



Ethical Practice and Internal Censorship Among Senior Journalists in Indonesia: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 29-03-2025

Revised 05-05-2025

Accepted 17-05-2025

Keyword:

Ethical practice, Internal censorship, Lived experience, Senior journalists, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, Press freedom, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The field of journalism studies has increasingly examined how political environments shape media practices, particularly in contexts of declining press freedom. In Indonesia, the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies has led to subtle forms of internal censorship, especially among senior journalists. However, little is known about how these journalists experience and interpret ethical dilemmas within such constrained environments. This study asks: how do senior journalists make sense of their ethical responsibilities while navigating internal censorship in a politically restrictive media landscape? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences—understood as the deeply personal and subjective perceptions—of ten senior Indonesian journalists to answer this question. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal four key experiential themes: implicit newsroom boundaries, ethical dissonance, memory of press freedom, and subtle resistance through mentorship and narrative strategies. These themes illustrate how internal censorship is experienced as a negotiation of professional ideals, institutional pressures, and moral identity. The study advances our understanding of journalism ethics by highlighting the fundamental human experiences (existential aspects) of ethical practice under constraint and emphasizes practical implications such as the importance of supporting moral agency and ethical resilience among journalists working in semi-authoritarian contexts. It also suggests the need for further research on moral agency within semi-authoritarian contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global media landscape has witnessed a significant regression in press freedom, particularly in democratic states facing political backsliding. Indonesia, once lauded for its post-authoritarian media liberalization, has experienced a resurgence of subtle yet pervasive constraints on journalistic autonomy. These constraints are primarily driven not by direct state censorship but through structural pressures, media owners' political affiliations, and implicit newsroom expectations—manifesting as internal or self-censorship.

Within this shifting media environment, senior journalists occupy a complex position. As gatekeepers of editorial decisions who have witnessed both democratic openness and emerging restrictions, they embody the historical trajectory of Indonesian journalism. Their experiences reveal a personal and ethical struggle to reconcile professional ideals with changing political realities. Prior studies by Hanitzsch (2017) and Duffy (2022) indicate that journalistic values remain stable, yet their application becomes more challenging in contexts influenced by fear, loyalty, or political dependency.

The discussion of quantitative methods' limitations has been streamlined to maintain focus on these nuanced experiences. The significance of exploring this phenomenon lies not only in its implications for media freedom but also in its resonance with the lived moral experiences of journalists. The shift toward internalized censorship transforms journalism from a practice of open truth-telling into one of calculated restraint. This transformation is not merely structural but existential—it challenges the very identity and conscience of those who practice it. Understanding how journalists interpret,

internalize, and navigate these ethical dilemmas requires a methodological approach that honors the depth of subjective experience.

In this context, a phenomenological inquiry becomes crucial. Rather than seeking to quantify censorship or prescribe normative ethics, phenomenology allows for the exploration of meaning as lived and experienced by individuals. By foregrounding the reflections of senior journalists, this study aims to reveal the nuances of ethical negotiation, moral fatigue, and silent defiance that accompany journalism under the shadow of new authoritarianism.

Research on the lived experience of individuals facing ethical dilemmas within professional environments has emerged as a critical area of inquiry, particularly in fields where moral decision-making is both personal and institutionally embedded. In journalism, the exploration of ethical tension has often been approached through normative frameworks or survey-based studies that quantify attitudes and practices (Singer, 2020; Tandoc, 2021). While these approaches have contributed valuable insights, they frequently fall short in capturing the complex, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of ethical struggle—especially within contexts of internal censorship and systemic pressure.

A key methodological challenge in this domain lies in uncovering how journalists themselves interpret their professional boundaries, internalize institutional expectations, and reconcile these with personal values. Quantitative methods, by their nature, tend to reduce these experiences to predefined categories, overlooking the nuances of subjective reflection and lived contradiction. Even qualitative research that does not employ phenomenological depth may risk treating participants' narratives as mere data points rather than meaning-laden accounts of moral experience (Eldridge, 2019).

Consequently, existing approaches often lack the capacity to fully illuminate the internal processes through which journalists negotiate ethical compromises, particularly in politically sensitive environments. The interpretative phenomenological approach, by contrast, prioritizes these subjective accounts and aims to uncover the essence of experience as it is lived. In the case of senior journalists confronting internal censorship under emerging authoritarianism, such an approach is essential for grasping the subtle mechanisms of silence, resistance, and moral dissonance that define their daily professional realities.

Existing responses to the ethical challenges faced by journalists under political pressure have largely relied on prescriptive ethical codes, institutional guidelines, and normative frameworks aimed at reinforcing objectivity and professional conduct. While such frameworks offer necessary structural support, they often assume a universal applicability that neglects the deeply personal and context-bound nature of ethical decision-making. In many cases, these approaches fail to engage with the subtle, internalized forms of censorship that emerge not from overt control, but from years of navigating implicit editorial expectations and political sensitivities (Hanitzsch, 2017; Eldridge, 2019).

Quantitative surveys and content analyses—common in journalism studies—provide a broad overview of attitudes or behaviors, but they do not sufficiently account for the internal processes through which journalists interpret and act upon ethical tensions. This gap is particularly evident in studies of journalists working within semi-authoritarian media systems, where much of the ethical negotiation occurs in the private, interpretive realm of personal conscience rather than in formal newsroom policies (Duffy, 2022).

Addressing this limitation requires an alternative lens—one that prioritizes the subjectivity of experience over generalizability of behavior. Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretative form, offers such a lens by seeking to understand how individuals make sense of their world through lived experience. In the case of senior journalists operating under the shadow of internal censorship, this approach is uniquely positioned to reveal how ethical values are preserved, compromised, or reinterpreted in response to shifting political and institutional forces. Without such depth, current understandings of media ethics remain incomplete and disconnected from the realities of those most affected.

Previous studies on journalistic ethics have often emphasized institutional frameworks and normative theories that define what journalists should do. However, few have explored how journalists experience ethical tensions from within, especially in settings where censorship is internalized rather

than explicitly imposed. Eldridge (2019) highlighted the limits of ethical reflexivity in digital journalism, while Duffy (2022) pointed to the moral dilemmas faced by local journalists under political pressure. These works underscore the need to move beyond prescriptions and listen to how journalists themselves interpret their roles and constraints. Yet, the specific experiences of senior journalists facing subtle censorship in semi-authoritarian contexts remain under-examined.

To address this gap, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how senior journalists in Indonesia reflect on their ethical practices and internal censorship. This method was chosen because it centers on the lived experience and personal meaning that individuals assign to complex situations. It enables the researcher to uncover the nuanced and often unspoken ways in which journalists negotiate professional values amid growing political interference. Through this lens, the study responds directly to the need for a deeper understanding of ethical dissonance and silent resistance. The aim is not to generalize, but to reveal the richness of individual perspectives.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the background, knowledge gap, and rationale for the study. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used, including participant selection, data collection through in-depth interviews, and the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results section presents key experiential themes supported by direct quotes from participants. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the contributions and implications of the study for journalism ethics in politically constrained environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of senior journalists navigating ethical dilemmas and internal censorship in the context of declining press freedom. Phenomenology was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the subjective meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences, particularly in complex sociopolitical contexts where overt expressions may be suppressed. The interpretative variant of phenomenology, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was deemed appropriate for its capacity to engage not only with descriptive accounts but also with the contextual interpretations shaped by each participant's history, culture, and professional practice. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how ethical values are experienced, negotiated, and preserved within authoritarian-leaning media ecosystems.

Given the phenomenological focus on depth over breadth, the sample size of 10 participants was considered sufficient. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews, ensuring the robustness of findings within this qualitative framework.

Participants

Participants consisted of senior journalists with a minimum of 15 years of professional experience in Indonesian news media. Inclusion criteria included active or recent employment in editorial or journalistic roles, direct involvement in decision-making related to news content, and willingness to share reflective accounts of ethical considerations in their practice. Exclusion criteria comprised individuals working solely in non-editorial departments or those without any involvement in political or social reporting. Purposive sampling was used to select participants whose backgrounds and roles were directly relevant to the study's focus. A total of 10 participants were involved, consisting of 7 males and 3 females, with an average age of 48. All had previously held or currently occupied senior editorial or managerial positions in national or regional news organizations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between July and September 2024. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a location selected by the participant to ensure comfort and confidentiality, either in private meeting rooms or secure online settings. An interview guide was developed to elicit narratives surrounding ethical

decision-making, perceived censorship, and changes in media freedom over time. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Clarifying questions and prompts were used to encourage elaboration and depth of reflection. The collection process emphasized creating a non-judgmental atmosphere, enabling participants to articulate complex experiences and personal insights freely.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved multiple readings of each transcript to identify emergent meaning units. These were clustered into subordinate and superordinate themes that reflected both the explicit content and the underlying interpretative significance of the participants' narratives. A coding framework was developed iteratively, with cross-checking between transcripts to ensure consistency and depth. The process of eidetic reduction was employed to isolate essential structures of meaning, minimizing assumptions and foregrounding participants' own articulations of experience. NVivo 14 software played a key role in managing and organizing qualitative data by enabling efficient coding, retrieval, and comparison of textual segments, which supported the systematic development of themes. This enhanced transparency and rigor in tracing how interpretations were grounded in the data. Through this method, key experiential themes were identified, revealing the essence of ethical negotiation and silent resistance within constrained journalistic environments.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics board of [Institution Name], reference number [XXXXXXXX], prior to the commencement of the study. All participants provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout data handling and reporting. Pseudonyms were used in all documentation and published materials to protect participant identities. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national standards on human research ethics.

RESULTS

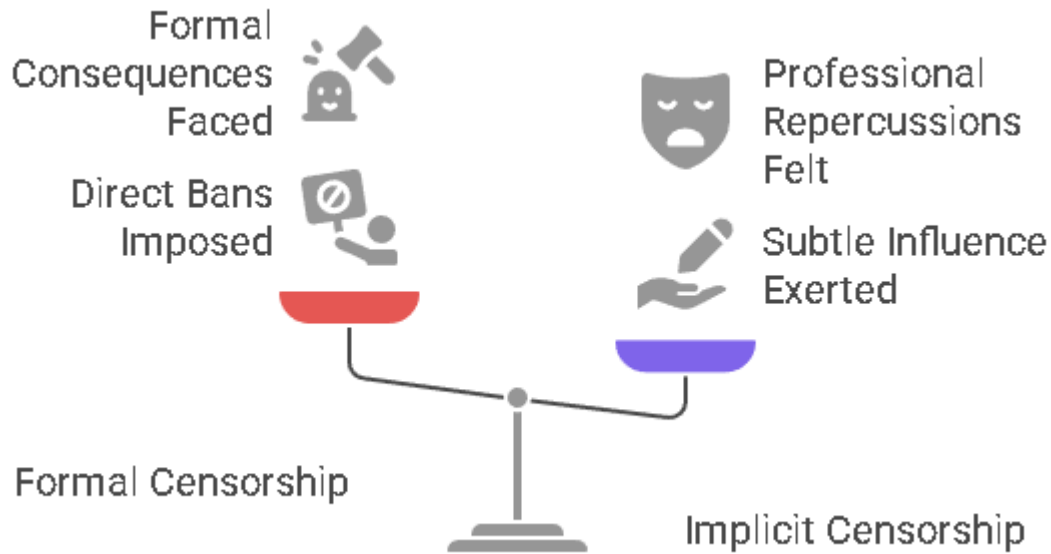
Navigating the Unspoken Rules of Newsrooms

Senior journalists consistently described an environment in which internal censorship is not formalized but operates through implicit, institutionalized expectations. Rather than direct bans, editorial decisions are subtly shaped by political proximity and ownership interests.

“No one told us to avoid criticizing the governor, but we all knew where the line was. Crossing it would mean consequences—not formal, but definitely professional,” (Participant J1).

This phenomenon reflects an ingrained culture of self-regulation, where journalists internalize editorial boundaries. Several participants mentioned the presence of “invisible boundaries” shaped by years of working under politically affiliated media structures. These unspoken rules often influence decisions about what stories to pursue or omit, leading to a form of soft censorship that becomes embedded in journalistic routines.

Comparing Formal and Implicit Censorship in Newsrooms



Ethical Dissonance and Compromise

Participants expressed a recurring tension between professional journalistic ethics and the pragmatic constraints of survival within an increasingly authoritarian media landscape. Many conveyed feelings of ethical compromise and moral fatigue, resulting from the necessity to align reporting with editorial interests.

“Sometimes I feel like I betray my own principles. But if I keep pushing, I lose my job. That’s the trade-off,” (Participant J5).

“We are told to be ethical, objective, and brave. But in practice, we are told to toe the line. It’s confusing, and over time, exhausting,” (Participant J3).

The ethical dissonance experienced by these journalists reveals a deeper layer of internal conflict, where loyalty to truth-telling is consistently negotiated against career stability and institutional loyalty. The result is often silent acquiescence to censorship, even when it contradicts personal values.

Memory of Freedom and the Loss Thereof

A striking contrast emerged between participants' recollections of a more open media environment in earlier democratic periods and the current climate of constraint. This theme captures a collective sense of loss and nostalgia, often accompanied by disappointment.

“There was a time when I could write without fear. Now, I always second-guess—what’s safe, what’s not,” (Participant J7).

“In the early 2000s, journalism felt like a mission. Now it feels like surviving,” (Participant J2).

These reflections serve not only as testimony to personal transformation but also as an index of systemic regression in media freedom. The sense of retreat from previous liberties is experienced as both personal disillusionment and professional disempowerment.

Strategies of Resistance and Silent Defiance

Despite constraints, several senior journalists revealed subtle forms of resistance. These included the strategic use of ambiguity, satirical language, or symbolic omissions. Others turned to teaching, mentoring younger journalists as a way of preserving journalistic ideals in the long term.

“We can’t speak openly in our articles, but we find ways—metaphors, irony, choosing what not to write,” (Participant J6).

“Now I teach. I tell my students how things used to be, and I ask them to imagine how they can be again,” (Participant J8).

This theme highlights that even under pressure, agency persists. While direct confrontation is often unviable, participants demonstrate that resistance can manifest in creative and quiet ways that sustain ethical values in constrained environments.

The lived experiences of senior journalists under the current wave of authoritarianism in Indonesia reveal a layered negotiation of ethics, identity, and institutional constraint. Their narratives illuminate how internal censorship is both externally shaped and internally enacted. Though marked by loss, compromise, and frustration, the findings also point to resilience and the quiet preservation of journalistic integrity within a tightening political atmosphere.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that senior journalists in Indonesia experience internal censorship not as a set of explicit rules, but as a network of unspoken pressures that shape their editorial decisions. These experiences are marked by ethical dissonance, silent compromise, and subtle resistance, reflecting how professional values are constantly negotiated within a media landscape increasingly influenced by authoritarian tendencies. This responds directly to the central research question concerning how senior journalists interpret and respond to ethical dilemmas under conditions of diminishing press freedom.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon by illustrating that internal censorship is not merely a reaction to external political threats, but a lived experience shaped by institutional culture, editorial hierarchies, and historical memory. Rather than presenting resistance as overt defiance, the findings show that ethical agency can be expressed through silence, indirect critique, and pedagogical commitment. These insights challenge the assumption that ethical failure results from moral weakness; instead, they reveal a complex negotiation of integrity, fear, and professional survival. This phenomenological perspective enriches the discourse on journalistic ethics by shifting the focus from prescriptive ideals to the realities of ethical practice as experienced in context.

In relation to existing literature, these findings both affirm and extend current understandings of journalism under constraint. Hanitzsch (2017) emphasized the influence of professional culture on journalistic identity, a point echoed in the way participants internalized editorial expectations without direct instruction. Eldridge’s (2019) argument about the limits of ethical reflexivity is reinforced by the theme of moral fatigue observed in this study. Meanwhile, the strategic ambiguity employed by participants resonates with Duffy’s (2022) insights into local journalists’ adaptive responses to political pressure. This study, however, adds a novel layer by foregrounding the temporal dimension of ethical memory—how past freedoms shape present compromises—and by articulating the existential weight of ethical negotiation through participants’ lived narratives.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual experiences of senior journalists and point to broader socio-political and cultural dynamics that shape ethical journalism in transitional democracies. In contexts like Indonesia, where media freedom is subtly undermined rather than overtly suppressed, the internalization of censorship reflects a deep entanglement between professional survival and political accommodation. These narratives suggest that ethical journalism is not merely about resisting external pressures, but also about preserving moral identity in spaces where resistance is constrained. From a professional standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of ethical mentorship and institutional memory, as senior journalists play a pivotal role in passing down values and strategies to younger generations. Socially and culturally, this study highlights the resilience of ethical consciousness, even under restrictive regimes.

This study, however, is not without limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, the findings are context-specific and based on the subjective accounts of a relatively small number of participants. While this allows for depth and nuance, it limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations or different national contexts. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the narratives may be shaped by personal bias, memory reconstruction, or professional positioning. These limitations are not flaws but

characteristics of phenomenological research, which aims to explore meaning rather than establish universal truths. Future studies should consider triangulating such data with ethnographic or longitudinal approaches to deepen and validate the insights.

Building on these findings, future research could explore how internal censorship evolves across different levels of journalistic seniority or institutional types, including digital-native newsrooms and community media. Comparative studies between journalists in centralized versus decentralized political systems may also illuminate the role of structural power in shaping ethical experience. Moreover, the pedagogical role of senior journalists—highlighted in this study as a form of quiet resistance—could be examined as a model for ethical leadership in other professional fields. In this way, the present study contributes not only to journalism ethics but also to the broader discourse on moral agency and professional identity in constrained environments.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how senior journalists in Indonesia experience and interpret ethical dilemmas and internal censorship in a media landscape increasingly shaped by authoritarian tendencies. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered four essential themes: unspoken newsroom boundaries, ethical dissonance, memory of press freedom, and subtle forms of resistance. These findings reveal that internal censorship operates through implicit institutional pressures and is deeply intertwined with personal conscience and professional identity. The study addresses a critical gap in the literature by shifting the focus from normative ethical models to the lived experiences of journalists who navigate ethical complexity daily. It also highlights the enduring role of senior journalists in preserving ethical values through indirect action and mentoring. Building on these insights, media institutions and policymakers should actively foster environments that support ethical resilience by promoting editorial independence, transparent governance, and capacity-building initiatives tailored to the challenges faced by journalists under political constraints. Without such reforms, the subtle mechanisms of internal censorship risk further eroding press freedom and journalistic integrity. Future research may build on this work by comparing experiences across different media environments or exploring the evolving pedagogical influence of senior journalists in restrictive political contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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