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**The Utilitarian Dilemma: Ethical Challenges facing Journalism  
in the Era of Social Media**

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Journalism in the Era of Social Media**

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This is to certify that this thesis is prepared by Eden Berhane, entitled *The Utilitarian Dilemma: Ethical Challenges facing Journalism in the Era of Social Media* and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Social Sciences complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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# Chapter One

## 1. Introduction and Background

For centuries, journalism has been important in the development of democratic societies, acting as an instrument in the pursuit of truth by the public and stakeholders (Sharma, 2024). Its task is to assist in decision making through the accurate provision of information. The emergence of social networking sites, however, has practically altered the journalism field (Ceron, 2014). Social media becomes an vital part of modern journalism (Miller & Nelson, 2022), however, as all new technological advancements it carries causes ethical issues too. Historically, there was a certain image of journalism that bases on the existence of regulated newsrooms with heavy emphasis on code of ethics and principles. Today, it exists in a broad virtual environment where any person with an internet connection can disseminate information (Rajendran & Thesinghraj, 2014).

We can say now, Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube and others, has transformed the process of news creation and consumption into a participatory approach via public involvement that can be identified as an ‘information democratization’. The manner of dissemination of the information on such platforms affects the extent and effect of news as well as journalism practices. Nevertheless, all this influences the demarcation between professional journalism and user content generated by anyone irrespective of their professional background, which carries the dangers of falsehood and manipulation in the distribution of news, information result to disinformation and misinformation,<sup>1</sup>

Most professions have formalized codes of conduct, and journalism is no exception. Just as the Hippocratic Oath guides medicine, journalism ethics governs the journalistic profession (Oso et al., 2024). The roots of ethical journalism can be traced back to ancient societies, where scribes and chroniclers were commissioned to spread messages.

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<sup>1</sup> Disinformation is generally used to refer to deliberate attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them. ....Misinformation is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent. Both are problems for society, but disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology." *Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation*, UNESCO Series on Journalism Education, 2018, p. 7.

The modern ethics of journalism emerged in the 19th century, with pioneer journalists like Walter Lippmann<sup>2</sup> and Joseph Pulitzer<sup>3</sup> advocating for ethical standards and codes of conduct. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)<sup>4</sup> highlights ethical journalism and its components, advocating for seeking the truth, minimising harm, and acting independently. Professional associations, such as UNESCO, also advocate for fundamental codes of conduct in journalism. The core ethics of journalism include seeking truth, protecting it, minimizing harm, acting independently, and taking responsibility for their decisions. The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) also has shaped the code and laid a foundation for media regulation and preliminary codes of conduct since 1990. Adhering to these principles is crucial for journalists to maintain public trust and credibility.

These codes are built on core values such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and independence. They serve as guiding principles (Oso et al., 2024) to ensure journalists uphold ethical standards for gathering and disseminating information. Among these principles, "Truth" is paramount (Oso et al., 2024). Pursuing truth ensures that information is not fabricated, fraudulent, or manipulated (Christians, 2007). As moral agents, journalists serve the public interest by providing truthful information. How journalists report news reflects their morality and impacts their audience.

Adherence to the journalism code of conduct demonstrates journalists' commitment to high standards of integrity and accountability. They must provide accurate, balanced, and objective coverage of events, presenting multiple perspectives and facilitating informed public discourse (Oso et al., 2024). Journalism wields significant influence, and journalists must use their platforms responsibly. Ideally, journalists should be detached and impartial, avoid conflicts of interest, and set biases aside (Oso et al., 2024). Only by doing so can they effectively uphold journalistic ethics and avoid distorting news,

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Lippmann, a prominent journalist and media critic, emphasized journalism's role in a democratic society. Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Pulitzer, prestigious Pulitzer Prizes award in journalism named after him, Pulitzer championed the idea of "new journalism," which combined thorough investigative reporting with a commitment to sensationalism and advocacy. Pulitzer, J. (n.d.). *Perspective on journalism and social justice*.

<sup>4</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. (2014). Code of Ethics. Retrieved from <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

sensationalism, and manipulating information for viral content. These actions positively impact the audience's perception of journalism.

Social media presents unique challenges to journalists, including the lack of news verification, potential news manipulation, sensationalism, privacy concerns, and algorithmic bias. Sharma (2024) discusses the detrimental impacts of false or inaccurate information on public discourse and democratic processes. Esser and Strömbäck (2014) highlight the implications of algorithmic bias for journalistic practices, emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability.

One significant advantage of social media is the rapid dissemination of news, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Marshall McLuhan (1964) noted, “The medium is the message,” underscoring how social media shapes the nature and perception of news content. However, this rapid dissemination also increases the risk of misinformation and disinformation, challenging journalists to verify and contextualize information amidst online chaos.

Philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill known for a moral theory, that advocates for actions that maximize happiness or pleasure for the most significant number of people (Christians, 2007). Journalism, aims to serve the public interest and promote societal well-being. However, this role is fraught with ethical dilemmas, especially in a landscape marked by structural changes in the media, skeptical news consumers, and a broad spectrum of critics (Oso et al., 2024). Society's reliance on engagement, clicks, likes, and shares on social media platforms often conflicts with journalistic principles, placing journalists in a precarious position where they must choose between driving engagement and maintaining integrity through accuracy, fairness, and impartiality.

One of the ways utilitarian ethics intertwine with social media is through the drive to maximize profit (creating big audience). The nature of the audience market, and consequently social media's profits, heavily rely on around-the-clock access to news and entertainment. In this context, there are several worrying trends the new media turn to in order to maximize exposure (and profit), some of them being the breaking of journalistic ethical codes.

Utilitarian ethics teaches us that an action is right if it creates an efficient outcome for the community overall. And Social media create an opportunity for large number of the public to have a say in what is produced, set as an agenda or broadcast news or engage audiences or to have a role of information disseminator which measure up in information democratization. However does this means i.e the opportunity created by social media, leading to right outcome as a result of the right action? Can this scenario pose the question of whether to be a journalist of integrity or not? Such topics will be expounded in heart of this paper's chapters.

## **1.2. Research Objectives and Hypothesis**

This study's primary objective is to assess and define the moral dilemmas that journalism faces in the age of social media.

**Hypothesis: I argue the advancement and very structure of social media as information outlet has altered the traditional model of journalism, leading to a ethical challenge which can be described as “utilitarian ethical dilemma” where the demarcation between professional journalists and amateur content creators blur, and changing the relationship between journalists and audiences shifts from a hierarchical structure to a egalitarian interaction, challenging the established norms and ethics of journalism.**

### **General Objective is to:**

The goal of this study is to define the basic utilitarian ethical dilemmas encountered by professional journalism in presence of social media. This involves exploring situations where professional journalism field overlaps to balance maximizing positive outcomes with maintaining their ethical standards in the presence of social media pressures.

### **The specific Objectives are to:**

- I. **Investigate the impacts on professional journalism practices:** Explore how social media affects traditional journalistic practices and code of ethics. This includes understanding how social media platforms' immediacy and comprehensive reach influence information reporting, fact-checking processes, and editorial decision making in journalism.
- II. **Propose recommendations to overcome the ethical dilemmas:** Assess existing ethical frameworks and guidelines of journalism to assert recommendations and

propose updates to address social media's unique challenges, that undermine the long-standing journalistic norms and ethics.

### **1.3 Purpose Of The Study**

Firstly, this research offers valuable insights into the ongoing discourse about journalism ethics in the digital age by discussing old and new ethical challenges emerged at a result of 'paradigm shift' caused by technological revolution in the global information ecosystem. By highlighting specific ethical challenges faced in the evolving field of journalism due to social media, this study provides a template for navigating these challenges professionally. Secondly, the findings can help develop policy recommendations and professional guidelines to improve ethical standards in journalism, particularly in in the context of Ethiopia. By achieving the above-discussed objectives, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of journalism ethics, ensuring that journalists can uphold their ethical standards while effectively utilizing social media platforms. Last but not least the study tries to stipulate professional journalism is facing 'Utilitarian ethical dilemma' in age of social media which leads it to existential threat.

### **1.4. Methodology: Research approach and and design**

This research employs a multi-approach methodology to investigate the ethical challenges facing journalism in the context of social media:

- **Literature Review:** Conducts a in-depth review of the existing literature on journalism ethics, social media structure, Public sphere, and utilitarian ethics. This helps establish a theoretical framework for the study and identify key themes and issues impacting professional journalism in digital age.
- **Ethical Analysis:** Ethical theories and frameworks, such as Utilitarianism and the Journalism Code of Conduct, will be applied to assess the ethical implications of social media presence for professional journalism practices. This analysis frames these challenges as 'utilitarian ethical dilemmas,' magnifying the tension between maximizing public good and adhering to ethical standards in journalistic decision-making.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Highlight the ethical challenges journalism faces due to social media by comparing traditional media and social media-driven information

exchange practices. The comparative analysis presents illustrative examples including an analysis of previous research findings of social media publication and posts, theoretical perspectives, and existing ethical guidelines relevant to journalism.

### **1.5. Description of the Study Problem**

The evolving structure and nature of social media platforms have transformed the overall communication ecosystem by facilitating easy access to information and promoting public interaction, unimaginably. While social media offers significant benefits, it also poses ethical challenges to Professional journalism, often presenting utilitarian ethical dilemmas. The need to balance to maximize positive outcomes for the public caused by the pressures of social media, is interfering with their professional duty. This study addresses critical questions such as:

- How do journalistic practices adapt to social media algorithms prioritizing virality and engagement over accuracy and integrity?
- What are the ethical implications of disseminating user-generated information and on social media platforms?
- How do journalists handle sensitive topics while balancing the utilitarian goal of public good with the ethical consideration of minimizing harm?

The study raises these questions and highlights the underlying ethical dilemmas facing journalism in the social media age. It proposes strategies to maintain ethical standards in evolving media outlets while promoting social good.

### **1.6. Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations:

a. **Literature review:** The literature review is limited to basic research on technology and innovations in media landscape, following the difficulty to understand the complex nature and structure of the digital age, which limits the identification of the gaps in the study.

b. **Scope Constraints:** The study focused primarily on **Jeremy Bentham** and **John Stuart Mill** utilitarian ethics perspectives without exploring other ethical frameworks in moral

philosophy, limiting its ability to address complex issues and respond effectively to counter arguments.

c. **Potential Bias:** The study is limited to basic desk literature review and illustrative examples collected from online may introduce biases, undermining the study's objectivity and credibility.

Addressing these limitations is essential to strengthening the validity, reliability, and relevance of the study and enhancing the understanding of journalism ethics in the face of social media.

### **1.7. Organization of the Study**

Throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapters two and three, we will examine a range of ethical challenges confronting journalism, including spreading misinformation and disinformation, sensationalism, and social media algorithms influences. We will also explore the emergence of public-driven journalism, the blurred boundaries between professional and amateur reporting, and the ethical frameworks and principles that guide journalists in navigating these challenges. We will analyze and illustrate the ethical dilemmas faced by journalism and the ‘moral agent’ journalists in the digital age, and discuss the ethical implications from perspectives of utilitarianism ethics. Furthermore, we will address the challenges posed by the emergence of technologies, examining their impact on the authenticity and trustworthiness of information dissemination. Additionally, we will explore the challenges posed by the new public sphere as a result of ‘paradigm shift’ in the information ecosystem, that distorted the relation between the audience and journalism, as well as their impact on information democracy and the ability of journalists to report adhering professional duty.

## Chapter Two

### 2. The ontology and epistemology aspects of journalism

In this chapter, I aim to define the multifaceted nature of journalism along with the relevant professional code of ethics. I will highlight the role that journalism plays in addressing human interests and try to examine the new ethical challenges facing Journalism in the era of social media. Additionally, the ‘paradigm shift’ in the information ecosystem that influence professional journalism and ethical practices will be discussed.

#### 2.1. Defining journalism

Questions such as "What is journalism?," "Who is a journalist?," and "What represented in the information sent via Journalism?" have been a point of heated debate and discussion points for years. However I would like to begin by defining journalism as per to the most general understanding of people.

Journalism may refer to acts as an umbrella covering several versions, practices, and genres, of gathering, compiling and sending information. News is one of the products of journalism and it is essential in defining journalism. At a basic level, McQuail defines journalism as; “the activities and outcomes of those professionally engaged in collecting, analysing, and publishing news” (McQuail, p.3).

An often referred to definition of journalism given by the American Press Institute (API)<sup>5</sup> points out that journalism involves collecting, evaluating, producing, and delivering news and information to a group of people. The description by API highlights journalism's multifaceted nature, emphasizing data collection, analysis of information, and its final form presented for public consumption.

One thing about journalism is its adaptability, which has led to the growth of several schemes that help define journalism. Different journalistic forms have been evolving

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<sup>5</sup> The American Press Institute (API) is non profit organization formed in 1946 in USA with the purpose of advancing the quality and sustainability of journalism. American Press Institute. (n.d.) *About the American Press Institute* <https://americanpressinstitute.org/>

from the time of the traditional era up to the present digital era in which we live now. Traditional forms include print, broadcast, and photojournalism (McQuail, 2010, p.4). The new media or digital era ushers the following forms of journalism: online, social media, mobile, and multimedia journalism.

Apart from the two forms, we also have other specialized forms of journalism: Investigative, Data<sup>6</sup>, Explanatory, Drone<sup>7</sup>, and Solutions journalism. Journalism versions can also be opinion-based: editorial, op-ed, and column writing. Journalism is multifaceted, and thus, appreciating its full scope of version can be underscored. Its multifaceted nature presents its role that emphasizes data collection, analysis of information, and the final form released for public consumption. Viewing it in the form of traditional and new digital era journalism makes it easier to understand the scope, as we will in the latter parts of this chapter.

## **2.2. The role of journalism: Why is it a public resource (Social good) within a society?**

In this sub-section I would like to address what Journalism does as a profession or what human interest it addresses. As it has been highlighted in the above paragraphs, journalism forms contribute to a higher purposes. However, just to limit the discussions of this paper let us encircle around Thomas Hanitzsch's categorizations. Hanitzsch, provides four distinct categories of journalistic roles:

*“Journalistic roles are widely recognisable and have a relatively stable and enduring form. They are mostly generally allude to a set of normative and cognitive beliefs as well as real world and perceived practices of journalists...Hence, all four categories of*

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<sup>6</sup>Data journalism involves the use of quantitative data to uncover and report on news stories, providing a factual basis for reporting. This approach often includes analyzing large data sets, visualizing information through charts and graphs, and revealing trends or patterns that might not be evident from qualitative reports alone. Data journalism enhances transparency and aids in understanding complex issues by presenting information in an accessible format (Coddington, 2015; Meyer, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Drone journalism refers to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) to capture aerial footage and gather data for news reporting. This technology allows journalists to obtain unique perspectives and real-time visual evidence that would be difficult or impossible to achieve through traditional methods. Drone journalism is increasingly used for tasks such as mapping disaster areas, monitoring environmental changes, and providing compelling visual content (Kitchin, 2014; Gilmour, 2017).

*journalistic roles- normative, cognitive, practiced and narrated roles...)*”(Hanitzsch, p.45).

As Hanitzsch described, the various aspects of these roles involve "**what journalists ought to do, what they want to do, what journalists really do in practice, and what they think they do**" (Hanitzsch, p.45).

In addition to defining journalism, examining these roles provides further insight into its complex nature and its contributions to society. Through the normative role , we understand what journalists believe they should uphold in the profession. “Normative roles indicate what is generally desirable to think or doing a given context” (Hanitzsch, p.45). “...they can be defined as “ generalized expectations which journalists believe exist in society and among different stakeholders, which they see as normatively acceptable, and which influence their behaviour on job” (Donsbach, p.62; Hanitzsch, p.2).

The normative function is linked to the societal view on journalism's role (Mesquita, p. 29). It stems from recognizing that journalism can shape public conversation and opinion (Hanitzsch, p. 45). Journalists serve the public, uphold truth, and act as a watchdog<sup>8</sup> for in a society where democracy as a system functions. Through normative roles, they aim to provide accurate, fair, and unbiased information to help citizens make informed decisions. Journalism provides an outlet for spreading news information.

The watchdog function of journalism advocates for a thorough examination of results before presenting them to the general public (Karadimitriou et al., p.104). Through this role, journalism upholds the need to ensure transparency and foster an environment of healthy democracy. Investigative journalism maximises watchdog journalism. The journalists dig deeper into uncovering wrongdoings, corruption, and abuse of power. **“The journalist makes moral judgments about potential missing or malefaction” (Coleman & Wilkins, p.210).**

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<sup>8</sup> The term "watchdog" in journalism is metaphorically derived from the concept of a guard dog that vigilantly protects and alerts its owner to potential dangers. It signifies the role of journalists in monitoring and holding powerful entities accountable, exposing corruption and abuses of power to protect the public interest. This role is crucial in maintaining transparency, promoting justice, and safeguarding democracy.

The notion of journalism expands its role to ensure checks and balances in functioning democracy, that is why it was named as a “Fourth Estate”<sup>9</sup>, historically.

The other role mentioned in the quote is the ‘cognitive role’, such role entails journalists' perception of their work and its impact. It entails what an individual journalist understands of their professional responsibilities. It is about how journalists perceive their role in the society. It can also be defined as the "institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs individual journalists embrace as a result of their occupational socialization" (Hanitzsch, p. 47).

In such a way the cognitive role of journalism is translated into journalists being educators. It manifests in several ways, of which one is promoting critical thinking skills among the audience. It also takes the initiative of enhancing media literacy by equipping the audience with media literacy skills<sup>10</sup>. News consumers can look out for bias and discern credible sources. As educators, journalists also help shape public discourse viewed from such angles journalists pursue a particular mission and promote specific values. In pursuing something, they get involved socially become committed, assertive and motivated.

The roles of the cognitive and normative aspects of journalism are the most focused on. Recently, there has been growing interest in exactly the journalistic roles are enacted in

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<sup>9</sup> Fourth Estate : The term "Fourth Estate" traditionally refers to the press and news media, both in explicit capacity of advocacy and implicit ability to frame political issues. The term originates from the British Parliament, where it was initially used to describe the three traditional estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. The media, as the Fourth Estate, is seen as an additional and influential force in society, holding power through its ability to shape public opinion and act as a watchdog on government and other institutions.

*”During the West’s eighteenth-century transition from a pre industrial to an industrial society, many European countries saw the development of what was then and still is described as the fourth estate: the independent press. The ability of the independent press to shape public opinion and so influence the wheels of power outside the established political and ecclesial channels rightly earned it a place alongside of the princes and bishops; .....”* C Dollar - Grapho: Concordia Seminary Student Journal, 2022 - scholar.csl.edu. A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils. [csl.edu](http://csl.edu)

<sup>10</sup> Media literacy skills involve the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, empowering individuals to critically understand and navigate the complex media landscape. These skills are essential for making informed decisions and recognizing biases, misinformation, and the influence of media on society (Aufderheide, 1993; Potter, 2013).

journalism as cited by (Carpenter et al., p.588; Mellado & Van Dallen, p. 859; Hnitsch, p. 50).

Practiced roles are roles enacted by journalists. They refer to behaviour and practices that journalists are engaged in during their work. The key aspects are observable practices, editorial decisions, and interaction with sources, colleagues, and audiences. It covers journalists' techniques when collecting, verifying, and disseminating information. They are the day-to-day activities of reporting, interviewing, writing, editing, and presenting news across media platforms. They play the role of pursuing stories, communicating with the audience, and making quick and thoughtful decisions. Practiced roles cover what goes on the ground with journalists, mostly prepared as a hand book with several media houses as editorial guide<sup>11</sup>.

### **2.1.2. Journalism for community empowerment and social development.**

Journalism extends far from the standard role of news dissemination to proactively contributing to society's progress. As a change agent, it significantly shapes the public discourse, influences policies, and drives toward economic and social development. Development is viewed from the lens of development indicators such as economic growth, social welfare, capita income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and Gross National Product (GNP) (Valarie et al.).

Apart from the general public, economists also tune in to media channels. Economic journalism is part of the beats<sup>12</sup> covered in journalism. In this form, media-based market indicators are used in economic forecasting. Boumans et al. (p. 308) explain that

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<sup>11</sup> Editorial guide are a set of rules and standards established by a publication or media organization to guide the creation, presentation, and management of content. These guidelines are designed to ensure consistency, quality, and adherence to ethical and professional standards across all published material. They cover various aspects of content production, including style, tone, accuracy, and legal considerations. E.g <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/>

<sup>12</sup> "In journalism, a "beat" refers to a specific topic or geographic area that a reporter regularly covers, developing expertise and sources in that domain. Beats allow journalists to provide in-depth, consistent coverage of particular subjects, such as politics, education, or crime." Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

“Media-based indicators have been used for forecasting inflation, investment, business cycles, and financial market developments.” Critical economic information, including inflation rates, employment statistics, and GDP, can influence investment decisions.

It also influences economic policies that determine the sustainability of investment in the market. Economic or business journalism provides insights into a country's tax policies, which are essential in funding or pulling out of an investment in a country. Business journalism may also analyze a country's economic policy and provide a platform for public discourse. The coverage indirectly influences policy-making decisions by highlighting the impacts of existing policies. It acts as an advocate for necessary policy changes. It provides information on matters important to the audience and what others are preoccupied with, consequently influencing people's behaviour patterns (Boumans et al.). Having successful stories on business investments can attract investing in a similar venture or a better venture.

Peace and security are necessary for the economic development of an area. When journalism news focuses on the negativity of an area and branding it unsafe, people get less likely to invest in there. Journalism promotes public discourse and shapes public perceptions. Depending on what news is shared and how it is shared, journalism can be a tool that promotes peace-building. Engaging in peace journalism will diverge attention from traditional war reporting and focus on underlying structures (Rafeeq). Through peace journalism, affected parties can voice their concerns and provide a pathway for potential war resolution. Utilizing journalism as a peace-building tool in war zone areas provides a platform for dialogue among conflicted parties. In strained communication, journalism is a bridge between parties, allowing them to engage in discussions and other things that can promote conflict resolution (Rafeeq). When focus is made one ensuring peace and security, foreign investors could become interested and opt to invest in the area. The creation of employment and the influx of capital fuels the economic development of an area.

Valarie et al. (p.71) wrote that the social responsibility theory proposes that: **“media has lot of responsibilities towards society apart from the right to criticize government and other institutions. It is the duty of the press to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society's interests and needs”**

In society, media is known as the fourth estate, which denotes that it acts as a guardian of public interest and helps keep the functioning of society in check. As an agenda setter, the media instructs audiences on the public issue and how much focus is required on these issues. The societal function of media is to improve social development. It works through managing social issues such as population control, education, food security, and public health (Valarie et al.). On emphasizing societal issues, it amplifies the need to address them. It gives a platform for the issues to be considered and addressed. Eventually, this leads to social development.

Journalism can also provide a platform to advocate for social justice by highlighting social inequities among marginalized communities. It acts as a microphone or the voice for the marginalized communities. Through this action, it can drive social change. Owing to the diversities in ethnicity, religions, cultures, ideology or political affiliation, gender, gaps in economic status, occupation or profession, people in different ways, get marginalized. These are chronic impediments of development, although many of do not understand to what extent they negatively affect the course of human progress. Journalism has the capacity to provide alight that enables people discern the right and the good from the wrong and bad.

Journalism also fosters social development by championing accountability, democracy, and social justice and providing information to the public. Societal norms and perceptions change through journalism. Journalism's primary role is to provide information that, in turn, helps raise awareness. It highlights critical social issues like poverty, inequality, and human rights violations. Through the works of journalism, the allocation of resources to solve the various issues of social problems can be addressed.

As the above section has explored the multifaceted role of journalism and journalists, its also important to see how such roles would be practiced in adherence to a code of conduct to maintain professionalism in journalism.

## **2. 2. Codes of ethics in professional journalism.**

At its core, like any other profession, journalism is guided by a code of conduct and core ethical principles. Journalism ethics are sacred to those in the process as they guide the practice and help journalists discern right and wrong (Apuke and Omar, p. 4). They guide

professional behaviour. The journalists abide by the ethical values of honesty, objectivity, and openness by accepting that they play a leading role in controlling the course of information, determining the conversations among the public, and influencing their impressions. From this perspective, journalism is also a primary tool for democratic governance.

The roots of ethical journalism can be dated back to the experience of ancient societies, where scribes and chroniclers were commissioned to note down and spread the message before the public. In course of time, various philosophical and religious doctrines recognised the importance of honesty, accuracy, and integrity in communication. For instance, in ancient Greece, "parrhesia" was a concept characterised by speakers' requirement to speak the truth, no matter whatever the consequences are. Likewise, Judeo-Christian ethics has underpinned the moral responsibility of honesty in communication.

The modern ethics of journalism first appeared in the 19th century, along with the rise of mass media and the professionalism of journalism. Pioneer journalists like Walter Lippmann and Joseph Pulitzer<sup>13</sup> advocated for ethical standards and codes of conduct in journalism to guide the profession. There are several views about the arrival of newspapers and wire services, which led to the beginning of new challenges, such as sensationalism, bias, and conflict of interest. Therefore, journalists were more obliged to follow ethical norms to uphold public trust.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) highlights ethical journalism and its components. The "Code of Ethics" of the SPJ was adopted in 1926. At the core, the SPJ ethics advocated seeking the truth, minimising harm, and acting independently among others.

The core ethics of the profession of journalism propose that journalism should seek truth and protect it. In this case, ethical journalism means the information sought should be accurate and fair. When gathering information, journalists should be honest and courteous. The presented news needs to be accurate, which is accomplished through verification before reporting (SPJ). Whenever possible, journalists should pursue and

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search for sources. It lessens the dissemination of wrong or inaccurate news information. The data collection process should incorporate rigorous research cross-checking the used sources, and the journalist should be committed to presenting a balanced view of events. The reason for upholding truthfulness is that misinformation undermines public trust and can lead to severe consequences.

They should also provide context for the gathered news; the other aspect of seeking the truth manifests when they identify sources clearly, diligently seek subjects of news coverage, and are vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable (SPJ). Upholding truthfulness in their profession helps avert damages associated with false information (Oso et al., p. 4-7). "**journalism's first obligation is to the truth**" ( **Kovach and Rosenstiel p. 49**).

Truthfulness is the cornerstone of journalism, as the public relies on journalists to provide accurate and reliable information.

The other code of ethics reported by SPJ is to minimize harm. Ethical journalism ensures that their sources, colleagues, and public members are treated with dignity and respect (SPJ). While seeking and pursuing stories, journalists should balance the need for information against potential harm. They should show compassion and sensitivity while representing. .

The SPJ Code of Ethics advises journalists to "**show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage**" and to "**consider the long-term implications of the information they present**" (SPJ, 2014).<sup>14</sup>

Minimising harm also means avoiding unnecessary harm or intrusion into the private lives of journalists. Sensitivity is significant when dealing with people in vulnerable positions.

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<sup>14</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. (2014). Code of Ethics. Retrieved from <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Journalists should also act independently. They should not allow personal beliefs or affiliations to affect their reporting. Ward (2010) emphasizes that; "**independence is the necessary foundation for journalistic objectivity**" ( p. 73).

Independence in journalism refers to the capacity to operate free from external influences. This includes government entities, corporations, and other bodies that can influence news coverage. Through independence, journalists provide unbiased information. They act as an impartial watchdog that can hold power accountable. When upholding independence, journalists can maneuver through societal pressures and provide news to their consumers as it is.

Accountability and transparency are other ethical obligations in journalism. This refers to taking responsibility and explaining one's decision to the public (SPJ). It involves explaining ethical choices to the public, responding quickly to queries about accuracy and fairness, acknowledging mistakes, and correcting them promptly. Journalists should be committed to their work and willing to accept responsibility for its impact. Accountability and transparency help answer questions that the audience has and also build trust with the audience. At its core, journalism is about investigating facts relentlessly, which includes sharp research, insightful analysis, and pointed questions so that we can get reliable and proven facts despite the complex nature of the world.

The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA), formerly called the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, has shaped the code and laid a foundation for media regulation and preliminary codes of conduct since 1990, putting the media landscape in Ethiopia in check. These early efforts have been foundational to setting standards and practices toward ethical journalism within the country. The Ethiopian Media Council, recognised in the Ethiopian Media Policy and Press Law, has further developed journalistic ethics in Ethiopia. The updated Code of Ethics of Journalism is up-to-date, addressing ongoing ethical concerns.

In general, the above points have been agreed upon<sup>15</sup> among others as a cardinal set of 'Codes of Ethics' in Journalism that ought to be followed by Journalist in several legacy

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<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in several media editorials such as the BBC, Washington post, The Guardian, Ethiopian Broadcast Corporation, Trita Fm Radio etc.. can be included as in Appendices .

medias or mainstream medias and professional Journalism. Adhering to these set of principles is what gives a journalists their role, that guide it to a professional conduct, maintain public trust and credibility.

In the next sub sections I will try to explore the major ethical challenge confronting professional journalism focusing on new and complex model of information platform i.e the internet. I believe it would be important to define , discuss and emphasize how it works in our evolving world.

### **2.3 Defining of social media; what effect does it have on information exchange?**

Social media<sup>16</sup>includes platforms like YouTube, Instagram Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. They rely on mobile and web technologies to create interactive sphere for communication. These platforms enable users to create profiles, share content, and communicate widely without being physically presented.

These platforms allow individuals create themselves as whatever to look like, uploading anything they want, on a space that invites every part of a public to participate, in a manner that is different from a form of simple communication. And what is most to look into here is these individuals are not responsible to the information they send, upload or create as they are only allowed to be presented in a virtual existence.

Buffer (2023) lists Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, and others as top social media platforms based on user engagement and value to businesses.

Therefore 'New Media' i.e Social media has removed communication barriers, allowing users to share ideas and receive feedback instantaneously. It has transformed journalism by enabling citizens or audiences to become content creators and publishers, influencing everyday interactions and global interconnectedness. Technological advancements have facilitated access to information and economic opportunities, promoting global collaboration and information sharing.

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<sup>16</sup> The term "social media" first emerged in 1994 in Tokyo's online community and has since evolved to describe platforms that enable user-generated content and interactive communication. The first formal definition of social media emerged as "Computer Social Network" (CSSN) in 1996. Various terms like "virtual communities," "social networks," and "social media" have since been used, all describing similar concepts

On the other hand opposite to its outstanding advantages, the social media has been accused of employing as a method of data collection from users, that end up in third party control.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) notes , **"social media platforms collect vast amounts of data on user interactions, which are then used to create detailed profiles that inform targeted advertising strategies."**

We will examine how and why they pose ethical challenges to journalism practices in later sections and chapters.

## **2.4 Ethical challenges in journalism**

### **2.4.1 Ethical challenges in traditional journalism-the mainstream media.**

As I have discussed earlier there are major ethical norms, principles, codes and standards to be adhered to by professional Journalists from Traditional Journalism's perspective. According these ethical standard professional or traditional journalists are expected to take their place in society to serve humanity by penetrating facts, happenings, events, and process, in order to examine, or advocate: social or economical or political issues via news , features, discussions , documentaries, debates etc. In doing so journalism fall into most valuable public good as it becomes a tool for citizens in rights to speech, expression, information and power at large.

Here are few points I explore central ethical challenges from the perspectives of Professional or Traditional Journalism.

Objectivity vs. Sensitivity- Objectivity is among the ethics traditional journalism that emphasizes presenting news and facts in a neutral and unbiased manner. In the pursuit of objectivity, it may collide with the need to be sensitive in reporting. Ghazali notes,"objectivity maintains credibility, promotes fairness, and preserves accountability" (Ghazali, pg 25). Sensitivity, on the other hand, minimizes harm and respects privacy. In the case of sensitive news, the journalist has to choose whether to be sensitive or objective. This is a tightrope to walk on, but it can be countered by finding the balance between the two. It requires further analysis of the pros vs benefits, the potential impact

of reporting, and the need to be respectful and truthful. Sensitive sources such as personal tragedies, mental health issues, and traumatic events require sensitive reporting. It requires empathy, respect, and understanding. Objectivity in such situations might be difficult; sometimes, even the omission of information is needed.

The other ever growing challenge is the right to privacy. Journalists can encounter the challenge of the right to privacy while gathering information. They must maintain confidentiality and protect the sources of their information, given that most sources seek anonymity, and the public might have conflicting views. The situation might be where a journalist must report on private matters to the public cases of corruption or social injustices. The ethical challenge arises in determining whether the public interest in having the information outweighs an individual's privacy. It can conflict with the public's right to know. To deal with the issue, a journalist must weigh the need for secrecy with sources and methods against the value of disseminating information.

To sum up before the emergence of new media the profession of journalism was not without ethical challenges , the range of the ethical challenges were encircled around pressures of economic, social and political forces over providing accurate and meaningful information. However the new media platforms embedded in the digital era introduced new ethical challenges, that questions the relevance of the profession to the extent of compromising the influence of journalistic effect on the quality of public discourse and the ability of citizens to engage in important societal issues.

#### **2.4.2 New ethical challenges facing Journalism in the social media era. cause and consequences.**

Before we explore the specific new challenges facing journalism in the digital era. Let us discuss where the challenges came from, what happened?

Here is an interesting finding that explains how journalism business model is changed to the core.

In "Ethics and the Media: An Introduction" Stephen J.A. Ward discusses how journalism is undergoing a major transformation. Using Thomas Kuhn's theory of “paradigm

shifts". Ward explains that journalism is moving from traditional objective reporting to a more fragmented, digital, and interactive environment.

Ward states, *"We are in the middle of the fifth revolution in journalism ethics since modern journalism began in the seventeenth century. The rise of internet-based media is a revolutionary event because it substantially alters the prevailing professional model of the JCP (journalists–communication methods–public). The journalistic element of this relationship is transformed to include, for the first time, ordinary citizens in great numbers. It becomes a sphere of professionals and nonprofessionals of varying ability, training, and motivation. The communication element has been revolutionized by interactive and global media. The public term of the relationship is altered almost beyond recognition. Citizens are no longer the passive, dependent consumers of professional media. Citizens have the technology to be active members of the JCP by creating content and using media tools to evaluate reports. Increasingly, citizens are the media"* (*"Ethics and the Media: An Introduction," p. 217*).

In this context its important to recognize the role of these platforms bringing to equal position of the journalist and public at one tray. We are now seeing millions of citizens or content creators who are able to act and perceive as information disseminators without being held accountable or having a verifiable physical address, as they could be traced in the offline era.

In this era, journalism faces numerous ethical challenges due to the complex landscape of online media platforms. The rapid advancement of technology, changing audience behaviors, and evolving industry practices have fundamentally transformed journalism. As Deuze (2005) notes, "the digital age has fundamentally altered the news cycle, with news now being produced and consumed in real-time, often bypassing traditional editorial processes."

Thus the nature of 'new media' over ride traditional editorial process<sup>17</sup> and weakening the professional journalist authority to fight 'Misinformation and Disinformation', 'Clickbait', and 'Algorithmic Bias' among others.

Let's define and start discussing the few terms mentioned above , to show how this

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<sup>17</sup> Traditional editorial process is a series of steps designed to ensure accuracy, fairness, and quality before published content, which includes fact-checking, multiple rounds of editing, and final approval by an editor before publication. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What News people Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 3rd ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014), 142.

emerging challenges following digital era imposing on face of Journalism as a profession and on Journalist as a professional.

### **Misinformation and Disinformation**

Misinformation, defined as false or misleading information, has become widespread in the digital era, fueled by the rapid spread of content on social media. Research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spreads faster and reaches more people than true news on Twitter, highlighting the detrimental impact of misinformation on public discourse and democratic processes. Journalists face the ethical challenge of verifying information, combating falsehoods, and upholding accuracy and truth-telling principles in an environment where the lines between news, opinion, and propaganda are increasingly blurred (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

One of the most pressing ethical challenges here is the platform of new media or social media allows information to be published instantly that to the extent the source is not verified and can not be hold accountable, latter might end up in confusion of audiences to skeptically view all news sources. Thus compromises<sup>18</sup> the role of a journalist in informing the public by creating vicious circle in double edge as it keeps them busy in debunking the false narratives and by the time they send the well researched reporting the damaged is done, so the information reception is already fall into blurred environment.

### **Click bait Culture<sup>19</sup>**

The practice of click bait is often seen in social media when a content is designed and produced to entice social media users into clicking a link, that does not reflect the actual detailed content. Such practice can be manifested in the form of putting exaggerated

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<sup>18</sup> See, *UNESCO, OSCE, OAS, & ACHPR. (2017). Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News," Disinformation and Propaganda. Retrieved from UNESCO website.*

<sup>19</sup> Click bait is a term that originated in the early 21st century as a way to describe headlines and online content designed to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link, often at the expense of accuracy or quality. Zannettou, S., Sirivianos, M., Blackburn, J., & Kourtellis, N. (2018). The Web of False Information: Rumors, Fake News, Hoaxes, Clickbait, and Various Other Shenanigans. *Journal of Data and Information Quality (JDIQ)*, 11(3), 1-37.

headlines, graphic pictures and attention grabbing images just to boost online views. Thus tactics may result in skewed decision making by provoking strong emotional reactions.

This is another ethical challenge in digital era posed on professional journalism, as it bypass the process of editorial oversight of professional journalism practices which allows any content creator to share information without accountability and leaves accurate and balanced content produced adhering ethical standards that avoided manipulation or deceptions with lower viewers traffic.

Keeber (2008) stated, "**I suppose the dilemma we are grappling with the most at the moment is balancing the increasing demands from our audience for ‘instant’ interactivity against a need to ensure that we maintain the same standards of legal, taste and moral judgments we make with our printed products**" (p.48 Ethics for journalists )<sup>20</sup>

Journalists must resist the temptation to succumb to clickbait tactics and instead prioritize substantive, meaningful storytelling that serves the public interest. By adhering to ethical standards of integrity and accountability, journalists can build trust with their audiences and foster a more informed and engaged society.

### **Algorithmic Bias**

Before pointing out what Algorithms bias is , I would like to define what Algorithm is and its functionality. Algorithm<sup>21</sup> refers to the important part of Mathematics and Computer science that is used to set sequence of instruction on computer to do specific

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<sup>20</sup> Keeber, R. (2008). Ethics for journalists (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis e-Library.

<sup>21</sup>In computer science, an algorithm is a list of unambiguous instructions that specify successive steps to solve a problem or perform a task. Algorithms help computers execute tasks like playing games or sorting a list of numbers. In other words, computers use algorithms to understand what to do and give you the result you need.

(<https://www.scribbr.com/frequently-asked-questions/algorithm-computer-science/>)

tasks and guide operations . N.Diakopoulos, defines it as follows

“An algorithm can be defined as a series of steps undertaken in order to solve a particular problem or accomplish a defined outcome. Here I consider algorithms that operate via digital computers due to their prevalence and ability to effect large numbers of people through scale.” (Diakopoulos, 2014). and ,

According to Gillespie (2014, as cited in Diakopoulos, 2014), There are myriad ways in which algorithms interact with and potentially problematize public life, including how they necessitate the datafication of the world, create complex feedback loops with social data, or encourage the creation of calculated publics.

Understanding from the above two quotations, it is important to relate how the entire human experience can be ‘calculated’, stored and defined by platforms built using algorithm codes. In such away algorithm is helping impacting the information received by human , helping making decisions, the connections we make and relationships we build.

Langlois, 2012 as cited in ,Gillespie (2014) also points out the role of algorithms plays in our information ecosystem consumption.

**“Algorithms play an increasingly important role in selecting what information is considered most relevant to us, a crucial feature of our participation in public life. Search engines help us navigate massive databases of information, or the entire web. Recommendation algorithms map our preferences against others, suggesting new or forgotten bits of culture for us to encounter. Algorithms manage our interactions on social networking sites, highlighting the news of one friend while excluding another's. Algorithms designed to calculate what is "hot" or "trending" or "most discussed" skim the cream from the seemingly boundless chatter that's on offer. Together, these algorithms not only help us find information, they provide a means to know what there is to know and how to know it, to participate in social and political discourse, and to familiarize ourselves with the publics in which we participate. They are now a key logic governing the flows of information on which we depend, with the "power to enable and assign meaningfulness, managing how information is perceived by users, the 'distribution of the sensible”**

The rise of algorithms in news distribution and content recommendation poses another ethical challenge for journalism in the digital age. Algorithms, driven by data and machine learning, curate content and personalize user experiences on social media and search engines. However, research has shown that algorithms can perpetuate bias and

discrimination, amplifying certain voices while marginalizing others (Diakopoulos, 2014).

Why we discuss algorithms bias vastly is that it is one of the unique challenges posed by social media nature to professional journalism since it mainly interferes the role of professional Journalism's integrity to accuracy, independence and data privacy. This is one of the main hardship posed as a new challenge on professional journalism

Journalists must critically examine the role of algorithms in shaping news consumption patterns and advocate for algorithmic transparency, accountability, and diversity to mitigate the risk of bias and promote ethical journalism (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014).

In summary , the ethical challenges facing journalism in the digital era, are multifaceted and complex, encompassing issues such as misinformation, click bait culture, and algorithmic bias. Journalists must confront these challenges head-on by upholding ethical standards, embracing critical thinking, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability in their reporting. Only by addressing these challenges with integrity and that journalists might fulfill the vital roles as facilitator of of democracy and champions of the public interest in the digital age.

## **2. 5 The Journalist as a 'Moral Agent'**

Journalists<sup>22</sup>, with their immense access to information, must qualify the information before disseminating it to the public. This involves making moral judgments, traditionally guided by moral codes of conduct that serve the public. Thus, the journalist acts as a moral agent, filtering moral from immoral content.

*TV and radio channels do not merely follow the public's taste and its preferences, but to a large extent form and determine the public's*

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<sup>22</sup> According to Harcup (2020), a journalist is "*a professional communicator who investigates and presents factual information and opinions in a variety of media forms*" (p.12). <sup>22</sup> See Harcup, T. (2020). *What is Journalism?*. Polity Press.

*preferences and taste.*(Ezra, Media Ethics p.40)

*For instance, broadcasting graphic contents of cruelty can make the public morally insensitive to such acts by making those too familiar. Or hate speech can dehumanize a human being which should be treated with dignity. (Ezra, Media Ethics p.39-40)*

These two points highlight two significant ethical concerns in journalism: the desensitizing effect of graphic content and dehumanizing impact of hate speech.

Firstly, broadcasting graphic content of cruelty can lead to moral insensitivity, meaning that repeated exposure to violent images or videos can diminish emotional impact over time. This desensitization can reduce empathy and make society more tolerant of violence. For example, constant exposure to war footage or crime scenes can make viewers see violence as normal, rather than something requiring urgent attention and action to prevent.

Secondly, hate speech can dehumanize individuals who deserve to be treated with dignity. Hate speech involves language that discriminates against or vilifies people based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or other characteristics. When media disseminates hate speech, it can strip away the humanity of the targeted individuals or groups, portraying them as less than human. This dehumanization can lead to increased prejudice, discrimination, and even violence against these groups.

These ethical concerns underscore the moral responsibility of journalists to carefully consider the content they broadcast or publish. By avoiding the overuse of graphic imagery and refraining from spreading hate speech, journalists can help maintain a society sensitive to cruelty and committed to treating all individuals with dignity.

Journalists, as conscientious agents, it's their professional duty to follow ethical codes and pursue the highest moral standards while informing the public. Their removal from media can lead to chaos and misinformation, where unchecked facts, sensationalism<sup>23</sup>, and

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<sup>23</sup> Sensationalism: The use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement (The Vital Role of Ethical Journalism in the Digital Age, n.d., <https://www.ielts.net/the-importance-of-ethical-journalism/>).

biased reporting increase rapidly.

In the context of journalism, pursuing the 'summum bonum' means excellence in maintain ethical codes while informing the society. This involves a commitment to truth, accuracy, fairness, and integrity in reporting. Journalists must navigate complex ethical landscapes, ensuring that the information they provide is not only factual but also presented in a manner that respects the dignity and humanity of all individuals involved. By doing so, they help to foster an informed and engaged public, capable of making thoughtful decisions about societal issues. For instance, ethical journalism can help to uncover corruption, advocate for social justice, and provide a platform for many voices, ultimately strengthening democratic processes in given society.

Conversely, extending this moral agency to a machine, as it is seen in social media platforms, plausible?

It has been discussed that pursuing 'pleasure' and avoiding 'pain' is the root of moral judgment in the utilitarian ethics (Bentham, p.5). Hence, moral values essentially require sentience. Likewise, Mill states unequivocally that the ultimate sanction for moral judgments come from the conscientious feeling of human beings. "The ultimate sanction, therefore, of all morality (external motives apart) being a subjective feeling in our own minds, I see nothing embarrassing to those whose standard is utility, in the question, what is the sanction of that particular standard? We may answer, the same as of all other moral standards- the conscientious feelings of mankind." (Mill, p. 41, utilitarianism)

On the other hand, Social media are fed with particular algorithms to differentiate between contents that should be available to the public or not based on their guidelines. what appears to be interesting and perhaps unprecedented is that fact that the moral agency, hitherto attributed to the sentient and conscientious being, is now being extended to machines with algorithms. Machines inherently devoid of any faculty, rational or intuitive, to make moral judgments with. Machines that inherently can not feel neither pain nor pleasure. Is this not extending moral agency to something inherently incapable of making any moral judgment?



## Chapter Three

### 3. Utilitarian dilemma and Journalism: In the Social media era

The chapter aims to discuss frameworks of utilitarianism for understanding the ethical dilemmas in professional journalism, particularly in the context of social media's influence. It argues that the pressures of the digital age, where sensationalism often outshines accuracy, create significant challenges for journalists who must conduct between upholding ethical standards and meeting the demands of a rapidly evolving new media landscape. The chapter presents an illustrative example of real story reported on Ethiopian social media platforms as a discussion point, showing how the concept of a 'paradigm shift' in journalism that introduced in chapter two, is linked to social media and the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result.

#### 3.1. Utilitarianism

Journalism, like most professional fields, draws upon principles and theories from moral philosophy, such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Ethical philosophy provides frameworks for thinking about moral dilemmas and guiding ethical decision-making in journalism. Moral philosophical concepts like truthfulness, integrity, and respect for human dignity are central to ethical journalism.

Utilitarianism, a prominent ethical theory, emphasizes the greatest happiness principle. This principle, articulated by philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, asserts that actions are judged by their outcomes, specifically their ability to promote happiness and minimize suffering.

"The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, "Utility", or the "Greatest Happiness Principle", holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure" (Mill,1863. Chapter 2)

John Stuart Mill's "Greatest Happiness Principle" highlights the importance of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, forming the basis of utilitarian ethics. This approach aligns with the natural human inclination to seek happiness and emphasizes the practical implications of ethical decision-making.

Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarian ethics, the principle of 'utility', or the central to human behavior, asserts that people are governed by 'pain' and 'pleasure', which dictate what they will and 'ought to do'. This principle measures the rightness of actions based on

their capacity to increase "happiness" or reduce "suffering" for every 'single person' and 'society'. Bentham's utilitarianism rejects sources of moral values, relying solely on human experience and reasoning.

**“By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered : if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community : if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.” (Bentham, p. 2)**

The society's interest is simply the collective sum of "individual interests", and any action or government measure is considered aligned with utility if it "maximizes overall happiness". Utility emphasizes that 'actions conforming' to it are considered "right", while opposition to it, 'is wrong.'

Though the principle of utility is self-evident and cannot be directly proven, most people naturally embrace it in their daily lives, either consciously or unconsciously. Attempts to disprove it often inadvertently rely on the same principle, showing that it is "universally applicable" to both "individual behavior" and "government policy". The notion of utility provides a clear, rational framework for evaluating "moral actions" and societal governance, placing 'happiness' and the 'avoidance of pain' at the 'core of ethical decision-making'.

Bentham notes, the pleasure or pain value is measured by many elements. Such factors will include .....

**“ To a number of persons, with reference to each of whom to the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances : to wit, the six preceding ones ; viz. 1. Its intensity, 2. Its duration, 3. Its certainty or uncertainty, 4. Its propinquity or remoteness., 5. Us fecundity, 6. Its purity, And one other ; to wit :, 7. Its extent ; that is, the number of persons to whom it extends ; or (in other words) who are affected by it.” (Bentham P.68)**

John Stuart Mill refined utilitarianism by prioritizing intellectual and moral pleasures over mere physical pleasures. He argued that happiness is the end goal of human actions and should be the foundation of moral judgment. Mill's emphasis on the conscientious mind of individuals validates utilitarian ethics, projecting personal moral aspirations onto society.

Mill's approach to utilitarianism extended beyond the mere calculation of pleasure. He distinguished between higher and lower pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral

pleasures were of greater significance than physical pleasures. This distinction addressed some of the criticisms of utilitarianism as a hedonistic philosophy focused solely on physical gratification.

According to Mill, higher pleasures include the satisfaction derived from intellectual pursuits, artistic endeavors, and moral virtues. These forms of happiness are inherently more valuable than the transient pleasures of physical sensations. For him, the quality of pleasure matters just as much as its quantity. This qualitative distinction is crucial for understanding Mill's vision of a well-rounded and fulfilling life.

Mill's refined utilitarianism emphasizes the development of individual character and the cultivation of moral and intellectual faculties. By promoting higher pleasures, Mill's utilitarianism aligns with broader humanistic values that prioritize personal growth and societal progress.

Utilitarianism has applications beyond moral philosophy, influencing fields like economics, public policy, and journalism.

Journalism, as a profession, has a moral obligation to serve the public interest by providing accurate and timely information, fostering informed democratic discourse, and holding power to account. These objectives align with the utilitarian goal of promoting societal well-being by ensuring that the public is well-informed and empowered to make decisions that contribute to their overall happiness and welfare. Utilitarianism thus provides a moral framework for evaluating journalistic practices and assessing their impact on societal well-being, underscoring the importance of ethical considerations in journalism.

On the other hand social media create an opportunity in democratizing information<sup>24</sup> to utilize in any form, by anyone regardless of professional capacity in the field of journalism or any form of information dissemination. It changed the ecosystem of information exchange, it becoming key infrastructure in connecting and engaging human kind. It provided a platform for the widespread and rapid sharing of information, and can be seen as a tool that aligns with utilitarian goal of inclusivity, greater number. It allows for the amplification of diverse voices, the mobilization of social movements, and the democratization of knowledge imparting one to another, all of which contribute to the overall forms of expression of rights

However, when comparing journalism and social media, variations emerge in their adherence to utilitarian principles. While journalism traditionally upholds ethical standards such as accuracy, fairness, and impartiality in pursuit of the public good, social media platforms operate within a different context. Social media platforms prioritize

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<sup>24</sup> Information democracy and social media

engagement and user interaction, often leading to the dissemination of sensationalized or misleading information for the sake of garnering attention. This can result in the spread of misinformation, polarization, and the amplification of harmful content, which may not necessarily align with the utilitarian goal of promoting overall societal well-being.

### **3.2 Utilitarian dilemma and journalism ethical challenges: Why and what are the dilemmas?**

In chapter two I discussed where the new ethical challenges were conceived, by referring Ward's exploration of Thomas Kuhn's<sup>25</sup> concept of the "paradigm shift" on the journalism ecosystem. So I strongly agree how the business as usual model has totally transformed the relationship of journalist- audience or media audience relationship as a matter of fact.

According Ward such transformation does not just appear abruptly, the reason for this, is the socio-economic and political change phenomenon in the world.

*“Value change does not occur ex nihilo. It is caused by changes in the socio-economic, technological, and political environment. For example, the 1960s social revolution with its stress on peace and equality – not to mention “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” was prompted by a growing economy and education system, communication technology, the civil rights movement, and resistance to the Vietnam War. Revolutions create new opportunities, new attitudes, and new problems. Existing norms may fail to express the spirit of the times and seem irrelevant. This shift in values is captured by slogans, from the 1960s’ “Make Love, Not War” to today’s slogan for the YouTube web site, “Broadcast Yourself.” Yet, the far-reaching implications of this shift may go unrecognized.”* (Ward, 2011, p209).

So now in the professional journalism and new media value is clashing in a manner how news is reported, consumed, and perceived. Traditional journalism focuses on objective reporting, where facts were presented with minimal bias, and journalists acted as gatekeepers of information. However, the digital age news is instantaneous, personalized, and influenced by algorithms. Thus the paradigm shift has altered news consumption and reporting, where speed often takes precedence over accuracy, and the line between news and opinion becomes increasingly blurred.

*“The professional model values well-trained journalists who make sure their stories are accurate, verified, and well researched before publication. The story is the end product of an editorial process. Its authority depends mainly on the capabilities and character of the individual professional journalist. The ethical mantra is “filter, then publish,” or “get it (news) first, but first get it right.”* In

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*contrast, new media value the speedy posting of information by anyone, even if there is uncertainty about its source or accuracy. The slogan is: “publish, then filter.”*(Ward, 2011, p.213).

In social media, Kuhn's paradigm shift is evident as these platforms have evolved from simple communication tools to powerful information ecosystems. Initially, social media connected friends and shared personal updates. However, it has now become a primary source of news and information for many. This shift has ‘democratized information’ dissemination but also led to challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of public opinion. The role of social media in shaping public discourse and influencing societal norms represents a significant shift in how information is curated and consumed.

Here is an important point to focus, in this new paradigm journalism is competing with the fast-paced, often sensationalist nature of instant ‘new media’. The nature or business model of the new media is ‘participatory’ allowing accesses anyone with an internet, allowing them to ‘publish’, ‘broadcast themselves’ and open wide spaces for engagement in mass or in any directions. Information is flowing interactively, attracting millions opinions and incrementing inclusivity both as an audience and information sender at the same time. Yet all the exchange is with minimum or no scrutiny, may result in misinformation, inaccuracy , opinion based disregarding the actual facts or objective truth.

A research by scholars at MIT, exposed “fake news spreads six times than true news on ‘Twitter’ now known as ‘X’ platform.”<sup>26</sup> So this is means someone with a story who won’t be held accountable for their publishing on Twitter has six fold advantage versus who holds a verified story. Therefore there is a setup of pro false information, on social media like Twitter which drives traffic and engagement. In this context the truth and accurate information is boring with low traffic, losing engagement and excluding large number of audiences.

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<sup>26</sup> Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146-1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>

When discussing these platforms, it is crucial to consider that they have structures capable of mimicking human accounts. For instance, "social bots" are designed to imitate human behavior, making it difficult to distinguish whether every profile encountered online represents an actual person with human moral faculties (Ferrara et al., 2016). These bots are not humans; they are programmed to appear human-like. They can interact with various social networks or even operate within a single platform. Often, these bots are engineered to collect and repackage comments, or even spread rumors, generated by other accounts. They then disperse this information across different sites to draw users back to specific platforms or profiles (Cresci et al., 2017).

As a result, the business models of these platforms tend to favor misinformation and disinformation, allowing stories to be published instantly without adhering to the ethical standards of journalism. This creates a clash, as platforms profit from the unregulated spread of information, allowing billions of posts and published contents to be shared without gatekeepers. The nature of these platforms supports instant virality over careful verification, contributing to the spread of misinformation.

So, did we entered in a paradigm where Journalists and media organizations have a tension between attracting engagement, and being abrupt only, over upholding journalistic integrity? Although Professional journalism expectation of a significant number of engagement, can conflict with the need to ensure accuracy, fairness, and to be objective. Maintaining a code of ethics is critical for journalism, while it is expected to deliver reliable information by the society. Conversely journalism expects recognition, as its part of their social contract in a functioning democracy, where the paradigm were not restructured.

### **3.3 Utilitarian ethical dilemmas in Journalism decision making: illustrative examples**

Utilitarianism, a moral theory advocating the maximization of overall happiness or utility, offers valuable insights into understanding the ethical dilemmas confronting journalism in the digital age. This section aims to explore the dimensions of utilitarianism and professional journalism, analyzing how utilitarian principles can inform journalistic decision-making, shape overall information exchange practices, and contribute to the debates surrounding the role of journalism and social media in society.

Let's see how Utilitarian ethical dilemma is surfaced in particular, as social media have posed a significant challenge to professional journalists' jurisdiction and legitimacy in setting the space, timing, and context of information reporting. Five real-world illustrative examples are presented below that helps ground the theoretical discussion in practical terms.

### **Illustrative Example 1**

#### **“The story of Heven”<sup>27</sup>**

I have chosen this story to show how the nature of social media has given unprecedented access to amateurs vs professional journalists, allowing anyone to influence public opinion, undermine democratic institutions, shake the supremacy of law and threaten the process of democracy itself. (even if its painful and mentally affecting).

I believe a more recent incident in Ethiopia's media ecosystem vividly illustrates this danger. A horrifying story emerged in Bahir Dar, Amhara region, where a young girl, age seven, named ‘Heven Awot’ was brutally raped and later murdered. This tragic event was brought to light via a YouTube channel called ‘Eyoha Media’, which aired an interview with the little girl's mother. The story, deeply disturbing in itself, was presented in a manner that ignite widespread outrage and deep emotional responses across social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, X and Facebook.

The online feedback was overwhelming, with comments, reactions, and judgments flooding the platforms. Many social media users, infuriated by the crime, called and suggest for extreme measures, including the execution of the perpetrator brutally, as well as harm against his family and children. These sentiments were shared and amplified across social networks, with some posts gaining millions of views.

What is particularly alarming is how these social media discussions have begun to undermine the proper functioning of legal and governmental institutions. The court's

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<sup>27</sup>**EYoha Media. (2024, August). This story has been surfacing in the Ethiopian social media platforms and mainstream media [የሃይማኖት ጥራት ለማረጋገጥ! የሰው ግድግዳ ለማስወገድ የሚያስፈልገው የሰው ግድግዳ ጥራት ለማረጋገጥ! ‘የሰው ግድግዳ’ ጥራት ለማረጋገጥ የሚያስፈልገው የሰው ግድግዳ ጥራት ለማረጋገጥ]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7L\\_27-PgrU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7L_27-PgrU)**

decision to sentence the rapist to 25 years in prison has been widely condemned and rejected by the online public. Social media commentators have not only questioned the adequacy of the sentence but have also undermined the authority of the police and the judiciary. Some have even called for the public to take justice into their own hands, advocating for mob justice over legal due process.

In this context, there has been an outcry on the platforms to deny the rapist his right to appeal before the case could even be heard by a higher court. This raises serious questions about whether the rule of law can be upheld in such a heated environment. Can the police conduct an independent investigation when the public has already formed its own conclusions based on incomplete information? Are these social media narratives driving people to think emotionally rather than rationally, regardless of the information completeness?<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, this situation challenges the role of journalism in facilitating critical thinking and informed decision-making. In an era where social media can amplify voices that appeal to emotion rather than reason, can journalists still present balanced, fact-based stories that encourage the public to consider different perspectives? Is the very foundation of journalism being undermined by these platforms, which prioritize sensationalism over accurate and well-researched reporting?

Suppose a journalist working for a reputable news outlet is covering the tragic case of Heven Awot , the story has already gained significant attention on social media, where emotional and sensationalized accounts have sparked widespread outrage. Many social media users are calling for extreme savage measures, including mob justice, and are

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<sup>28</sup>**Note: I condemn the crime and argue that the sentencing is unjust considering its impact on the family and society. My conclusions are based on thorough research from various sources. However, my main focus is to illustrate how Eyoha Media's video swayed public emotions, highlighting how social media can exaggerate and misrepresent issues without proper verification or multiple perspectives, thus undermining the principles of journalism.**

questioning the legitimacy of the legal system that sentenced the perpetrator to 25 years in prison.

The journalist is faced with a critical decision on how to report this story:

**Option 1:** Covering the story sensationally

The journalist could choose to report the story in a way that resembles with the emotional tone already set by social media. This approach could include focusing on the most disturbing details, highlighting the anger of the public, and questioning the adequacy of the judicial system's response. This type of reporting would likely attract significant attention, increasing audience and could even lead to swift social and political action. However, it could also worsen the existing public feeling, may be lead to violence or mob justice, undermining the legal framework, and creating a climate of fear and revenge..

**Option 2:** Present the Story adhering ethics of journalism

Alternatively, the journalist could choose to report the story with a balanced, fact-based approach. This would mean managing to explain the legal proceedings and details surrounding the case, as well as the right of the convicted, particularly his right to appeal. The journalist would also present perspectives from legal experts, law enforcement, and community leaders, encouraging the public to consider all aspects of the case before passing judgments. While this approach promotes informed decision-making and upholds journalistic integrity, it may not attract as much immediate attention or alienate large number of audiences. It could also be accused of neglecting the victim's family.

**3.3.1 The Ethical Dilemma explained :: Illuminating deductions and analysis of the dilemma.**

Should the journalist prioritize immediate public reaction and emotional satisfaction by reporting the story in a sensationalized manner, potentially at the expense of justice and societal stability? Or should they prioritize a balanced, fact-based approach that supports the rule of law and informed decision-making, even if it risks alienating a large portion of their audience and may not lead to immediate action?

In this case should not be the journalists role to educate the public the purpose of appeals help to identify and correct mistakes made during the initial trial, such as misinterpretation of laws and improper admission of evidence, rather than worrying the outcome.

On the other hand let's say the journalist confirm the outrage provoked by the public to deny the right of the convicted to appeal on its report, wouldn't that weakens the purpose of higher courts, that can manage clarify, refine, and develop legal standards that lower courts follow in future cases.

This dilemma presents a classic utilitarian challenge, where the journalist must consider the greatest good for the greatest number, balancing the immediate emotional impact with the long-term consequences for society.

In the first illustrative example I tried to demonstrate how public opinion was shaped by social media and influencing journalism professional roles, pushing it to undermine its integrity and independence. The following part further examines how social media has undermined journalistic visibility and trust worthiness by enabling the rapid dissemination of false information, using several illustrative examples from Covid-19 crises .

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a wave of misinformation spread across social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter), falsely claiming that consuming garlic and ginger could kill the virus as well. Some posts on social media even suggested that taking these herbs would make a person immune to the virus entirely. Additionally, there have been rumors circulated that COVID-19 explains vaccines would cause impotence, infertility<sup>29</sup>, or other severe side effects, without any scientific backing. The social media posts I tried to present next spread rapidly, unchecked by reliable gatekeepers (like journalist or fact checker organizations) , and were not verified by credible institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO).

The harm was immense, even the public began to believe in these unverified remedies, leading to a false sense of security and deterring them from following medically sound

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56012529>

guidelines. Some may have delayed or avoided getting vaccinated, believing that garlic and ginger could protect them from the virus or that vaccines were dangerous. This undermined public health efforts to control the spread of the virus and contributed to further infections, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Such situation highlights the dangers of the "information democracy" facilitated by the internet, where anyone can publish content without oversight. The platforms have been accused of prioritizing virality and instantaneousness over verification, amplifying false narratives in the name of free expression. While some may argue that allowing open discourse benefits the public by giving everyone a voice (a utilitarian perspective that aims to maximize collective freedom), it also leads to harmful consequences when it compromises facts and public safety. In this case, the lack of regulation and accountability on social media resulted in widespread misinformation, with real-life consequences for those who trusted the unchecked information over scientific guidance that could be held accountable.

Let us dive into the following illuminating examples:

### **Illustrative Example 2**

A Facebook profile under the name Yohanes Asheber posted the following information on May 30, 2020: (The page does not have the person's picture with information. It was shared more than 524 times, gained more than 24 furious and hateful comments and nearly to 100 outrage Emojis (digital image icons represent ideas) reactions within less than 40 minutes, of publishing)

"We sent the person with Corona by public transport, they received him. Very embarrassing! At this time, even at the international level, it is forbidden to forcibly return a person affected by Corona to where he resides. Our leaders are using political advantage even in Corona! Politics!"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Asheber, Y. (2020, May 30). "We sent the person with Corona by public transport, they received him. Very embarrassing!" [Facebook post]. Facebook. Archived version: <https://archive.ph/zsvz0#selection-1089.0-1089.111>

The post included a screen shot supposed to be from Debre Markos Comprehensive Specialized Hospital as a source which says:

“It is a very shameful thing. The Oromia region has once again mishandled a COVID-19 case, sending an infected individual on a public bus instead of arranging proper medical transportation. While they did provide the license plate number, the lack of appropriate action is outrageous. If they were unable to treat the patient immediately, they should have informed us, and we could have arranged for an ambulance rather than risking exposure to other passengers. On May 20, 2020, the entire bus, traveling from Addis Ababa to Bahir Dar, was redirected to Debre Markos, where all passengers were placed under quarantine. The community is now appealing to anyone who can assist in improving the region's response to the pandemic, as many fear that such negligence could lead to further outbreaks.”

The post was debunked by the fact-checking site Pesacheck<sup>31</sup>, which clarified that no such event occurred. However, by the time the correction was issued, the damage was already done, with many users having already engaged with and spread the misinformation. This example demonstrates how quickly false narratives can spiral out of control, undermining public trust in official health measures. Journalists, whose responsibility is to provide accurate information, must spend valuable time debunking these claims, diverting attention from more critical stories.

### **Illustrative Example 3**

Another website page called ‘Maroole’ that claimed itself as a source of news and Current affairs also posted the following without attributing a authenticated source (supposed to get it anonymously as a leak)

“Breaking News: 14 of the 25 Confirmed COVID-19 Cases Reported Today are Oromo

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Debunked by Pesacheck.org (2020). False: Oromia region did not knowingly send a COVID-19 patient on public transport. Pesacheck.org.  
<https://pesacheck.org/false-oromia-region-did-not-knowingly-send-a-covid-19-patient-on-public-transport-4e36ccb5ca80>

<sup>31</sup> FYI Note: Pesacheck.org is a fact-checking organization that filters published misinformation, click bait and misleading claims on social media outlets with the motto "Citizens need accurate information to make sound decisions." Retrieved from <https://pesacheck.org/about>

Political Prisoners:

Reliable anonymous sources have reported that 14 of the 25 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported today in Ethiopia are Oromo political prisoners in Ethiopian prisons. The anonymous sources have leaked this sensitive news which is tightly held by the Ministry of Health, while Abiy administration is using COVID-19 as a pretext for postponement of elections and plan to do unpopular constitutional changes.”<sup>32</sup>

This situation illustrates a key dilemma for journalists who must balance the public's right to know with the need for accurate and verified information in an already volatile political environment. Putting pressure in setting the time and space, journalism set of principles highlight the need for careful verification before reporting, but social media's speed and scale often leave little time for thorough analysis.

#### **Illustrative Example 4**

The wide open nature of the digital age for information also can allow posts presented in highly politicized contexts that might result in escalating conflicts.

As you can see bellow a news website called "Ethiopia 365 News" website managed to reach the public with a headline that says :

“Breaking news : The federal Government of Ethiopia Blocked a medical support of Corona virus to Tigray Regional region.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Maroole. (2020). Breaking news: 14 of the 25 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported today are Oromo political prisoners. Archived version: <https://archive.vn/ZV8UM#selection-447.0-451.401>

Debunked by Pesacheck:

<https://pesacheck.org/false-25-new-cases-of-covid-19-announced-on-may-7-do-not-include-14-oromo-political-prisoners-fbebdaca87fe>

<sup>33</sup> Ethiopia 365 News. (n.d.). Breaking news: The federal government of Ethiopia blocked medical support for coronavirus to Tigray region. Archived version:

<https://archive.vn/cQVPZ/37bc0b44eb09d9d703d79556a0a9052445045c8e/scr.png>

Debunked by Pesacheck:

<https://pesacheck.org/false-ethiopias-federal-government-has-not-blocked-covid-19-medical-supplies-to-tigray-region-96476100d4b>

With sensational claims, such as like this can easily gain audience and engagement . This kind of reporting risks inflaming political divisions and exacerbating already tense situations. Can Professional journalists dominate this landscape narratives by adhering to their ethical responsibility of verifying sources?. In cases like these, failing to do so can lead to a wider spread of panic, which can be seen in the misleading Facebook post on the Oromia region, shared more than 500 times within minutes.

### **Illustrative Example 5**

False claims about the virus on social media was also seen as it often opens reaches a large audience and is taken seriously due to the person’s perceived authority, created by the platforms.

For example at a time there were an Australian Parliment memeber called Craig Kelly spread a misinformation / misleading content On Twitter (X) that says :

“How stupid must the world feel today having wasted hundreds of thousand billion dollars on useless [vacine] and destroyed trillions of Dollars of wealth with panic lock downs- when it is now discovered that garlic kills Covid.”<sup>34</sup> ( he was censored by face book and you tube )( he had nearly 150,000 followers then and a research he quoted had more than 500,000 views and shared by several even sites of social media at the time) how ever it was found to be Misleading. since the study was not conducted on humans and the findings show no medical treatment application. (it was fact checked by Australian Associated Press)

Misinformation shared by influential individuals poses a unique challenge, as it often reaches larger audiences and carries more credibility. Journalists must decide whether to engage in fact-checking and how much effort to devote to disproving such claims. While

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<sup>34</sup> Kelly, C. [@CraigKellyPHON]. (2023, May 30). How stupid must the world feel today having wasted hundreds of thousand billion dollars on useless vaccines... [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/CraigKellyPHON/status/1663708535383793664>

Debunked by Australian Associated Press. (2023). Fact check: Senator’s garlic cure claim smells a little strange. AAP FactCheck. <https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/senators-garlic-cure-claim-smells-a-little-strange/>

reporting these stories is crucial to public health, the resources spent on debunking falsehoods might detract from more significant, impactful journalism. The balance between protecting the public from misinformation and focusing on valuable, fact-based stories remains an ongoing ethical challenge for journalism.

### **3.3.2 Is there over all Utilitarian dilemma posed on journalism by emergence of Social media ?**

Yes, I argue that the emergence of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of journalism, creating new ethical dilemmas that challenge traditional reporting practices. One of the most significant dilemmas is the pressure on journalists to cater to the emotional and often sensationalized narratives that dominate social media platforms. According to McChesney (2013), social media has shifted the focus of news from a public good to a commercial product, where the primary objective is to generate engagement and attract viewers. This shift has led to a situation where the public's emotional reactions, rather than objective facts, increasingly drive the news agenda. In this environment, journalists face a utilitarian dilemma: should they report in a way that maximizes immediate public satisfaction, even if it risks long-term societal harm, or should they adhere to principles of balanced, fact-based reporting, even if it means sacrificing popularity?

The dilemma is further complicated by the speed and reach of social media, which can amplify certain narratives and make them go viral within minutes. As Rosen (2012) notes, social media has created an "attention economy" where the most emotionally charged and sensational stories often dominate public discourse.

In this context, journalists are under constant pressure to produce content that will "go viral" and capture the public's attention, sometimes at the expense of accuracy and depth. This creates a utilitarian conflict between the short-term benefits of attracting large audiences and the long-term responsibilities of promoting informed, rational discourse. The ease with which misinformation can spread on social media only heightens this dilemma, as journalists must decide whether to compete with or counteract these powerful, yet potentially destructive narratives. (That is the reason, why click bait is flourishing)

Moreover, social media has democratized content creation, allowing anyone with an internet connection to become a "journalist" in their own right. This has blurred the lines between professional journalism and amateur content creation, as noted by Shirky (2008). The proliferation of amateur content has led to a situation where the public is increasingly exposed to unverified, emotionally charged stories that may undermine trust in traditional media and the rule of law. Journalists are therefore confronted with the challenge of whether to align their reporting with these dominant social media narratives to remain relevant or to uphold journalistic standards that may be less popular but are crucial for a functioning democracy. This presents a utilitarian dilemma, as the journalist must weigh the immediate impact of their reporting against the potential long-term consequences for public trust and social stability.

Finally, the interactive nature of social media adds another layer to this dilemma. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook allow for immediate public feedback, which can influence the direction of journalistic reporting in real-time. As Ward (2011) discusses, this feedback space can lead to a form of "crowd-sourced journalism" where the boundaries between professional journalism and public opinion are increasingly blurred. The utilitarian challenge here is whether journalists should allow public sentiment to dictate their reporting, potentially leading to the destroying of journalistic independence and integrity, or whether they should resist these pressures in favor of maintaining a more objective and balanced approach. The rise of social media thus poses a deep ethical challenge for journalists, forcing them to negotiate the competing demands of public engagement and responsible reporting in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

### **3.3.3. Why can we call these dilemma a Utilitarian Ethical Dilemma ?**

We can call these dilemmas "Utilitarian Ethics Dilemmas" because they involve making decisions that require weighing the outcome of different actions to determine which one will produce the greatest good or the least harm for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism, a consequentialist ethical theory primarily associated with Bentham and Mill, focuses on the outcomes of actions rather than the actions themselves. The central question in utilitarian ethics is whether an action will maximize overall happiness or well-being.

In the context of journalism and social media, the dilemmas described are utilitarian because they involve complex trade-offs between different consequences that affect society at large. For instance, when a journalist decides whether to report a story in a sensationalized manner to attract attention or to present it in a balanced, fact-based way, they are essentially engaging in a utilitarian calculation. They must consider the potential benefits of attracting a large audience, which might lead to swift social or political action, against the potential harms, such as inflaming public sentiment, undermining the rule of law, or promoting mob justice.

Ultimately, these are utilitarian dilemmas because they require the journalist to evaluate which course of action will lead to the best overall outcome for the most people, balancing short-term gains against potential long-term consequences. The ethical challenge lies in determining how to act in a way that maximizes overall well-being, which is the core principle of utilitarian ethics

## Chapter Four

### 3. **Overcoming the utilitarian dilemma facing Journalism and recommendation**

This final chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks of ‘social media as the new public sphere’ to underpin ethical challenges facing journalism in the era of social media. It also aims to conclude the study by offering a recommendation for overcoming the challenges.

#### **4.1. Social Media as Public Sphere<sup>35</sup>**

In this section I attempt to show, the ethics of Professional Journalism, which has relied on mass communication via broadcast and print media work process and general business as usual model, is being challenged as social media platforms evolve from common social networks to major media outlets. Specifically journalism is facing an existential threat, as it struggles to uphold its core ethical codes versus being instantaneous, participatory and engaging.

I tried to argue that this was caused by a ‘paradigm shift’ that disrupted the traditional top down relation of the audience and journalist relation as the emergence of social media created horizontal means of communication, where news is shared, discussed and developed by audiences or general public. As it is discussed extensively in chapter two, this paradigm shift is accompanied by spreading misinformation, creating algorithmic bias and promoting click bait cultures. This puts journalism as a profession, in a precarious position and diminishes its vital role in facilitating a well-informed decision-making and promoting democracy.

However another grand narration has been spotted by several scholars that the rise of social media created access to public sphere that empowers citizen not to be passive, and

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<sup>35</sup>According to Jürgen Habermas, “a Public Sphere is.... casting itself as forum in which the private people come together to form a public raised themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before a public opinion.” Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (p. 36-37). MIT Press.

makes 'participatory democracy'<sup>36</sup> possible.

***“The professional model thinks objective news reporting and well informed analysis are essential for informed public decisions. The new media model favors a participatory model of democracy which is libertarian in spirit. A free and many-voiced marketplace of ideas, using the interactive medium of the Internet, is sufficient for democracy”*** (p. 214 Ward, S. J. A. 2011). Ethics and the Media: An introduction

Similarly scholars like Fasil Merawi portrays social media as a new form of the public sphere. On his Article called "Public Sphere, The Virtual Subject, and Ethics of Social Media," where he explores the complex relationship between the public sphere, social media, and ethics, he emphasizes the need for regulatory frameworks that prioritize the public good and uphold democratic principles in the digital age, highlighting the complex synergy between technology, ethics, and societal norms.

***'In modern societies, one witnesses a quest for grounding critical praxis and human emancipation in a space within which all members of a given community have an equal voice. In modern Europe, such an urge was expressed in the notion of a public sphere as a context that institutes symmetrical relationships and functions as an autonomous unit being shielded from the influence of particular interests, power and ideology. Today such an idea of a public sphere is expressed in social media that revolutionize our conceptions of space, time, subjectivity and human interactions by creating a new stage in the space of social media. Such a space is dictated by concrete human relations, although it also has its own internal logic making possible new ways of relating to other individuals.'***  
(‘Public Sphere, The virtual Subject, and Ethics of Social Media)

He also defines the concept of the virtual subject, representing individuals in the world of social media, is distinct from their real-life counterparts. This virtual subjectivity complicates traditional understanding of identity, communication, and social interaction.

Therefore, according to 'social media' is 'the new public sphere' perspective, if journalism to maintain its 'status quo ante', where journalists serve as the primary

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<sup>36</sup> Participatory democracy is grounded in the belief that the more citizens are engaged in their own governance, the more legitimate and effective the government will be. It empowers individuals and communities to have a direct say in policies and decisions that affect their lives, fostering a more engaged and active citizenry. Pateman, Carole. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1970.

gatekeepers of information, maintaining their distinct role in upholding objectivity, accuracy, and ethical standards, need to find a way how to operate in this new public sphere.

If we agree with such premises its crucial for journalism to reconsider new form as eloquently recommended below:

- *‘Finally, integration appears as a worthy goal because no one form of journalism has all the virtues while another form has all the vices. The virtue of the professional system is that, ideally, it supports reliable, professionally trained journalists dedicated to the public, thus maximizing accurate, unbiased news while reducing misinformation. The vice is that it places enormous influence in the hands of a privileged class of citizens (journalists) who work for powerful news organizations who may not care about ethics. The virtue of new media is that it places the freedom to publish in the hands of countless citizens. This reduces the power of main stream journalists and media owners. The vice is that new media causes both misinformation and information overload. The power of journalism can be exercised by anyone with any ethics and any motivation. Good journalism and reliable information become lost in a sea of unreliable voices. Weakening the economics of mainstream journalism results in lay offs for experienced journalists. Layoffs reduce journalism’s ability to act as a watchdog on power. For these reasons, the ethical task is to construct an ethics for the new mainstream which combines the virtues of both models.’ ( Ethics and the media Cambridge P. 216)*

#### 4.2. Specific Recommendations on What to DO?

The digital era created a landscape presents vast opportunities and various ethical dilemmas to journalism as we have discussed in Chapter two and three. The opportunity created by the emergence of social media were widely discussed how it was creating conducive environment as a Trojan horse to perpetuate misinformation, click bait cultures , and algorithmic bias in particular and resulting crippling the professional role of Journalism within a society. Navigating these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes ethical considerations and the public interest. This section provides practical recommendations for stakeholders in the digital media ecosystem.

**Recommendations for Journalists:** Based on the discussion of the earlier chapters, the first thing to do for journalists is, adhere to established ethical guidelines and codes of conduct, such as those from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) and Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) or the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN). Thus would help to prioritize truth, accuracy, and transparency in reporting with

credible information to the public.

Promoting media literacy is essential in the digital age, this is another aspect that journalists should look into. Journalists should educate themselves and their audiences about media literacy and critical thinking skills. By providing context and background information, journalists can help their audiences discern credible information from misinformation. Media literacy education empowers individuals to critically evaluate the information they encounter, fostering a more informed and discerning public.

On other hand avoid click bait headlines and sensationalist reporting fosters integrity in journalism. Journalists should resist the temptation to use sensationalist tactics to attract clicks and views. By prioritizing quality over quantity, journalists can build trust with their audiences and contribute to a more informed society.

Finally yet important is journalist should surpass the alluring effect of social media by fostering transparency. By disclosing any conflicts of interest and provide explanations for editorial decisions to maintain credibility and trust with their audience, journalists allows the public to understand the rationale behind the information presented to them. Such action would put them in a position of authenticated and go to source.

**Recommendations for Media Organizations:** One thing the most discussing in the earlier chapters, is how social media is allowing assault on truth, accuracy, and other forms of journalism core ethical guidelines. Therefore developing clear and comprehensive ethical guidelines for journalists and staff to follow that address issues such as accuracy, fairness, and transparency in reporting, as well as the responsible use of social media platforms by media houses is vital.

Providing an ongoing training and professional development opportunities for journalists enhances their ethical decision-making skills and media literacy. Offering workshops, seminars, and resources on topics such as fact-checking, source verification, and ethical reporting practices is imperatives.

The other issues which is ignored and should be addressed is, the concern of ‘diversity and inclusion’. Practically media organizations should ensure that diverse voices and perspectives are represented in their content coverage and editorial decision-making

processes. This includes fostering an inclusive work environment where all staff feel valued and respected. By promoting diversity and inclusion, media organizations can provide more comprehensive and representative coverage, reflecting the true diversity of a given society.

Collaboration with stakeholders is essential for advancing ethical journalism as well. Media organizations should engage with other media entities, industry associations, and regulatory bodies to develop industry-wide standards and best practices. By sharing insights and lessons learned, media organizations can strengthen ethical standards across the media ecosystem, fostering a more ethical and responsible media landscape.

**Recommendations for Policymakers:** Policymakers have a critical roles in shaping the ethical landscape of digital media just as they have been historically maintaining on mainstream medias. They should develop and enforce regulations that promote transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior. This may involve measures to combat misinformation, protect user privacy, and ensure algorithmic transparency. Effective regulation helps create a more trustworthy and accountable digital media environment.

At the same time policymakers should invest in initiatives that equip the public with the skills and knowledge needed to critically evaluate information online. Collaboration with educational institutions, nonprofits, and media organizations can help develop and implement effective media literacy programs, fostering a more informed and discerning public.

Innovation in journalism and media technology can help address ethical dilemmas in the digital media landscape immensely. Policymakers should encourage innovation that prioritizes ethical considerations and the public interest. Supporting research and development efforts in areas such as content moderation and algorithmic transparency can lead to new solutions that enhance ethical standards in media.

Additionally facilitating dialogue among stakeholders is essential for addressing ethical issues in the digital media landscape. Policymakers should create opportunities for engagement and collaboration through roundtable discussions, workshops, and public forums. These platforms allow stakeholders to explore ethical challenges, share insights, and identify potential solutions, fostering a more ethical and responsible media

environment.

**Invest in External and Internal Fact-Checking:** Fact-checking initiatives play a crucial role in verifying information and combating misinformation on social media platforms. Media organizations should invest in fact-checking resources and collaborate with independent fact-checkers to ensure the accuracy of their reporting.

Such kind of external fact checking organization are emerging everywhere now a days, of course internal fact checking units are, and should be part of every media house that is claiming to be led by set of ethical and verifiable information obtaining and sending process.

Seeing such activities and taking account the Ethiopian case , I only found three fact checking organizations and media houses that do fact checking activities. Namely , HaqCheck, Ethiopian Check and the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) which is the regulator of the Ethiopian media.

### **4.3. Conclusion**

Enhancing professional ethics and journalistic integrity in the era of social media requires a concerted effort from journalists, media organizations, and policymakers. By promoting media literacy, implementing ethical guidelines, investing in fact-checking, prioritizing transparency and accountability, and advocating for ethical standards, journalists can uphold the principles of integrity and professionalism in their reporting. In doing so, they can maintain the trust of their audiences and ensure the continued relevance and credibility of journalism in the digital age.

Other than that, professional journalism now, cannot ignore the nature new media business models, nor it cannot beaten by it, and loose its roles within a society. Although it cannot follow its status quo ante business model work process and survive the evolving information landscape. Therefore does this means Journalism as a profession rethinks its business model in the era of digital world? Should it re-examine its roles and set ethical principles that it is adhering to? That is the dilemma further to study!

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