

# ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE NEW MEDIA ERA WITHIN THE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS OF MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS IN HAIKOU, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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## Abstract

This research aimed to 1) analyze the ethical challenges facing news organizations in Haikou, China, during the digital transition and 2) formulate concrete policy proposals for ethical operations. This qualitative study employed purposive sampling to select 95 participants across three key groups: 30 media practitioners, 50 general news consumers, and 15 media researchers. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and subsequently analyzed using content analysis and methodological triangulation. The findings identified four primary ethical challenges: 1) the proliferation of fake news driven by decentralized communication and Echo Chambers; 2) privacy violations stemming from the inherent Dilemma between public interest and personal rights; 3) reporting bias exacerbated by political and business pressures, which are amplified by algorithms; and 4) information overload leading to audience information fatigue. These challenges were found to contribute to an industry-wide Trust Crisis and a societal-level erosion of the Public Sphere. The root causes were identified as four interconnected factors: technological factors (e.g., information democratization), business factors (e.g., the attention economy), social factors (e.g., value pluralism), and deficits in ethical consciousness (e.g., insufficient systematic training).

**Keywords:** *Ethical Challenges, New Media, Fake News, Media Ethics, Haikou, China*

## Introduction

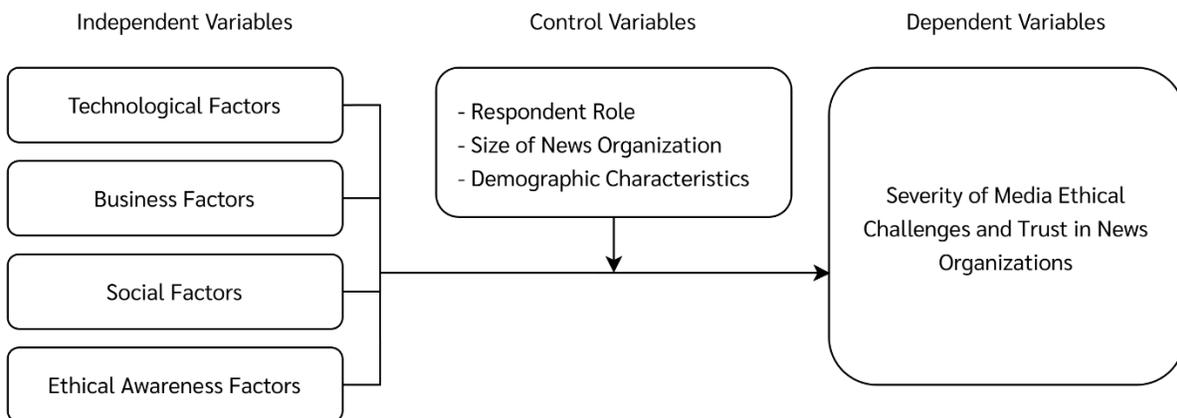
The transformation within mass communication extends beyond mere technological reform; it represents a profound structural adjustment of society's entire communication system. The rapid development of the internet has fundamentally altered the methods of news production, dissemination, and consumption. However, this transformation is not solely positive; it has introduced significant ethical and professional challenges, particularly the proliferation of fake news (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), privacy violations (O'Neil, 2016), and biased reporting. In an era where news organizations must compete within an Attention Economy and restructure toward a Readers First paradigm, media ethics has become a cornerstone of professional integrity.

In this context, Haikou, the capital of Hainan province and a strategic area developing into a Free Trade Port, serves as a critical case study. Media organizations in Haikou face intense ethical pressures

stemming from the full-scale digital transition. These include maintaining information credibility, preventing the spread of disinformation, and balancing international standards with China's domestic policy requirements. While fake news, privacy protection, and multicultural issues are significant challenges, it is imperative for these organizations to restructure their ethical standards to elevate the quality and trustworthiness of public information.

Given this urgency, this study investigates the Ethical Challenges in the New Media Era Under the Dimensions of Responsibility and Regulatory Frameworks of Media Organizations in Haikou City, People's Republic of China. The research objectives were: 1) to analyze the ethical challenges for news organizations in the new media era in the context of digital transition and the imperative to maintain professional credibility, and 2) to generate concrete policy proposals for ethical operations of news organizations.

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** Research Conceptual Framework for Ethical Challenges in the New Media Era within the Dimensions of Responsibility and Regulatory Frameworks of Media Organizations in Haikou, People's Republic of China

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the ethical challenges of news organizations in the new media era in the context of digital transition and maintaining professional credibility standards.
2. To create concrete policy proposals for the ethical operation of news organizations in the context of digital transition and maintaining professional credibility standards.

### Literature Review

This study reviews concepts, theories, and related research across four main areas: 1) concepts of challenges, 2) media ethics, 3) new media, and 4) related research.

The first section, 'concepts of challenges,' defines obstacles presented by new media (particularly fake news). These comprise: 1) Technological change compelling a paradigm shift from an Advertisers First to a Readers First Paradigm utilizing AI and Big Data; 2) The inherent conflict of Speed vs Accuracy in the 24-hour news cycle (Byerley, 2013); 3) The Privacy Challenge stemming from cyber threats and the Mosaic Effect (Ducharme, 2022); and 4) The Regulatory Challenge posed by increasingly complex legislation. The second section, 'media ethics,' is noted as increasingly complex in the digital age due to the integration of AI (Hopster, 2021; RYT9, 2025). In the specific context of China, this includes strict controls via the Great Firewall (All-China Journalists Association, 2019) and a revised Professional Ethics Code. The third section, 'new media,' defines these as interactive digital systems where primary issues are Fake News (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018) and privacy protection, the latter being significantly challenged by the use of Big Data and AI (Solove, 2004; O'Neil, 2016). Finally, the fourth section reviews 'related research'. In Thailand, studies such as Pluekpitichai (2019) found that digital media is challenging traditional ethical principles. Mukkarak et al. (2023) found that media organizations often prioritize profit over accuracy. In China, research by King, et al. (2013) found that censorship primarily targets the limitation of collective action rather than direct criticism of the state, and Yin et al. (2013) highlighted that China is actively promoting Media Convergence as a national strategy.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews with key informants selected via purposive sampling. Participants were stratified into three main groups: 1) 30 media practitioners, including reporters, editors, and media executives; 2) 50 general news consumers, covering diverse occupations and backgrounds; and 3) 15 media researchers, specifically experts in media ethics. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to cover four main themes: 1) participants' understanding of media ethics, 2) new challenges in the new media era (with an emphasis on fake news), 3) the protection of privacy rights (including the balance between public interest and personal rights), and 4) the fairness and neutrality of reporting. Data derived from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis, and the credibility of the findings was ensured through methodological triangulation.

## **Research Results**

The results responding to the first research objective regarding the analysis of ethical challenges revealed a consensus among all participant groups that media ethics serves as the foundation of the profession; however, the new media environment has introduced complex ethical dilemmas. Four primary challenges were identified. First was the proliferation of fake news. Media practitioners noted that decentralized communication allows unverified information to spread widely, a finding consistent with Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018). Media researchers added that algorithmic echo chambers significantly exacerbate the difficulty in discerning truth. Second is the violation of privacy rights. Practitioners acknowledged a persistent dilemma between public interest and personal rights, particularly when

prioritizing reporting speed, while consumers concurrently expressed concern over privacy fragmentation leakage. Third is reporting bias. Practitioners admitted that pressure from advertisers and political directives impacts news framing, consistent with Framing Theory (Entman, 1993). Researchers also noted that algorithms intensify opinion polarization. Fourth is information overload. Practitioners stated that the sheer volume of news shortens verification processes, thereby impacting quality, while consumers reported experiencing information fatigue, which aligns with Information Processing Limit Theory (Miller, 1956). These ethical problems were found to manifest at three levels: an industry-level trust crisis; a societal-level distortion of public perception and erosion of the Public Sphere; and individual-level economic damage and privacy violations. The results addressing the causal factors identified four complex, interconnected areas. First, technological factors, specifically information democratization, have weakened traditional verification mechanisms, while algorithms create echo chambers. Second, business factors, driven by commercialization and the attention economy, incentivize some media outlets to lower ethical standards in favor of clickbait. Third, social factors such as cultural pluralism and high levels of information complexity make balanced reporting difficult to achieve. Finally, ethical consciousness factors play a significant role; some younger journalists were found to prioritize speed over quality, and media organizations often lack systematic ethics training.

To address the second research objective regarding the creation of concrete policy proposals, this study formulates six key strategies based on the research findings. First, to enhance ethical consciousness and professionalism, ethical training should be a mandatory annual requirement for media personnel. This training should utilize mixed methods such as case-based learning, scenario simulation, and problem-based discussion to address emerging issues like algorithmic bias and deepfakes. Organizations should establish an internal "Ethics Case Database" to perform post-mortem analysis on incidents and foster a culture of "critical responsibility" that allows staff to voice ethical concerns without fear of external pressure. Second, media organizations must shift from reactive to proactive technological governance. This involves applying AI and Big Data to develop automated fake news detection systems using NLP and machine learning to verify content before publication. Furthermore, organizations should utilize data analytics to monitor post-publication feedback for ethical risks in real-time. Crucially, the logic of algorithmic recommendations should be adjusted to include "public value metrics" alongside quantitative engagement metrics, ensuring a balance between popularity and factual accuracy. Third, a multi-stakeholder participatory governance model is essential to ensure transparency. This includes establishing public complaint platforms and readers' ombudsmen to allow direct oversight, as well as organizing "Media Open Days" and "Editor Meet & Greets" to bridge the gap between production and consumption. Support for independent media ethics assessment bodies to evaluate and publish transparency scores for media organizations is also recommended to maintain industry accountability. Fourth, regarding privacy protection and data security, organizations must strictly define sensitive personal data and apply the principle of "data minimization," collecting only what is strictly necessary. Operational policies should dictate clear rules on anonymity and mandate privacy checks at every stage of production. For highly sensitive content involving

minors or victims, a "Red Line" mechanism requiring ethics committee approval before publication must be enforced to prevent violations. Fifth, organizations should promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) by acting as creators of social value. This involves using agenda-setting power to focus on public interest issues such as inequality, education, and the environment. Media outlets should give voice to marginalized groups to ensure inclusivity and social justice. Additionally, establishing a "Public Interest Media Fund" is recommended to support investigative journalism and content with high social value but low commercial return. Finally, improving the media ecosystem requires industry co-regulation. The industry must move towards standardized governance through regional ethical alliances to share best practices and manage crises. Professional associations should enforce a unified "Code of Conduct" to reduce disparities in standards across different organizations, fostering a culture of truth, neutrality, and respect for rights across the entire ecosystem.

## Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate a strong congruence between the fieldwork data and the study's theoretical framework. The most critical finding was the consensus among journalists, consumers, and researchers that media ethics is the foundation of the profession and the key factor in maintaining public credibility. This supports classic conceptions of the media as guardians of the public's right to know, built upon truth, neutrality, and ethical standards (Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922). Regarding technological challenges, the results confirmed that digital technology and AI have forced a paradigm shift from an Advertisers First to a Readers First model, which relies heavily on big data and machine learning (Bakke & Barland, 2022). This shift has generated new problems identified in the literature, including fake news, information overload, and algorithm-driven bias.

The speed versus accuracy dilemma was also empirically confirmed; participants from all groups noted that rushed reporting in the post-truth era leads to factual errors and erodes media credibility. Similarly, the fieldwork clearly reflected theoretical challenges regarding privacy, confirming a tangible, real-world dilemma between public interest and personal rights. Findings on reporting bias, which participants attributed to both economic and political pressures, directly align with the study's theoretical framework, particularly Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and News Values Theory (Gans, 1979). However, a notable divergence emerged between literature and the fieldwork data. While the literature emphasized regulatory and complex legal challenges, practitioners in the Haikou context did not prioritize these issues. Instead, they focused overwhelmingly on problems with direct operational impacts, such as fake news, privacy violations, and bias. This suggests that, in practice, daily operational challenges may hold greater immediate significance for practitioners than abstract structural or legal issues.

Based on these findings, the researcher offers several suggestions for future research. First, comparative, cross-cultural studies are needed to understand the universal versus localized nature of media ethics in different political and social contexts. Second, in-depth analysis of the relationship between AI (particularly generative AI such as ChatGPT) and media ethics is urgently required to assess emerging

risks and develop appropriate governance mechanisms. Third, experimental research designs should be employed to test the long-term effectiveness of specific ethical interventions on news quality, consumer trust, and media credibility. Finally, future research should focus on consumer ethical perception and media literacy to develop evidence-based training programs and public campaigns that enhance public resilience against ethical violations in the media.

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