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Journalism Ethics: Mainstream Versus Tabloid Journalists

Through a survey of 356 journalists working for various newspapers under the Singapore Press Holdings, this study shows that despite the influence of newsroom culture, journalists working for the mainstream and tabloid newspapers may not differ in terms of their professional values and ethical standards. It is the content orientation of their newspaper or their perception of it that leads them to act differently in covering certain kinds of news. In other words, the institutional influence does have an impact on the ethical decision-making process among journalists in their daily operations even though it may not determine the direction of their personal beliefs and ethical values.

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Most daily newspapers are published in broadsheet format. Some, however, are printed in a format known as the 'tabloid', which is about half the size of a broadsheet newspaper. Because the early 'tabloid' newspapers tended to follow a sensational style focusing on celebrity gossips, scandals, human-interest features with 'sensational' twists, the term 'tabloid' is often used to denote a sensational style of journalism.

Featuring big, bold headlines and large photographs (Stephens, 1988), almost all the front pages of tabloid newspapers are devoted to crime and entertainment stories. The term 'tabloid reporter' conjures images of 'sleaze' personified: a slimy, pushy nuisance working in shabby offices, willing to do anything to dig up dirt and invent preposterous stories (Bird, 1992: 79). Tabloid journalists are seen as less mindful of ethics and professional journalism standards in the pursuit of stories (Time, 1972: 64).

Branded as a "disgrace to journalism" by many critics in the mainstream press (Buckley, 1981: 508), tabloid journalism, which refers more to the sensational style of journalism rather than the size of a newspaper, has nevertheless survived the test of time and continues to exist in almost every literate society. Even in a country like Singapore, where the government exerts heavy influence on the press, tabloid newspapers exist along their

mainstream counterparts.

With the exception of one free English daily newspaper, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) enjoys a monopoly position by owning eleven newspapers, which can be divided into three groups. The mainstream group includes *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*, which are the national dailies in English and Chinese respectively. The tabloid group consists of *The New Paper* in English, and *Lianhe Wanbao* and *Shin Min Daily News* in Chinese, which are broadsheet in format but tabloid in content. The specialised group comprises *The Business Times* for readers of financial news, *Berita Harian* and *Tamil Murasu* for the minorities, and the Chinese *Friday Weekly* and *Thumbs Up* for school children. In addition, *Streets*, a new tabloid-size paper for free distribution at the subway stations, offers a light-hearted mix of serious news and entertainment. The counterpart of *Streets*, *Today*, run by Mediacorp, is the only daily newspaper outside of SPH.

Despite the sensational approach of the tabloid newspapers and public perception of journalists working for them, the tabloid journalists in Singapore do not necessarily differ fundamentally from their mainstream counterparts in qualifications and professional training as SPH has developed a one-for all recruitment and training policy (Turnbull, 1995). All SPH journalists, whether working for mainstream or tabloid newspapers, have to receive the same set of training in interviewing, writing, law and ethics, and adhere to the same standards of professionalism.

The SPH editorial training department incorporates journalism ethics as a part of its core program for training all journalists (Tan, 2001). Since 1991, senior journalists have been sent to the United States to attend ethical decision-making classes. In the meantime, in-house training courses on journalism ethics have also been offered on a regular basis (Tan, 2001). In all these training efforts, no discrimination has been given to journalists working for the tabloid newspapers.

In addition to identical recruitment policy and training programs, both the mainstream and tabloid journalists are subjected to the same restraints imposed upon them by Singapore's media environment. From time to time, the media are criticised and fined for sensational reporting by the government, which sees itself as a guardian of public morals.

Singapore's unique press system allows us to study the issue of journalism ethics with some special objectives. The first objective of this study is to find out to what extent journalists working in a monopolised and controlled media environment differ in their ethical standards for journalism practices. Considering the fact that journalists in Singapore need to subscribe

to the same set of media policies defined by the government and its monopolised media industry, would that lead them to think in a uniform way and subscribe to the same set of ethical standards?

The second objective is to find out to what extent institutional influence may affect individual journalists' ethical standards and ethical decision-making process. Since we know that SPH journalists are not specially chosen and trained to work for different orientations in news reporting, the differences in the content of mainstream and tabloid newspapers should be attributed to the readers' taste and newsroom policies rather than personal preference of the journalists. However, would journalists uphold different ethical standards for journalism practice as a result of self-customisation to work habits and institutional demands?

The third objective is to gauge to what extent the socialisation in the newsroom may affect the development of ethical standards among journalists. To a certain extent, the orientation of news content affects the interests and professional values of news workers. Journalists working for different types of newspapers tend to experience different newsroom cultures. Would the differences in newsroom culture affect the socialisation process in the newsroom? Would there be any differences between the mainstream and tabloid newspapers in terms of how their cub reporters are mentored? Do senior journalists and bosses in the newsroom affect journalists in the same way despite differences in the newsroom culture?

Few people admit to being passionate readers of the tabloids, but tabloid sales are in the millions. Day (1996) commented that the public's appetite for sensationalism affects both how stories are selected and the coverage they receive. For example, although the incident in which Lorena Bobbitt cut off her husband's penis is of little consequence when compared to various problems facing the world, it received substantial coverage by all the news media around the world.

Winch (1997) noted that although mainstream journalists condemn tabloid journalists for undesirable practices, cases of mainstream journalists doing likewise have surfaced. This blurring of boundary between the two groups of journalists, he explains, is due to the evolution of mainstream news into more entertaining mode. Journalists who consider themselves mainstream journalists say tabloid journalists make decisions about the newsworthiness of a story based on entertainment values, implying that they make, or should make, decisions about newsworthiness solely on the basis of informational or news value.

Literature Review

Comparing six major tabloid newspapers in the United States, Hogshire (1997) found that due to the enormous pressure on the editors to maintain a high circulation figure, tabloid journalists violate almost every rule to sell their papers, sometimes even to the extent of making up stories or using tactics comparable to that of private investigators to spy on the private lives of the rich and famous. The biggest irony is, the mainstream newspapers behave like scavengers and eagerly pick up all the juicy news from the tabloids, at the same time denouncing the 'unethical practices' of these newspapers.

Journalism historians attribute the growth of human-interest and sensational style, rather than subject matter, reporting to the emergence of the "penny press" (Nordin, 1979), which began in 1833 with *The Sun*, the first mass market newspaper aimed at a growing mass of semiliterate working class urbanites who favored human-interest stories (Mott, 1963). *The Sun's* writing style and tone marked a novel turn in the development of American journalism (Whitby, 1982).

While traditional newspapers relied on formal documents such as court records to write their stories, *The Sun*, *The Herald*, and other penny papers began using 'legwork' reporting techniques including observation and interviewing to produce richly detailed stories (Francke, 1986). Penny press journalists also widely adopted 'sensory detail' styles, which often produced graphically detailed descriptions. The later half of the 19th century saw the evolution of the penny press into yellow journalism (Campbell, 2001), which reflected "the familiar aspects of sensationalism - crime news, scandal and gossip, divorces and sex, and stress upon the reporting of disasters and sports" (Mott, 1962: 539). Reporters from the 'yellow' papers further enhanced the reporting techniques that originated with the penny papers and concentrated on producing stories filled with detailed physical description and colloquial dialogue (Francke, 1986).

Like all professionals, journalists are guided by a role morality - the responsibilities, rights, ideals, and virtues especially germane to their role as professionals (Cohen & Elliot, 1997). The most fundamental theoretical task concerning morally responsible journalism is to clarify how journalistic ethics is related to ordinary morality. In turn, that task requires clarifying the ideas of professional ethics, ordinary ethics, and morality itself (Martin, 1981). There is much disagreement about the idea of 'special ethics' for journalists and for other professionals. All sides of the dispute grant that professionals have especially strong responsibilities, such as to maintain confidentiality, obtain informed consent, and zealously pursue the distinctive goods served by their profession (Cohen & Elliot, 1997).

Sensationalism is often denounced as an act that compromises journalism ethics. The blurring of the line between journalism and sensationalism worries many people. What is missing, they say, is judgment about what is newsworthy and what is just nosy (Day, 1996). "Tragic events may be newsworthy (the assassination of a president) or carry a message (a drunk-driving crash), but sometimes there is no larger issue (an interview with a man who lost his wife in a plane crash). These stories serve no purpose, except to capitalise on someone's tragedy" (Hulteng, 1985: 154).

For Stevens (1985), stories about murder, separation, and divorce force readers to reconsider moral boundaries. By stimulating community gossip, these stories lead to the public re-evaluation of a community's social values and moral boundaries (Nordin, 1979; Levin & Arluke, 1987). Francke (1986) argues that 19th century journalists filled their stories with sensory details in order to call attention to pressing social problems.

Critics of sensational news argue that these stories violate social boundaries of decency and respect (Dickson, 1988; Taylor-Flemming, 1992), relate to prurient interests (Nordin, 1979), and overshadow more important public affairs reporting (Adams, 1978). Focusing on the economic intent of sensational stories, Emery & Emery (1984) as well as Copeland (1992) argue that sensationalism is based on the media owners' drive for profits by satisfying their audience's desire for entertainment and titillation.

Social responsibility theory of the press holds that the news media are obliged to offer news that will enlighten the citizens of a democracy (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1974). Fulfilling this obligation may be compromised by the media's over-emphasis of sensationalist stories, which could deprive citizens of "information and discussion need to discharge responsibilities to the community" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947: 56). Slattery (1994) argues that sensational news coverage should not aim to appeal to prurient interests but, rather, to point to a wrong, an injustice or to a social evil that requires the community's involvement.

In general, ethics deals with the foundations of decision-making, of choosing between the good and bad options on the basis of moral principles. Journalism ethics addresses problems concerning behavior of reporters, editors, photographers and any other professionals involved in the production and distribution of news. At the roots of this normative, philosophical study is the understanding that the profession fulfills a necessary function of society (Cohen & Elliot, 1997).

Citizens need to receive and share particular kinds of information to function effectively in their communities, and news organisations have pledged to provide that information.

Journalists therefore have an ethical obligation to tell the truth and report news accurately, fairly, and objectively (Cohen & Elliot, 1997) and truth-telling is a major criterion to classify news reports as good or bad (Kieran, 1998).

Another important ethical consideration centers around the issues of privacy, which has grown to encompass protection against surveillance by private or state security organisations, unauthorised access to private or confidential data and invasions of privacy by the press (Belsey & Chadwick, 1992). Various types of deception, including faking one's identity, undercover reporting, using hidden cameras, and breaking confidentiality promises to sources are also areas of debate for journalism ethics (for example see Cohen & Elliot, 1997; Fink, 1995; Jackson, 1992; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996).

While numerous studies have been done in other parts of the world to gauge the ethical standards upheld by journalists, there has been no published research on the Singapore journalists in terms of their ethical values. This study therefore will help to fill in the gap.

Research Questions

Despite public criticism of tabloid journalism, much of the research on journalism ethics focused on journalists from the mainstream media, and so far no studies have been done to compare the tabloid and mainstream journalists in terms of their professional values and ethical standards. As a result, we are not clear to what extent the news content is influenced by the predilection of the journalists themselves or by their newsroom policies.

Although we can easily see differences between the tabloid and mainstream newspapers in content, we do not have much evidence to conclude if such differences are purely the results of efforts to accommodate readers' taste or they could also be attributed to differences between journalists working for the two types of newspapers in terms of their professional values and ethical standards. We don't know if the two types of newspapers tend to attract different journalists to work for them in the first place or if the institutional policies and newsroom culture lead journalists to practice their trade in different ways.

Although tabloid newspapers exist in almost all news-reading societies, it cannot be assumed that all journalists working for tabloid newspapers subscribe to a set of ethical standards different from those followed by mainstream journalists. As a pioneer study to examine the ethical standards upheld by journalists working for different types of media, this study seeks to answer the following questions

1. Do mainstream and tabloid newspaper journalists differ in their perception of the role of journalism and job satisfaction?
2. Do they subscribe to different standards of journalism ethics?
3. What demographic differences, if any, may affect journalists' ethical standards?

For this study, six newspapers owned by SPH were divided into two groups on the basis of their content orientation. The tabloid group includes journalists from the English *New Paper* and the Chinese newspapers *Lianhe Wanbao* and *Shin Min Daily News*. The mainstream group includes journalists from the English *Straits Times* and the Chinese *Lianhe Zaobao*. All the full-time editorial employees of these newspapers are targeted for this survey.

Using the SPH Staff Directory 2001, we obtained the names of 229 journalists from the *Straits Times*, 155 from *Lianhe Zaobao*, 55 from *Shin Min Daily News*, 56 from *Lianhe Wanbao* and 68 from *The New Paper*. A six-page questionnaire was hand-delivered to all the journalists selected in June 2001 and by the end of July 2001 we had 356 journalists returned their completed questionnaire, reaching a response rate of 63.2%.

The questionnaire included questions on perception of the role of journalism and duties as journalists, reasons for joining journalism, job satisfaction, acceptability of certain journalistic practices, and sources of influence on journalism ethics, etc. Three scenario questions were also included to see what decisions the journalists would make under different conditions.

Compared to other professions, Singapore journalists tend to be much younger. A typical Singapore journalist is likely to be in his/her mid 20s, has a local university degree and has worked from one to five years in journalism. The proportion of female journalists (55.4%) is slightly greater than that of the males (44.6%).

The majority of the respondents felt that journalism is a profession (63.6%), rather than a craft (17%), trade (9.4%) or just a job (6%). Most respondents (56%) feel satisfied or fairly satisfied with their job and only a small number of them (7%) think otherwise. Most journalists are willing to stay in journalism (87.6%) and would choose journalism again if they could restart their career (70.8%).

The excitement of the job, interest in news and current affairs, and flair at writing were the top three reasons for the respondents to become journalists, and factors such as attractive income and special privileges associated with the profession are furthest from

Method

Findings

the respondents' minds.

The respondents feel that breaking promises of confidentiality to sources is the most unacceptable practice among eight questionable reporting practices, followed by disclosing the name of a rape victim and using confidential documents without permission. On the other hand, using hidden camera/microphone during interview and repeatedly questioning unwilling witnesses are tolerated if not supported. Please see Table 1 for details.

Table 1:
Attitudes towards questionable practices

Reporting Practices	Mean*	Std Deviation
Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so	6.41	.923
Disclosing the name of a rape victim	6.14	1.348
Using confidential documents without permission	5.95	1.202
Dramatising news story with own imagination	5.76	1.415
Claiming to be somebody else	5.61	1.424
Paying people for confidential information	5.38	1.584
Repeatedly questioning unwilling witnesses	4.38	1.621
Using hidden camera and microphone	4.20	1.834

*1= "Strongly Agree", 4= "Neutral" and 7= "Strongly Disagree"

Asked if they would go ahead and publish a story if one of their 'reliable sources' told them that a popular actor had been under investigation for an alleged rape but the police would not confirm it, more than half of the respondents (55.2%) indicated that they would go ahead and report the story, but withhold the identity of the actor. Majority of the rest (43.1%) said that they would not report the story until they could get confirmation from

the police. Only a tiny minority would report the story and reveal the identity of the actor without confirmation from the police.

However, when they were asked to step into the shoes of someone else, many changed their answers according to the role they were asked to play. Acting as reporters for the mainstream press, most of them (64.9%) would abstain from reporting the story. However, most respondents (67.2%) would go ahead and report the story if they were reporting for a tabloid newspaper.

On the other hand, majority of the respondents (63.3%) felt that as a member of the public, they would expect the story to be reported. The statistics presented in Table 2 seem to show that journalists tend to think they are more concerned about truthfulness of a story than the public, whose eagerness for sensational news tends to outweigh their concern about the veracity of the information. However, journalists also tend to see some differences between mainstream and tabloid newspapers if not between journalists working for them. Mainstream journalists are seen as more likely to exercise caution when it comes to unverified information than tabloid journalists.

Table 2:
Reporting on Alleged Rape by Actor

Actions	As Mainstream Journalist %	As Tabloid Journalist %	As Public %
Report the story	33.5	67.2	63.3
Not report the story	64.9	30.0	33.6
Not sure	1.6	2.8	3.1
Total Respondents	319	323	289

When asked if they would report the story and reveal the identity of an opposition politician who was found dead in a hotel with a prostitute just before the general election, majority of the respondents (81.4%) said “yes”. Only 16.6% of the respondents said they would report the story but withhold the identity of the politician. No significant differences were found when the journalists were asked to answer the same question in different

capacities. Please see Table 3 for details.

Table 3:

Reporting story of dead politician with prostitute

Actions	As Mainstream Journalist %	As Tabloid Journalist %	As Public %
Report the story	95.1	95.4	93.9
Not report the story	4.0	2.1	3.8
Not sure	0.9	2.5	2.3
Total Respondents	328	326	300

When asked whether to publish the identity and photograph of a 10-year-old child who was the sole witness of a murder case, most respondents found problem with it. Many respondents (40.7%) said that they would publish the photograph of the child but mask his face, and another 47.5% of the respondents would not publish the photograph of the child, but would mention his presence in the article. Only 2.3% of the respondents would publish the child’s photograph and reveal his identity. No significant differences were found when the respondents were asked to act in different capacities. (see Table 4)

Table 4:

Handling identity of child witness of murder

Actions	As Mainstream Journalist %	As Tabloid Journalist %	As Public %
Publish photo	22.6	29.8	25.3
Not publish photo	76.1	67.9	71.9
Not sure	1.3	2.2	2.4
Total Respondents	314	315	287

Day-by-day newsroom training is deemed the most important source of influence on the respondents’ ethical standards. Majority of the respondents (66.4%) feel that day-by-day newsroom training plays a big role in shaping their thinking about journalism ethics,

and in addition, a quarter of the respondents also think that newsroom training has some influence in this area. The next most important source of influence is the editors, who are followed by senior reporters, co-workers and peers.

Mainstream newspaper journalists were found to be better educated than their tabloid counterparts. Of the tabloid journalists, 19.4% of them do not have a university degree, while only 9.1% of the mainstream journalists belong to this category. About 20% of the mainstream newspaper journalists have had postgraduate education, while only 7.3% of the tabloid newspaper journalists attained similar qualifications.

There are more veterans among the tabloid newspaper journalists, with 37.1% of them having more than 15 years of work experience, but only 21.7% of their mainstream newspaper counterparts have worked the same number of years. The average age of the mainstream newspaper journalists is also younger. Of the mainstream newspaper journalists, 48.2% are between 20 and 30 years old, while only 33.9% of the tabloid newspaper journalists belong to this age group.

To see if journalists working for the mainstream and tabloid newspapers tend to maintain different ethical standards for journalism practices, t-tests were conducted to compare their answers. The results (see Table 5) show that there are few significant differences between the two groups in terms of their tolerance of various questionable reporting practices. The only significant difference found between the two groups was their willingness to pay for information. The mainstream journalists are slightly more willing to do so than the tabloid journalists.

The two groups of journalists do not differ in terms of their perception of journalism as a profession, job satisfaction and sources of influences on their ethical standards. There was a slight difference between the two groups in terms of how they would report on the case of the actor accused of rape. The majority of those in the mainstream group (64.9%) were not in favor of reporting the case without confirmation from the police but the majority of the tabloid journalists (64%) were more in favor of reporting the case but withholding the identity of the actor.

When asked whether to report the case of the opposition politician found dead with a prostitute, the overwhelming majority of both groups (85.9% of the mainstream journalists and 90% of the tabloid journalists) indicated that they would report the case. No significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of their responses to the question whether they should publish the photo and reveal the identity of the child witness of a murder.

Table 5:
Mainstream vs. tabloid journalists on certain reporting practices

Journalism Practices	Newspapers	Mean	Mean Diff	Sig.
Use of hidden camera	Main	4.139	-.175	.379
	Tabloid	4.315		
Disclosing name of rape victims	Main	6.191	.159	.290
	Tabloid	6.032		
Dramatising stories with own imagination	Main	5.827	.190	.229
	Tabloid	5.637		
Faking Identity	Main	5.584	-.225	.606
	Tabloid	5.667		
Paying for Information	Main	5.247	-.390	.027*
	Tabloid	5.637		
Using of documents without permission	Main	5.900	-.132	.326
	Tabloid	6.0325		
Repeatedly questioning unwilling witnesses	Main	4.286	-.279	.121
	Tabloid	4.565		
Revealing names of sources	Main	6.419	.032	.750
	Tabloid	6.387		

Scale for measurement: 1= "Strongly Agree", 4= "Neutral", 7= "Strongly Disagree"

To see the impact of the type of newspapers on journalists in their ethical decision making with various demographic factors under control, multiple regression analyses were carried out. The results (see Table 6) show that the type of newspaper a journalist work for indeed has very little influence on how he or she would react to various questionable journalism practices. The only significant difference found between the mainstream and tabloid newspaper journalists when other factors are under control is on whether journalists should dramatise a news story. Journalists from the mainstream newspapers are more opposed to the practice of dramatising news with their own imagination than their tabloid counterparts.

In addition, journalists working for the English newspapers were found to be more tolerant of dramatising news stories than journalists working for the Chinese newspapers. Male journalists are more likely to support the use of hidden camera/microphone than their female counterparts, whereas female journalists are more likely to oppose the practice of paying for information. Journalists with higher education are found to be more tolerant of using hidden camera/microphone.

More importantly, the grade or seniority of the journalists was found to be a major factor affecting the ethical decision making process. The more senior a respondent is, the more likely he or she would oppose the use of hidden camera/microphone, paying for information, using documents without permission, disclosing the name of a rape victim, faking identity and disclosing the name of a confidential source.

Table 6:
Factors affecting attitude on questionable reporting practices

Factors	Hidden Camera	Paying Informant	Use of Docum.	Disclose Name of Rape Victims	Faking Identity	Dramatise Stories	Betray Sources
Newspaper	.025	.102	.048	-.001	.060	-.139*	.026
Language	.033	-.089	-.038	-.013	-.088	.189**	-.100
Grade	.236**	.153*	.178*	.185*	.259**	.122	.180*
Gender	-.181**	.167**	.066	.058	.094	.051	.017
Age	-.089	-.004	-.004	-.170	-.025	.048	-.176
Years	.084	.190	.061	-.023	.076	.018	.155
Education	-.169**	-.054	-.009	.038	-.034	.059	.029

*p< .05, **p< .01

Discussion

Western commentators have often dismissed Singapore's newspapers as lackluster, obeisant mouthpieces of the establishment, unworthy of the sacrosanct role upheld by the profession (Asiaweek, 1980; Lent, 1984). They do not provoke the same degree of passion and controversy, sound and fury as the Western media, nor do they engage in tireless probes and

investigations, exposes and revelations, which have come to typify the role of the media in the West (Tan, 1990).

While it is debatable whether the Western model of the press is universally applicable, it has to be admitted that the Singapore media are not known for controversies and thought-provoking opinions. The prevailing notion that the press must support the government in its efforts for nation building as well as the newsroom policies adopted by the monopoly press do not seem to leave much room for individual thinking by journalists, which is crucial for ethical decision making.

Our findings show that as far as their motivations are concerned, journalists in Singapore do not differ much from journalists in other parts of the world. The most commonly cited reasons for Singapore journalists to start their career in journalism -- excitement of the job, personal interest in current affairs and writing ability - are all based on self-gratification.

A survey of American journalists conducted by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) shows, although most journalists cited love for writing as their main reason for entering the profession, there was often a connection to more altruistic reasons such as making a difference or informing the public of what was happening. For the Singapore journalists, satisfying their own interests seems to be the overwhelming reason for them to enter journalism. Making a difference and serving the society do not feature as the most important reasons to enter the profession. Part of the explanation may lie in the fact that Singapore is a relatively stable and corruption-free society, and it lacks a tradition in muckraking journalism due to its unique press-government relationship.

Although Singapore journalists tend to enter the profession for self-gratification purposes, such self-gratification is based more on idealistic notions than monetary rewards or privileges as respondents to our survey tended to rate low factors such as attractive pay and entitlement to privileges like free trips and free memberships as motivations to become journalists. The fact most journalists feel satisfied with their job and would like to be journalists again if they could restart their career seems to tell us that their motivations based on self-gratification could be actually satisfied through their work, in spite of the various restraints imposed upon the profession.

One thing that bothers media critics about monopoly lies in its potential effects on the thinking and practice of journalists. For journalists working in the same news organisation, their independent thinking is subjected to the pressure of company policies and concerns, and more so within the context of a monopoly. In the Singapore context, the monopolised newspaper industry naturally leads to the concern that journalists may

become institutionalised and lose their power for independent thinking. Our findings seem to show that such a concern may not be well grounded. Despite the fact that journalists working for SPH go through the same kind of training and face the same kind of pressure in work, they still hold different views on how to handle certain ethical issues.

Unlike the situation with newspaper industry elsewhere, newspaper journalists in Singapore are recruited by SPH as a company rather than by individual newspapers. As a result, journalists working for various newspapers are not necessarily pre-oriented for the particular newspaper they work for. Although our data do show some differences between the two groups of journalists in terms of their age and education, etc., these differences are not great enough to contrast the two groups. This naturally leads to the question: Would the newsroom policy of a particular newspaper affect the way its journalists handle certain ethical issues? In other words, would the journalists be institutionalised in a uniformed way of thinking about ethical issues if they work on the same newspaper?

Our findings seem to tell us that the institutional effects on ethical decision-making may not outweigh individual thinking. In general, no significant distinction could be found between journalists working for the mainstream newspapers and those working for tabloid newspapers although journalists of tabloid newspapers tend to go for the more sensational stuff, especially when glamour, sex and crime are mixed. As far as their personal views are concerned, journalists of the two groups would more or less act in the same way when they have an ethical decision to make.

However, our respondents tend to change their mind when they switch their roles in reporting a sensational story. It is clear that journalists would act differently in covering certain stories if they work for different types of newspapers. Many of them would be quite willing to replace their personal view with the perceived orientation of the newspaper in making an ethical decision. For certain things they would not do for a mainstream newspaper, many would do for a tabloid newspaper. Obviously, the ethical standards for the mainstream and tabloid newspapers are perceived to be quite different and such a perception may well be the factor that actually leads journalists to act differently in handling ethical issues. In other words, the institutional impact may not affect what a journalist truly believes he should do under the circumstance as an individual, but it may affect his actual decision as the employee of a newspaper. Future studies should test if this is a phenomenon unique to Singapore, or if it is universally applicable.

The institutional impact on journalism ethics is also demonstrated by the fact that the majority of the journalists feel that the day-to-day operations in the newsroom have the greatest impact on their thinking about journalism ethics, similar to research findings about American journalists (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). In addition, editors were chosen as the next most important influence. Although it cannot be denied that a person's ethical values have a lot to do with his or her family background, schooling, religious belief, etc, ethical decisions regarding journalism practices are seen more as a result of newsroom training than personal values.

This study of Singapore journalists seems to tell us that institutional influence does have an impact on the ethical decision making process among journalists in their daily operations even though it may not determine the direction of their personal beliefs and ethical values. While the mainstream and tabloid journalists may not differ in their personal beliefs and ethical values, the content orientation of their newspaper or the perception of it may lead them to act differently in covering certain kinds of news.

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