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Governing the Narrative: Algorithmic Power, Propaganda and the Ethical Resistance of Filipino Journalists in the 2022 Philippine National Elections

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how Filipino journalists negotiated ethical dilemmas amid the algorithmic, polarised, and economically precarious media environment of the 2022 National and Local Elections. Drawing on 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners from broadcast, online, and community news organisations, this study examines how journalists navigate algorithmic pressures and propaganda to regain control over their professional narratives. The findings reveal that digital networks accelerate newsroom timelines, compressing traditional editorial deliberation, and forcing gatekeepers to constantly negotiate with computational visibility regimes, which are automated platform algorithms that prioritise engagement over factual verification. To survive these pressures, practitioners employ dilemma triage, a tactical management of moral trade-offs, where they navigate platform engagement mechanics to fund, insulate, and sustain hard-hitting investigative election reporting amid institutional and economic precarity. Journalists also mitigate algorithmic anxiety and partisan hostility through relational moral buffering networks, which function as informal, horizontal peer support circles built outside corporate hierarchies for collective reflection and protection. To counter audience polarisation, practitioners engage in visible, process-based integrity work and use radical transparency to rebuild public trust. By linking these lived realities to systemic reforms across pedagogy, policy, and practice, this study conceptualises digital journalism ethics not as compliance with fixed codes, but as a dynamic capacity for moral resilience cultivated through peer mentorship and reflexive field prototyping, which is the collaborative, real-time adaptation of ethical workflows under structural duress.

Keywords: journalism ethics, digital journalism, election coverage, algorithmic pressures, Philippines, qualitative research

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1.0 Introduction

The 2022 Philippine National and Local Elections occurred in an unprecedented media environment marked by digital convergence, political polarisation, and algorithmic visibility. Filipino journalists navigate a complex terrain where truth-telling and speed compete as professional virtues (Singer, 2019). Traditional newsroom hierarchies coexist with social media virality, while partisan influencers blur the boundaries between journalism and advocacy.

Globally, journalism has undergone what Pavlik (2019) calls a technological reconfiguration of moral labour, in which immediacy and audience engagement often supersede the deliberation and verification. In the Philippine context—especially following the ABS-CBN franchise denial in 2020—the profession has been reshaped by precarity, digital migration, and eroded public trust (Pertierra, 2013). As McQuail (2013) reminds us, the media's public role depends not only on technology but also on adherence to ethical responsibility and civic accountability.

While existing scholarship maps the macro-dynamics of platform manipulation, there remains a distinct lack of empirical clarity regarding how individual practitioners experience and resist these pressures on a shifting, day-to-day basis. This study addresses this research gap by focusing on the lived realities of ethical decision-making within digitised newsrooms. Specifically, this study is guided by the following three central research questions:

- a. RQ1: How did Filipino journalists experience and navigate algorithmic pressures regarding speed, accuracy, and editorial autonomy during the 2022 Philippine National and Local Elections?
- b. RQ2: What recurring ethical dilemmas emerged from the intersection of misinformation, platform metrics, economic precarity, and political influence, and how did practitioners attempt to maintain professional integrity amid heightened audience polarisation?
- c. RQ3: Based on the empirical insights of practitioners, what institutional, educational, and pedagogical frameworks can be advanced to strengthen journalistic ethics within platform-mediated electoral contexts?

By exploring these questions, this study offers a critical perspective from the Global South, where journalists navigate fragile democracies and limited newsroom resources. Drawing from these empirical insights, this study builds on normative and applied ethical frameworks, integrating McQuail's (2013) theory of media responsibility, Ward's (2019) global media ethics, and Singer's (2019) insights on the digital redefinition of journalistic professionalism.

2.0 Literature Review

The reconfiguration of the contemporary media environment has necessitated a profound re-evaluation of journalism ethics, particularly within highly volatile electoral contexts in the Global South. Rather than treating technological development as a neutral background element, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises digital infrastructure as active, nonhuman actors that reorder professional values, temporalities, and editorial configurations. This section synthesises global and local literature across intersecting themes to locate the structural gaps in existing research and establish the multi-tiered theoretical framework guiding this enquiry.

2.1 Global Trends in Digital Journalism Ethics: Immediacy, Agility, and Virtues

A critical examination of global journalism scholarship reveals a foundational tension between traditional deontological codes, which emphasise fixed, rule-based duties, and the fluid demands of networked ecologies. Singer (2019) conceptualises this shift through a tripartite redefinition of professional boundaries, noting that digital conditions continuously destabilise traditional mandates of immediacy, transparency, and autonomy. Within this framework, immediacy introduces an operational speed premium that routinely undercuts long-standing verification protocols, shifting the professional burden from pre-publication validation to post-publication remediation. This structural acceleration builds on Pavlik's (2019) analysis of technical reconfigurations, pointing to an operational need for

what this study terms ‘techno-moral agility’—an intrinsic capability of practitioners to dynamically reconcile computational affordances (such as real-time analytics and visibility optimisation) with fundamental humanistic ethics. However, a significant conceptual gap emerges in how scholars theorise practitioner responses to these systemic constraints. Structuralist perspectives frequently imply a form of technological determinism in which journalists are positioned as passive actors who adapt to platform imperatives. In contrast, media ethicists increasingly advocate for virtue-based approaches that emphasise professional agency, ethical reflexivity, and moral judgment. Ward (2019) advances a model of radically pragmatic “global media ethics,” arguing that within borderless and digitally integrated information ecosystems, rigid institutional compliance must give way to active moral character, human empathy, and contextual prudence. In the Asia-Pacific region, this tension is empirically visible. Hanusch et al. (2017) observed that when formal newsroom codes fail to provide adequate guidance for emerging algorithmic conditions, journalists frequently rely on highly localised and situational ethical frameworks. Consequently, moral reasoning becomes fundamentally relational, shaped through ongoing negotiations among individual conscience, peer networks, and real-time audience feedback metrics. Nevertheless, as Domingo and Wiard (2016) emphasise, the exercise of individual moral agency does not occur in isolation from the social context. Rather, it is systematically filtered, incentivised, or constrained by underlying technological infrastructures that privilege sensational engagement over meaningful public deliberations.

2.2 The Philippine Context: The Fractured Intersections of Ethics, Politics and Technology

When transposed to the Global South, and specifically the Philippines, the intersections of technology, politics, and media ethics become acutely compromised. Philippine political communication has evolved into what Soriano and Gaw (2022) label a “hybrid propaganda system”, an environment in which mainstream newsrooms, highly paid partisan influencers, and coordinated troll networks compete within the same computational architecture. This hybridity breaks down the traditional gatekeeping authority. Landmark studies on networked disinformation by Ong and Cabañes (2018) illustrate that platform manipulation during Philippine elections is not merely an external threat but a highly sophisticated form of digital labour that actively weaponises cultural vulnerabilities and visibility metrics, thereby implicating the entire media ecosystem in the moral economies of spectacles.

This hostile digital infrastructure directly collides with the precarious political and economic reality of local media. Pertierra (2013) maps this transition as the emergence of a “post-broadcast public sphere” in the Philippines. This space is characterised by the institutional erosion of legacy network dominance, most violently exemplified by the politically motivated ABS-CBN franchise denial in 2020, which forced a mass migration of professional journalism to unregulated, algorithmic third-party platforms. Consequently, local practitioners do not just battle disinformation; they battle structural newsroom precarity, where corporate survival dictates reliance on platform monetisation and traffic generation.

Faced with these multilayered threats, Philippine communication scholarship has sought alternative ethical models. Hossain and Aucoin (2018) advocate for a structural “ethics of care” within local newsrooms, arguing that empathy, meticulous accuracy, and aggressive social accountability must serve as conscious structural counterweights to platform-driven sensationalism. Furthermore, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (Salazar, 2022) records that this performance of ethical integrity frequently occurs under direct psychological and physical duress, characterised by state-backed red-tagging, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on alternative outlets, and targeted gendered harassment campaigns against field reporters. Thus, the local literature indicates that for a Filipino journalist, “ethics” is not an abstract philosophical choice but a dangerous, continuous act of structural and digital survival.

2.3 Three-Tiered Analytical Framework

This study adopts a three-tiered analytical framework to examine how Filipino journalists navigate the ethical, professional, and structural challenges of algorithmically mediated news production. Rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective, the framework integrates complementary approaches that capture journalism as a democratic institution, a digitally mediated profession, and an ethical practice. These perspectives operate at three interconnected levels of analysis: the macro level of

institutional responsibility, the meso level of professional practice within digital environments, and the micro level of individual moral agency.

Macro Level: Media Responsibility Theory (McQuail, 2013). Media Responsibility Theory provides the normative foundation of the study by identifying journalism's democratic obligations to truth, accountability, and service to the public. It establishes the benchmark against which participants' accounts of political pressure, commercial imperatives, and platform-driven editorial practices are interpreted.

Meso Level: Digital Professionalism (Singer, 2019). Digital Professionalism explains how platform technologies reshape journalistic work by altering editorial routines, professional autonomy, and news production practices. The framework enables the study to examine how algorithmic metrics, audience analytics, and accelerated production cycles influence everyday editorial decision-making while requiring journalists to continually negotiate competing professional and commercial demands.

Micro Level: Global Media Ethics (Ward, 2019). Ward's global media ethics, grounded in virtue ethics, focuses on the moral agency of journalists operating within complex and rapidly changing environments. Rather than treating ethical decision-making as mere compliance with professional codes, this perspective examines how practitioners exercise practical judgement, cultivate professional virtues, and enact ethical responsibility under conditions of technological, political, and economic constraint.

To support the interpretation of newsroom decision-making, the study also draws on Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) as a complementary analytical concept. Gatekeeping is used to explain how editorial selection processes have evolved from predominantly human decision-making toward hybrid forms in which journalists negotiate visibility alongside algorithmic recommendation systems and platform logics. Rather than functioning as a separate theoretical framework, gatekeeping provides a conceptual lens for understanding how digital infrastructures reshape editorial control within the broader three-tiered analytical framework.

2.4 The Core Research Gap

A rigorous synthesis of the literature reveals a distinct two-fold research gap that this study addresses. First, macro-level communication scholarship has extensively examined the geopolitical and infrastructural dynamics of platform manipulation, algorithmic configurations and institutional capture (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Soriano & Gaw, 2022). However, there remains a significant empirical gap in understanding how individual, mid-level, and frontline media practitioners experience, interpret, and psychologically negotiate macro-level pressures within newsroom environments, particularly during highly compressed electoral cycles. Although existing scholarship has extensively analysed algorithms as infrastructural forces, less is understood about how sustained engagement with these systems reshapes journalists' moral identity and ethical self-understanding.

Second, much of the digital journalism literature continues to treat structural constraints and individual moral agency as analytically separate, often mutually exclusive domains. Structuralist accounts tend to depict journalists as constrained by analytics dashboards and platform logics, whereas philosophical and virtue-oriented approaches often assume a relatively unconstrained moral agency. This bifurcation leaves a notable absence of localised, empirically grounded frameworks capable of capturing the situated and operational negotiation between these dimensions in everyday newsroom practices.

By examining the lived experiences of Filipino media practitioners during the highly polarised 2022 electoral cycle, this study addresses these gaps in the literature. It moves beyond descriptive accounts and exposes how structural platform constraints and localised, virtue-based forms of resistance intersect to produce forms of moral resilience in modern journalistic practice.

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design anchored in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine how Filipino journalists negotiated ethical decision-making during the 2022 National and Local Elections. This research combined descriptive and interpretive paradigms, mapping

journalists' real-world experiences while theorising their ethical significance. This approach aligns with Ward's (2019) call for "empirically grounded virtue ethics", which investigates how journalists enact moral values. This is also consistent with Christians' (2019) communitarian ethics, which emphasises relational morality within professional and societal networks.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Participants and Sampling

Data were gathered from 27 media practitioners across the Philippines through semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2024 and March 2025. Participants represented national, regional, and community media organisations across the broadcast, online, and print sectors, including reporters, editors, producers, anchors, and digital content specialists involved in covering, producing, editing, or interpreting news related to the 2022 elections.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Initial participants were identified through professional networks and publicly available newsroom affiliations based on the study's inclusion criteria. These participants subsequently referred other eligible journalists with relevant experience, enabling the recruitment of practitioners from diverse media organisations, geographic locations, and professional roles. Eligibility required participants to have: (1) actively covered or managed news during the 2022 election cycle; and (2) regularly engaged with digital platforms, social media, audience analytics, or related technologies as part of their journalistic practice. Although the interviews were conducted two to three years after the 2022 elections, participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on their professional experiences during the election period. The interval allowed for more considered reflections on the enduring ethical and professional implications of these experiences while drawing on events that remained salient in their journalistic practice. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymised throughout the study.

Participant recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantively new codes or themes in successive interviews. Following the analysis of the later interviews, participants largely reinforced previously identified patterns rather than introducing new conceptual insights, suggesting that sufficient depth and breadth had been attained for the study's research objectives.

The sample captured a broad range of perspectives from mainstream, community, and independent media, reflecting the diversity of Philippine journalism during the 2022 election period. The demographic and professional characteristics of the 27 participants are presented in Appendix A.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was strategically designed to gather rich experiential accounts addressing the study's research questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2024 and March 2025 via Zoom, Facebook Messenger, Google Meet, and, where feasible, face-to-face. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Interviews were conducted in English, Filipino (Tagalog), or Tagalog–English code-switching according to participants' language preferences to facilitate natural and detailed responses.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research team. Interviews conducted in Filipino or Tagalog–English code-switching were initially transcribed in their original language before being translated into English for analysis. Translation prioritized semantic equivalence rather than literal word-for-word rendering, and bilingual expressions were retained where they conveyed culturally specific meanings relevant to the analysis.

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide adapted from the Institutional Interview Report Guide, a standardized institutional template used by the researchers' university to document qualitative interview data. The guide was modified to align with the objectives of the present study while maintaining consistency in question sequencing and documentation across interviews.

- a. Experiences of speed, accuracy, and algorithmic pressure (Addressing RQ1): This question block prompted participants to reconstruct their technical workflows, production timelines, and encounters with audience metrics. The resulting narratives generated empirical data relevant to RQ1 by showing how automated visibility regimes reconfigured traditional editorial gatekeeping and compressed the time available for content verification.
- b. Ethical dilemmas, newsroom decision-making, and precarity (Addressing RQ2): This line of questioning targeted specific moral trade-offs, corporate pressures, and institutional disruptions, such as the ABS-CBN franchise crisis, that shaped the election cycle. These items addressed RQ2 by capturing the real-world mechanics of dilemma triage and documenting how journalists negotiated commercial survival and civic duties.
- c. Human involvement and collective moral buffering (Addressing RQ2): This component explores the emotional labour, psychological strain, and horizontal support systems used by field reporters. The evidence generated here further addresses RQ2 by identifying how informal peer care networks function as moral buffers against partisan swarming and platform-driven metric anxieties.
- d. Integrity, trust, and proposed frameworks for reform (Addressing RQ3): This forward-looking segment asked practitioners to articulate systemic remedies for the profession based on their lived field realities. This section generated data relevant to RQ3 by gathering practitioner-informed recommendations for institutional updates, safety policy reforms, and higher-education curriculum development.

Following the completion of each interview, the transcripts were compiled into structured matrices that systematically summarised the respondents' demographics, operational contexts, and emergent thematic insights. These individual data sources were subsequently synthesised into a comprehensive, unified dataset for the overall thematic analysis. This step ensured that the raw text could be systematically cross-examined to provide integrated answers to the research problems.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a structured approach to codebook thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), which permits the use of a pre-defined yet flexible codebook alongside measures of intercoder consistency, combining systematic coding with theoretically informed interpretation. The six-phase analytical process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify, review, and interpret patterns across the interview data while addressing the study's three research questions.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the 27 verbatim interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. During this stage, the research team noted recurring patterns related to newsroom precarity, platform metrics, and ethical dilemmas experienced by frontline journalists during the election cycle.

The researchers then conducted systematic open coding by identifying meaningful segments of text and assigning descriptive codes. These codes captured participants' experiences and were initially organised according to the study's research questions. For example, codes related to technical and temporal pressures (e.g., metric anxiety, speed premium, and dashboard pressure) informed RQ1, while codes reflecting structural and economic challenges (e.g., troll backlash anticipation, franchise trauma, and monetisation compromise) informed RQ2. Codes concerning proposed institutional and professional interventions (e.g., curricular deficits and peer care protocols) informed RQ3.

Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader candidate themes representing recurring patterns across participants' accounts. Themes concerning production pressures were organised under Speed–Accuracy Tensions, adaptive newsroom responses under Tactical Resistance, and long-term recommendations under Systemic Reforms.

To enhance coding consistency, two members of the research team independently coded a randomly selected 20% of the interview transcripts ($n = 6$), a proportion commonly used in qualitative research

for coding verification. The unit of analysis was the coded meaning unit (i.e., a segment of text assigned a code). Intercode agreement was calculated using a simple percent agreement method: the total number of identical coding assignments divided by the total number of meaning units identified within the audited sample. This resulted in an initial agreement rate of 88%. Coding discrepancies, particularly those involving distinctions between compliance and dilemma triage, were discussed during three refinement sessions, leading to clarification of code definitions and refinement of the codebook. Through this process, consensus was reached on all previously disputed coding decisions. Candidate themes were then reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure conceptual coherence, adequate evidential support, and clear distinction between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The themes were subsequently refined, defined, and aligned with the study's analytical framework. To strengthen the organisation of the findings, the final themes were explicitly mapped to the three research questions: (a) Algorithmic Pressures, Temporality, and Autonomy (RQ1); (b) Ethical Dilemmas, Dilemma Triage, and Moral Buffering (RQ2); and (c) Frameworks for Reform: Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice (RQ3). This mapping ensured that the presentation of findings remained closely aligned with the study's research objectives.

The final phase involved interpretive writing, integrating rich descriptions supported by bilingual verbatim quotations with conceptual interpretation informed by the study's three-tiered analytical framework. Interview excerpts presented in the Findings were selected to illustrate the analytical themes identified across the dataset rather than to represent isolated perspectives. To improve readability, quotations were subjected only to light editorial revisions, including the removal of verbal fillers, false starts, and repetitive expressions, without altering participants' intended meanings. Quotations originally expressed in Tagalog or Tagalog–English code-switching were translated into English where necessary, while bilingual expressions were retained when they conveyed contextually or culturally significant meanings. The translated excerpts were reviewed by the research team to ensure semantic accuracy and fidelity to participants' original accounts.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, data were triangulated across participants from diverse media sectors (broadcast, online-only, and community media) and geographic regions throughout the Philippines (Guest et al., 2020). Although only selected quotations are presented in the Findings, these excerpts were chosen because they are representative of patterns observed across multiple participants. Where relevant, variations across media sectors, professional roles, and divergent or minority perspectives are also highlighted to demonstrate the breadth and complexity of the data. Reflexive memo-writing was maintained throughout the analytical process to document interpretive decisions, challenge researchers' assumptions arising from their professional proximity to journalism and promote transparency and reflexivity during data interpretation (Tracy, 2020).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the established ethical principles and standards for qualitative research involving human participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). The research protocol was officially reviewed and granted ethical clearance by the Polytechnic University of the Philippines University Research Ethics Centre (PUP-UREC) under Protocol Code UREC-2024-0698, receiving an “exempted” status determination on 9 May 2024.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. Given the professional sensitivity of election-related journalism in the Philippines, particular care was taken to protect the participants' identities and institutional affiliations. Pseudonyms were assigned using alphanumeric codes (P01–P27), and all potentially identifying professional profiles were structurally generalized in Appendix A into broad operational bands (e.g., grouping age and experience into macro-brackets and collapsing specific municipal bases into macro-regions) to prevent deductive identification while retaining analytical context. All identifying details, including specific newsroom roles, locations, and organisational markers, were either generalised or omitted in the presentation of findings.

Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected digital files that were accessible only to the research team. The data were used solely for academic purposes. To preserve the

authenticity of the participants' voices while maintaining confidentiality, the quotations retain bilingual Tagalog–English code-switching but were edited to remove potentially traceable references.

The researchers reflexively acknowledged their positionality throughout the research. As communication scholars engaging with professional journalists, the researchers remained attentive to the power relations, professional hierarchies, and shared disciplinary assumptions that could shape interpretation. Reflexive memo writing was employed to strengthen analytic rigor and ethical accountability.

3.5 Limitations

While the qualitative approach enabled depth and nuance, it limited generalisability. The dataset leaned toward broadcast and online journalists, reflecting the digital dominance of 2022 coverage but under-representing print and vernacular media. Additionally, because the interviews were conducted two to three years following the election cycle, the data are susceptible to recall bias, as participants' retrospective reconstructions of ethical dilemmas may have been altered or smoothed over by subsequent professional experiences. Furthermore, reliance on snowball sampling and researchers' professional proximity to the local media community may have introduced a selection bias, potentially drawing in participants who already possessed a baseline inclination toward ethical reflexivity. To mitigate this, the research team actively diversified the initial seeds across distinct networks, geographic bases, and institutional hierarchies (from campus press to regional networks) to ensure that the empirical narratives captured peripheral and precarious counter-perspectives, alongside mainstream ones. Nevertheless, data saturation was achieved as similar ethical patterns emerged across diverse respondents (Guest et al. 2020).

4.0 Results and Discussion

The empirical findings of this study reveal a complex moral landscape negotiated by Filipino media practitioners during the 2022 National and Local Elections. Grounded in a triadic framework of media responsibility (McQuail, 2013), digital professionalism (Singer, 2019), and global media ethics (Ward, 2019), the results demonstrate that ethical decision-making is not a fixed exercise in code compliance. Instead, it manifests as a dynamic, relational, and highly situated negotiation process involving individual conscience, institutional precarity, and automated platform environments.

4.1 Algorithmic Pressures, Temporality, and Autonomy

This section addresses RQ1 by critically evaluating how the macro-structural features of the digital news ecosystem, specifically algorithmic acceleration, platform metrics, and temporal compression, actively intervene in and disrupt traditional editorial gatekeeping and professional autonomy. Empirical data suggest that platforms do not merely distribute content; they contribute to a new newsroom temporality that may encourage journalistic practices oriented toward speed.

Across the interviews, the participants described a production cycle that was heavily influenced by platform-driven velocity. “If we’re five minutes late with a clip from a campaign rally, the story is dead on arrival in terms of reach,” explained P03 (News Anchor). “Election night felt like a race between trending hashtags rather than verified facts.” This operational reality suggests a significant temporal compression, where the window for traditional editorial deliberation narrows significantly; a delay of mere minutes frequently results in a story being obscured by platform parameters. P09 (Photojournalist) observed that analytics dashboards acted as invisible editorial arbiters: “A live dip on our real-time metrics could effectively stall a developing explanatory story because the desk would demand a shift to whatever topic was trending on the widget.”

These narratives illustrate what this study conceptualizes as algorithmic visibility regimes—drawing on Pavlik’s (2019) framework of technological transformation, in which professional autonomy is heavily mediated by non-human actors. Grounded in Media Ecology Theory (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1985), this technological environment redefines the boundaries of digital professionalism (Singer, 2019). Autonomous gatekeeping, as traditionally conceptualised by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), has fragmented into a hybrid model. Editors no longer evaluate news values solely through public interest

mandates (McQuail, 2013); instead, they enter into active, high-stakes negotiations with real-time computational feedback loops (Tandoc, 2014).

Furthermore, this algorithmic mediation is exacerbated by intense political polarisation. Participants revealed that the systemic pressure to achieve visibility forced them to rely on sensational framing to break through partisan algorithmic filters. “Even meticulously verified, neutral updates were instantly buried or swarmed as biased if they didn’t match a specific candidate’s narrative profile,” shared P12 (Newsroom Management). This reality appears consistent with discussions of algorithmic media effects (Napoli, 2019), wherein automated content-distribution systems reward polarising emotionally charged content over measured public-affairs reporting.

This algorithmic optimisation appears to create significant structural tension, placing journalists within an operational environment that appears to systematically devalue the time required for comprehensive verification.

4.2 Ethical Dilemmas, Dilemma Triage, and Moral Buffering

This section addresses RQ2 by mapping the specific ethical breakdowns, including disinformation backlashes, corporate monetisation, and post-broadcast economic fragmentation, that emerged during the 2022 cycle, and evaluating the exact micro-ethical practices practitioners used to preserve their moral agency.

4.2.1 Balancing Speed and Accuracy via Procedural Virtues

Faced with the algorithmic mandate for speed detailed in the previous discussion, journalists did not simply surrender to speed; they constructed operational coping mechanisms to maintain accuracy. “Our baseline rule became post when you can defend it, not just when you hear it,” stated P06 (Senior Correspondent). Practitioners have developed dual workflows to manage this tension. P06 (Anchor / Presenter) explained, “We routinely drafted two distinct versions of high-stakes breaking political news: a highly concise, objective snippet for immediate release on the social feed and a deeply contextualised package for the primary evening newscast. The feed satisfies the algorithm’s velocity, but the broadcast preserves the normative standard.” This dual-layer workflow highlights the temporal challenges outlined in Singer’s (2019) work, illustrating an operationalized ‘ethics of immediacy’ where gatekeeping becomes an active dialogue with metrics. Rather than abandoning verification, practitioners operationalised Ward’s (2019) pragmatic virtue ethics by creating rapid checklist rituals (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2014). These micro-moves allowed journalists to protect procedural time for verification, even within compressed real-time cycles, ensuring that character-driven prudence remained embedded in automated workflows.

4.2.2 Human Conscience and Collective Moral Buffering

Furthermore, the data suggest that human moral conscience remains an important factor even within automated environments, although navigating this ethical terrain amid persistent disinformation and partisan swarming frequently exacts a notable psychological toll. “An AI tool can easily trim and optimise a video clip for maximum engagement, but it is fundamentally incapable of feeling when a specific visual frame unfairly exploits human vulnerability or incites targeted partisan harassment,” insisted P01 (Frontline Reporter). This performance of ethical journalism under platform conditions incurs a severe psychological toll. “Networked disinformation does not operate on a shift schedule; you find yourself manually factchecking coordinated propaganda attacks at three o’clock in the morning while your phone is being flooded with automated troll notifications,” shared P10 (Editorial/Production Staff).

To survive this environment, journalists moved away from isolated individual decision-making, constructing informal, horizontal networks of mutual protection which this study defines as “collective moral buffering.” P05 (Editorial/Production Staff) described these arrangements: “We established decentralised, informal peer circles outside of formal newsroom management hierarchies. We debriefed after high-intensity campaign coverage—explicitly reviewing what framing mistakes we made, what biases crept into our captions, and how to fix them without the fear of institutional reprimand.”

Similarly, practitioners utilised real-time peer consultations as immediate moral gut-checks: “Before hitting publish on a highly sensitive tweet about a candidate’s asset disclosure, I would privately direct-message a trusted colleague to ask: ‘If I phrase it this way, does it violate our collective standard of fairness, or am I just feeding the feed?’” (P03). This collaborative practice aligns with Christians’ (2019) communitarian ethics and Christofolletti’s (2024) framework for building moral communities within journalism. By engaging in constant dialogical reflection, practitioners built informal protective shields against both algorithmic metric anxiety and emotional exhaustion triggered by political polarisation.

4.2.3 Dilemma Triage and Post-Broadcast Precarity

A major theme emerging from the data connects ethical breakdowns directly to the shifting political economy of the Philippine media. Multiple journalists explicitly situated their ethical struggles within the acute precarity following the 2020 ABS-CBN franchise’s denial. “After the franchise crisis structurally fractured our traditional broadcast footprint, our entire organisation was forced to lean heavily on social media virality simply to remain financially solvent,” reflected P08 (Editorial/Production Staff). “Corporate revenue anxieties began seeping into our editorial spaces—not through overt management dictates, but through a soft, persistent daily pressure to maximise pageviews.” This testimony directly mirrors Pertierra’s (2013) critique of the Philippine “post-broadcast public sphere”, where legacy institutional authority is diffused and corporate media survival is increasingly dependent on third-party platform monetisation policies.

This economic fragmentation frequently guided practitioners toward an operational strategy of “dilemma triage”, wherein they sought to navigate platform engagement mechanics to support and preserve resources for in-depth investigative election reporting despite the challenges. “We were perfectly candid about the structural compromises,” admitted P11 (Anchor Presenter), “Pure ethics alone cannot cover a newsroom’s payroll; advertisement clicks do.” To navigate this, practitioners have developed highly creative and tactical methods of resistance. P04 (Digital Content Creator) shared: “We were frequently forced by management to carry highly sensationalised, soft-news sponsored posts directly adjacent to our hard-hitting election fact-checks. We viewed this as our quiet, structural pushback: we consciously exploited the revenue generated by engagement-bait stories to fund and insulate our serious investigative election reporting.” From the perspective of Ward’s (2019) global media ethics, this triage demonstrates a highly sophisticated, context-sensitive performance of moral labour. Practitioners do not appear to passively submit to commercial monetisation pressures; instead, they strategically navigate the technical “side doors” of platform architectures to couple visibility optimisation with rigorous corrective contexts. This tactical manoeuvring allows them to fulfil their macro-level media responsibilities (McQuail, 2013) even when operating within highly precarious and compromised corporate environments (Hossain & Aucoin, 2018).

4.2.4 Integrity Work and Process Transparency

Finally, the results suggest that in a polarised public sphere where institutional credibility is continuously contested, trust repair is executed through highly visible rituals of transparency, which this study terms “integrity work.” “The days of relying solely on an institutional logo to command public trust appear increasingly limited,” noted P06. “We must show our receipts publicly now. If an error occurs, we do not quietly delete the post; we publish a transparent correction thread detailing exactly what time the mistake happened, what source misled us, and what the verified reality is.” Practitioners also engaged in pre-emptive transparency to insulate their work from partisan manipulation: “We consciously over-cited our data and provided public links to raw government documents and complete interview transcripts directly within our social media copy,” explained P03. “We did this explicitly to pre-empt coordinated troll attacks and demonstrate to the audience that our reporting process was entirely open to scrutiny.” This shift represents a fundamental transition from traditional, authority-based credibility to process-based credibility (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Singer 2019). By transforming the hidden production mechanics of journalism into public rituals of transparency, practitioners operationalised procedural fairness. Making the how of journalism explicitly visible serves as a vital micro-ethical shield, enabling reporters to re-earn public belief in an active, highly polarised information ecosystem.

4.3 Frameworks for Reform: Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice

This section addresses RQ3 by synthesising the forward-looking structural remedies articulated by the practitioners themselves. Moving beyond descriptive critique, the data offer actionable interventions designed to bridge academic journalism education, newsroom institutional policies, and public accountability frameworks.

4.3.1 Pedagogical and Curricular Reform

Multiple respondents emphasised the severe disconnect between legacy university curricula and the operational realities of digital newsrooms. “Our higher education institutions are still teaching journalism as if we operate in a stable, legacy print or broadcast environment; they teach us how to avoid plagiarism, but they completely fail to prepare us for how to handle an algorithmic visibility crisis,” argued P05. P01 pushed for an aggressive restructuring of journalism education to include comprehensive algorithmic literacy as a mandatory requirement. Participants suggested that curricula could train future practitioners to critically dissect, understand, and strategically subvert the computational visibility regimes they will inherit. These proposals align closely with UNESCO’s updated Media and Information Literacy (MIL) agendas, which advocate embedding digital platform critique directly within professional training (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

4.3.2 Institutional Newsroom Policies

Rather than relying entirely on fixed corporate handbooks that assume a slow-paced editorial environment, participants recommended that newsrooms formalise and protect decentralised “ethics circles” and peer-debriefing protocols, as observed in the previous section. Furthermore, practitioners noted that newsrooms could establish institutional firewalls to protect editorial decisions from real-time analytics. Outlets are encouraged to safeguard “procedural time” for verification, ensuring that metrics do not dictate the life cycle of public-interest reporting.

4.3.3 Public and Participatory Accountability

To counter intense audience polarisation, practitioners have proposed transforming the public from passive information consumers into active stakeholders. “We need to establish open digital newsroom forums and interactive Q&A sessions where ordinary citizens can directly question our editorial framing and understand our verification methods,” suggested P10. This transition to participatory ethics echoes the work of Soriano and Gaw (2022) and Ong and Cabañes (2018), recentring journalism as a transparent, collective civic infrastructure rather than an isolated, top-down authority.

4.3.4 Structural Labour and Safety Policies

The data strongly suggest that professional ethical behaviour is closely connected to labour equity and physical safety. “We cannot talk about abstract ethical purity if our regional and community reporters are paid starvation wages; economic precarity is the greatest enemy of journalistic ethics because a hungry reporter is structurally vulnerable to capture,” argued P02. Additionally, P08 emphasised that newsrooms should implement formalised institutional safety protocols to protect field reporters from coordinated digital harassment and state-backed red-tagging: “Psychological and digital safety protocols are not peripheral human-resource benefits; they are absolute prerequisites for moral agency.” This finding extends Christians’ (2019) model of structural justice and reinforces Pertierra’s (2013) research on the moral economy of Philippine media, suggesting that ethical resilience may be more sustainable when practitioners are protected from economic, physical, and psychological duress.

In summary, the empirical findings of this study suggest that the 2022 Philippine National and Local Elections served as a critical stress test for journalistic integrity, shifting the view of professional ethics from fixed compliance to an active, localised landscape of resistance. By evaluating practitioner experiences using a triadic framework of media responsibility, digital professionalism, and global media ethics, the analysis explicitly resolves the study’s three core research problems. First, the investigation suggests that third-party digital networks exercise significant algorithmic influence by contributing to an accelerated production temporality that compresses editorial deliberation and reduces autonomous

gatekeeping into a hybrid configuration mediated by real-time metric optimisation systems (resolving RQ1). Second, the evidence indicates that journalists confront state-aligned propaganda, audience polarisation, and post-broadcast financial precarity not with passive submission but with distinct tactical manoeuvres. Through individual acts of dilemma triage, collective moral buffering, and visible integrity work, practitioners strategically utilise platform architectures to fund and protect public-interest truth-telling (answering RQ2). Finally, the forward-looking interventions proposed by field reporters provide potential structural directions to bridge the gap between media theory and real-world execution across the fields of pedagogy, policy, and practice (answering RQ3). Ultimately, these multilayered negotiations suggest that while automated networks increasingly configure the spaces of political discourse, the moral imagination and agency of practitioners may be understood as an important source of resistance and countervailing influence. These empirical insights lay the conceptual foundation for a broader re-evaluation of systemic accountability, democratic communication, and professional endurance in the Global South, as detailed in the final section.

5.0 Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the complex moral terrain negotiated by Filipino media practitioners during the 2022 Philippine National and Local Elections. Drawing on 27 semi-structured interviews across broadcast, online, and community newsrooms, the findings suggest that contemporary journalism operates within an increasingly complex environment shaped by the intersection of algorithmic systems, political polarisation, economic precarity, and professional ethical commitments. Within this context, practitioners described navigating competing pressures related to speed, visibility, verification, and public accountability while attempting to maintain their editorial autonomy and professional integrity.

The study suggests that digital platforms and real-time analytics have contributed to changes in newsroom routines and editorial decision-making, encouraging forms of hybrid gatekeeping in which journalistic judgment is increasingly negotiated alongside computational feedback systems. Simultaneously, the findings indicate that practitioners do not simply adapt passively to these conditions. Instead, they employ a range of ethical strategies, including dilemma triage, collective moral buffering, and visible integrity work to navigate tensions between commercial demands, public service responsibilities, and democratic accountability. These practices highlight the continuing importance of human judgment, relational support networks, and process transparency in sustaining ethical journalism in conditions of uncertainty.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in media ethics by suggesting that digital journalism ethics may be understood not only as adherence to formal professional codes but also as a dynamic and situated process of moral resilience. Practitioners' experiences point to the significance of peer mentorship, reflexive learning, and adaptive ethical decision-making in responding to rapidly changing media environments. These findings may also offer insights into understanding journalism practices in other contexts characterised by platform dependency, political contestation, and institutional vulnerability.

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative study based on interviews with a specific group of media practitioners, the findings reflect the participants' perspectives and experiences rather than the full range of practices across the Philippine media landscape. Future research may benefit from incorporating comparative newsroom studies, audience perspectives, ethnographic observations, or mixed-method approaches to further examine how ethical decision-making evolves across different media sectors and political contexts.

Based on these findings, this study offers several evidence-informed recommendations for journalism education, newsroom practice, and media policy. The findings suggest that media organisations should consider formalising peer debriefing networks and collaborative reflection mechanisms that provide space for collective moral buffering and ethical discussion, particularly during periods of intensive political coverage. Newsrooms may also benefit from developing institutional policies that protect adequate verification time and encourage thoughtful engagement with analytics, rather than allowing performance metrics alone to shape editorial priorities.

At the policy level, this study points to the potential value of initiatives that strengthen labour protections, economic security, and digital safety measures for journalists, particularly those working in precarious regional and freelance positions. Such measures may help reduce the professional vulnerabilities associated with political pressure, online harassment, and economic instability.

For journalism education, the findings suggest that higher education institutions and journalism programs should further integrate algorithmic literacy, platform governance, and ethical decision making under digital conditions into existing curricula. The development of newsroom simulation exercises and practice-based learning opportunities may also help prepare future practitioners for the ethical and professional challenges associated with contemporary digital news environments.

These recommendations are not intended as universal prescriptions but rather as possible directions for strengthening ethical resilience, professional autonomy, and public accountability within an increasingly platformed media ecosystem.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

KBGF: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing. ARPG: Data Curation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. MMDC: Methodology, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing. DJUC: Data Curation, Investigation, Visualisation, Writing – Review & Editing. RMP: Supervision, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Research data supporting this publication are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Appendix A

Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Gender	Age Range	Broad Operational Role	Organization Type	Years of Experience	Macro-Region
P01	Female	20–29	Frontline Reporter	National	1–5 Years	Metro Manila
P02	Male	30–39	Editorial/Production Staff	National	6–10 Years	Metro Manila
P03	Female	30–39	Anchor / Presenter	National	11+ Years	Metro Manila
P04	Male	20–29	Digital Content Creator	Online-Only	1–5 Years	Metro Manila
P05	Female	28–32	Editorial/Production Staff	Hybrid	6–10 Years	Metro Manila
P06	Male	40+	Senior Correspondent	Regional	11+ Years	Visayas
P07	Female	20–29	Frontline Reporter	Community	1–5 Years	Luzon
P08	Male	30–39	Editorial/Production Staff	Online-Only	11+ Years	Metro Manila
P09	Female	20–29	Visual Journalist	Independent	6–10 Years	Luzon
P10	Male	20–29	Editorial/Production Staff	Regional	1–5 Years	Mindanao
P11	Female	30–39	Anchor / Presenter	Community	6–10 Years	Luzon
P12	Male	45+	Newsroom Management	Regional	11+ Years	Visayas
P13	Female	20–29	Digital Content Creator	Online-Only	1–5 Years	Metro Manila
P14	Male	27–31	Fact-Checking Specialist	Online-Only	6–10 Years	Metro Manila
P15	Female	36–40	Senior Correspondent	National	11+ Years	Metro Manila
P16	Male	24–28	Frontline Reporter	Community	1–5 Years	Mindanao
P17	Female	32–36	Editorial/Production Staff	National	11+ Years	Metro Manila
P18	Male	38–42	Newsroom Management	Regional	11+ Years	Mindanao
P19	Female	25–29	Frontline Reporter	Independent	1–5 Years	Visayas
P20	Male	41–45	Anchor / Presenter	Regional	11+ Years	Luzon
P21	Female	26–30	Frontline Reporter	Online-Only	6–10 Years	Metro Manila
P22	Male	29–33	Editorial/Production Staff	National	6–10 Years	Metro Manila
P23	Female	33–37	Editorial/Production Staff	Online-Only	11+ Years	Luzon
P24	Male	27–31	Frontline Reporter	Community	6–10 Years	Visayas
P25	Female	42–46	Newsroom Management	Alternative	11+ Years	Metro Manila
P26	Male	23–26	Frontline Reporter	Student Press	1–5 Years	Luzon
P27	Female	39–43	Anchor / Presenter	Regional	11+ Years	Mindanao