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Online Newsrooms as Communities of Practice: Exploring Digital Journalists' Applied Ethics

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Online Newsrooms as Communities of Practice: Exploring Digital Journalists' Applied Ethics

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Based on qualitative interviews with online media professionals conducted in several Spanish online newsrooms, this article explores the ethical issues that are debated by digital journalists, following the implementation of convergence and multiplatform production. Through the journalists' perceptions about the challenges of convergence and the demands of online news production, the main areas of ethical conflicts are examined. Building on Alasdair MacIntyre's theory about communities of practice, I argue that the standards and practices currently being developed in online newsrooms provide a valid framework for ethical decision making. Finally, the premises for constructing online journalism ethics in these communities of practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Mass Internet access is causing a redesign in media organizations, from their structures and business models to their work routines. A growing number of journalists create content for multiple platforms (e.g., print, online, mobile) as part of their daily work. As companies diversify their products across multiple platforms, the number of convergence strategies has increased, through cross-media synergies or the integration of journalists into a single multimedia newsroom (García Avilés, Kaltenbrunner, Meier, Carvajal, & Kraus, 2009). The implementation of various convergence models is blurring the boundaries between the various media organizations and between journalistic cultures, and it entails the development of multiple skills and profound changes in professional practice (Infotendencias Group, 2012).

In the Internet ecosystem, professional journalists share the communication sphere with bloggers, social networks, and multimedia creators. Users distribute their own content through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other channels, sometimes with results that outperform tradi-

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tional media outlets. The participation of users is challenging the socio-cultural rationale for professional control over content creation, filtering, and distribution (Jenkins, 2006). This has caused tension among traditional journalism professionals, who see their monopoly on news production threatened (Patino & Fogel, 2005; Lewis, 2012).

Coping with real-time coverage as well as managing videos and conversation via social networks are necessary skills for online journalists (Deuze, 2004). Internet production rates are characterized by the regular updating and continuous streaming of news. The obsession with immediacy is glaring: The race to be the first to report on a news item leads to mistakes and deplorable practices, such as the publication of manipulated images or uncorroborated news items (Micó, Canavilhas, Masip, & Ruiz, 2008). Thus, the ethics of traditional journalism, sustained on values such as accuracy, thoroughness, source verification, and fairness, seem to be at conflict with those of digital journalism, where collaboration with users, transparency of production processes, or postpublication correction predominate (Ess, 2009).

A growing body of scientific research is accumulating in literature on the ethics of journalism. In one early study, Cooper (1998) catalogues 40 ethical problems raised by new media, such as plagiarism and the manipulation of digital images. Meanwhile, Davis and Craft (2000) explore a number of potential "conflicts of institutional interest" arising from media convergence regarding the promotion of related products or programs with other companies within the same multimedia group.

Numerous national and international studies have shed light on the ethical perceptions of professionals working in digital media. Garrison (2000) was one of the first to analyze the ethical challenges faced by online journalists in the United States, and Deuze and Yeshua (2001) published a similar report on the Netherlands. According to Cohen (2002), online journalists come under commercial and advertising pressures that harm editorial quality. Boczkowski (2004), studying practices in digital newsrooms, suggests that technology affects news production standards when news content is distributed through multiple channels. More recently, Ward and Wasserman (2010) called for "open ethics" in online media that would allow for the inclusion of different cultural and professional approaches in a global discourse.

One author who has researched the ethical challenges of digital journalism, Jane B. Singer, addresses the issues raised by the pressure put on professionals to publish before their rivals (Singer, 2003). In a later work, Singer (2006) analyzes the work of journalists in four converged newsrooms and the impact convergence has on ethical standards. She concludes that although journalists do not consider that convergence poses serious ethical problems, it does raise "concerns related to specific components of public service, including a devotion to accuracy, an avoidance of sensationalism, and independence from economic pressures" (p. 30).

Digital media outlets are trying to consolidate their niches in the communication ecosystem and, at the same time, secure public confidence by increasing their credibility indicators and transparency. According to Whitehouse (2010), ethical principles regarding privacy must be updated due to the ease with which information is obtained and disseminated through social networks, in order to strengthen the credibility of online media (pp. 323–324). Nevertheless, several studies (e.g., Eberwein, Fengler, Lauk, & Leppik-Borj, 2011; Micó et al., 2008) have shown that most digital media outlets have only just started to implementing codes of ethics or specific rules for self-regulation.

Friend and Singer (2007) argue that the participatory dynamic that exists in the Internet has ethical implications for professional journalists, unlike bloggers and "citizen journalists."

Both authors believe that if anyone capable of managing Web 2.0 tools can publish content, the question arises as to how this affects journalism. Friend and Singer respond:

> We think the answer rests less on what journalists do—basically, gathering and sharing information, which lots of folks online are doing, too—but how and why they do it. It rests, that is, on ethics. (p. xv)

In this sense, Singer (2008) says that the ethical principles that guide journalism on the Web should be the same as those that guide traditional journalism. Nevertheless, she believes that the theoretical foundations of these principles need to be reformulated, since online journalists face their own ethical challenges. Should a media outlet refrain from posting comments containing accusations against public figures? Should journalists ignore news tips sent in by users? Does the outlet have to vouch for the accuracy of the content of links to other sites? Values such as authenticity, accountability, or independence, according to Singer, need to be reconsidered when a journalist becomes part of an interactive network where they are no longer central in the news distribution process.

Ethics and social responsibility are key elements in the effective functioning of online media organizations and, as such, should go hand in hand with the freedom that prevails online (Eid & Ward, 2009, p. 1). The growth of the number of online media outlets means that journalistic ethics are currently passing through a difficult transition where practices of a diverse nature coexist.

ONLINE NEWSROOMS AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

As pointed out by Larson (1977), in any profession a sense of identity prevails among its members. Therefore, professions "tend to become real communities, whose members share a relatively permanent affiliation, an identity, personal commitment, specific interests and general loyalties" (p. x). The standards of any professional community embody the common identity of its members, based on the shared interests and loyalties referred to by Larson.

Leading social theorists (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & vonSavigny, 2001; Wenger, 1998) have examined the conceptual implications of practice. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) conceptualizes a practice within the Aristotelian tradition as

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity. (p. 175)

MacIntyre's characterization is especially helpful by providing a model of what can happen when journalists working in close-knit professional communities strive to meet standards of excellence. His theory of the creative connection between social practices offers useful possibilities for articulating an ethical framework (Lambeth, 1990). As MacIntyre (1984) argues, in any professional community, each practice has its own standards of excellence, and it requires its practitioners to strive to achieve "internal goods" in their work. He says that engaging in a practice involves

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> accepting the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. (p. 190)

Later, MacIntyre (1993) identifies three main features present in any practice:

1. The need for learning on the job. Anyone who starts a practice must recognize his/her own inexperience and ineptitude and participate in learning the criteria and steps necessary in order to achieve excellence in that practice.
2. Excellence is the primary goal of any professional's activity, and it sets the standard against which practitioners are judged.
3. Learning takes place through decision making by means of assessing actions, products, and people (pp. 3–6). Professionals must learn to distinguish excellence, according to the established criteria, and critically evaluate their own performance and that of their colleagues.

The value of communities of practice has also been applied to the fields of business management, communication studies, and education (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). Wenger (1998) discusses how the communities of practice constitute environments that promote collective learning, while Lambeth (1986) applies the concept of communities of practice to newsrooms, in order to explore how journalism's standards of excellence could be improved.

The concept of practice has been further explored in the journalistic field by Sandra Borden (2007). She contends that MacIntyre's ideas about virtuous practices "provide a useful framework for thinking about journalism as a cooperative endeavour guided by a sense of moral purpose" (Borden, 2007, p. 21). The journalist profession has been internally regulated by standards, principles, and norms, which are instructive for individual journalists' everyday decisions. Thus, virtue ethics in journalism is regarded as an internalization of an ideal concerning how journalists should behave and an instinctive sense of what constitutes good actions for news professionals (Borden, 2007).

In the area in question, digital media newsrooms can also be considered internally cohesive professional communities. In fact, journalism as exercised in these media organizations is an example of communities of practice in the sense referred to by MacIntyre (1984). Each community consists of journalists from a particular online newsroom, with their own professional standards consisting of a range of information production processes that are in keeping with set criteria of competence, quality, and professionalism formulated by the community of practice itself. These are standards that are transmitted from one generation of journalists to the next, through a mix of osmosis and rules. They cover practical issues, from how to edit a story on the Web to how to carry out an online interview or moderate a chat: Each of these activities can be adapted or not to the ethical criteria established by the members of that community of practice.

If we analyze shared practices in professions such as law, medicine, or psychology, we find a set of basic standards that guide the work of their professionals. Similarly, the regulatory interpretation of journalistic practice can be applied to online newsrooms by setting out ethical principles and models for news quality. The newsrooms, which are subject to a 24-hour news cycle, do more than produce and disseminate reports. As Husband (2005) argues, certain

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communities of practice, such as minority ethnic media, exist where shared values have been developed regarding the kind of journalism practiced. Besides, learning and knowledge sharing are mechanisms that foster innovation in these communities of practice (Weiss & Domingo, 2010).

Thus, it could be argued that journalistic practices play a key role when it comes to differentiating journalism from other types of work in media outlets, since they are based on notions such as objectivity, accuracy, and rigor, which confer legitimacy on the role of journalism in society (Karlsson, 2011). As news professionals are experimenting with new formats and genres revolving around convergence, multimedia reporting, and audience participation in a networked media environment (Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, & Dimoulas, 2013), online journalism poses unique ethical challenges for journalists.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Three overriding questions guided my research:

RQ1: What ethical issues are raised by convergence processes in online newsrooms?
RQ2: Do journalists perceive the convergence of newsrooms as a threat to quality of journalism?
RQ3: To what extent does conceptualizing online newsrooms as communities of practice provide a useful framework for ethical decision making?

This research employs a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the experiences and perceptions of online journalists regarding the ethical challenges they face in their work. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002),

> qualitative interviewing is predicated on the idea that interview talk is the rhetoric of socially-situated speakers. We interpret the "truth value" of interview speech—that is, its truth for the speaker—within a whole matrix of information about the interview event and the person being interviewed. (pp. 172–173)

For the fieldwork, 10 Spanish online media outlets were selected, with the common denominator that all cover general news with permanently updated information (a list of the media outlets is shown in Appendix 1). In-depth interviews were conducted with 34 media professionals from these outlets, including editors, publishers, reporters, and technical directors. Among other questions, they were asked about the evolution of convergence in their newsrooms, as well as journalistic practices and their ethical repercussions. The interviews were between 30 minutes and one hour long, and they were conducted face-to-face and recorded, as recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

Field work was conducted between April 2011 and May 2012 by researchers involved in the project, titled "Evolution of online media in the context of news media convergence and integration." All interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire of 15 items. Interviews following the narrative theory of qualitative research have been a useful tool to get

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a deeper understanding of the work situation and the personal choices of individual reporters (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). Interview citations presented here were edited and translated from Spanish into English. Transcripts of the interviews were then coded using individual categories as the unit for content analysis. Testimonies of 20 interviewees that corresponded more closely with the aim of this research were selected.

Responses that addressed issues relating to ethical issues were processed using an open coding sequence, in order to select and code each sentence in the transcripts, thus identifying the various issues addressed by the interviewed journalists. This resulted in a variety of topics related to the three main research questions. These topics were then grouped and labelled accordingly. In the coding phase, the statements were categorized and then tested against the transcripts, to verify whether our grouping matched the answers offered in the interviews. The next step was to identify the various ways in which the interviewees discussed these topics, resulting in a series of coherent categories for analysis.

In structuring the answers, a longitudinal model based on newsrooms' process of news production was followed. In this regard, Bantz, McCorkle, and Baade (1997) identified five stages: story ideation, task assignment, gathering and structuring materials, assembling materials, and presenting newscast. Meanwhile, Alfred Hermida (2011), based on work by Domingo Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, and Vujnovic (2008), proposed an additional five-stage classification: access/observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation (Hermida, 2011, p. 18). In this article, I have classified the ethical issues raised in the interviews according to the model proposed by Hermida.

Ethical Issues Regarding Information Access

In digital newsrooms, the production model has not stabilized enough to prevent conflicts over differing views of product information, work performance, and professional practices. In an environment in which the number of outlets is ever increasing, the Internet is a common source for journalists. As one editor pointed out, "in addition to the usual sources, we use email and social networking, albeit with care." In this respect, the same editor qualifies: "We check the information we receive on Twitter, go to the source that can confirm this information, and then publish it." Another journalist stresses that she uses Twitter because it is more accessible, so long as it can be cross-checked with other sources.

Several interviewees admit that the rules on the need to verify information through at least one other source often take second place due to the intensity of news production. One manager admits to the absence of either "methodology or ethical criteria" regarding the use of Internet sources and adds that "it's essential to cross-check information: there's a lot of information, trash and excellent material on the net."

Some debate whether journalists should publish what they want on their private Twitter accounts and to what extent a company should control the activity of its employee on social networks. One reporter explains that journalists have "a tool that connects all personal Twitter accounts to that of the online outlet, so that at the very moment that we update any information, it immediately appears on it. However, every Twitter profile is personal, not professional, and this can cause problems." According to several interviewees, the controversy over personal Twitter accounts is still an on-going issue.

Ethical Issues Regarding Information Selection/Filtering

Given the high degree of uncertainty that characterizes the process of selecting online information (e.g., rumors, photomontages), strategies have been put in place to process the vast amount of information available on the Internet. Some outlets have established guidelines for the verification of material sent in by users.

Having strategies that allow users to participate in the process of news production can bring added value to journalism. One editor noted:

> Input from regular users is often crucial in the pursuit of a story or to suggest new approaches for a particular issue. Out there we have experts in many different areas who know much more than we do, so it makes sense to ask them for their collaboration—that way, everyone wins.

This view is corroborated by another editor:

> We were one of the first news outlets to report stories following tipoffs from readers, and we acknowledge this: *information gathered with the help of John Smith*. However, the reader only gives us a lead; we are the ones who produce the full story, not the reader.

Nevertheless, most newsrooms do not have sophisticated systems in place to cross-check the contents provided by users. One director admits:

> There are no professionals dedicated specifically to monitoring content. On our website we have a section with photos sent in by readers. Each editor is in charge of the material sent to them. In the case of photos reporting complaints, however, we do have a person that checks them, selects them, and evaluates them.

Another reporter notes "users' emails are sent to the community manager. If they believe that a reader's contribution is useful, they pass it on to the appropriate section."

In selecting themes, there is a certain degree of pressure to increase traffic and to gather news that attracts readers, to the detriment of other, less newsworthy, items. One editor admits there exist

> pressures on digital media outlets to increase their audience, increase the number of individual users and to consider how newsworthy an item is. Sometimes the work is conditioned by the minute-to-minute nature of the job or the success of certain formulas, which does not necessarily equate to good journalism.

Access to news content also generates conflict between journalists of print and digital newsrooms. For example, the website of one regional media outlet, in addition to items supplied by news agencies, can only publish reports in the local section that have not appeared in the print edition. One journalist claims that there are problems with coordination between the two newsrooms:

> Before, they called you to let you know about something, now they no longer tell you anything. There is a degree of rivalry between the two newsrooms and it is the online journalists who are the ones set to lose out.

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Ethical Issues Surrounding Processing and Editing

When asked to evaluate the consequences of convergence in content production, most interviewees point out the risks to product quality that constant updating and multi-tasking entail. Some reporters want to produce more elaborate pieces but admit that this is impossible as the website is not profitable and they cannot request more resources.

Professionals are united in rejecting the concept of the "Jack-of-all-trades," the "journalist for everything." One editor said:

> In the past, a journalist would go to a press conference with their camera, video camera ... they would get out their recording equipment, make a video for the Web, make calls ... But this system of the "Jack-of-all-trades" doesn't work, it's not feasible. It's better to specialize.

In certain cases, the integration of paper and digital journalists into a single newsroom increased juggling of roles: "Increasingly, we are getting used to doing pretty much everything," says one journalist. But he adds, more critically:

> There should be some difference between those who are in charge of the up-to-the minute information, read headlines and social networks, and those who write long articles and produce in-depth reports. I do not write about economics one day and football the next, so it seems equally unreasonable for those who produce investigative reports to have to Tweet or publish things on Facebook.

There is also a widespread perception that newsroom convergence is an inevitable process due to the economic crisis and the crisis within the sector. As one publisher puts it, "there have been no cuts in costs. Everything described is investment in technology, talent, and product in order to be competitive in the present and the future."

Convergence processes are designed to both modernize the company and cut costs. One editor commented:

> To talk of cutting costs is to talk in business terms and I do not wish to go down that route, although the dynamics of the industry is heading in that direction. From a business point of view, convergence entails some savings in terms of costs, but a newspaper is an intellectual project and not a business project.

The relationship between editorial content and advertising through sponsored sections or brand-sponsored coverage also raises ethical challenges. One manager points out that there is always a clear differentiation between advertising and information:

> When we sponsor sections, we expect journalists always to differentiate it from advertising, sponsorship, advertorials, etc. In other words, the reader should know that this is a paid piece to differentiate it from the outlet's news.

Along these lines, another journalist argues that content generated by "agreements or 'co-branding' with companies, for example, restaurants, cinemas, etc., should be located in the Web services section, not in the information section."

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Ethical Issues Regarding Distribution

Free distribution predominates in the Internet. Messages circulate at great speed, with repercussions, through social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. This immediacy increases the pressure to publish news before checking its veracity; constant updating can have a negative impact on product quality, including inaccuracy, arbitrariness in the choice of subject matter, or lack of context.

Some editors prefer not to be the first to break the news but to report it well, rather than be the first and report it badly. As one interviewee stated, "everything on the Internet leaves a trace, and it is easy for people to remember an erroneous report. It's worth taking the time to confirm the veracity of the information, rather than be the first to publish it."

One readers' ombudsperson notes that "with the increasing number of media outlets, we are witnessing a change in newsroom culture." This journalist argues that

> we are generating a newspaper of 'now', where immediacy takes precedence. We have many 'fast guys' to break news. But good, experienced editors are also necessary. In the past, a newsroom was organized to produce a product every 24 hours. Now we have a system of instant information—the whole newsroom has been turned over to digital, so much so that many consider it a waste of time to leave their desks to gather information since they are so pressed for time.

Nevertheless, one editor argues that although mistakes are made on the Internet due to haste, "they are quite trivial errors. There is some uncalled-for criticism of the media because of this haste."

Copyright issues are also relevant. According to one interviewee, a journalist's work automatically becomes the property of the media organization. In this regard, one journalist stressed the importance of properly attributing each piece to the author:

> Reports reworked by news agencies are not attributed to any particular author because that news is not yours; in these cases, the piece is simply attributed to the outlet. If there's an online source, there's always a link to it; this practice is spreading to other sections.

Ethical Issues Regarding Interpretation

Credibility is not only dependent on the accuracy and veracity of the content, but also on the perception users have about the professionalism of journalists and specific media outlets. Therefore, user feedback is important. One editor claims that

> newspaper journalists consider their articles to be a finished product. On the Internet, however, the reporting process is constant and is not so perfect. That does not mean that we are bad journalists or that we lack standards—our job is simply different from that of a paper journalist. We have our standards, of course, which include collaboration, transparency and allowing readers to participate in the process.

Publishing inappropriate comments is controversial. Editors debate to what extent anonymity or installing systems to filter out injurious comments should be allowed. Several media outlets have in place a subsequent comment moderation step to check that they comply with the basic rules and do not violate human rights. Publication is not without risks: "In the past, comments

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were open but now legal problems arise when they are abusive or insulting," points out one community manager.

Increasingly, journalists comment on sporting events, political events, and big news items as they happen live. When working under this pressure, mistakes are usually made, from simple misspellings to inaccurate information. In this regard, one journalist states: "Users can alert us to our mistakes—with constructive criticism—to tell us where we went wrong." As one readers' advocate warns, "The challenge is to apologize more often—the journalist needs to be diligent in correcting."

Several interviewees said that online newsrooms increasingly demand transparency. When any citizen is capable of publishing information on the Internet, professional journalism needs to have higher standards of transparency when it comes to producing information and opening the process to readers.

DISCUSSION: ONLINE NEWSROOMS AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Building an Applied Ethics

As synthetized in Table 1, interview results show the impact of multiple factors on online journalism ethics. They also confirm the existence of common values and practices in digital newsrooms and, at the same time, important differences. Each media outlet develops strategies, tools, and routines that can only be explained through thorough analysis of the actors and their circumstances. The main ethical issues that influence the routines in online newsrooms are organizational (collaboration between the editors of various platforms, working conditions,

TABLE 1
Ethical Issues Raised by Online Newsroom Professionals

Production Phase	*Ethical Issues*
Access/observation	Checking what appears on social networks
	Verifying the information with two or more sources
	Using journalists' Twitter accounts
Selection/filtering	Checking content posted by users
	Pressure to report on mass-audience news items
	Tensions regarding access to news
Processing/editing	Rejection of the "Jack-of-all-trades"
	Convergence as a cost-saving measure
	Separation between advertising and news
Distribution	Valuing journalists' authorship
	Obsession in beating the competition
	Immediacy of live coverage
Interpretation	Gathering user feedback
	Moderating comments and insults
	Error correction
	Transparency

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transparency), economic (cost reduction, lack of resources, advertising revenue), cultural (open access of online journalism, the use of social networks) and professional (authorship, source verification, and error correction).

Many professionals express concern about the challenges of live coverage due to immediacy and constant updating. Concern is also raised over verifying information, the proper use of Twitter by journalists, and the ability to use reader input while ensuring accuracy. These are just a few of the many questions journalists are facing in the digital age. The answers are not easy ones. But journalism ethics is not only about avoiding problems; it is also about doing the right thing. Digital news makes possible a wide variety of tools (e.g., design, search and publication tools, social media) that journalists should embrace, with an ethical mandate to use them to report the news more fully, more accurately, and in a better context.

My findings draw attention to the normative functions of professional practices in online journalism. They reveal that the ethical principles of digital journalism need not be differentiated from those of traditional journalism, since they are applicable to any media outlet. However, ethical standards, whether print, broadcast, or online, have their own peculiarities regarding journalistic practices that undoubtedly raise specific ethical issues.

By considering their work as virtuous practice in MacIntyre's (1984) sense, online journalists might be drawing closer to the goal of striving for excellence. Journalistic work carried out in online newsrooms might be conceived as the result of collaboration with a common goal. News practices tend to facilitate teamwork because they provide useful mechanisms to evaluate journalists' virtuous performance, which in MacIntyre's theory are conceptualized as "internal goods" (p. 176).

MacIntyre (1984) defines "internal goods" as those goods that can only be achieved by engagement in a particular practice. He states that these goods are internal in two senses. First, they can only be specified in terms of the particular practice, and secondly, they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in this practice. MacIntyre argues that those "who lack the relevant experience of the practice are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods" (p. 176). The practice of online journalism enhances a series of internal goods (e.g., truthfulness, transparency, prudence, accuracy) that contribute to professional excellence, in so far as these goods allow journalists to improve the quality of their news output.

The excellence in each practice provides for its practitioners a *telos* for their own activities as well as a standard by which they are to be measured (MacIntyre, 1993, p. 4). From the standpoint afforded by a practice, the standards of good cannot be understood as an expression of anyone's tastes, feelings, and thoughts, for it is the independence of any particular person's tastes, feelings, and thoughts in which the objectivity of good consists. Further, MacIntyre emphasizes the need for apprenticeship in such practices (pp. 4–5). The apprentice has to learn how to distinguish between what it merely seems good to him or her and what really is so, and how to identify what it was that led him or her to confuse appearance with reality, so that on future occasions what caused the error will have been remedied. Journalists who first enter an online newsroom—their community of practice—lack experience; therefore, they are to learn the required standards to reach excellence in digital news. According to some reporters' statements in the interviews, journalism standards are learned by osmosis, by absorbing them from experienced professionals.

Journalism is an "imperfect trade," as Lambeth (1986, p. 73) put it, because it is never perfected; it keeps constantly evolving. The "know how" of online journalism is a task that

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gets updated on the daily experience, as journalists make decisions about how to shoot a picture, edit a piece, or highlight a particular story, according to their news judgment and the standards of professional excellence. News judgment is implemented in a collective environment, for journalism is very much a team job. Decisions such as checking a news source or moderating users' comments could be taken ethically or unethically, according to the prevailing newsroom practices.

Knowing how to apply the rules is the work of the virtue of practical intelligence, so as to judge which rules are relevant to each kind of situation and task. Practical intelligence is "a matter of discriminating among the various forms of guidance to be derived from the past in a way for which there is no universal recipe" (MacIntyre, 1993, p. 7). Being able to judge what is good and best is itself a matter not only of judging in the light of established standards but also of understanding how on occasion to reformulate them within a more adequate knowledge of what suits best for that particular practice. Practical intelligence is then indispensable for online journalists, because there are no algorithms for making the kind of judgements that are required in the process of gathering, filtering, editing, distributing, and interpreting the news.

My results support claims by Singer (2006), Ward and Wasserman (2010), and Spyridou et al. (2013), who suggest how online newsrooms are embracing ethical standards. Many of these standards are based on traditional principles, on the premise that journalism ethics applies to all forms, regardless of the type of media in which the work is carried out. Nevertheless, news production on the Internet raises its own particular challenges, with specific standards for issues, such as the use of social networks and comment moderation. In digital newsrooms, journalists make decisions every day based on the professional standards formulated in their communities of practice. A healthy practice would constitute a viable ethical community capable of inspiring real solidarity among journalists. In conjunction with an effective collective organization, online journalism as a practice should be able to better withstand current ethical challenges.

Online news standards demonstrate their value when used as a guide to practice in specific actions. These principles and rules, despite their shortcomings, could provide a coherent framework for facing ethical issues arising in the communities of practice at the different online newsrooms. Thus, standards strengthen the relationship between the profession's general and applied ethics. The first cover the moral dimension of human beings and their foundations; the second embody these moral principles in certain occupations. General ethics derive vitality from being permanently exposed to reality, whereas applied ethics formulate criteria for evaluating specific procedures.

Deciding on what to report, what to include, what to omit, or in which direction to investigate, for example, are professional activities in which journalists' freedom is at stake. Satisfying the fundamental right to receive accurate information needed by the public in order to be able to act as citizens in society depends on that independent practice, both professional and moral.

Using a false identity to gain access to information, obtaining sensitive documents, or hacking telephones, no matter how well intentioned, involves deception and invasion of privacy. Guaranteeing a right cannot be at the expense of violating others. Journalists recognize themselves that the use of such procedures increases the more they come under pressure to publish a piece quickly. Professional practices, such as the correct transcription of a statement, the verification of the origin of pictures, or the verification of information provided by sources,

always have a moral dimension. Thus, intellectual and moral virtues are needed to realize and extend journalists' internal goods.

The "community of practice model" has the potential to provide online journalists with a solid group identity that can distinguish them from others in the media marketplace and reinvigorate the occupation with a new sense of purpose (Borden, 2007). Transparency, accountability, and openness are values tied to ethical standards, which command substantial autonomy and credibility in news professionals and their organizations.

This article is not intended to be a systematic study of the ethical standards of online journalism, but an exploratory analysis that needs to be expanded on with more specific and longer studies. Further research is needed, with a broader and more representative sample, in different national and work environments, in order to expand on these results.

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APPENDIX 1. LIST OF ONLINE MEDIA OUTLETS SELECTED FOR THE STUDY SAMPLE

Elpais.com, Elmundo.es, 20minutos.es, Heraldo.es, Ideal.es, Lavozdegalicia.es, Rtve.es, Informativostelecinco.com, Canalsur.es and Lainformacion.com.

At least three professionals were interviewed from each media outlet.

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