnessed a drugs deal and exposed this in his newspaper. He explained that in any situation where a journalist feels it is necessary to hide their identity to uncover a story, the company legal team becomes involved and has to approve the course of action prior to the journalist being allowed to proceed. He had been given details about how drugs were being sold in an area of the city he covered and had requested permission to covertly cover the story. Shortly after he attended an appraisal meeting.

That did form quite a formal period of how do you think that it went, how do you think you could have done it better, do you think you considered everything before you did it? (anon TM trainee)

There is complexity here in his learning, evidence of cognitive learning through experience, and in relation to Eraut’s typology this is a work process with learning of journalism ethics as a by-product. In undertaking the undercover research, he was tackling a challenging task, problem solving and consulting with senior staff which is where work process is located. However, he was also forced to reflect on his performance, which he acknowledged brought into sharp focus the ethical dimension of this particular piece of work.

Trinity Mirror trainees at the larger publications were also required to participate in monthly reviews with senior editorial managers. This was something all staff participated in, not just trainees, and while the focus of discussion was not formulated around progress towards the COJ, it was a formal learning opportunity via a one-to-one discussion with managers.

(in the one-to-one meetings) there will be quite a wide question, they will say how do you think things are going, or do you have any concerns? (anon TM trainee)

He said that it was here that he had useful conversations around whether he had “done the right thing” in his approach to his journalistic work.

Non-formal learning

Fieldwork signalled that early career journalists were also engaging in non-formal learning, both through work processes where the main objective was work with learning as a by-product, and also through learning activities which were located within that work (Eraut, 2007, p. 409). There was also evidence of informal and incidental learning as defined by Marsick and Watkins (2001) and Marsick and Volpe (1999) as discussed in Chapter 2.

This section then uses Eraut’s typology to discuss non-formal learning of journalism ethics through work processes with learning as a by-product and through learning activities which are located within work or learning processes. While there was evidence of each type of early career learning as defined by Eraut (Figure 4), some were more significant than others, and it is these I explore below.

Work processes with learning as a by-product

Working with others and in group processes

Participants were asked to talk about their daily routine and how stories were constructed, and through this they set out newsroom culture where teamwork was perceived as being important. Lisa’s response was typical of the majority of early career journalists interviewed, in that she said initially, as a new journalist, her news editor would give her detailed directions on how he wanted her to cover a particular story. As she became more experienced, he would be less prescriptive but would discuss her ideas for stories and sometimes the discussion would involve other senior journalists who she shared a newsroom with.

Most early career journalists talked about group processes where story direction might have been given by a news editor, and discussions on the best approach held with colleagues. David said that talking with senior staff helped him identify where ethical challenge was located, particularly in stories where it might not be obvious, for example in the coverage of a suicide where giving too much information on how someone died can be dangerous as it might lead to other people adopting the same way of taking their lives.

Analysis of the data revealed that discussions with colleagues were significant in developing an understanding about how to treat journalistic work. Some of the discussions were focussed on stories which the early career journalists were producing as single reporters, but a number of participants talked about instances where a news event required a large team of reporters because it either ran across several days or there were multiple approaches to it. One example of such a story was the bombing of an Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena in a terrorist attack in May 2017, when 23 people died. This incident featured in a number of interviews with early career journalists in the north of England and is discussed again later as its impact on the learning of some of the participants in this study was profound. Eddie had been working as a journalist for a little over a year when the incident happened, and there was an urgent demand for information by the readers of his newspaper, as many local people had attended the concert. He talked about how he had frequent discussions with other journalists in his newsroom, and with his editor, as they worked together to gather information and produce news reports for immediate online publication and also for their print edition. He said he was concerned about intruding into grief as local people had died in the event, and talking to colleagues helped him understand how to act ethically in a pressured environment, treating the family of victims with care and respect over the gathering of information and also the kind of information disseminated through his publication.

Joe worked on a daily regional publication where often a story was started by one journalist and handed over to another as shifts changed, and he gave as an example the coverage of the death of a man following a fight in a pub. A colleague had started the story and briefed Joe when he came on duty on how to follow it up, setting out the challenges, in particular that while the victim had been identified on social media his family had not been formally informed of his death. This afforded him the opportunity to discuss the ethical dimension to the story as part of that team.

Lesley talked about the ‘news conference’ where approaches to stories were discussed and team tasks allocated. News conferences are a journalistic norm, it is standard practice in most newsrooms in the print sector to hold planning meetings where the potential stories for upcoming editions are discussed and the performance of recently published work is unpicked. In the larger newsrooms on daily newspapers, conference is usually only attended by senior staff, but on Lesley’s publication, he said that all reporters attended and generally the meeting began by discussing the issue of the newspaper which had just been published.

We go to the paper and we analyse it and say are there any follow-ups, could we have done anything better, what do people think of the front page….? We all take it in turns to go through our stories but in terms of who would lead the meeting, it is not really a formal meeting…we look to see what we could have improved…just chuck some ideas around. (Lesley)

To some extent, while this is a feature of the work of Lesley’s newsroom, learning activity is embedded within this process, learning is a little more than a by-product and here there was evidence of some reflexivity. Attending the news conference is part of the work of the journalist, and by its nature, it is designed so that lessons can be learned from the previous publication in order to plan for the next, but Lesley was the only early career participant who discussed taking part in such planning meetings. Lesley said that complaints about stories were discussed in this forum, and that he had found it helpful to be part of the team discussions as he learned how to approach different types of story. He was unable to point to a particular example of an ethical issue which had been debated in this forum but said that when problems had been identified they were discussed there, an example of reflection on practice which, while not identified as a formal learning structure, was part of the routine of Lesley’s news organisation to which he was invited. None of the other participants discussed being included in a news conference within their own organisations, and indeed spoke about this as something their managers attended rather than more junior members of staff.

Problem solving

Early career journalists in interview identified two areas which align to Eraut’s learning through problem solving which have the potential for an ethical dimension, firstly in gaining interviews and information when a story involves someone who has died, and secondly in managing news content which emerges through social media platforms which might be contentious.

Ian worked for a small weekly newspaper which was impacted by an international incident when three local people died in a helicopter crash. National news media had identified the victims as living local to him and he was asked to contact family members for tributes to those who had died. He said the way the national press had covered the story made him ‘uncomfortable’ as they had carried pictures of someone running away from the burning wreckage of the helicopter. He knew that readers of his paper would want to see some information about the incident as those who had died were known locally, but because his paper valued itself as a local community publication, he did not want to cause upset to family members and make a difficult situation for them worse. His problem was how to secure an interview and tributes to those who had died in the aftermath of insensitive national media coverage of the incident and described a process whereby he spoke to senior journalists to get their advice. He articulated his dilemma with care and spoke about how he reached a decision to approach the families with a letter explaining who he was and how he wanted to write tribute pieces on those who had died, leaving the decision about whether or not to make contact in the hands of the grieving families. His approach led to a telephone call from the father of one of the victims who gave him photographs and information, and who also included the newspaper in follow up stories about a memorial service to the victims of the crash. His learning from that experience centred on a better understanding of his newspaper’s place within a community and notions of championing and protecting his community, which in itself has an ethical dimension which is discussed further in Chapter 9.

…the stance we take is we live in the communities we are reporting on and these are not just distant people, they are our neighbours. (Ian)

A number of participants discussed the problematic nature of social media coverage of events with a clearly identifiable ethical dilemma. Witnesses at the scene of a fatal incident sometimes post information online through various social media channels, often before the identity of the victim has been verified or family members informed, and at times using graphic imagery taken at the scene. There is an expectation that the local newspaper carries up to date information which is accurate, and prompt and the problem journalists face is ensuring they have the correct information. Alina said working with information from social media was one of her biggest challenges.

I covered this crash when this car was hit by a train at a level crossing, and before we had confirmation from police we had people saying “oh it was this boy and his grandad”, blurting it out on social media, but as a newspaper you can’t just say it because everyone else is saying it, that is quite a struggle, having to make sure you are getting all the facts checked, not rushing to put it out there so that you are first with the news. (Alina)

The problem Alina had was that unverified information had appeared online, and local people were turning to the local paper for more information. Alina talked about the processes she went through in resolving the problem about how to handle this story in terms of what to publish and when to publish it, clearly articulating the ethical dilemma and where it related to the Editors’ Code, and how senior staff guided her to the view that it was important to ensure that the information published was correct even if that meant waiting a while for verification. She said she gained an understanding of the importance of fact checking by digging into the details herself. This was a clear example of Eraut’s learning as a by-product of work – the nature of learning here being located through the process of working out how to verify information and the importance given to fact checking.

Learning activities located within work or learning processes

It is within the area of Eraut’s typology where it was evident from an analysis of participant interviews that rich learning experiences were located. One of the journalistic norms is that journalists ask questions and gather information, and the data from the interviews clearly signals that this applies to inquiry about journalistic practice as well as through the process of news production. There was evidence that early career journalists used the opportunity of casual conversations with colleagues to consolidate their understanding of how to deal with ethical dilemma and develop good occupational behaviours.

Asking questions, listening and observing

All participants in the study talked about taking part in open discussions in their newsrooms when challenging stories with an ethical dimension would arise. Often, they would approach senior journalists for advice, such as their news editors, but they also spoke about talking to colleagues, which Lesley described as “throwing ideas around the office”. Alina described a process involving coverage of a sexual assault in her area. Police were appealing for witnesses, but it is unlawful to identify a victim, (this would also be in breach of the Editors’ Code) and so after drafting her first news story she asked her news editor to check it to ensure she had not written anything which was in breach of the rules. The environment she described in her newsroom was an open one where any member of staff felt empowered to take concerns to any of the senior editorial team for discussion, even emailing the editor out-of-hours when a story had broken during the night. Bo, who worked for a different newspaper group, described a similar open environment where asking questions about work was encouraged, and he too had his editor’s contact details for out-of-hours support.

As will be discussed in more detail later, there was clear evidence of a Community of Practice within all newsrooms where learning happened through interaction with colleagues. Diane’s experience was typical of that set out by the majority of the participants.

I am quite lucky as on our news desk we do have quite a free and open conversation nearly every day in terms of ethics, what we should be doing. Obviously, journalism isn’t always a clear-cut thing, we have lots of guidelines to help us make decisions, but I think there will always be grey areas. I would go to our news editors and ask them for guidance…often I would get one of my news editors to check the content [of a story] before it goes online just to say look, we have got this, do you think this is OK as it stands? (Diane)

Diane’s point is important as it identifies one of the weaknesses of working with codes as a framework for ethical decision making, in that codes can offer guidance but where there are grey areas, and situations which codes do not account for, then journalists still need to be able to identify and articulate the ‘right’ course of action.

Eddie worked in an office with seven other journalists, who across the team were responsible for five local publications and he said that there were daily conversations across the office as difficult stories cropped up.

We all help each other and if you do have any issues yourself, it’s an environment where you can bring them up and people will support you in that…At my level as a trainee, it is the informal discussions that are useful as they happen when a story comes up and helps me reach a decision really quickly…As you go through those early weeks and months you do pick up off people around you. (Eddie)

Joe said he would often ask the reporter sat next to him for his opinion on a story, which informed his decision as to whether he needed to get advice from his editor, and often this would result in more voices entering the debate.

We bounce ideas off each other and are quite open about discussing our stories, we are not possessive about them, we are open and support each other and discuss these things among us. (Joe)

In relation to the research question then, the learning here is informal and located in learning activity in alignment with Eraut’s typology. Early career journalists spoke about learning how to operate ethically by feeling empowered to ask questions about their work as they arose, drawing on the experience and knowledge of more senior colleagues, learning from those within the occupational community.

Getting information

As this study is looking at the learning of ethics, the information here is information to inform ethical understanding. Without exception, all participants in the fieldwork, early career journalists and training managers, identified the Editors’ Code as the source they would refer to for information to guide their decision making, and as discussed previously, they identified journalism ethics as being predicated upon the Editors’ Code of Practice. The majority of early career journalists carried a copy of their code with them, as it had been made available to them in credit-card sized format and some presented it for me to look at. It is possible that as the researcher, my presence impacted on the responses I was given when I asked where they drew their information on ethics from – I had informed each participant that I was investigating journalism ethics after all. However, at no time in the approach to the interviews had I mentioned the Editors’ Code, my communication with each participant simply stated that I was investigating how early career journalists learned ethics (see Appendix 4), so perhaps the fact that some carried the code in their wallet was an indication of the importance placed on working to the code and using the information set out in the code. Each of the training managers stated that all journalists had their own personal copy of the code supplied to them, irrespective of the newspaper group they were located within, and whenever the code was updated it was recirculated.

Two participants talked about an additional resource made available to them - Joe and Charles each said they received regular legal bulletins which they believed were circulated to all staff in their organisation. They both said they made a point of reading the bulletins as this gave them information about any legal matters the organisation wanted to draw to their attention, but also discussed cases taken to the Independent Press Standards Organisation where there were complaints about breaches of the Editors’ Code. Joe said he saw the examples in the bulletins as case studies to help him better understand Code, clearly identifying that this material had a part to play in his learning of ethics.

Locating resource people

Eraut discusses resource people as those with particular knowledge, which is useful in this context as it can be positioned as people who have an understanding of journalism ethics. When asked what they would do if they encountered ethical dilemma, each of the early career journalists were clear about locating resource people and identified their news editors, who were generally first in the line management chain, as the main resource for advice.

Data revealed that line managers were an important learning resource to all early career participants. In some interviews they were described as news editors, in others, senior reporters, but they were all experienced journalists whose understanding of ethical approaches to stories was drawn on by early career journalists in helping them frame their own understanding of occupational ethics. When looking at learning through the lens of Wenger’s Community of Practice, these ‘resource people’, the news editors, appear to play an important role in guiding the early career journalist from the periphery of the community towards becoming full participants through their guidance in interpreting ethical responses to challenging contexts – for example in the reporting of inquests. However, what is less well understood is the extent to which the resource people themselves are equipped to act as a resource for learning. Early career journalists turn to them because of their more senior position and they take on trust that their understanding of journalistic ethics is sound, but it is difficult to judge whether that trust is well placed. Further research would be necessary to explore how senior journalistic staff ensure that their knowledge base retains currency in journalism ethics. Training managers did indicate that there were no training requirements on senior staff other than the recently developed in-house programmes on the Editors’ Code, which was a mandated feature across all newspaper groups in this study.

Reflecting, learning from mistakes and receiving feedback

There were formal reflective structures built into journalism training at all three of the news organisations who engaged in the study, and this was discussed earlier. The training appraisals were where formative feedback on work was discussed using the NQJ or CoJ portfolio of work as the focus, however, early career journalists said that this was also an opportunity for their manager to raise issues they felt needed to be addressed. Jo in particular recalled that at one appraisal interview a discussion was held about an undercover operation he had been involved in, which he felt was useful in consolidating his understanding of the best approaches to clandestine work.

There was also evidence of ongoing feedback and reflective practice through the open discussions held in newsrooms. This was either through discussion of how stories had been received by readers, complaints from readers or planning on how to take a particular news story forward. Lesley discussed how a complaint about a story he worked on was managed. He had attended an inquest of a male nurse who had committed suicide and his father had complained to Lesley’s editor about the initial report which had appeared online, and which had mentioned the nurse had hanged himself. The father had not wanted everyone to know how his son had died as it was distressing for the family.

He was really upset and had called up in tears. We had done nothing wrong in terms of when you go through the Editors’ Code, but we debated it in the office for a while and in the end we decided not to include the information and took it out. In all sort of stories where there might be an ethical issue, we are all involved. There is no going into a small room to discuss it privately between two people, we are only a small team anyway, we are all involved, whether we are right or wrong. We are quite happy to debate openly and honestly, and that is what I think is really good about what we do. (Lesley)

In this example, feedback to Lesley and his reflection on that feedback happen concurrently, and this pattern was identified in analysis of the majority of interviews with early career journalists. Feedback in this context lacks the structure and formality as described by Henderson et al. (2019, p. 1406) but it is tailored to meet the needs of the learner in that it focussed on the work he had been doing, and it was valued through its relevance and immediacy. Few participants, however, discussed their interactions with colleagues through the lens of it being ‘reflection’, this was not a term they used, but it was clear that the discussions formed the basis of reflective practice which informed future decision making. Lesley’s example also points to something which is more fully discussed in Chapter 9, and that is the influence of the local community, the readers, in making an ethical judgement on how to cover the inquest. Lesley engaged in reflection with his colleagues in reaching a decision, but the starting point to those discussions was a plea from a bereaved father to reconsider publishing information his son’s death. As I go on to discuss, the good opinion of readers mattered to all the early career journalists in this study who articulated the importance of avoiding conflict with the people they were writing for, with reflection on an ethical approach to a story prompted by concern about the story’s reception once published.

Lisa talked about how her experiences on studying the NCTJ programme prior to working for the paper began to make sense through discussions in her newsroom, which suggests that she was using newsroom discussion as a mechanism to reflect on what she had learned in the classroom. While she did not label this as conscious reflective learning, she did go on to say that the newsroom discussions meant that she felt more secure in her decision making further along the line.

In looking at the role of reflection and learning from mistakes, this could be categorised as Eraut’s “activity which enhances learning” (Eraut, 2007, p. 420). Informal feedback is happening ‘on the spot’, and there are opportunities for working alongside and consulting others. However, none of those responsible for training were aware of any formal support for the distributed leadership structures around how learning happens in the workplace. While informal feedback through conversation provides learning opportunities for early career journalists, senior journalists were not consciously providing those learning opportunities, learning was very much incidental, and it was not clearly labelled as “learning”. Any reflection prompted by discussions was not recorded, and while all early career journalists who participated in this study said that they trusted the judgement of their senior colleagues, what is less-well understood is how secure senior journalists are in their understanding of what is ethical. This was perhaps a flaw in the design of the fieldwork, in that in looking at how early career journalists learn ethics then it might have been appropriate to look at how the wider journalistic community understands ethics, particularly when it would appear that senior staff are influential through informal learning opportunities offered by way of workplace discussion. This is something which could perhaps inform further research directions.

Summary

In consideration of this research question, using Eraut’s typology of workplace learning to evaluate my data, then I identify a number of findings:

Firstly, there is strong evidence of formal learning of journalism ethics located in the workplace through the existence of training schemes, organisational training and one to one learning.

I found that all early career journalists who participated in this study engaged in formal training schemes, either via the NCTJ’s National Qualification in Journalism or Trinity Mirror’s Certificate of Journalism. Each scheme incorporated an expectation that trainees learned about the regulatory framework within which they operated and were able to demonstrate an understanding of the Editors’ Code of Practice. When asked about how they learned journalism ethics, it was to these training schemes which participants in this study pointed, emphasising a positivist approach to learning ethics via gaining understanding of a proscribed code.

This then leads to my second finding which is that all early career journalists conflated learning ethics with understanding the Editors’ Code of Practice. When asked what they understood by the term ‘journalism ethics’, the Editors’ Code of Practice was cited by all participants, without exception, as the framework which for them defined journalism ethics. Irrespective of the Chair of the Editors’ Code Committee referring to the code as a set of ‘standards’ rather than ‘ethics’ (Benson, 2017), the formal teaching of journalism ethics via the NCTJ or Trinity Mirror training schemes positions the Editors’ Code as central to that teaching, to the extent that early career practitioners were clearly conflating journalism ethics with the Code during my fieldwork interviews. They did not make any distinction between the Code and any other occupational advice or guidance on ethical understandings. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Editors’ Code of Practice provides the basis of a regulatory framework which is used by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, and while it does set out expectations of ethical behaviours, it is through a narrow lens which specifies prohibited behaviours and is not designed to encourage wider debate about emergent ethical issues. In the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, learning on the Editors’ Code of Practice had been mandated for all editorial staff in the newspaper organisations which participated in this study, not just those new to journalism, ensuring that the particular understanding of the term ‘journalism ethics’ through the lens of the Editors’ Code was held in common and heavily influenced what was learned about ethics through the formal workplace learning structures. This was amplified through the nature of the curriculum underpinning the NQJ and Trinity Mirror senior qualifications which specified learning the Editors’ Code in relation to learning occupational ethics.

The third point is that there is some ambiguous positioning of journalism ethics within the formal learning structures. Reflection on practice is formally facilitated as early career journalists prepare a portfolio of work for assessment, yet there is little guidance on how journalism ethics should shape those reflections, and it is left to the individual journalist to decide whether there is an ethical dimension to the work presented in their portfolio – on the one hand early career journalists are expected to learn a code of practice, yet on the other their application and interpretation of the code is not carried through in any directed way into their reflective portfolio for examination.

My fourth finding is that non-formal learning was evident and well described by all participants in the study, across all fields of Eraut’s taxonomy of work-based learning processes. Without wishing to homogenise the data, every early career participant spoke about learning through working with others in their news organisation, drawing on historic and collective wisdom in making sense of ethical approaches to journalistic work. They drew on the experience of colleagues through collaborative approaches to major stories, in problem solving, by asking questions and observing, in working out where key information might be found, and through informal reflective discussions about their work.

What began to emerge through an analysis of data around Eraut’ learning processes was that the community of practice within which the early career journalist was located was important in shaping their understanding of journalism ethics, offering opportunities for constructivist approaches to learning through inquiry, and that the community of practice needed to be reimagined to fully explain how that learning happened. Chapter 9 now moves on to consider this in some detail.

Chapter 9 RQ3 – How does the community within which the early career journalist operates impact on the learning of journalism ethics?

There were two conceptualisations of ‘community’ I was able to identify from an analysis of the data, and each impacted on how early career journalists learned ethics and how they understood what ethics meant within their own context. The first community is the Community of Practice (CoP) as defined initially by Lave and Wenger (1991) and later by Wenger (2008), the second as described by Studdert and Walkerdine (2017), which for clarity is perhaps best referred to as a Community of Interest (CoI) to distinguish it from CoP.

Community of Practice (CoP)

As Meltzer and Martik (2017) observed, CoP is a useful lens through which to study the development of skill and practice among journalistic practitioners because of the collaborative nature of practice in journalistic groups. As I was able to identify from an analysis of the data around Eraut’s typology of learning, the community within which the early career journalists in this study were located impacted on their learning through collaborative practice, but also through discussion and observation for example, through being part of a group of journalistic practitioners, and it is this aspect of learning that I intend to consider in more detail. The group structures and culture might differ dependent on context but Wenger and Lave’s concepts allow a researcher to take account of that through careful description and analysis of journalistic practitioners to understand how that learning happens and where learning opportunities are located (op cit p 209), helping me address the overarching research question at the heart of this study - how do journalists learn ethics in the workplace?

As set out in the methodology, the CoP which is the focus of this study is that of local newspaper journalism. In defining a CoP Wenger stated that there were three dimensions which needed to be present: there is mutual engagement in a joint enterprise where there is a shared repertoire. (See Fig 11)

Fig 11 Wenger’s dimensions of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 2008, pp. 72-73)

Applying Wenger’s dimensions of practice to this study, all early career journalists were engaged in the production of news, for weekly or daily newspapers and web pages (joint enterprise). They all made reference to other journalists who they worked with in the production of news, they were mutually engaged with their peers, reporters, news editors, sub-editors, in a common output. There was strong evidence of a shared repertoire through the use of specific language, for example they made reference to the editor, page-leads, the splash (the main story on the front page), death-knocks (calling on relatives of someone who has died) and the Editors’ Code – language connected to their work.

There was also evidence of legitimate peripheral participation through engagement in the four components of learning as a social activity within the CoP, with participants moving from the periphery to full membership of their community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The legitimacy of the participation was conferred through two key structures. Firstly, each of the early career journalists defined themselves as trainees, and were employed as such, with an expectation that they would learn occupational skills in this role, travelling from the periphery of the community where their understanding of journalistic norms was not well developed towards the centre of the community where full membership was conferred and recognised via what they referred to as a ‘senior qualification’. Secondly, legitimacy in their participation was evident through their involvement in full discussion with their peers about daily routine and challenges. None of the participants spoke about exclusion from discussions, and all referred to open supportive encouragement to share conversations with peers and senior staff, in terms of dynamics, a clear narrative of encouragement to move from the periphery towards full membership of the community was evident.

As the focus of this study is the learning of journalism ethics, interviews with early career journalists were analysed for evidence of legitimate peripheral participation as it relates to developing understanding of journalism ethics. Early career journalists were encouraged to talk about where they had encountered ethical dilemma and how they resolved it, and it is through these discussions that evidence of their learning through legitimate peripheral participation was located. Again, there was evidence of the legitimacy of their participation through their inclusion in some of the formal learning structures, as discussed earlier.

Each of the newspapers which participated in the study had mandated training on the Editors’ Code of Practice which all staff had to undertake, including new appointees. This was one of the impacts of the Leveson Inquiry in that local newsrooms took steps to reassure themselves that all staff understood editorial guidance on good practice. At the time of the fieldwork, the requirement of all staff to undertake the training had been in place for less than two years, and in some places, the early career journalists were in the unusual position of undertaking the training at the same time as senior staff (Benson, 2017; Johnston, 2017b). The power dynamic revealed here is unusual. Wenger (2008, p. 191) notes that social power within any group impacts on the development of a sense of belonging in the learner, their identity, to the extent that someone new to an organisation can be excluded from groups or discussions because they do not have the requisite understanding of an issue, or might perceive that they do not fit. One of the journeys a learner takes in gaining full membership of their CoP is in gaining recognition as being one of us. However, in terms of the learning of ethics, early career journalists entered their workplace on even terms with experienced staff in that they had recently undertaken some form of learning around the Editors’ Code through their preparatory training, or were immediately expected to undertake the training concurrent with their peers. There was an even dispersal of power around the content of the Editors’ Code, which facilitated their inclusion in discussion and legitimised their participation. To some extent, the expectation that all staff engage in training on the Editors’ Code, which Benson said was to be an annual occurrence, provides an access point for all new staff around which they can all gather – it acts as a seed for conversations and interactions which gives the new journalist a boost along their pathway from the periphery to full participation.

One way of exploring how Wenger’s dimensions of learning (as meaning, practice, community and identity) through participation in a CoP is enacted is to consider some of the testimony given by early career journalists around how discussions connected to an ethical dilemma are played out.

Alina was nearing the end of her training period when I interviewed her, and she described the newsroom she worked in as an open plan office with about eight other journalists working around two large desks. All journalists in her organisation had undertaken online training around the Editors Code at a similar time to her, and it was clear that she could talk with confidence to colleagues and managers about issues when they arose. When stories came up which presented an ethical challenge she said she would ask her news editor – her direct line manager - for her view, but often views were also expressed by other journalists, senior and junior, in an open unstructured debate. She gave as an example, discussions around the suspicious death of a local woman which had been covered by her paper and also the national press:

The other day there was this woman who had been found dead at a house with another man, and her husband released tributes about her, so we reported on that, but the way the national papers angled it was that the husband had a drug smuggling conviction in the past. We were just comparing headlines, their headlines were Drug Smuggling Husband Pays Tribute to Wife Found Dead, but we wouldn’t do that here, because it’s not relevant and it’s not sensitive and reasons like that. [Their headline had referred to his tribute but not his past]. It is interesting when we were discussing it in the difference in what they would say and what we would say the difference in tone. We are a local paper; we are writing about people in our local community and you want to stay on the side of the local community. That is how we have always seen it, for us to champion it and not to unnecessarily vilify people because it makes a better story. (Alina)

There are a number of points Alina reveals in describing the team discussion. Firstly there is the discussion itself which is mutual engagement about a joint enterprise, and the specialist nature of the language in the way that she refers to “tributes” – where family members speak well of those who have died – is indicative of a shared repertoire. In terms of her learning ethical understanding, the discussion itself and the sharing of opinion about the story is a process of practising her reasoning skills and making meaning of how the story had been treated both by her own paper and the national press. She uses her colleagues’ understanding to help her make meaning through the open nature of the discussion. Her reference to “their headlines” and “we wouldn’t do that” are clear indicators of her identifying as part of that community, the understanding of senior colleagues shaping her own understanding of what is right for her paper, and the lack of any signalling of any inhibitory power dynamic in that discussion. And finally she makes reference to “we are the local paper”, signalling a sense of belonging, of adopting the CoP as her own and in turn being accepted by the CoP, and accepting its collective understanding of ethical approaches to news production. In relation to the research question then, the CoP is shaping her understanding and interpretation of ethical journalism.

All of the early career journalists without exception told a similar story to Alina in that it was common practice to hold open discussions about a story which might have an ethical dimension in which the CoP reached a view and where learning an understanding of ethical approaches was evident through that process of negotiating through debate in the participant interviews.

David was a relatively recent recruit to his newspaper, and he described covering a case where a mental health worker had pleaded guilty to having indecent images of children on his computer. David had been asked to get video footage of the man leaving court and ask him questions about why he had indecent pictures. He said he had to run after the man to try to get the footage and felt “a bit uneasy” about chasing him, and whether he should have been trying to get any video footage of him at all. For David, being able to talk to his line manager and other members of his CoP was important to him in working out what was permissible and where the ethical line is drawn. His learning through practice in this case was significant as he struggled to make meaning of what he had been asked to do but felt sufficiently included in his CoP that seeking guidance was legitimate and useful in his learning journey. There was a power dynamic in that he had been asked to get video footage by his news editor, but that dynamic was not so inhibitory that he did not feel he could ask his news editor why this was necessary. Through that discussion he learned how his newspaper perceived their role in protecting their readership from potential harm.

Lisa had been working for her newspaper for about a year at the time of interview and worked in a small open plan office shared with her editor and news editor as part of a four-person team and talked about listening to the discussions across the table about how to treat challenging stories which had arisen, learning from what was being said around her, and gradually being brought into the conversation for her opinion. It was understood from the first few weeks of her employment that they had all undertaken the same training and could fully participate in the discussions, with each participant’s contribution carrying equal weight.

Joe worked in a large office for a daily newspaper. He said he often asked colleagues for their views on stories he was working on:

It could be something as informal as, oh God I don't know about this, what do you think?... to someone sat next to me, just another reporter, to see what their take on it is and that often will inform my decisions whether to refer it up or not. Sometimes speaking a problem out loud can help you figure it out yourself or see if you are being over cautious or under cautious. (Joe)

He had just completed his training and senior exams and was at a stage in his learning where he had gained full membership of his CoP, being able to initiate conversations and share his thinking, referring issues “up” to his news editor only after discussion with peers.

Early career practitioners identified members of the CoP who could be interpreted as key influencers, they were all either news editors or senior staff, people who they trusted in terms of their understanding of ethical practice and who they could go to for advice. It was evident quite early in the interview process that senior staff were highly influential in developing ethical understanding and in latter interviews I wanted to see how trusted they were by their junior staff by asking what they thought of their line managers’ grasp of occupational ethics. All early career journalists without exception said they trusted their managers and found their advice helpful and in line with the Editors’ Code.

A weakness here is that this study did not directly attempt to evaluate senior journalists’ understanding of ethics, therefore the validity of the early career journalists’ perception is open to question and their responses might well have been influenced by the knowledge that I was interviewing them in their workplace, and their responses might have been a reflection on the loyalty they felt they owed their managers. There is also another dimension revealed here in that in turning to senior journalists they may be seeking to draw on their more extensive experience, but they might also be looking to pass responsibility for decision making, by for example taking the view that the editor said it was OK, so it must be, allowing them to avoid making difficult decisions themselves. Future research might usefully investigate this point further as it speaks to the development of agency in ethical decision making, and it is not my intention to explore this further here as it strays too far from the aims of this study.

The trust held in managers in the news organisations which participated in this study was validated to some extent by contrasting it with prior experience of one early career journalist. Suzanne had worked for a national press agency prior to getting a job as a trainee on a local daily paper and her time at the agency had exposed her to very different practical application of ethics. She was able to articulate the different approaches and recognise the strength of the CoP she currently worked within in local news production. An analysis of her feelings about her previous employment at the news agency is illustrative of a CoP which did not support ethical learning and draws into view Wenger’s notions of boundary. The boundary of a CoP can be fluid, but it tends to be defined by members of that community through shared understanding, language and history, the sense of ‘being one of us’. Wenger discusses “discontinuity” of boundaries, that is, where shared histories of learning and practice become fixed making it difficult for newcomers to become peripheral participants and for new thinking to be embraced (Wenger, 2008, p. 103).

Suzanne’s first job as an early career journalist was working for a press agency which supplied stories to national newspapers, in particular the British tabloid press. She said that she spent a lot of time out of the office seeking interviews with people who had been involved in high profile events, for example national crime stories or where someone had died in unusual circumstances. A press agency sells the interviews to the national press, and Suzanne said it was a pressured working environment because the agency was only paid when it had a story the nationals wanted to buy, which she found “totally different” to the environment on the local newspaper where she subsequently found work as a trainee. She said there was no mandated training on the Editors’ Code at the agency, no in-house training on law or ethics, and she was frequently pressured to step outside the boundaries set by the Code in order to “get the story at any cost”. One example she gave related to a ‘death knock’ where there had been a murder and suicide of a married couple at the same house. She had been sent to get an interview with their adult children. The Editors’ Code section four, which refers to intrusion into grief and shock, states that

In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. (Editors' Code of Practice 2019)

Section 3 of the code refers to harassment and states

Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit. They must not persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist; nor remain on property when asked to leave and must not follow them. If requested, they must identify themselves and whom they represent. (Editors' Code of Practice 2019)

Suzanne said the family refused to be interviewed and asked her to go away, which she accepted was their right as it was a very distressing situation for them, however, her news editor sent her back to try again.

He said it wasn’t good enough, I should have pushed for more…I didn’t get anything that day and when I went back into work the next time there was a really icy attitude towards me, and they said something along the lines of there was another death but another reporter would be sent and I was to shadow them because, you know? [reference to the unsuccessful incident]. They gave me a smirk as if to say you didn’t do your job and now you are being punished by being sent to shadow another reporter. (Suzanne)

She said she had tried to act ethically as she knew that she was only meant to ask once for an interview, and beyond that she would be in breach of the Editors’ Code, having studied it as part of her MA programme prior to starting work. However, the press agency later gave her instruction on how to persist in getting interviews from bereaved families and how to circumvent the spirit of the Editors’ Code – if not the letter - to get a story, which she felt uncomfortable about and subsequently left the agency. Suzanne said that during her time at the agency she frequently cried in private.

It was an environment of if you didn’t do something you would be sort of shamed in front of your colleagues and stuff…I got my probation extended twice and I felt like they were trying to put the fear into me that I might not have my job any more. (Suzanne)

Suzanne’s experiences raise a number of considerations about the impact of the CoP on learning. Firstly, there was a power dynamic here that suggested pressure to act against the Editors’ Code was applied by senior staff in such a way that she was excluded both at the level of the “icy attitude” and also the threat of losing her job, and for her to learn by becoming, she would have to align what she had been taught on her journalism course with the expectations of the organisation’s notions of identity which she was not comfortable with. Her learning through experience was such that in trying to make meaning of the ethical expectations of her employer, she was brought into direct conflict with her understanding of the expectations of the Editors’ Code. While the agency can be described as a CoP, in that all members are mutually engaged in the production of news, there was a dissonance between her understanding of ethical practice and the agency’s understanding, a breakdown between her and the agency at the level of ‘shared repertoire’ which suggests that for her, this was not a CoP in which she could learn. The historic practice of the agency, where there was a strong imperative to “get the story at any cost” (Suzanne), combined with the lack of engagement in and training around the Editors’ Code, had led to a discontinuity in the CoP itself from the perspective of the local news production sector of the industry. The news agency’s shared repertoire in the understanding of the code differed from that Suzanne had been taught to observe on her MA journalism programme; while she endeavoured to participate in a joint enterprise, the way she was expected to participate in that enterprise was at odds with what she had previously been taught, and she found it difficult to become mutually engaged in that enterprise. In effect, the CoP she had been taught to expect as a journalism student was different to the one she found herself trying to work within. The agency CoP was discontinuous with the CoP she had expectations of entering, perhaps because the historical development of practice had diverted in a post-Leveson environment where local newspapers had introduced training on observance of the Editors’ Code and news agencies had not.

Wenger (2008, p. 102) notes that “communities of practice reproduce their membership” by sharing their historic understanding and practice through handing it down to newcomers. Suzanne had resisted this process of reproduction as she did not want to align her journalistic identity with that of the agency. She had struggled to negotiate the legitimacy of her participation in a sector which had boundaried itself in a way which excluded her.

There are other concerns raised by Suzanne’s testimony about ethical practice in news agencies, which takes me beyond the scope of this study. It was a single interview with someone who had worked in a different context prior to working in local journalism, and although it suggests an interesting line of research, a sample size of one is not sufficient for any conclusions to be drawn about ethical understandings in news agencies. What it does suggest is that in relation to learning journalism ethics from a CoP, there are different types of journalistic CoP, with different boundaries and potentially with different approaches to ethical practice. Future research into how journalists learn ethics in national news agencies would make an interesting comparative study. Suzanne did state that in working for a local newspaper she felt better able to learn how to apply the Editors’ Code, the CoP shared repertoire here fitting more closely with her expectations and sense of occupational identity, with a clear route to senior staff where discussion around the code was encouraged – an easier journey for her to full membership of her CoP.

Allee (2000) states that ethics and values are important in any knowledge-based organisation where there is a CoP. While she refers to ethical practice as staff being properly rewarded for their creativity and input within a CoP, she also equates ethics with organisations which operate with integrity and honesty where building trust at all levels is important. Suzanne said that she trusted the ethical direction set by her editor in her current post and learned from working with him, describing her place within the organisation in terms which align with Lave and Wenger’s notions of legitimate peripheral participation, moving towards full membership.

Wilkins (2014, pp. 33-35) notes that news organisations influence ethical decision making through the climate created within that organisation, which leads to the acceptance of specific standards, both informal and formal, which are deemed acceptable within that climate. The leadership of the organisation emphasise particular values, which may or may not align with those of the individual.

Organisational climate does not replace individual thinking or the emotional components of ethical decision-making. But organisational ethical culture can enhance or degrade individual choice in both inconsequential and fundamental ways. (Wilkins, 2014, p. 34)

Suzanne described working with the press agency in terms which suggest her individual ethical choices were being degraded through a culture of bullying. Wilkins (p. 40) cites Victor and Cullen (1988, p. 119) who argue that worker retention is affected by how satisfied they are by the ethical climate they find themselves working in, and in Suzanne’s case, her dissatisfaction with the climate at the agency directly led to her decision to leave.

In developing a positive culture towards practice within the CoP of the local newspaper all journalistic staff in each of the participating organisations were expected to undertake training on the Editors’ Code as discussed above. However, there was another incentive to avoid breaches of the code through an annual return all member organisations are expected to make to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). Gerald said that each newspaper in the UK which took part in the voluntary agreement to be registered with IPSO was required to report the number of complaints made about editorial content on an annual basis, which he said had the effect of ensuring that all journalistic staff endeavoured to work within the boundaries set by the Code – creating a positive environment towards working within the Code of Practice.

In summary then, each of the early career journalists who participated in this study described something which could be interpreted as a CoP which was an effective space for learning their understanding of occupational ethics. Senior colleagues were influential in negotiating that understanding, which they gained through legitimate peripheral participation, and it was through their interactions with senior staff and colleagues that they moved to full membership of their community in terms of their understanding of that community’s definition of occupational ethics. As discussed previously, the nature of what is learned about journalism ethics is foregrounded by the Editors’ Code of Practice with which all members of the Community of Practice were expected to align with.

However, there was one important and unexpected theme to emerge in the analysis of early career journalists, and that was the role played by the wider community which encompasses the imagined reader, the Community of Interest (CoI), in the learning of ethics.

Community of Interest

The term CoI needs some explanation in terms of its use in this study. In interviewing the early career journalists, there would be frequent references to ‘they’, as in “they don’t want to read about this”, or “they wouldn’t like it”, “we don’t treat them that way”. The study participants were referring to their readers, not in the sense of named individuals but in who they believed their readers to be – their imagined readers who live in the locality served by the paper and who have an interest in what happens within that locality. There was reference to ‘the community’, as in “serving the community”. As this thesis looks at the impact of Community of Practice on learning, and as it became evident from analysis of data the local community also impacted on learning, there is a need to draw a distinction between the two types of community for the purposes of discussion. Therefore references to the imagined reader and the potential reader who live within the geographical area which a local newspaper notionally serves, or who have interest in that area, I refer to as the Community of Interest or CoI.

As Carey argues, notions of community and journalism are linked:

The principal task and consequence of journalism is to form and sustain particular communities. Journalism forms them not only in space but also in time, within a particular temporal horizon: today, this week, this month, or this year but always in the now, the immediate.(Carey, 2007, p. 4)

The purpose of journalism then is to serve the reader to some extent, through publishing material which is relevant to them, their local area, and local history. There is a substantial body of academic literature which looks at what a reader might find relevant, what makes a story newsworthy (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Keeble, 2005; Wendelin et al., 2017) and who chooses what the imagined reader wants to see through news gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). It is not the intention of this study to discuss these topics, rather to acknowledge the reification of the imagined reader as articulated by the early career journalists in their research interviews and investigate the impact the reader has on the learning of journalistic practice and understanding of occupational ethics in relation to RQ3.

Jane Singer makes the case that historical journalistic norms set the boundary between the “us and them”, the journalist and the reader, with the concomitant reification of both sides of this boundary (Singer in Carlson & Lewis, 2015). She argues that this comes from a viewpoint where the understanding of what a journalist is has become less easy to identify through the emergence of online platforms which provide space for anyone to make claims to being a journalist at a time when politically, importance is placed on the need for accuracy, truth and provenance in news.

…journalists and the organisations that employ them need to be perceived by the public (aka their audience) as crucial to the provision of factual, reliable, timely and meaningful information. (Singer in Carlson & Lewis, 2015)

Singer goes on to argue that technology is leading to erosion of this boundary where “citizen” journalism through social platforms, and entrepreneurial journalism via online journalistic start-ups are gaining legitimacy and blurring the lines between the “us and them”. One of the ways in which journalists try to protect their “occupational turf” is through their implication that the ‘us’ has a good understanding of and adherence to ethical standards, whereas this is less so among the ‘them’.

Metykova (2009, p. 129), a co-researcher on large-scale EU-funded study Media and Ethics of the European Public Sphere From the Treaty of Rome to the “War on Terror” (eMEDIATE) focussed on the relationship between readers and journalists in the first decade of the 21st century. She noted that the emergence of communication technologies has led to a closer dialogue between journalists and their readers, and an increased power of readers to influence content. Market pressures to some extent account for this as there is a desire to attract more readers, which means tailoring content to an imagined and sought for audience – for example including more stories which might appeal to women where it is felt that this was a readership which was not being fully served (Metykova, 2009, p. 137). She also noted that journalists across Europe were concerned about readers’ reactions to their stories, particularly where material was controversial, and that some of the participants in her study were self-censoring journalistic content so as not to offend readers, or “for the public good” (p. 138)

This aligns to some extent to what was being articulated by participants in this study, a relationship where awareness of the ethical expectations of the ‘them’, the CoI, influenced the approach to occupational ethics as developed by the early career journalists. The boundary between the CoP and the CoI, Singer’s “us and them” had become blurred at the level of learning what was deemed acceptable for publication.

The importance of a good relationship with her CoI was expressed particularly clearly by Alina. She was asked what she felt was important when deciding how to cover a big news event which might happen in her town, and she said she was mindful of how her local community would receive it.

Because we are a local paper, we are writing about people in our local community and you want to stay on the side of your local community and that is how we have always seen it, for us to champion it and not to unnecessarily vilify people because it makes a better story, because these are people you know. I think the local approach is so different to the approach that a national paper would have. They are going to do that story and never go back to it again from a national paper’s point of view, but we are reporting to that community again and again, so there is a big difference. (Alina)

Firstly, there is reference to the “us” and “them”, the newspaper and the reader, but she also perceives herself as part of the CoI when she says “writing for” rather than writing about – there is a sense of connectedness expressed. She articulates the relationship between the CoP and CoI as one where the CoP is protective of the CoI, journalists “champion” the CoI because “these are people you know”. She gave an example of the desire to protect the CoI played out through careful choice of pictures and interviews following a local air crash where the national newspaper used graphic pictures of plane wreckage but “most people knew someone who was involved and who really don’t want to see pictures of the horrible death and destruction”. In addition to the protective approach to the CoI, she is also aware of the need to remain on good terms with it and protect the newspaper’s reputation. Not wanting to “upset” a community suggests that the community directly impacts on news choice. Of note is the perceived difference in approach by national journalists, and this was a theme which emerged in interview with other participants. They discussed national journalists as being less careful in their relationship with local communities because they did not ‘belong’, something which resonated in Suzanne’s account of working for the press agency which was far removed the local readers. As one of the facets of Lave and Wenger’s Community of Practice is belonging, this might suggest that to the early career journalist, the notion of belonging is about more than belonging to the newsroom and that sense of connectedness with the geographic community within which they are located is powerful in influencing their learning.

Ian talked about the connectedness of journalists and the communities local newspapers serve in general:

The stance we take is we live in the communities we are reporting on and these are not just distant people, these are our neighbours, people who we speak to on a regular basis, and we are not in the business of upsetting them, we would always want to do right by our readers. (Ian)

Metykova (2009, p. 138) noted that a Spanish interviewee in her European study expressed a similar sentiment:

“We play safe…we take few risks in our job…because we may offend the reader’s sensitivity.”

The difference is that Ian does not talk about “risk”, he articulates a more positivist approach, one of “doing right”, protecting the reader.

Concern about protecting the reputation of the newspaper, not “upsetting” readers and also reflecting the CoI in a positive light were common themes which emerged in a number of interviews with early career journalists in this study, and the perception of how the CoI might receive stories influenced how journalists went about their work in three broad areas.

1. Self-censorship – journalists chose what to include and exclude from stories to take account of how they would be received by the CoI

2. News framing – where a story about the CoI had negative connotations, a positive tone was actively sought

3. Relationship building – Each early career journalist spoke of the need to build trust with their CoI

In each case, there is an ethical dimension which speaks to the representation of people the newspaper is intending to serve, of developing a better community and a greater connectedness, which early career journalists learn how to negotiate through their interactions with their community of interest. In looking at how early career journalists learn ethics then, the impact of the community of interest on what is learned through an analysis of their handling of ethical dilemma is illuminating.

Self-censorship

Early career journalists described censoring their writing in a number of ways in the interests of their community. They spoke about responding to requests from individuals to leave information out of a story because of harm it might cause to individuals, to decisions to exclude information in the interests of the public good.

Penny attended an inquest of a man who had died in local woodland. The coroner had reported that there were some photographs found on the man’s camera which he had with him when he died, and they were of a sexual nature but bore no relation to the death. The man’s family had asked her to leave information about the sexual images out of their report. She said in interview that she knew she had the legal right to use this information because it had been set out in open court, and it would have made an interesting angle and an attention-grabbing headline to any newspaper story, but she was mindful of the impact this would have on the family who were already struggling to come to terms with the man’s death. She said:

…the point for me was this was about the public interest versus the personal distress of the family …(Penny)

Part of the process in reaching the decision to exclude information was a discussion with her Editor where they considered how much their CoI needed to know about the man’s death as he had been found in a public area, against the request of his family to exclude mention of photographs which the Coroner had deemed not relevant to his death. They chose to self-censor and withhold the information about the photographs out of respect for the family, judging that while the information was interesting to the public it was not of sufficient public interest to warrant its use. In terms of the CoI impact on learning here, Penny was forced to think about the application of the Editors’ Code and its section on intruding into grief, against her learning on law which sets out journalists’ rights of access and of publication from an Inquest. She works in a small newsroom with two other colleagues, and the request to withhold information steered her into a discussion within her CoP about the best course of action, which was decided as a group. It was clear that the decision to omit information following a request to do so was not taken lightly, and the discussion helped add to her understanding of journalism ethics, her learning of ethics influenced by her community of practice and also her community of interest.

When I think about where I would like to see my career in 50 years’ time, I don’t want to look back on it and think I made someone’s life a misery without solid reason. Obviously if something was in the public interest to expose a certain kind of wrongdoing that is different …what we can publish isn’t always what we should publish I think, you have to take into consideration what affect it will have on individuals as well [as the public]. (Penny)

Eddie, who worked for a large weekly newspaper, when covering the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Manchester Arena in May 2017 also exhibited self-censorship in the timing of the publication of the identity of some of the victims. The bomb attack killed 23 people, many of whom were children and young people who had gone to see the teen pop-star Ariana Grande who had been performing at the Arena. The victims were predominantly from the north of England and regional and local newspapers found themselves negotiating a big international news story that had importance and relevance at local level. Eddie said that because of their local contacts and networks, his newsroom had very quickly been able to establish the identity of victims in their area, and less than 12 hours after the bombing, he had rung the secondary school on his patch where one of the teenagers who had died had been a pupil, asking for a tribute from the head teacher. The intention was to run the tribute on the paper’s website, and he knew that once the local paper had published the information it would have been picked up by the national press to build a bigger picture of the impact of the bombing. But the school head teacher asked them to wait and hold off publishing any mention of the teenage victim for a few hours.

This was front page news in probably every paper in the country that morning, but we didn’t publish anything at that point to say she was missing. There was a lot going on. The school had only found out that morning and they were arranging an assembly to tell people what had happened. There were her classmates [to think about] and they were 12 and 13 years old, and we obviously knew that she had died….but we made a choice, it was unanimous, to embargo the statement until about three hours later when we knew that all the schoolchildren and all the family knew [about her death] and we were not breaking that news [to them]. (Eddie)

He said everyone in the newsroom agreed this was the correct course of action, local people were turning to the newspaper’s website for information that morning on who had been affected by the bombing, and the place of the paper in the community and as part of that community influenced the decision to wait in publishing the teenager’s identity and tributes, the decision was one of acting in the public good. He added:

We weren’t thinking “if we publish this, we might get a complaint”. It was “what is the correct way of doing this, and what do people expect of us, and what is the proper way to go about it”.

His description of how the story unfolded suggested that there was no time to consult group management policy on this decision, it was taken at local level with the community interest foregrounded. There was clearly an ethical dimension to the decision over the timing of publishing the information which is not coded for specifically in the Editors’ Code, but the decision reached to delay publication was influenced by the perception of what the CoI expected of their local newspaper, and his desire, as an ambassador for his paper, to do the right thing. Eddie’s acceptance that delaying publication was ethically the right thing to do was shaped by his discussions with members of his Community of Practice, drawing on their experience, asking questions and listening carefully to his colleague’s points of view. He was engaging in non-formal learning, while at the same time travelling from the periphery to the centre of his Community of Practice, identifying as part of that community “we weren’t thinking…what do people expect of us”. He was also identifying with his Community of Interest through the care with which he approached the release of news.

This approach resonated in an interview with an early career journalist working for a different newspaper group following the death of three local people in a helicopter crash. This incident was discussed earlier but was covered by a number of different news publications because of the magnitude of the incident. Ian covered this story for his paper and said that they also made a decision to make a careful and tentative approach to the families who had been affected, mindful that the national press had been very quick to make direct approaches. He described writing notes which he posted through the doors of the families, explaining he was the local reporter and asking whether they would be prepared to talk to him – both did and one said this was directly because he was with the local paper. Being part of the community was an important factor.

I think this was because he knew us, felt comfortable with us, we were in amongst all these anonymous faces of journalists from all over the country, we were the ones he knew and had always been there. (Ian)

As a result of that community connection, the local paper avoided the sensationalist imagery and descriptive detail from the crash site and instead ran tributes and follow up stories in support of the families affected. While the policy of being “on side” with the community was one motivation here, what was also evident was reward. Because of the relationship developed between the local press and its CoI, members of the CoI granted interviews which were not given to “outsiders” – national journalists, who were not part of that community. The early career journalists did not make the connection between the cultivation of good relationships with their CoI and reward through access to interviews, though a number of them did say that people would talk to them because they were local and as such, were trusted.

In each of the interviews where journalists discussed making choices to censor their approach to covering a story, the Community (of Interest) was cited as an influence on this decision, they were learning where to exercise constraint and “do the right thing”.

News framing

Journalists in presenting the news can choose how to position it in terms of its content, context, relevance, importance and tone, and there has been much written about how media influences public opinion through concepts such as agenda setting, media effects, news values and news framing (Entman, 1993, p. 53; Franklin, 2005, p. 12; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Temple, 2008, p. 121). It is not the intention of this study to investigate these concepts, and as Temple points out:

While there is little dispute that the media do affect us, there is much disagreement about the nature and extent of their influence. (Temple, 2008, p. 121)

However, one aspect of news framing is relevant when looking at how local journalists interact with their CoI. News framing relates to how a story is presented rather than whether information or imagery is included or omitted. Masahiro Yamamoto (2011) investigated the impact the local newspaper had on community cohesion and found an empirical link – where there is a good relationship between the community and its journalists there is a greater sense of pride within a community. (p27) Hatcher and Haavik (2017, pp. 151-153), in a study of local journalism in Norway also noted the potential for journalists to impact on a sense of community pride. There is an awareness of this expressed in the fieldwork in this study, where journalists articulated the importance they placed on being “on the side of” the community, not working against it, and framing stories about the CoI using a positive tone wherever appropriate.

Lesley explained how his relationship with a senior reporter helped him to understand how to represent his town, and to be mindful that the local paper was itself an important part of a community. Instead of referring to events in the town through the lens of a distant observer, he was encouraged to treat news as happening to “us” not “them”.

It is Phil who has lived in the town all his life, when we do write stories, he will say perhaps you could write it in a different way. (Lesley)

He cited an example about a local company that trained apprentices which had its licence to operate withdrawn following a failing Ofsted inspection. The organisation had been well established in the local community and was well regarded but had hit a “rough patch”. He said the Ofsted decision had affected a lot of people in the area, organisations the company worked with as well as the trainees.

The company had been in the town for 30-40 years and it was a big deal. They came to us and said look, would you support us on this, give us your backing because we are on the verge of turning this around….so we sat down with them and said yes. We still reported it had a bad Ofsted rating and all the bad things that happened, but we said, let’s save it. (Lesley)

The story was framed as a call to action with a headline *Urgent plea to help save apprentice training firm facing closure*, with a story setting out how the local community could help, and is an example of how a community organisation negotiated the direction of the story in a way which Lesley felt was ethically right. In taking part in discussions between the company and his editor about how the Ofsted rating had affected the organisation gave him the opportunity to reflect on the impact the various potential approaches to covering the story would have on the local community. He said a negative story about the company, which was making positive changes, would have been damaging for apprentices and local employers, and that as the newspaper saw itself as part of this community, such an approach was inappropriate – the ethical approach was to frame the story more positively *Urgent plea to help…* yet not ignore the problems that the company faced.

A report on a poor school Ofsted inspection was given similar framing by Lisa who said that parents and pupils at the school already knew it was having trouble and did not want that reinforced by the local paper. Instead the paper ran a story about how the school was tackling the problem and what local people could do to help. A poor school Ofsted report could be framed in a number of ways by a local newspaper, which could shame the school in large headlines, and lead calls for the sacking of the headteacher. Such headlines would be uncomfortable for parents and children attached to the school, and it was out of concern for this section of their community that Lisa’s paper opted for a more positive framing of the story. Lisa said that this course of action was not about avoiding the truth underpinning a difficult story – the school had had a poor Ofsted report – it was about supporting the community through a difficult time.

One training manager who was also a group editor said that all papers in his group had recently undergone training around the tone of a story, and that as local newspapers their role was to be positive in the way they wrote about their town. He said while this was not a new approach, it was one which his company had wanted to see adopted more extensively.

Since I started in 2005, successive editors here have said it's been their view that we shouldn't run down the area where we live. if you have a town that is a bit run down and not doing very well, you shouldn't tell your readers that, because they know where they live, they don't need their paper to be constantly rubbishing the town. (Training manager anon)

A training director with one of the participating organisations said that phone hacking and poor conduct by the national press in the run up to the Leveson Inquiry had eroded trust between journalists and their local newspapers. While the emergence of online news platforms had done much to impact negatively on local newspaper sales, the erosion of trust also had a part to play. He felt it was important to rebuild that trust and part of that was in giving the local community the understanding that their newspaper was on their side. This suggests that the need to develop trust with the CoI influences how stories are approached: making sure that journalists did the “right thing”, building positive perspectives around difficult news – which participants in this study referred to as tone.

The concept of tone is not covered in the Editors’ Code of Practice, and it was not identified by any of the early career journalists as an ethical issue when they were asked what they thought the term journalism ethics meant. Tone as a topic emerged as Lesley and Lisa began to talk about examples of challenging stories they had addressed – they had not framed tone as a journalism ethics matter, nor had the training manager when I followed the concept of tone up with him in interview. When reviewing the data, I found that the concept of tone, in particular taking a positive approach to difficult stories, was something that the majority of participants had raised in one way or another and had not made the link between this and journalism ethics. This may be because for them, journalism ethics was framed as observance of the Editors’ Code of Practice, yet news framing with a particular tone does carry an ethical dimension – it relates to the representation of local people in the media, where doing the ‘right thing’ is perceived as important. The Editors’ Code is very much focussed on the impact of journalistic activity on the individual, for example children, victims of crime, people who are bereaved, and not on the ethics of the impact of journalism on a community as a whole. Yet for Lesley and Lisa, they were clearly considering the ethical approaches to covering difficult stories, working out how to do the right thing, with the potential impacts of their stories on their Community of Interest at the forefront of their thinking. Their relationship with their Community of Interest was shaping their understanding of ethical journalism through the way they framed particular stories.

Relationship building

Early career journalists and training managers all spoke about building trust with their imagined readers in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry.

As the earlier cited training director stated, part of the work in building trust related to the tone of stories but he also identified building a reputation based on responsible journalism.

It has always been my belief that when people pick up the local paper or go to their local website, that actually they do know that it's the result of responsible diligent journalism… I think that is something we aspire to, that we are trusted. In a world where there are so many places that you can get news, and I have to use the phrase fake news, we need to provide an oasis of sanity and trust I think in the middle of that. (training director, anon)

This was something which all early career journalists spoke of, the desire for the local paper to be seen as a reliable source of local information.

Trust is really important. People saying “oh yes, it was in the local paper”, it is important to have that trust and maintain it. (Charles)

And

You want them to feel that they can trust what you say. (Penny)

All of the participants in the study were aware of the Leveson Inquiry into Press Conduct and many were concerned that it had damaged the reputation of the local press. While they discussed having a relationship built on trust with the reader, it was through the lens of their identity as ethical journalists. However, trust in local journalism is perceived as important in the financial wellbeing of the industry. In its submission to the Leveson Inquiry, the Newspaper Society made the point that trust was an important factor in the business model of all regional and local newspapers – both in terms of readers making active purchases of the title because the news content is trusted, and of advertisers who choose it as a marketing platform. (Rasaiah, 2011)

Penny was very conscious of the Leveson Inquiry and how there had been an erosion of trust in the newspaper industry.

I think after everything that happened in the Leveson Inquiry, for me it’s being seen as a trustworthy source. I think a lot of people now jump to conclusions that we are making stuff up, or there are inaccuracies in our work, where we do our best to make sure that stories are unbiased and we present both sides of the story so people can make their own decisions. (Penny)

Steven said that he felt journalists were easy targets for criticism because of the image which had been painted of them nationally, and that it was important that local people understood that local journalists could be trusted to cover local news responsibly and in the interests of their community.

I think a lot of people think of journalists as scumbags, because of Leveson and the phone hacking scandal, and all that stuff, but a lot of people who work in journalism aren’t like that at all. A lot of people do things in the right way which is what I think ethics is about. (Steven)

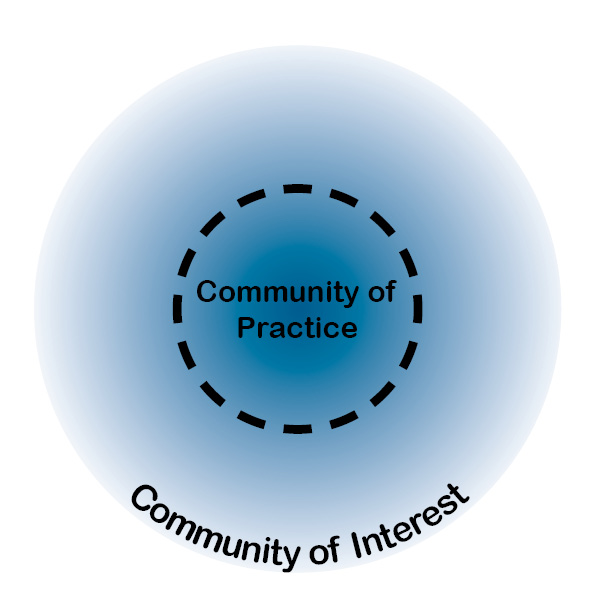
The desire to have a relationship with the Community of Interest built on trust shaped how early career journalists made decisions about the nature and content of the stories they covered. While the Editors’ Code of Practice, which each of the early career journalists cited as their source of journalism ethics, is predicated on concepts which may lead to trust, such as accuracy, trust itself is not explicitly set out in the code. This is an example of how working to a code inhibits the identification of the ethical. Here early career journalists talked about trust without labelling it as journalism ethics, though Steven’s mention of doing things in “the right way” indicates he is actively linking trust and ethics.

Suzanne’s account of her time working with a news agency suggests another view of the relationship between the CoI and the CoP and how this shapes ethical practice. The agency she worked for supplied news to national media outlets, it was not embedded in any local community and its business was in trading stories about people as commodities for national publication. Suzanne described it as covering a very wide geographical area across several counties in the UK. The agency journalists had no relationship with any particular community and could distance themselves from the impact of their stories. National media outlets, in using agency stories, can also distance themselves ethically from the action of the agency, they are purchasing the stories as commodities from the agency. There was no need to consider what a community might think of their output as agency journalists were not reliant on good relationships with any particular readership and did not frame themselves as belonging to any particular community. This resonates with Alina’s notions of “us and them” in the coverage of the death of a local woman where a tribute was paid by her husband who had incidentally had a conviction for drug offences, the “us” being the local paper interested in building a relationship of trust with the local community, the “them” being the disconnected journalists working for national media who had no interest in a relationship with a community beyond the immediate needs of a particular story, and could therefore be less constrained in their choice of headlines. In terms of learning ethical journalism then, the desire for a relationship with local people in a Community of Interest built on trust is important.

What emerged in analysis of participant interviews was that the Community of Interest within which early career journalists were located was having an impact on learning in a similar way to that of a Community of Practice. The early career journalists spoke about a desire to be perceived as part of their local community, there was legitimate peripheral participation in the CoI by the fact of the local newspaper being accepted as part of the CoI infrastructure, and the new journalist moved from the periphery towards the centre of the CoI as evidenced by the importance placed on the gaining of trust within the CoI. I would argue that the CoI is not a different Community of Practice to that of the newsroom, but an extension of the CoP, albeit more diffuse with a degree of separation via a semi-permeable boundary as visualised in Figure 13.

This resonates somewhat with observations made by Sally Lehrman (a researcher on the US Trust Project) cited in a Reuter’s Institute study into audience perceptions of news:

Trust is a relationship. It’s more than just that I believe what you’re talking about but that we share values. (Toff et al., 2020, p. s2.1)

Figure 13 Relationship between the CoP and CoI as revealed through participant interviews

Summary

When considering how the communities within which early career journalists operate impact on their learning of journalism ethics, there are a number of findings.

Firstly, early career journalists learn their understanding of occupational ethics from the Community of Practice, travelling from the periphery, as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 13, to full membership at the centre of this community.

Secondly, they also learn their understanding from their interaction with the Community of Interest which sits outside the Community of Practice.

My third finding is that in considering influences on the learning of journalism ethics, it is possible to reimagine Lave and Wenger’s concept of learning from a community. While the CoI is not a participant of the CoP in that they are consumers of the product and take a distanced view of the activity of the CoP, it is possible to identify Wenger’s theoretical dimensions of a CoP within the CoI, in that by engaging with journalists in the production of news there is a joint enterprise and mutual engagement. People willing to be interviewed to help produce a story for the local paper demonstrate this mutual engagement in joint enterprise, for example the bereaved families seeking out their local paper in the days following a helicopter crash. There is also a shared repertoire which consists of knowledge of local structures such as councils, charities, places of worship, shopping areas, as well as common understanding of the tools and terminology of journalism such as photographs, interviews and headlines. This study did not include interviews with the CoI but the very relationship between the newspaper and its readers, where there is a reliance on co-production of news, suggests that the CoI has a peripheral interest in the CoP. This shared interest is underlined by the Cairncross Review (Cairncross, 2019) which sets out the importance of local journalism in the public life of communities.

Members of the Community of Interest do not cross the boundary of the Community of Practice into full membership of the CoP because they are the final consumer of the CoP’s product, the people for whom the journalists are producing news. The CoI is not given legitimacy in any peripheral participation in the CoP if the CoP is viewed as the professional newsroom. However, what this study suggests is that the CoI is given some tacit, unacknowledged legitimacy, through their role as arbiters of what is acceptable in terms of ethical practice. Their understanding of the behaviours they are prepared to accept from their local paper, their view of what ethical journalism should be, finds its way through the CoP boundary, which would appear to be semi-permeable, into the heart of the newsroom; so while members of the CoI do not gain full membership of the CoP, the standards of the CoI become a fully established part of the shared repertoire of that CoP. Therefore, at the level of learning an understanding of journalism ethics the CoI informs the CoP through legitimised peripheral participation at the semi-permeable boundary of the newsroom and the imagined reader.

Chapter 10 RQ4 - How is the learning of journalism ethics reinforced through reflection on practice?

Introduction

Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988) and Boud et al. (2005) discuss reflection on practice as a tool for learning. Boud et al assert that reflective activity strengthens the learning experience as discussed in Chapter 2 (Boud et al., 2005, p. 26), and to understand how reflection is used in the journalistic workplace to secure an understanding of journalism ethics all participants in this study were asked about their experiences of reflective practice. It was in the responses to this line of questioning that weaknesses in the learning structures within the Community of Practice became evident, in that there was only a limited mechanism to force reflection on ethical dilemma provided by any of the participating news organisations.

Reflection on practice

Early career journalists were encouraged to reflect on their work in general as part of their training, and this was through either a trainees’ appraisal system at Trinity Mirror or incentivised via the compilation of a portfolio used in assessment for those journalists undertaking the NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism at each of the participating newspaper organisations.

At Trinity Mirror newspapers, trainees were expected to engage in a quarterly appraisal with their editor. One of the senior training managers said that there was a proforma which trainees were expected to complete prior to these meetings where they had to demonstrate they had met expectations across a number of themes, one of which was an awareness of the Editors’ Code. However, guidance on how to reflect on journalism ethics in practice was not formally set out. He also described a more informal system of monthly one-to-one discussions between trainees and senior managers where their performance in general was discussed. He said there were opportunities in these forums for early career journalists to raise ethical issues for discussion, though again there was no formal guidance on how to initiate these conversations nor the direction that the reflection should take.

One early career journalist within Trinity Mirror said that the monthly meetings were useful but tended to focus on performance in terms of stories which were well received and ones which hadn’t gone so well, and the volume of online traffic they attracted. He said they did not always take place, with meetings affected by workload on any one day, and there was no preparatory reflection required.

Those early career journalists who were undertaking the NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism within Johnston Press or Newsquest had to submit a reflective portfolio on a selection of their work. However, there was no structured guidance on how to undertake reflection, which Diane said was something she felt was missing. She said that if there was an ethical dimension to a story you were expected to list that and how it relates to the Editors’ Code, but added that this depended on the journalist correctly identifying the ethical dimension in the first place.

Eddie said that in constructing his NQJ portfolio for assessment, the guidance was that he had to include two stories for each of 20 story categories proscribed, for example sports stories, court cases or council meetings.

You are encouraged to reflect on how you came about the story and how you put it together, and that sort of thing, which involves thinking about ethics. (Eddie)

He said this tended to be where he noted how he had used the Editors’ Code if it was relevant to a particular story.

Boud suggests that for reflection to be useful as a learning tool, the learner should describe their experience objectively within a short time of encountering that experience, noting how they felt about that experience. None of the participants in the study made contemporaneous notes about their experiences of ethical dilemma, nor were they ever encouraged to note how they felt about those experiences. While they were encouraged to identify where the Editors’ Code was relevant to a story in their portfolio, this identification was done at the time of compiling the portfolio, not contemporaneous to the event itself. The only participant to discuss how she felt about her experiences was Suzanne when talking about her time working for a press agency. She did not undertake formal reflection where she wrote down her feelings about what she had been asked to do as described earlier, however her internal reflection on her feelings led her to leave her job. Her emotional responses had been negative ones where she felt she was being pressured into intruding into grief and shock. The pressure from her news editor around how to get people involved in traumatic cases to talk was a form of situational inducement as described by Bandura (2002, p. 102), an example of where negative emotion provides an opportunity for learning how to avoid doing the right thing and “toughen up” when called to do the wrong thing. When asked why she felt it important to leave her job, she talked about her own moral code being in conflict with that of the agency to the extent that she felt she had to leave.

None of the other participants recalled being asked to note their emotional responses to ethical dilemma, nor were they asked to reflect on how their experiences and feelings shaped their behaviours and understandings. Other than noting how a situation related to the Editors’ Code, there was no evidence of any structures, systems or routines to facilitate depth of reflection on experience. If this is added to the observation that the notion of ethical journalism is conflated with an understanding of the Editors’ Code of Practice, then I would argue that journalistic learning of ethics in the local press lacks sufficient reinforcement to make it robust enough to withstand top-down pressure.

There was also a lack of formal group reflection on ethical issues, and while each participant spoke about being able to have open discussions with peers and managers, none of those discussions were guided, there was no sense that notes were taken to help steer future decision making, or feelings noted about how a particular story was treated.

Reflection on practice would serve to improve recognition and understanding of where ethical dilemma is located and how it might best be handled within the community of practice in journalistic newsrooms. However, the primary activity of the press is the production of news, and the need to find space and time for routine ethical thinking on the ground may well find itself in conflict with the demands of daily news production. Senior staff who supervise new recruits, and who might reasonably be expected to steer ethical thinking, are journalists not teachers, and as discussed in earlier chapters, are unlikely to have studied ethics themselves and may feel ill equipped to manage ethical debate. In the fieldwork, managers were not asked about their capacity to manage ethical debate, which is a weakness in the methodology. However, training managers when talking about their understanding of ethics did reference the Editors’ Code in alignment with the framing of ethics evidenced by early career participants in this study; also each of the managers interviewed were a product themselves of NCTJ training pre-Leveson when ethics was not specifically referenced in the curriculum. During a busy news-day they are unlikely to prioritise the need to make a formal reflection on how they felt about their handling of the journalistic activities of their reporters and may well need additional training and support, and strategic direction, in order to facilitate such reflection.

Penny made a point that when discussing whether to withhold information about sexually explicit photographs found in the pocket of a suicide victim, one question she was asked by her editor was whether there had been any other reporter at the Inquest from another media outlet. She said that the implication was that had there been, then she may have had to include the information about the photographs as her editor would not have been comfortable with another publication carrying information they had withheld. The editor would have had to weigh the potential distress publication of information may have caused the bereaved family against appearing to withhold information from the reader. Penny felt there would have been top-down pressure to include the detail about the explicit images, but had she been asked to note her feelings about this particular case for full examination and reflection later, she may well have been able to marshal a robust defence of her stance to withhold the information had it been necessary. Indeed, if her editor had also been included in any reflectivity around this case, he may not have even felt it relevant to consider the presence of another journalist at the inquest as a reason to publish potentially distressing information. As it was, there was no formal discussion or noting of the incident and so an opportunity was missed at the level of the individual (Penny) and of the community of practice (newsroom) to consider and reflect on what the correct ethical course of action would have been. This was potentially a missed learning opportunity around the resolution of a difficult ethical question.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how early career journalists learn ethics in the workplace in the context of the post-Leveson British press.

An historical analysis of literature relating to journalism education and training in Britain from 1900 to the present demonstrated that concerns about the ethics of journalism and how this is learned were largely absent for the much of this period. In Britain, journalism was regarded primarily as a trade or craft where the focus was on the need to develop journalistic skills, leading to a culture of anti-intellectualism which resisted attempts to establish journalism as a credible area of study in the university sector. This was in contrast to the development of journalism education in the United States which became established in the college and university sector in the early years of the 20th century as part of liberal arts programmes.

Concerns about journalism ethics were initially raised in the 1930s by journalists themselves which led to the National Union of Journalists’ development of a code of conduct, which was ratified in 1936, but against a backdrop of haphazard training on the job, this was not widely observed by the industry and journalistic behaviour became the focus for what became in 1947 the first of five subsequent government sponsored inquiries into press conduct. In the post-war environment, after the first Royal Commission released its report into press conduct, there was an opportunity to align journalism training and education with systems adopted in the United States, however, the British press rejected this approach and instead established an industry training body, the NCTJ, as a means of delivering tertiary level qualifications in craft skills through on the job training and block release programmes, which also served as a means of controlling entry into journalism as an occupation.

By the time of the Calcutt Commission, which reported in 1990, journalism education had begun to make moves into the higher education sector, but instead of this marking a shift from trade-school approaches to training to a liberal arts education, the industry maintained a strong influence on course content through tightly controlled NCTJ accreditation of university courses. The nature of such accreditation arrangements was such that craft skills were prioritised over critical exploration of journalism as an academic field. The teaching of journalism ethics was dependent on whether there was a special interest in this area in the faculty.

It was not until 2012, post-Leveson, that the NCTJ recognised journalism ethics as an explicit and necessary component of journalism education, more than 60 years after its formation as a training organisation, having been established in the wake of a Royal Commission into press conduct and been present throughout four further inquiries, each of which addressed in some form concerns about ethical conduct of the press.

In terms of supporting learning in journalism ethics then, industry structures prior to the Leveson Inquiry were thin and dependent on one dominant training organisation, the NCTJ, in setting a curriculum which had marginalised teaching and learning in journalism ethics, and while ethics is now part of that curriculum, it is through the relatively narrow lens of understanding a code of practice and how to apply it.

As the training ground for newspaper journalists in Britain tends to be located in the provincial press, fieldwork focussed on journalists working for weekly and daily local and regional newspaper titles.

Semi-structured interviews with early career journalists and training managers revealed that early career journalists do learn ethics in the workplace, and that learning is both formal through the pursuit of an industry recognised qualification (chiefly via the NCTJ), and also informal through interaction with the Community of Practice and the Community of Interest within which they are located.

However, there are weaknesses in the learning structures and processes in relation to the learning of journalism ethics.

Firstly, as already identified, formal teaching and learning structures are dominated by the NCTJ. The relationship between the provincial press and the NCTJ as noted in the fieldwork for this study was such that all early career participants bar one, irrespective of the newspaper group they were employed by, were recruited on the basis that they had successful completed an NCTJ validated programme which prepared them to work as journalists. The exception was a participant who had been recruited on an apprenticeship model and was studying for the NCTJ diploma while working. As discussed in Chapter 1, emphasis on journalism ethics through the preparatory programme was minimal, and framed ethics through the somewhat narrow lens of the Editors’ Code of Practice.

Each of the early career participants were expected to engage in a formal journalism training programme as a condition of employment, and apart from those employed by Trinity Mirror, they were each expected to successfully pass the NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism within three years which consisted of submission of a portfolio of work and completion of formal examinations. Journalists working for Trinity Mirror were required to complete the Certificate of Journalism, an in-house equivalent qualification. Across each route though the teaching of journalism ethics was again framed through the lens of the Editors’ Code of Practice.

Completion of a journalism degree or masters-level programme at a British University was not seen as sufficient to gain entry to journalism as an occupation, unless that programme carried NCTJ accreditation, and any wider curriculum in journalism ethics was diluting by the requirements of accreditation. When journalism graduates were asked to recall their prior learning on journalism ethics, it was to the Editors’ Code that the majority made reference via an NCTJ accredited curriculum.

My starting point was the Leveson inquiry which prompted the question as to how the industry had found itself at the door of a fifth public investigation into press conduct, and perhaps in part the answer may lie in the emergence of a monopolistic training body – the NCTJ – and its historic resistance to embracing journalism ethics as a subject of serious study.

Data signalled that all early career journalists who participated in this study were expected to learn and be examined on their understanding of the Editors’ Code of Practice, and this positive development was a direct result of criticism levelled at the industry by Leveson. Such was the emphasis placed on having an understanding of the Editors’ Code that each of the participating newspaper organisations also mandated training to all journalistic staff on the Code, so strengthening the understanding of the Code across the Community of Practice. However, the Editors’ Code would appear to be the definition which early career journalists use to describe journalism ethics in its entirety. There was no awareness of other codes alluded to in interview and no evidence of structures in the workplace to facilitate formal or informal learning of wider ethical issues such as representation of diversity, social media and the dissemination of fake news, or their role in the democratic process.

I was however able to identify a rich seam of data in relation to informal learning of journalism ethics, and it is here that new understandings about the learning of ethics began to emerge. Early career journalists learned approaches to ethical conduct from the Community of Practice within which they were located. They travelled from the periphery of that community towards full membership through their interactions with members of that community, learning through work processes and activities where learning was a by-product. The Editors’ Code was used by the Community of Practice in defining the ethical, though when dilemma emerged which was not coded for, there was evidence of discussion leading towards resolution of that dilemma which took the CoP beyond the code. In some organisations, a reflexive space was opened up where trainees and senior journalists were able to discuss ethical concerns and were encouraged to do so.

A major influence on those informal discussions was the Community of Interest, the imagined reader, and the desire to be trusted by them to ‘do the right thing’ - the perception of what the CoI would tolerate in terms of publication presented an alternative to the Editors’ Code as an arbiter of what was ethical journalism. The approach underpinned by the mantra ‘what would our community say’ opened the door to wider interpretation of what was ethical and stepped beyond the definition of journalism ethics as presented by the Editors’ Code and the NCTJ. The weakness in using the CoI as an arbiter of the ethical is that this approach is not captured in any formal sense and is not recognised by the early career participants explicitly as a learning resource in relation to journalism ethics.

Informal learning can play an important part in work-based learning, but as Eraut points out, it is important that learners recognise and reflect on those informal learning encounters (Eraut, 2007, p. 420). An analysis of the data pointed towards opportunities for informal reflection on the informal learning of ethics through discussion within the Community of Practice, what was missing was robust formal reflection on that learning. Early career journalists were expected to prepare a portfolio of exemplar work as a requirement of their NQJ or CoJ qualifications and reflect on each piece within the portfolio. While they were expected to discuss how they applied the Editors’ Code of Practice on stories where the code was implicated, there was no further direction on how to draw in discussion of wider ethical considerations, such as representation of minority interests. Once a journalist had passed their senior qualifications there was little evidence of formal and routinised structures to facilitate debate and capture opportunities presented by the informal learning encounters. There were however indications of a cultural shift in the negotiation of journalism ethics, from a code-based stance where the code is decided by an expert journalism elite (The *Editors’* Code), towards one which is more deliberative, reflective, collaborative and non-elite, formed through interaction with the community of practice in the newsroom and importantly through interaction with the wider community of interest.

Early career journalists demonstrated a concern for people in their community, an empathy, which informed their ethical approaches to their occupational activity, typified by Eddie’s observation following the Manchester bombing:

We weren’t thinking “if we publish this, we might get a complaint”. It was “what is the correct way of doing this and what do people expect of us, and what is the proper way to go about it?”

And also by Penny when she said:

…what we can publish isn’t always what we should publish…you have to take into consideration what affect it will have on individuals…

The accounts given by early career journalists of the importance of developing a relationship with the community of interest, the readers, built on trust presents a different perspective to Hadley’s observation on the relationship between the press and the readers as discussed in Chapter 1. He noted there was a tension between serving the commercial interest and serving the public interest, and that duty to the company should come first (in Kemsley, 1954). An analysis of my data suggests that serving a public interest has now assumed greater importance as far as early career journalists are concerned, who see the development of a relationship with the reader built on trust as a major challenge, as without trust and a focus on public interest, the commercial interests of their news organisations are themselves in jeopardy. As Toff et al. (2020, p. s1.2) point out:

Trust is not an abstract concern but part of the social foundations of journalism as a profession, news as an institution and the media as a business.

He observes that trust in journalism has been eroded yet it is perceived to be important by the industry where there is an increasing reliance on subscription models of business, and where there is a direct commercial connection between the reader and the journalist.

When considering the sustainability of the provincial press then, understanding what ethical journalism means in the development of a relationship of trust with the reader may have a direct impact on any commercial success of the legacy print sector.

In conclusion then, in investigating how early career journalists learn journalism ethics in the workplace I am able to make a number of key findings.

1. Early career journalists working in the British press in a post-Leveson environment are exposed to both formal and informal learning opportunities in the workplace centred on the learning of journalism ethics.
2. Formal learning is heavily influenced by the National Council of Training Journalists which historically has been slow to develop a curriculum which adequately addresses journalism ethics despite repeated criticism at governmental level of journalistic conduct.
3. The formal curriculum for learning as set out by the NCTJ and also Trinity Mirror (Reach plc) interprets journalism ethics as being dependent on the observance of the Editors’ Code of Practice, which is a narrow regulatory approach, and overlooks wider interpretation of what journalism ethics could be.
4. Informal learning, however, extends early career journalists’ understandings of good ethical practice, and the community within which they are located influences those understandings. The Community of Practice influence is shaped by the NCTJ definition of journalism ethics through observance of the Editors’ Code of Practice. The desire to belong to a wider community which extends into the Community of Interest, and be perceived as trusted journalists by that wider community, is where a richer learning of ethics is located, and where early career journalists gain an understanding of what doing the “right thing” means beyond the narrower interpretation of ethics as set out by the Editors’ Code.
5. While informal learning presents rich opportunities for learning journalism ethics through work-based learning encounters, there is little recognition of these opportunities or reflection on such encounters. Early career journalists did not identify work-based encounters, either within the newsroom or within the community, as loci where ethics was learned. This lack of recognition of such learning encounters may be a function of the formal learning of ethics which does not make room for any definition of ethical practice which sits outside an understanding of a regulatory framework.

These findings draw on fieldwork carried out in a limited number of local and regional newsrooms, and I recognise that they may not apply to all early career journalists in all newsrooms across Britain. They do, however, draw on testimony of early career journalists in three major organisation which form a substantial share of the British press. It also has to be acknowledged that the nature of news work in the legacy newspaper industry is rapidly shifting in response to the opportunities afforded by new digital infrastructures. (Majid, 2020; Tobitt, 2019) The move towards “digital first” publishing strategies accelerated towards the end of this study, and it is too early to evaluate the impact of this development on the relationship between the journalist and the community they serve. It is also not possible to evaluate at this point in time how a move to prioritising digital publication over print publication will impact on how early career journalists understand ethics, other than to acknowledge that the shifting nature of news production may limit the applicability of my findings in the future.

This study has revealed new insight into the relationship between early career journalists and the community within which they are located which I hope to build on in future work. One area in particular worthy of further exploration is to gain some understanding of how the Community of Interest – the imagined reader – would define journalism ethics and what they expect of their local journalists in terms of good ethical practice.

Appendices

Appendix 1 National Union of Journalists’ Code of Conduct

A journalist:

1. At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed.
2. Strives to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair.
3. Does her/his utmost to correct harmful inaccuracies.
4. Differentiates between fact and opinion.
5. Obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means.
6. Does nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest.
7. Protects the identity of sources who supply information in confidence and material gathered in the course of her/his work.
8. Resists threats or any other inducements to influence, distort or suppress information and takes no unfair personal advantage of information gained in the course of her/his duties before the information is public knowledge.
9. Produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.
10. Does not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service save for the promotion of her/his own work or of the medium by which she/he is employed.
11. A journalist shall normally seek the consent of an appropriate adult when interviewing or photographing a child for a story about her/his welfare.
12. Avoids plagiarism.

The NUJ believes a journalist has the right to refuse an assignment or be identified as the author of editorial that would break the letter or spirit of the NUJ code of conduct.

The NUJ will support journalists who act according to the code. (NUJ, 2019)

Appendix 2 The Editors’ Code of Practice

**Preamble**

The Code – including this preamble and the public interest exceptions below – sets the framework for the highest professional standards that members of the press subscribing to the Independent Press Standards Organisation have undertaken to maintain. It is the cornerstone of the system of voluntary self-regulation to which they have made a binding contractual commitment. It balances both the rights of the individual and the public's right to know.

To achieve that balance, it is essential that an agreed Code be honoured not only to the letter, but in the full spirit. It should be interpreted neither so narrowly as to compromise its commitment to respect the rights of the individual, nor so broadly that it infringes the fundamental right to freedom of expression – such as to inform, to be partisan, to challenge, shock, be satirical and to entertain – or prevents publication in the public interest.

It is the responsibility of editors and publishers to apply the Code to editorial material in both printed and online versions of their publications. They should take care to ensure it is observed rigorously by all editorial staff and external contributors, including non-journalists.

Editors must maintain in-house procedures to resolve complaints swiftly and, where required to do so, cooperate with IPSO. A publication subject to an adverse adjudication must publish it in full and with due prominence, as required by IPSO.

**1. Accuracy**

i) The press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.

ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.

iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given, when reasonably called for.

iv) The press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.

v) A publication must report fairly and accurately the outcome of an action for defamation to which it has been a party, unless an agreed settlement states otherwise, or an agreed statement is published.

**2. \*Privacy**

i) Everyone is entitled to respect for his or her private and family life, home, health and correspondence, including digital communications.

ii) Editors will be expected to justify intrusions into any individual's private life without consent. In considering an individual's reasonable expectation of privacy, account will be taken of the complainant's own public disclosures of information and the extent to which the material complained about is already in the public domain or will become so.

iii) It is unacceptable to photograph individuals, without their consent, in public or private places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.

**3. \*Harassment**

i) Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit.

ii) They must not persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist; nor remain on property when asked to leave and must not follow them. If requested, they must identify themselves and whom they represent.

iii) Editors must ensure these principles are observed by those working for them and take care not to use non-compliant material from other sources.

**4. Intrusion into grief or shock**

In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. These provisions should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings.

**5. \*Reporting suicide**

When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media's right to report legal proceedings.

**6. \*Children**

i) All pupils should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion.

ii) They must not be approached or photographed at school without permission of the school authorities.

iii) Children under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child’s welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents.

iv) Children under 16 must not be paid for material involving their welfare, nor parents or guardians for material about their children or wards, unless it is clearly in the child's interest.

v) Editors must not use the fame, notoriety or position of a parent or guardian as sole justification for publishing details of a child's private life.

**7. \*Children in sex cases**

1. The press must not, even if legally free to do so, identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sex offences.

2. In any press report of a case involving a sexual offence against a child –

i) The child must not be identified.

ii) The adult may be identified.

iii) The word "incest" must not be used where a child victim might be identified.

iv) Care must be taken that nothing in the report implies the relationship between the accused and the child.

**8. \*Hospitals**

i) Journalists must identify themselves and obtain permission from a responsible executive before entering non-public areas of hospitals or similar institutions to pursue enquiries.

ii) The restrictions on intruding into privacy are particularly relevant to enquiries about individuals in hospitals or similar institutions.

**9. \*Reporting of Crime**

i) Relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime should not generally be identified without their consent, unless they are genuinely relevant to the story.

ii) Particular regard should be paid to the potentially vulnerable position of children under the age of 18 who witness, or are victims of, crime. This should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings.

iii) Editors should generally avoid naming children under the age of 18 after arrest for a criminal offence but before they appear in a youth court unless they can show that the individual’s name is already in the public domain, or that the individual (or, if they are under 16, a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult) has given their consent. This does not restrict the right to name juveniles who appear in a crown court, or whose anonymity is lifted.

**10. \*Clandestine devices and subterfuge**

i) The press must not seek to obtain or publish material acquired by using hidden cameras or clandestine listening devices; or by intercepting private or mobile telephone calls, messages or emails; or by the unauthorised removal of documents or photographs; or by accessing digitally-held information without consent.

ii) Engaging in misrepresentation or subterfuge, including by agents or intermediaries, can generally be justified only in the public interest and then only when the material cannot be obtained by other means.

**11. Victims of sexual assault**

The press must not identify or publish material likely to lead to the identification of a victim of sexual assault unless there is adequate justification and they are legally free to do so. Journalists are entitled to make enquiries but must take care and exercise discretion to avoid the unjustified disclosure of the identity of a victim of sexual assault.

**12. Discrimination**

i) The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.

ii) Details of an individual's race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.

**13. Financial journalism**

i) Even where the law does not prohibit it, journalists must not use for their own profit financial information they receive in advance of its general publication, nor should they pass such information to others.

ii) They must not write about shares or securities in whose performance they know that they or their close families have a significant financial interest without disclosing the interest to the editor or financial editor.

iii) They must not buy or sell, either directly or through nominees or agents, shares or securities about which they have written recently or about which they intend to write in the near future.

**14. Confidential sources**

Journalists have a moral obligation to protect confidential sources of information.

**15. Witness payments in criminal trials**

i) No payment or offer of payment to a witness – or any person who may reasonably be expected to be called as a witness – should be made in any case once proceedings are active as defined by the Contempt of Court Act 1981. This prohibition lasts until the suspect has been freed unconditionally by police without charge or bail or the proceedings are otherwise discontinued; or has entered a guilty plea to the court; or, in the event of a not guilty plea, the court has announced its verdict.

\*ii) Where proceedings are not yet active but are likely and foreseeable, editors must not make or offer payment to any person who may reasonably be expected to be called as a witness, unless the information concerned ought demonstrably to be published in the public interest and there is an over-riding need to make or promise payment for this to be done; and all reasonable steps have been taken to ensure no financial dealings influence the evidence those witnesses give. In no circumstances should such payment be conditional on the outcome of a trial.

\*iii) Any payment or offer of payment made to a person later cited to give evidence in proceedings must be disclosed to the prosecution and defence. The witness must be advised of this requirement.

**16. \*Payment to criminals**

i) Payment or offers of payment for stories, pictures or information which seek to exploit a particular crime or to glorify or glamorise crime in general, must not be made directly or via agents to convicted or confessed criminals or to their associates – who may include family, friends and colleagues.

ii) Editors invoking the public interest to justify payment or offers would need to demonstrate that there was good reason to believe the public interest would be served. If, despite payment, no public interest emerged, then the material should not be published.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **THE PUBLIC INTEREST** There may be exceptions to the clauses marked ***\**** where they can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.  1. The public interest includes, but is not confined to:  i. Detecting or exposing crime, or the threat of crime, or serious impropriety. ii. Protecting public health or safety. iii. Protecting the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organisation. iv. Disclosing a person or organisation’s failure or likely failure to comply with any obligation to which they are subject. v. Disclosing a miscarriage of justice. vi. Raising or contributing to a matter of public debate, including serious cases of impropriety, unethical conduct or incompetence concerning the public. vii. Disclosing concealment, or likely concealment, of any of the above.  2. There is a public interest in freedom of expression itself.  3. The regulator will consider the extent to which material is already in the public domain or will become so.  4. Editors invoking the public interest will need to demonstrate that they reasonably believed publication – or journalistic activity taken with a view to publication – would both serve, and be proportionate to, the public interest and explain how they reached that decision at the time.  5. An exceptional public interest would need to be demonstrated to over-ride the normally paramount interests of children under 16. | |  |  |
| (ECPC, 2019 accessed 19.11.20) |  |  |

Appendix 3 IMPRESS Standards Code

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(IMPRESS, 2019a)

Appendix 4 Documents shared with participants which explain the research project and their rights as participants in line with the University research ethics policy

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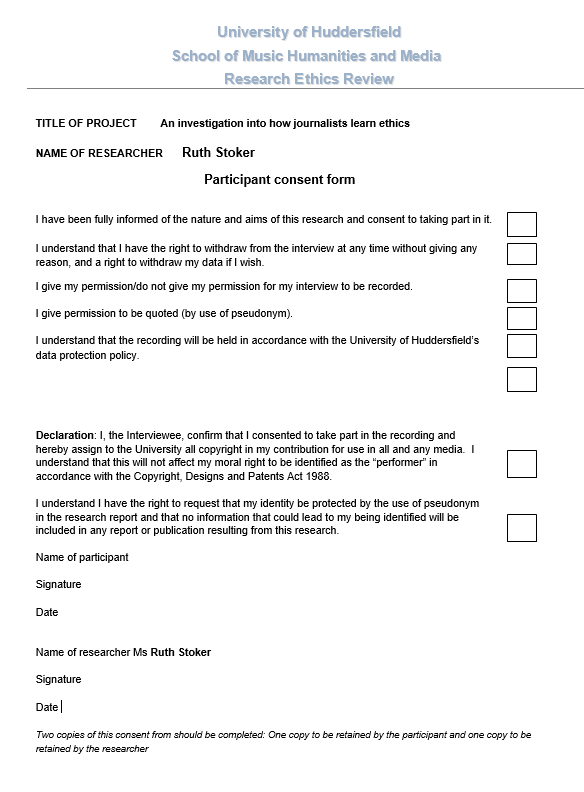
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Text, letter

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Text, letter

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1. For purposes of clarity in this thesis, all reference to the National Association of Journalists will be via its later nomination, the Institute of Journalists (IoJ). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first journalism school in the United States was formed at the University of Missouri in 1908, and by 1918 there were 86 universities offering some form of journalism education. Keeble, R. (2001b). *The Newspapers Handbook* (Third ed.). Routledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The history of the General Council of the Press is the subject of other bodies of research. There is a very useful chapter on self-regulation of the press in Media Law (Robertson and Nicol, 2002, pp. 275-280; and Tim Gopsill and Greg Neale’s history of the National Union of Journalists sets out the Union’s involvement in the development of industry self-regulation (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Leveson Inquiry referenced Calcutt and noted that the British press had failed to fully engage with the recommendations of the Calcutt Committee in addressing ethical standards.(Leveson, 2012 p. 218) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I can testify to this as in 1984, as a science graduate, I sought advice from University Careers Guidance officers on how to get into a career as a journalist and was told the only route into newspapers was to either get a job on a newspaper where I would be put through an NCTJ programme, or take an NCTJ “pre-entry” course at a college which would give me the qualifications necessary to find work as a journalist on a newspaper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This point helped inform my approach to gathering data about how early career journalists learn ethics, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Press Complaints Commission was disbanded in 2014 pcc.org.uk. (2014). *Press Complaints Commission archive page*. pcc.org.uk. Retrieved 22.6.20 from [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. At the time of the fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, the NQJ was registered as a level 5 programme on National Qualifications Framework, but since July 2019 has been registered as a level 6 qualification NCTJ. (2019d). *NCTJ National Qualification in Journalism*. NCTJ. Retrieved 25.10.19 from https://www.nctj.com/journalism-qualifications/National-Qualification-in-Journalism-NQJ. The level 6 qualification did not come into operation fully until July 2019, and the level 5 specification was still available and dated 2018, therefore it is safe to assume that the majority of participants who engaged with the NQJ in this survey had followed the level 5 syllabus and not the replacement level 6 programme. However, the detailed syllabus for both qualifications are very similar in relation to the study of ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Etienne Wenger and Beverley Trayner began writing as Etienne and Beverley Wenger-Trayner following their marriage in 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. When journalists refer to the “parish pump” they are using a shorthand to refer to those events which are of interest to small communities who would historically gather around the parish water pump to share information. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Press Complaints Commission, the regulatory body for the British Press which was in existence prior to the Leveson Inquiry. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Code of Practice was drafted by the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, and independent body, and adopted by the Press Complaints Commission. It has been updated post-Leveson Inquiry, and is currently adopted by the Independent Press Standards Organisation.) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This prompt relates to Wenger’s observation that learning can be designed but it can also emerge, and is an attempt to ascertain the extent to which journalism ethics learning is designed or emergent. Wenger, E. (2008). *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning, and identity* (18th ed.). Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This relates to Wenger’s notes that a community of practice can have local adaptations to learning structures and practice which differ from the global company policy. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Relates to Wenger’s notion of extracted or embedded learning ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Anonymised so that data about the newspaper group’s approach to training can be discussed while protecting the identity of the individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Reference to a fire at Grenfell Towers in London in June 2017 in which 72 people died. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)