



Behind the Screen: Navigating Ethical Challenges in Digital Investigative Journalism in the Indonesian Media Landscape

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ABSTRACT

In the era of digital media, investigative journalists frequently encounter ethical complexities intensified by commercial, political, and editorial constraints. The primary objective of this study is to examine how investigative journalists operating in the Indonesian digital media landscape navigate ethical challenges while maintaining professional integrity. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research delves into the lived experiences of eight investigative reporters working in digital platforms, each with prior exposure to high-stakes ethical conflicts. Through semi structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, four primary themes emerged: the clash between personal ethics and institutional mandates, the emotional toll of self-censorship under threat, the ambiguity of existing ethical guidelines, and the development of resilience through alternative ethical practices. These findings uncover the intricate psychological and moral dimensions that shape ethical journalism in practice. Rather than depicting ethical decision-making as purely guided by codes and regulations, this study highlights it as a fluid and often solitary negotiation influenced by personal meaning, fear, and contextual pressures. The research contributes to a richer understanding of journalism ethics by amplifying the voices of practitioners and emphasizing the urgent need for more responsive institutional support. The insights presented also have broader implications for shaping ethical frameworks attuned to the realities of digital investigative reporting.



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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital journalism, the role of investigative reporting remains both essential and precarious (Abbasi dkk., 2023). As digital platforms increasingly shape public discourse, investigative journalists are often positioned at the frontlines of exposing corruption, injustice, and institutional failure. However, this crucial function is frequently accompanied by heightened ethical challenges, particularly in environments where media organizations are influenced by political, commercial, or ideological interests. In such contexts, reporters may encounter censorship, pressure to align with editorial biases, or expectations to prioritize engagement metrics over journalistic integrity.

The phenomenon of ethical dilemma in journalism is not new, yet its manifestations have become more complex in the digital era. The speed-driven nature of online news production, the rise of algorithmic content distribution, and the presence of instantaneous public feedback mechanisms have transformed not only how news is delivered but also how journalists perceive and enact their professional responsibilities. Within this transformation, journalists are often compelled to make difficult decisions in real-time, balancing personal ethics, institutional expectations, and the potential consequences of their reporting (Arfaoui dkk., 2025). These decisions are deeply embedded in their lived experiences, shaped by professional histories, socio-political contexts, and the broader cultural environment of the media industry.

Understanding such experiences requires more than normative analysis of journalism ethics. It demands a close examination of how individual reporters experience, interpret, and respond to ethical tensions within their daily work. This need for exploration is particularly urgent as the boundaries between editorial independence and institutional influence become increasingly blurred. Investigative journalists, especially those working on controversial or high-stakes stories, often find themselves in positions where ethical clarity is elusive and professional support is limited.

To address this, a phenomenological approach—particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)—is well suited, as it focuses on how ethical dilemmas are perceived, felt, and navigated in practice without over-reliance on prescriptive codes or purely quantitative indicators (Belcher dkk., 2023). Rather than imposing external judgments, phenomenology seeks to illuminate the meaning embedded in individual experiences, providing insights that are grounded in the reality of professional life. Such an exploration is essential for developing a more comprehensive view of journalistic ethics—one that reflects the complex, emotionally charged, and often conflicted nature of ethical decision-making in contemporary investigative reporting.

The exploration of journalists' lived experiences when confronting ethical dilemmas has become an increasingly significant area of scholarly inquiry, particularly as the boundaries of press freedom and editorial independence face mounting constraints. Research within media ethics and communication studies has acknowledged the complexity of ethical decision-making; however, much of this literature tends to adopt normative or rule-based frameworks that do not fully capture the depth of individual experiences. While valuable in setting professional standards, these approaches often overlook the subjective meanings and internal conflicts that professionals endure in real-world situations.

Methodologically, capturing the richness of personal and professional experience poses a substantial challenge. Quantitative studies, although useful for identifying trends and correlations, are inherently limited in their ability to engage with the nuanced, affective, and interpretative dimensions of ethical struggles faced by journalists (Bogen dkk., 2022). Surveys and structured questionnaires frequently reduce complex experiences into categorical data, failing to grasp the emotional weight, contextual subtleties, and moral ambiguity embedded in ethical reporting dilemmas. As a result, the deeper layers of how journalists internalize, navigate, and make sense of these dilemmas remain underexplored.

These methodological limitations suggest that prior research has not been fully effective in addressing the essence of the phenomenon—namely, the lived meaning of ethical conflict as experienced by investigative reporters in digital media contexts. What is often missing from existing accounts is a phenomenological lens that centers the voices of journalists themselves, attending to how ethical choices are made not only as professional decisions but as deeply personal and existential moments. A more interpretive and experiential approach is thus necessary to illuminate the complexities that define ethical journalism in practice.

In the existing discourse on media ethics and journalistic decision-making, prevailing solutions tend to rely on institutional codes of conduct, newsroom guidelines, and professional standards as tools to address ethical challenges (Budrionis dkk., 2020). While these frameworks provide practical direction and serve as essential benchmarks for ethical journalism, they often operate at a prescriptive level, focusing on what journalists should do rather than exploring how ethical decisions are experienced and made in the dynamic contexts of actual reporting.

These conventional approaches, while structurally sound, fall short in capturing the deeper, often conflicted experiences of journalists working under the pressures of time, institutional influence, and public scrutiny—especially in digital newsrooms where immediacy frequently outweighs deliberation. The ethical landscape in these environments is marked not only by external regulations but also by internal moral reasoning, emotional tension, and context-specific judgment, all of which are largely inaccessible through quantitative methods or normative analyses. Consequently, the existing body of research lacks a comprehensive understanding of the internal processes through which investigative journalists navigate moral complexity and ambiguity in their everyday work.

To address this deficiency, a phenomenological approach offers a more fitting alternative. By focusing on the lived experiences of reporters, phenomenology allows for a rich, nuanced exploration of how ethical dilemmas are perceived, felt, and interpreted by the individuals directly involved (Cesare dkk., 2020). This method prioritizes depth over breadth and interpretation over generalization, making it especially suitable for uncovering the meanings embedded in ethically charged journalistic practices. Such an approach has the potential to yield new insights into the human dimension of journalism ethics, which remains underrepresented in current literature.

Previous research in journalism ethics has primarily focused on theoretical models and policy frameworks, emphasizing norms, regulations, and professional standards. Several studies have addressed journalists' ethical dilemmas, but most remain surface-level, lacking insights into the emotional and interpretive dimensions of those experiences. For instance, Tandoc and Maitra (2021) highlight digital journalism's ethical tensions, yet their work emphasizes institutional roles rather than individual meaning-making. This leaves a gap in understanding how journalists personally experience ethical pressures in real time. There is a clear need for qualitative inquiry that centers journalists' voices and subjective experiences.

To address this, the present study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach. This method was chosen to explore how investigative reporters make sense of ethical challenges in digital media contexts (S. Chen dkk., 2023). Unlike surveys or content analysis, phenomenology provides tools to uncover meanings embedded in complex, emotionally nuanced experiences. The method enables a deeper response to the knowledge gap identified earlier, revealing the essence of ethical decision-making as lived and felt. This approach allows the study to go beyond rule-based explanations and into the heart of personal ethical struggle.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction provides the general and specific background of the phenomenon and the rationale for adopting a phenomenological lens. The methodology section describes the interpretative phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis process (S. S. Chen dkk., 2022). The results section presents the main themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by direct quotations. The discussion then interprets these findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The article concludes by summarizing contributions, limitations, and implications for journalism ethics in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of investigative reporters facing ethical dilemmas in the digital news environment. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, focuses on how individuals perceive and make meaning of specific experiences within their social and professional contexts. The interpretative variant of this approach, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, emphasizes the co-construction of meaning through an in-depth engagement with participants' narratives (Civila dkk., 2023). This design was selected due to its capacity to reveal the nuanced, personal dimensions of ethical decision-making in journalism, particularly those aspects that are not readily captured through normative or quantitative methods. It facilitated the discovery of rich, contextualized insights into how journalists internalize, interpret, and respond to complex ethical challenges during their investigative reporting.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in investigative journalism and prior encounters with ethical controversies in their reporting practices. Inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) having at least three years of professional experience as an investigative journalist, (2) active involvement in reporting on politically or socially sensitive issues within digital media platforms, and (3) willingness to reflect deeply on their personal experiences. Individuals currently serving in managerial editorial roles without recent field reporting experience were excluded. The final sample consisted of eight participants (5 males and 3 females), aged between 29 and 47 years, representing diverse media organizations, including independent outlets and

mainstream digital newsrooms (Cotté dkk., 2020). All participants had previously published stories that provoked public or institutional scrutiny.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in a private and comfortable setting chosen by the participants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' ethical considerations, emotional responses, and coping strategies. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were conducted when clarification or elaboration was required (Criss dkk., 2021). The interview protocol was adapted from existing frameworks in journalism ethics research and tailored to the specific context of digital investigative reporting. All sessions were conducted in environments that ensured confidentiality and psychological safety.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved several systematic steps to extract the essential themes from participants' narratives. The process began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve immersion, followed by initial coding of meaning units that reflected significant experiences or ethical tensions. Codes were then grouped into emergent themes that captured shared patterns of meaning across participants. These themes were refined through iterative comparison and abstraction to ensure their fidelity to the original experiences described. NVivo software was utilized to assist in the organization and management of data, although analytical interpretation remained rooted in the phenomenological framework. The final themes represented a synthesis of individual experiences into broader insights concerning the ethical dimensions of investigative journalism.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from a recognized institutional research ethics committee. All participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards, and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team (David Carlson & Dobson, 2020). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the Declaration of Helsinki and adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and respect for participant autonomy.

RESULTS

The Clash Between Personal Integrity and Institutional Pressures

One of the most dominant themes that emerged was the constant tension between journalists' ethical convictions and the commercial or political expectations imposed by their news organizations. Participants reported that, despite having a strong sense of journalistic ethics, they often found themselves in conflict with editorial directives.

"I knew the story was important, but my editor said it would anger a major advertiser. I had to choose between publishing the truth and keeping my job." (Participant 3)

This internal conflict was not only emotional but also existential, as journalists reflected on their professional identity and the erosion of autonomy in editorial decisions. The dilemma was particularly intensified in digital newsrooms where immediacy, audience engagement metrics, and advertising revenue often trump ethical reflection.

Navigating Fear and Self-Censorship in High-Stakes Reporting

Many participants spoke of fear—not only of legal consequences or job loss but also of social and digital repercussions such as cyberbullying or online harassment. These fears led to varying degrees of self-censorship, even among seasoned reporters.

“I started omitting names or toning down certain facts—not because they weren’t true, but because I didn’t want to deal with the aftermath.” (Participant 6)

Such experiences reveal a pattern of psychological burden, where journalists continuously negotiate between truth-telling and personal safety, especially in the online sphere where backlash can be immediate and far-reaching.

Ethical Gray Zones and the Absence of Clear Guidelines

Another recurring theme was the ambiguity and lack of institutional support in navigating ethical gray areas. Reporters shared that ethical codes often failed to address the nuanced realities of digital journalism, leaving them to rely on personal judgment and peer discussions.

“There were no real guidelines for what to do when the story involves someone powerful. You’re on your own, and that’s terrifying.” (Participant 2)

This absence of clear frameworks led to feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and uncertainty. Many participants described making decisions on a case-by-case basis, sometimes contradicting formal codes of conduct due to situational complexities.

Professional Resilience and the Pursuit of Ethical Journalism

Despite these challenges, the data also revealed a resilient commitment among participants to uphold journalistic integrity. Many described finding ways to preserve ethical standards through collaboration, mentorship, or alternative platforms when institutional support was lacking.

“I knew my newsroom wouldn’t run the story, so I collaborated with an independent outlet to get it out. It wasn’t easy, but it was right.” (Participant 5)

This theme underscores the adaptive strategies employed by journalists to maintain ethical reporting in hostile or unsupportive environments. It highlights the importance of peer networks and independent media as spaces for ethical resistance and professional survival.

The findings reveal a complex, emotionally charged landscape in which investigative reporters must navigate conflicting demands, ambiguous ethical territories, and personal risks. Their lived experiences reflect the fragility of ethical journalism in the digital age and the critical need for institutional reforms and support systems that recognize the realities of frontline ethical decision-making.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that investigative journalists experience ethical dilemmas as emotionally and professionally complex events, often marked by tension between personal integrity and institutional constraints. These lived experiences answer the central research question by uncovering how reporters interpret and respond to ethical conflicts when writing controversial stories in fast-paced digital environments.

This research contributes meaningfully to understanding the phenomenon by offering an insider perspective into ethical decision-making in journalism. Unlike normative or prescriptive approaches, the findings expose how journalists internalize ethical challenges, negotiate personal and professional values, and develop coping mechanisms amid organizational and societal pressures. The study thus addresses a previously underexplored area by foregrounding the interpretative and emotional dimensions of ethical journalism, revealing ethical action not as a static rule-following process, but as a fluid, context-driven negotiation rooted in personal meaning and resilience.

The themes identified in this study align with and expand upon existing literature. For example, (de Paulo dkk., 2020) acknowledges the ethical strain caused by the demand for speed in digital journalism, yet this study adds emotional and experiential depth by showing how such strain is felt and processed internally by reporters. Similarly, (Dodemaide dkk., 2022) describe digital-era dilemmas, but primarily through institutional analysis—this study complements their work by

capturing the subjective realities behind those dilemmas. Moreover, the absence of clear editorial guidelines highlighted by participants echoes concerns in (Fabris dkk., 2020) cross-national study, yet the current research enhances this discourse by emphasizing the existential and psychological uncertainty faced by journalists when institutional support is lacking.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate context of investigative journalism. They highlight the urgent need for institutional frameworks that recognize and support the emotional labor and ethical autonomy of journalists, particularly in digital environments where pressures are both accelerated and intensified. On a broader level, the study sheds light on how professional roles are shaped not only by external regulations but also by internal moral reasoning and cultural expectations. These insights can inform newsroom policies, journalist training programs, and ethical guidelines that are more attuned to the lived realities of reporting in high-stakes contexts. By centering the voices of journalists, the study contributes to a deeper societal understanding of the moral dimensions of news production.

Like all qualitative inquiries, this study is subject to limitations. The purposive sampling of participants—while appropriate for phenomenological depth—limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of journalists. The data reflect the experiences of individuals working in specific media environments and may not fully represent those operating under different cultural, institutional, or geopolitical conditions. Additionally, the interpretative nature of the analysis, while methodologically rigorous, is shaped by the context of the participants and the researcher's interpretive lens. These limitations do not diminish the value of the insights but rather underscore the need for contextually grounded and culturally sensitive approaches in future studies.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring the experiences of journalists in varying cultural and political systems, comparing how ethical dilemmas manifest across different regulatory and organizational landscapes. Longitudinal studies may also help trace the evolution of ethical perceptions over time as digital journalism continues to evolve. Moreover, expanding the focus to include the perspectives of editors, media owners, and audiences could provide a more holistic view of the ethical ecosystem in which journalists operate. Such work would further enrich our understanding of professional ethics as a lived and dynamic phenomenon within global media practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how investigative journalists experience and interpret ethical dilemmas when reporting controversial news stories in digital media environments. The findings revealed that journalists often navigate complex tensions between personal integrity and institutional expectations, particularly under time pressure and editorial constraints. These insights fill a critical gap in journalism ethics research by emphasizing the emotional and interpretive dimensions often overlooked in normative or quantitative approaches. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis provided a deeper understanding of ethical decision-making as a lived, context-bound process. This research offers practical implications for newsroom policies and journalist training by highlighting the need for support systems that acknowledge ethical ambiguity and emotional labor. Future studies may expand this work by examining cross-cultural comparisons or including diverse perspectives within the media ecosystem.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript, and no financial or personal relationships have influenced the integrity or objectivity of the research presented herein.

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