

Reconstructing News Verification as Epistemic Labour: Journalism Training, Knowledge Cultures, and Responsibility Failures in Kenyan Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper theorizes news verification in Kenyan print journalism as a form of epistemic labour central to the construction of public truth. Drawing on Social Responsibility Theory and interpretive interviews with journalists supplemented by textual analysis of print media outputs, the study uncovers how weak pedagogical foundations, elite-driven news routines, routinized shortcuts, and thin verification cultures undermine accuracy in Kenya's media ecosystem. The findings reveal that while journalists discursively endorse verification ideals, their ability to enact them is constrained by limited disciplinary literacy, organizational incentives that privilege access over scrutiny, and a misapplication of objectivity that normalizes transcription rather than interpretation. Unlike prevailing research that frames misinformation as a problem of fake content, this paper reframes inaccuracy as the outcome of knowledge-production failures embedded within journalism education, newsroom socialization, and professional identity. It advances a reconceptualization of news verification competence as an embodied disposition cultivated through training, relational capital, interpretive judgement, and exposure to tacit newsroom learning. In doing so, the study contributes a model of news verification as a socio-cognitive practice whose development is essential for the media's normative responsibility and democratic function in contexts where digital and traditional media intersect.

Keywords - News accuracy; Epistemic Cultures in Journalism; Journalism Training; Social Responsibility Theory; News Production Practices; Kenyan Media Ecology

INTRODUCTION

This paper situates its analysis within the framework of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), which posits that the media hold a normative obligation to serve the public interest through accurate, reliable, and ethical reporting [8], [9], [16]. Central to this normative orientation is the principle articulated by in *The Elements of Journalism* that journalism's primary duty is to the truth [9]. Here, "journalistic truth" is conceived not as a static endpoint but as a processual practice; a disciplined effort to gather, verify, and disseminate facts, while remaining open to ongoing scrutiny and revision. SRT emphasizes that this responsibility is heightened in contexts where misinformation can circulate widely and unchecked, and where citizens rely on mainstream media as a critical arbiter of knowledge.

In Kenya, this responsibility is particularly salient given the growing influence of social media as a source of information. Social platforms enable rapid circulation of user-generated content, much of which bypasses traditional verification mechanisms. A salient illustration in the Kenyan context is the 2023 *Shakahola* forest case, where social media posts circulated sensational and, at times, exaggerated claims regarding deaths, organ harvesting, and institutional complicity before official confirmation. These posts garnered widespread attention, prompting mainstream media to cover elements of the story rapidly. The initial rush to report, often based on unverified social media content, demonstrates the epistemic pressures faced by journalists which revolve around the imperative to inform the public versus the obligation to verify information accuracy. This phenomenon highlights the structural, cognitive, and normative dimensions of journalistic verification.

Citizen-generated content, while expanding the information ecosystem, introduces epistemic risk that legacy media must manage.

Although digital platforms dominate overall reach, broadcast and print journalism retain a critical role as a verification hub. For instance a survey [15] indicates that 76% of television viewers consult traditional media to confirm social media claims, with others relying on radio or print outlets. Yet, declining readership and perceived credibility challenges underscore a growing concern over how print journalists navigate their normative obligations to truth and accuracy while operating within an environment increasingly dominated by unverified social media content [6].

The duality where social media disseminates unverified information quickly whereas mainstream media are expected to authenticate and contextualize such content creates a tension that places journalists at the nexus of public trust and epistemic responsibility [11]. Thus the tension between the normative mandate of traditional journalism and the accelerating flow of unverified online information represents a theoretical gap in the Kenyan context. While studies on misinformation often focus narrowly on “fake news” or social media virality, few interrogate the epistemic processes through which journalists verify news accuracy under existing pressures. By examining journalistic knowledge and news verification practices in print media, this paper contributes to scholarship on media responsibility and epistemic accountability, proposing a conceptual framework for understanding how normative obligations, professional training, and newsroom culture interact to uphold accuracy in news dissemination.

To investigate the epistemic and procedural dimensions of verification within traditional media institutions, the study draws interpretively on six interviews with journalists in Uasin Gishu County alongside a review of eight print news articles, reinterpreting these earlier data as insight into the cognitive routines, professional norms, and verification strategies employed in news production. By integrating these sources, the study develops a conceptual understanding of journalistic knowledge and verification, highlighting how professional training, newsroom culture, and structural pressures shape accuracy in reporting. In doing so, the paper advances a theoretical contribution to the discourse on media ethics, epistemic responsibility, and information integrity in Kenyan journalism, offering a framework that can inform both future research and professional practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of “fake news” has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of a broader “post-truth” or “post-factual” era, where the authority of journalistic knowledge is increasingly challenged by the circulation of alternative facts [13],[23]. In such environments, epistemic uncertainty undermines journalism’s truth-seeking mandate because reporters must adjudicate between competing claims whose credibility is not readily discernible. While scholars often suggest scientific evidence and fact-checking infrastructures as institutional correctives, journalism practice requires more than procedures; it depends on the cognitive and interactional skills of journalists who can evaluate half-truths, interrogate claims, and exercise judgement under time pressure.

This challenge has prompted critiques of the mainstream media’s ability to maintain professional accuracy. Studies across Africa and globally document eroding capacity to uphold core journalistic values [10], [4], [22]; [21]. Wahutu (2019), for instance, urges a shift in scholarly emphasis by arguing that the proliferation of misleading information is not merely a social media or media literacy problem, but a journalistic culture problem. Wahutu challenges the assumption that journalists simply combat misinformation rather than occasionally amplify it.

Despite these concerns, literature on journalistic competencies for detecting inaccuracies remains sparse. Kenyan scholarship acknowledges that media actors struggle with skills integral to professional performance. A 2021 Internews study identifies “accuracy” as the top priority for improving news quality but reports widespread deficiencies in interviewing, editing, production, verification, and media law knowledge. Vergeer’s (2018) study further complicates assumptions linking journalism training and verification behaviour by showing that while formal training affects perceived credibility of online information, it does not significantly

influence verification effort. This raises questions about whether journalistic education sufficiently cultivates epistemic vigilance.

Parallel research on African journalism education amplifies this tension. Scholars point to persistent disconnects between theory and practice [2], [5], [12]. These studies identify institutional weaknesses but do not specify which newsroom competencies are missing or how gaps in skill translate into failures of verification. This gap in the literature provides the analytic space to foreground journalists' own understandings of their competence and how such competencies intersect with verification demands.

Following [14] this study adopts “misinformation” to refer to misleading information disseminated without intent to deceive, distinguishing it from deliberate disinformation and hoaxes. Kenyan examples illustrate how misinformation can escalate through institutional neglect. The *Daily Nation's* 2018 publication of a false obituary announcing businessman Jimmy Wanjigi's death demonstrates the fragility of verification safeguards: incorrect yet specific biographical details should have triggered scrutiny, but they did not. Once circulated by a mainstream outlet, such claims gain epistemic authority, circulate through personal networks, and may subsequently transform into disinformation as audiences redistribute them without awareness of falsity.

These empirical concerns are theoretically significant when read through Social Responsibility Theory (SRT). Originating from the 1947 Hutchins Commission, SRT posits that the press must exercise freedom alongside public accountability, grounded in obligations to provide truthful and relevant information, and enable diverse voices to participate in public life [16]. Although some authors view SRT as outdated for contemporary journalism, the framework remains analytically useful in Kenya, where trust in mainstream media persists even amid digital disruption. Public reliance on legacy media to verify social media content [15] heightens normative expectations that journalists uphold truthfulness. SRT therefore illuminates the ethical–epistemic tension between institutional responsibility and structural constraints such as speed, resource gaps, and skill deficits that impair verification.

To bridge these strands, this study approaches misinformation not as isolated error but as a form of information disorder that travels between print and digital systems. It therefore asks how journalists articulate their verification competencies, how these competencies shape performance expectations, and how their understandings reflect or fail to reflect SRT's normative charge. In doing so, the study extends existing scholarship by foregrounding journalistic knowledge as a missing explanatory variable in research on misinformation.

Drawing from the foregoing literature, it becomes apparent that journalistic verification sits at the intersection of professional skill, epistemic responsibility, and institutional constraint. While Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) foregrounds the normative role of the media in safeguarding public interest, the persistence of misinformation raises questions about whether journalists possess and enact the epistemic competencies needed to authenticate knowledge claims. Existing scholarship highlights this gap but seldom interrogates journalists' self-perceptions of competence and how these translate into verification behavior within everyday newsroom practice.

Given that the data informing this study was generated during a peak period of misinformation (2020), it remains analytically valuable not as a frozen temporal snapshot, but as a situated lens through which contemporary verification challenges can be interpreted. Accordingly, the methodology embraces an interpretivist stance that recognizes meaning as historically embedded while still illuminating enduring epistemic structures. The following section outlines how this epistemological positioning shaped the research design.

METHODS

This study is anchored in an interpretivist epistemological orientation, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best accessed through the meanings actors assign to their practices. Journalistic verification is not merely procedural cognitive, ethical, ideological, and shaped by institutional norms. A qualitative approach

is therefore appropriate because it enables exploration of how journalists know what they know and how they justify that knowledge in practice [18].

A case study research design was selected because it enables close examination of complex social units and meaning-making within professional practice. Kenya's journalistic field is heterogeneous, yet press verification challenges remain widespread. Uasin Gishu County was selected as a representative microcosm of national news culture due to its presence of mainstream media bureaus but limited editorial oversight; an ideal site for observing everyday verification practices.

Data gathering techniques were triangulated. Semi-structured interviews conceptualized as dialogical encounters that elicit participants' worldview, experiential reflections, and professional sense-making. Although the study engaged only six journalists working for leading Kenyan media houses, this sample size is consistent with the epistemological commitments of qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes depth, reflexivity, and meaning-making over numerical representativeness. In interpretive research, a small cohort is not a deficiency but a condition that enables sustained engagement and iterative probing of how actors recognize misinformation, what competencies they believe matter, and how verification is enacted under deadlines [17].

The intention of the study was not to produce generalizable prevalence claims about Kenyan journalism, but to illuminate the cognitive, professional, and organizational logics through which verification is navigated. The sample thus enabled thick description and conceptual adequacy, providing sufficient variation in newsroom affiliation and experience to surface patterned epistemic assumptions despite its modest size. The six interviews, though conducted prior to the current digital acceleration, provide rich interpretive insight into the cognitive routines, decision-making strategies, and ethical considerations that guide verification processes in print newsrooms.

Document analysis [1] of eight print news articles complemented interview accounts. News articles published in January, February, April, June, July, November, and December 2020 were purposively selected across four major print outlets: *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, *The Star*, and *People Daily* to maintain analytic manageability while ensuring organizational, thematic, and stylistic diversity. Although not exhaustive, the articles served as textual exemplars that grounded interview narratives in observable newsroom practice. In line with interpretive methodology, the goal was not to achieve statistical coverage of all print reporting, but to identify how verification is performed, neglected, or symbolically invoked within real texts. This purposeful selection strategy is appropriate for analytical generalization, allowing the study to trace how broader epistemic cultures manifest within situated reporting choices.

The purposively selected news articles primarily from 2020 also constitute a limitation. Journalism is a rapidly shifting field, and newsroom cultures evolve alongside technological, political, and economic pressures. However, the slightly dated nature of the material does not fundamentally weaken the study's analytic purchase. Verification, ethical reasoning, and epistemic judgement are enduring professional dispositions, and the challenges documented including skills gaps, routinized shortcuts, and constrained access to authoritative sources remain structurally embedded in Kenyan journalism. The time-bound data therefore function as a diagnostic window into persistent epistemic problems rather than an attempt to document current events.

Data analysis proceeded in three coding phases consistent with grounded analytical logic. Open coding was first conducted to identify micro-meaning units from transcripts and texts. Axial coding succeeded to cluster codes into conceptual categories reflecting journalistic competence, constraints, and news verification practice. Finally selective coding was conducted where emergent categories were refined into analytical themes aligned with literature and research questions. Throughout, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) principles informed interpretation of both interview discourse and news texts. CDA assumes that texts are embedded within power relations and ideological struggles. This study uses it to interrogate how journalists discursively justify or naturalize their choices, including silences, omissions, authority claims and rhetorical positioning. CDA aligns with Social Responsibility Theory by providing tools to evaluate whether journalistic discourse reproduces or resists ethical accountability, verification, and public-interest obligations.

FINDINGS

1) Journalism Education, Competency Gaps and Epistemic Misalignment: The first analytical strand explored whether Kenya's media landscape long criticized as sensational, elite-driven, and normatively weak has evolved toward socially responsible reporting. Data drawn from journalists' reflections on their formative training, competencies, and gaps reveals persistent misalignment between journalism education and the practical demands of verification. Respondents consistently argued that the media is insufficiently attuned to societal needs and that formal training offers limited guidance for producing trustworthy journalism. While media training institutions are premised on the assumption that education generates competence, journalists contended that this belief holds only marginally true.

This finding resonates with existing scholarship documenting a gap between curriculum design, learning outcomes, and professional expectations. Foote and Wao (2017), for example, describe the Kenyan journalism curriculum as largely Western-centric and attribute global weaknesses in journalism education to inadequate participation by educators in skills transfer and weak quality assurance mechanisms within accrediting bodies. Evidence from my fieldwork mirrors these critiques, as one participant explained:

"Most of the time in school is amorphous; they just touch on things here and there. It is a patchwork of knowledge that you are given. They don't get to the nitty-gritties of what real journalism is out there. With the information it is very hard to compete effectively in the fast-paced environment we meet out there. I wish there was a way during our training especially in colleges; you can be given hands-on training." (J6)

This view reinforces Njuguna's (2020) argument that students' perceived readiness depends on what they are taught, how they are taught, and the training environment. Njuguna's Rwandan study, which observed positive readiness outcomes when curriculum incorporated multimedia production skills and experiential learning through mobile-based tutorials, illustrates the importance of pedagogy aligned to evolving practice.

Gessesse's (2020) work in Ethiopia similarly confirms that journalists may understand professional principles but struggle to apply them in daily practice. He notes that journalists "seem to believe that their education helps them understand the professional underpinnings. At the same time, they hardly perceive that they apply professional principles in their daily professional news production" (61).

These converging insights suggest that journalism education in East Africa equips students with conceptual knowledge but insufficiently cultivates applied competencies particularly verification skills, judgement, and contextual awareness. It points to a critical competency deficit relevant to the present study. If training systems inadequately cultivate verification literacy, journalists enter practice without the epistemic foundations required under Social Responsibility Theory to produce accurate, accountable, and public-interest-oriented journalism.

2) Verification as Epistemic Practice: The findings further reveal that while formal training in journalism or media literacy instills confidence and foundational awareness, it does not sufficiently equip journalists with the practical competencies required to meet professional verification standards. This aligns with existing scholarship [16], [20] suggesting that education alone does not shape verification behaviors or control journalists' engagement with misinformation.

Journalists repeatedly emphasized that verification is not merely procedural but epistemic; a process grounded in consultation, subject-matter familiarity, and exposure to authoritative sources. As one respondent explained,

"Reading, reading, and reading helps to own a journalist in his profession...you get new information, you are researching, you gain knowledge which impacts positively on journalistic work" (J4).

This perspective reinforces arguments by Iyer regarding the rise of mid-career specialists for example, medical correspondents who have disciplinary grounding that enables them to interpret, authenticate, and contextualize evidence-based reporting [7]. Within this logic, lack of continuous reading and updating knowledge was seen

as detrimental because it produces what journalist J6 described as “mismatch reporting,” where outdated knowledge leads to flawed interpretations of emerging events.

The interviews also point to specialization as central to verification. Several respondents argued that competence breakdown occurs when journalists report on technical beats without relevant disciplinary grounding. As J2 noted,

“In cases where it needs some expertise like environment, health, education, the organization needs to offer some training so that it becomes easy for journalists to approach certain topics.”

Similarly, J1 highlighted the newsroom preference for subject-specific desk roles such as security, courts, environment because “lack of specialization in writing issues to do with health...makes one not understand some terms.”

These views illustrate that journalists’ interpretive capacity is constrained when they encounter specialized knowledge without disciplinary literacy. Limited knowledge affects the ability to evaluate claims, assign news value, and distinguish accurate from flawed information. Conversely, journalists possessing field-specific knowledge are perceived as more capable of exercising socially responsible reporting; they can challenge sources, recognize inaccuracies, and provide context that supports informed public decision-making.

This finding thus underscores that verification is not merely a matter of professional routine, but one shaped by deeper epistemic competencies including disciplinary literacy, ongoing learning, and interpretive capacity, all of which influence journalists’ ability to uphold their social responsibility obligations.

3) Structural Forces that Undermine Verification: The third theme reveals that while specialized or mid-career journalism training promotes accurate reportage, journalists often fail to apply the competencies acquired in training institutions within everyday practice. Echoing Gessesse’s (2020) argument, participants attributed this disconnect to “managerial pressure, primacy of organizational and political interests over the public interest, dichotomous role expectations (i.e., professional loyalty versus organizational loyalty), self-censorship, and weak democratic culture” (p. 61). These dynamics were observable in the privileging of elite sources, particularly political actors, whose claims were frequently amplified at the expense of broader social perspectives. As Journalist 3 noted, “If you are not keen to ask some questions, at times you can’t get a good story” (J3), reflecting a reluctance or inability to interrogate power which is a behavior incongruent with the watchdog ideals of Social Responsibility Theory.

This tendency is not hypothetical but empirically observable in Kenyan news routines. A newspaper review from *The Star* (21 July 2019), titled “*Avoid Red Meat, Go Back to Traditional Foods*”, serves as an illustrative case. The article reproduced verbatim the pronouncements of then Health Cabinet Secretary Sicily Kariuki, without inviting countervailing views, citing empirical data, or interrogating the accuracy of the claim. The journalist thus operated as a “conveyor belt” of elite narratives rather than an independent evaluator. Moreover, the headline exaggerated the claim, omitting contextual nuance regarding industrially preserved meat, pointing to the risks of misleading framings when verification practices are weak.

This laxity aligns with the critique that Kenya’s news culture privileges “superficial regurgitation of politicians’ statements” over investigative depth [3]. Studies of election coverage (2007, 2013, 2017) found that journalists excelled at quoting campaign rhetoric but were much less able and willing to unpack the policies and issues [3]. This failure to interpret undermines the media’s democratic function by denying audiences the analytical scaffolding needed for informed decision-making. In this study, journalists recognized this problem, acknowledging that the media frequently disseminates “alternative facts with no verifiable evidence,” leaving citizens without reliable spaces of truth arbitration. The theme therefore illustrates a critical divergence between normative expectations of journalism within Social Responsibility Theory and actual verification practice, where organizational and political imperatives override truth-seeking obligations.

4) Objectivity, Transcription Culture and the Misapplication of Balance: The fourth theme shows that the industry's prevailing understanding of journalistic objectivity contributes to a reluctance to interrogate source claims. Participants described a professional norm where journalists are expected to "just report what you saw and what you heard" (J6) without appearing to advocate for any side. While intended to prevent bias, this ethos normalizes transcription over interpretation and, consequently, constrains news verification practice. In theory, Kenyan journalism ethics mandate interpretive engagement. The Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya directs practitioners to present "analytical reporting based on professional perspective, not personal bias" and to reflect diverse expressions and contextualized perspectives. Consistent with this, Journalist 1 emphasized that accuracy requires multi-sourcing and contextual evaluation: "You can't just rely on one person as a source; you have to talk to several people... someone may say their leg got fractured when it's just a sprain" (J1).

However, field evidence shows that while journalists understand this standard discursively, implementation remains inconsistent. Newspaper review revealed frequent reliance on distancing language that obscures sourcing and weakens accountability. An illustrative example appeared in *Daily Nation* on 20 June 2019, reporting political unease over a presidential visit. The article stated that "reports last evening indicated" certain political actors were excluded from speaking, but did not disclose sourcing or triangulation. This opaque phrasing functions as both a narrative shield and a rhetorical cue that legitimizes unverified claims while deflecting responsibility. Rather than embodying impartiality, such linguistic distancing signals weak verification, inadequate sourcing, and a failure to meet the interpretive responsibility envisioned in Social Responsibility Theory. The legacy media therefore inadvertently erodes its epistemic authority by reproducing elite narratives without analytic scaffolding through which citizens can evaluate truthfulness, deepening public uncertainty in distinguishing fact from conjecture.

5) Verification and the Right of Reply: The fifth finding reveals that journalists conceptualized verification not simply as information checking but as a procedural commitment to fairness, balance, and dialogic truth-testing. Respondents consistently framed the right of reply as a constitutive element of verification, emphasizing that accuracy is secured only when all implicated parties are given a chance to account for themselves. As Journalist 6 explained, verification collapses without the structural discipline of counter-voices:

"I can't go to let's say a place that has been ravaged by hunger then start saying: These are the people who have been neglected by the Government. If they are accusing another party, go ask the accused" (J6).

This articulation not only mirrors Social Responsibility Theory's insistence on pluralistic, evidence-driven public discourse, but also demonstrates journalists' tacit understanding that truth claims must be contestable to be credible. In the interview narratives, verification emerged as inherently dialogic; an epistemic process built through challenge, reply, and negotiation among affected actors. Nonetheless, the right of reply is valued conceptually but undermined by production pressures, routinized assumptions, and the push for speed.

Absence of a right of reply in print texts is not an isolated editorial flaw but symptomatic of the broader structural and cognitive tensions identified by respondents. When organizational imperatives override journalists' own articulated epistemic standards, the press's Social Responsibility mandate to provide comprehensive, testable, and pluralistic information becomes compromised. The finding thus underscores a crucial interpretive insight: verification failures are produced at the intersection of professional awareness and institutional constraints, where journalists' normative commitments are insufficiently supported by newsroom systems that enable them to enact those commitments.

6) Relational Competence, Experiential Triangulation and Emerging Practice Pockets: While earlier findings underscored significant deficiencies in journalists' analytical and interpretive capacities, the sixth finding reveals pockets of professional competence that complicate claims of total incapacity. Respondents demonstrated awareness of basic information-seeking practices and described relational techniques used to extract credible evidence, particularly where institutional opacity hinders straightforward newsverification. Journalist 1 explained that in rigid systems such as the police service, the capacity to verify news is contingent on interpersonal trust rather than procedural transparency:

“Establish a rapport and that even before you go talk to the authorized sources, you have talked to other people already and they have given you information. But then, also the kind of questions you are going to ask, do not ask questions that will evoke memories of a fateful night unless someone opens up...” (J1).

This finding shows that journalists understood verification not merely as technical fact-checking but as relational labour requiring sensitivity to context, emotion, and human vulnerability which is something often overlooked in formal journalism curricula. Respondents articulated a need to triangulate evidence from multiple sources before reaching conclusions about accuracy. Again, Journalist 1 observed:

“When a human rights activist tells me that someone has been killed... I try also to visit the home of the person killed and talk to the family to get to know the circumstances that led to death” (J1).

Newspaper examples corroborated this emergent competency. *People Daily’s* reporting of the Ivy Wangeci murder on 10 April 2019 reflects a careful sourcing strategy: the journalist drew from eye-witness accounts, university colleagues, police statements, and contextualized the event within broader societal patterns of student murders. This approach not only strengthened the legitimacy of the account but also signaled recognition of journalism as a socially responsible practice grounded in evidential plurality and public interest.

Yet this finding exists in tension with preceding ones. While such stories indicate pockets of verification capability, they appear as exceptions rather than professional norms. The emergent skillset appears experiential and personality-driven rather than systematically taught or institutionally reinforced. As such, journalists’ capacity to triangulate information and balance emotionally complex narratives does not necessarily counteract the broader structural and epistemic gaps identified earlier; instead, it exposes a latent competency that remains underdeveloped and unsupported by training systems or newsroom practices.

7) Experience as a Compensatory Mechanism and Professional Socialization Process: The final theme reveals that longevity in newsroom practice contributes to the gradual acquisition of news verification competence, functioning almost as a compensatory mechanism for gaps in formal training. Both interview accounts and supporting literature suggest that ethical habits such as honesty, truthfulness, inclusion of relevant facts, and balanced sourcing appear more consistently among seasoned practitioners than among early-career journalists. In essence, professional maturation generates tacit knowledge needed to distinguish fact from fiction and to operationalize verification behaviors.

Journalist 2 highlighted this relationship between experience and verification capacity, linking credibility with relational capital and accumulated networks:

“Security agencies... will deny you information just because you are not familiar to them. I have around six years of experience... I have sources that I’ve built for like five years and it is easy for me to confirm from them, to make phone calls, to travel to them and have a story” (J2).

This observation underscores that knowledge in verification is not simply cognitive but social. It is hinged on trust, institutional memory, and relational access, none of which is easily transferable via classroom teaching. Similarly, Journalist 4 reinforced the role of newsroom experience in enhancing efficiency, interpretive judgment, and verification reflexes:

“A veteran [journalist] has a lot of background information on what s/he wants to say; he does not need to sit down [for say] two hours writing a simple story” (J4).

These accounts suggest that verification proficiency is often accumulated through doing journalism rather than being trained for journalism. Frequent writing, iterative problem-solving, and exposure to varied reporting contexts slowly equip journalists with the tacit intuition to recognize suspicious claims, seek corroborating evidence, and navigate complex information environments. This phenomenon resonates with wider narrative strands in media training literature, which describe the newsroom itself as a “hidden curriculum” where professional norms are absorbed through immersion rather than instruction.

This raises a crucial implication for Social Responsibility Theory. If the ability to verify and ethically report hinges on extended experiential learning rather than systematic training provision, then the media's institutional capacity to safeguard public interest depends disproportionately on individual journalists surviving conditions that are themselves hostile to verification practices.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes a reconceptualization of journalistic verification by demonstrating that it operates not as a universally available professional procedure but as a stratified capability embedded within unequal knowledge regimes. Whereas existing scholarship and normative frameworks such as Social Responsibility Theory depict verification as a rule every journalist can and should enact, the findings reveal that verification is contingent upon the epistemic resources journalists possess, the organizational environments in which they work, and the market conditions shaping newsroom priorities. This suggests that verification is not merely a normative obligation but ability anchored in professional experience, access to networks, institutional memory, and editorial autonomy. In effect, the study advances the argument that verification must be understood as a form of epistemic capital that is accumulated differentially through years of practice and which significantly determines whether journalists can act on professional ethics.

Veteran journalists in the study repeatedly emphasized that they could verify information because they had cultivated trust networks, accumulated background knowledge, and developed intuition through repeated exposure to events and sources. This tacit knowledge acted as a filter for suspicious or unreliable claims. Such insights extend existing literature, which tends to treat verification techniques as procedural knowledge that can be taught. In contrast, the data here suggests the presence of an experiential epistemology: the idea that much of journalistic knowing resides not in codified rules but in habituated judgement, intuition, and relational capital. Verification, therefore, is deeply embedded in invisible cognitive and relational infrastructures rather than being solely the outcome of formal training or ethical aspiration.

The findings further demonstrate that even when journalists hold strong verification norms, their ability to enact them is structurally mediated. Market forces including speed pressures, the race for exclusives, editorial hierarchies, and ownership interests often override verification imperatives. This produces an important refinement to Social Responsibility Theory, which presumes that ethical practice primarily depends on professional intent. The results suggest that ethical commitment is insufficient where structures do not support or actively penalize verification practices. This introduces what may be termed a responsibility-to-capacity gap, the disconnect between normative expectations placed on journalists and their practical capability to fulfill those expectations in organizational contexts dominated by revenue imperatives, political pressures, and productivity demands.

Institutional weaknesses revealed in the study compound these structural pressures. The absence of systematic mentoring, limited editorial scaffolding, lack of verification infrastructure, and the marginal role of training in everyday newsroom life all illustrate how responsibility deficits emerge not from individual moral failure but from epistemic fragility embedded in newsrooms. Professional norms alone cannot counteract misinformation if journalists are unsupported, inexperienced, or structurally discouraged from exercising verification. The study thus expands verification theorization from an individual ethical act to a systemic function requiring supportive institutional conditions.

These insights give rise to a contextual journalistic knowledge and news verification model that emphasizes four interlinked mechanisms: (1) News verification as epistemic agency distributed unevenly across the profession (comprising of the skills and cognitive routines journalists deploy to assess and validate information); (2) the centrality of experiential knowledge regimes in shaping verification practice (acquired through tacit knowledge, domain expertise, relational capital, background memory, and intuition); (3) the structural mediation of ethical conduct through market and political pressures; and (4) the necessity of institutional scaffolding to enable news verification.

This moves verification discourse beyond the presumption of universality toward an understanding of stratified practice rooted in capability, power, and organizational context. Fig. 1 shows the four-dimensional news

verification model illustrating how verification capacity emerges from the interaction of epistemic agency, knowledge regimes, structural pressures, and institutional support.

The theoretical contribution of this study, therefore, lies in its redefinition of verification as capability-dependent rather than uniformly applicable, and in identifying tacit knowledge as a critical but under-theorized element of journalistic epistemology. It challenges the idealism of Social Responsibility Theory by revealing how market logics and institutional deficiencies constrain ethical practice. By showing that verification failures are often systemic rather than moral, and that skilled journalists enact responsibility through accumulated epistemic capital, the findings align with but also extend media ethics theory. They underscore that strengthening professionalism requires investment in institutional cultures, mentorship, and epistemic infrastructures and not simply the promulgation of ethical codes.

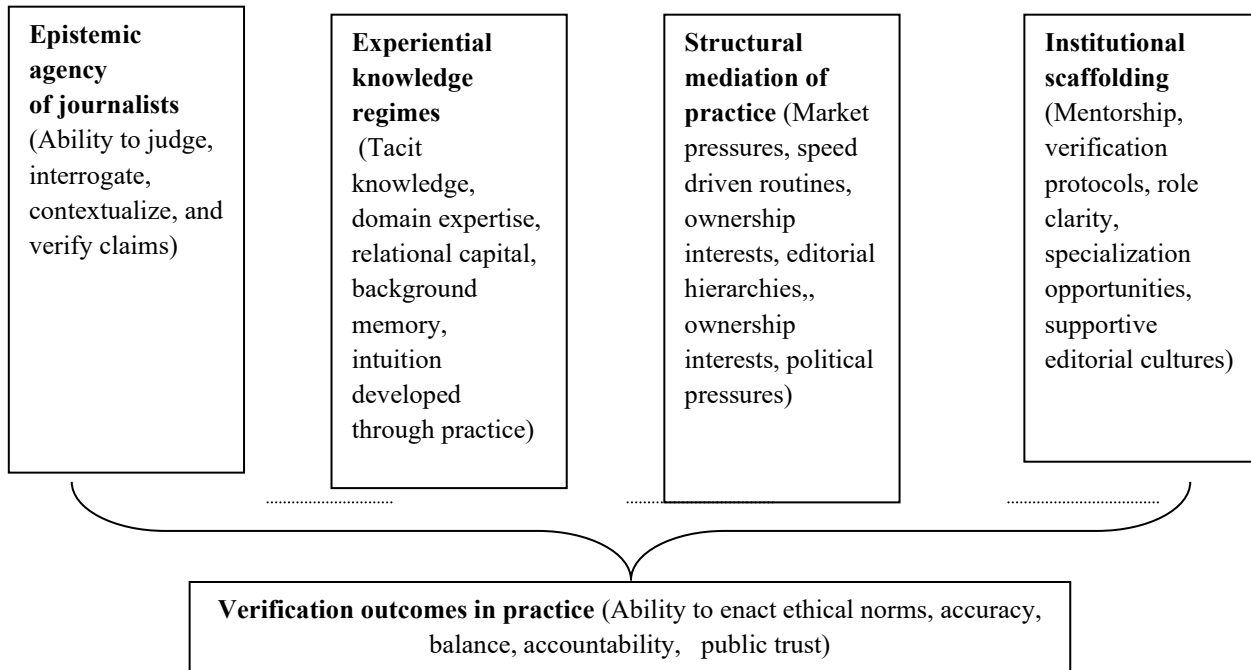


Fig. 1 Representation of the four-dimensional news verification model

These conceptual advances carry several implications for policy, journalism education, and newsroom training. At the policy level, the study suggests that regulatory frameworks must shift from compliance-based ethics enforcement toward capacity-building approaches that enhance epistemic infrastructures within news organizations. Media regulators and professional bodies could integrate verification requirements into accreditation standards, introduce mandatory continuous professional development in evidence evaluation, and incentivize newsrooms that establish dedicated fact-checking or source-tracking systems. Policies that support the professionalization of journalism such as clearer criteria for entry, stronger editorial independence provisions, and institutional support for collaborative investigative work would help address the responsibility-to-capacity gap identified in this research.

For journalism education, the findings point to the need for curricula that transcend procedural instruction and cultivate epistemic dispositions. Training institutions should place stronger emphasis on judgement formation, contextual reasoning, tacit knowledge development, and relational reporting skills. This could involve more immersive fieldwork, mentorship by veteran practitioners, scenario-based verification exercises, and structured reflection on epistemic dilemmas. The evidence suggests that verification competence emerges through iterative learning across varied contexts, implying that journalism pedagogy must more intentionally scaffold the acquisition of experiential epistemology rather than relying solely on classroom-based ethics instruction.

Within newsroom practice and training, the results highlight the necessity of institutional scaffolding that enables journalists, especially novices, to exercise verification. Newsrooms should institutionalize structured mentoring systems, embed verification checkpoints in editorial workflows, and provide time allowances that reduce the epistemic erosion produced by speed pressures. Regular in-house training on interrogation

strategies, source triangulation, and digital verification tools would help distribute epistemic capital more evenly across staff. Editorial leaders must also cultivate cultures where accuracy is valued as much as immediacy, where journalists can challenge weak sources without fear of reprisal, and where verification failures are treated as organizational learning opportunities rather than individual shortcomings.

CONCLUSION

Holistically, the findings indicate that erroneous reportage remains pervasive within Kenya's media landscape, not due to deliberate deception, but because of a structural deficit in role-specific journalistic competencies. The data show that journalists do not intentionally seek to misinform; rather, their day-to-day routines fall short of the professional obligation to interrogate, contextualize, and authenticate information before publication. This points to a central theoretical insight of the study: verification is not simply a normative expectation, but a capability that materializes only when journalists possess and can mobilize epistemic resources such as domain knowledge, interpretive skill, confidence, and institutional autonomy. Where such capabilities are weak or unevenly distributed, the verification function deteriorates, undermining the press's social responsibility mandate.

Accordingly, the study reframes misinformation in Kenya not as a primarily ethical lapse or a consequence of technological acceleration, but as a manifestation of fragile knowledge regimes that support competent journalistic practice. The profession is increasingly populated by celebrity anchors, mid-career hires without foundational grounding, and early-career recruits lacking domain expertise. This re-professionalization pattern produces inverted skills ecology: experienced journalists exit under commercial pressure, while underprepared entrants sustain a practice loosely tethered to journalism's normative aspirations. The result is what this study conceptualizes as a rhetorical responsibility ethos without practical realization. In that, journalists affirm truth-telling values but are unable to fully enact them.

This observation offers an important extension of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT). Whereas SRT assumes that a free press will naturally fulfill its duty to inform, scrutinize power, and safeguard public reason, the present findings demonstrate that freedom without capability yields responsibility in principle but not in practice. When journalists lack the interpretive skill to question elite narratives, possess limited substantive knowledge, and operate with weak verification routines, the public sphere becomes saturated with unchallenged claims, providing fertile ground for elite capture of meaning. Thus, the study advances SRT by identifying epistemic capability as an essential and previously under-theorized condition for its normative outcomes. Social responsibility is not merely a moral choice; it is an epistemic competence.

The policy implications are therefore significant. If journalists' inability to interrogate sources, synthesize perspectives, contextualize information, and evaluate evidence facilitates recurring public misinformation, journalism training institutions cannot remain structurally unchanged. The findings call on educators, regulators, and professional bodies to redesign curricula that cultivate not just graduates, but knowledgeable verifiers equipped to navigate contemporary complexity, political contestation, and digital mis/disinformation. Continuing professional development must similarly support mid-career specialization, sectoral literacy, and investigative autonomy.

Ultimately, the study argues that strengthening verification in Kenya requires synchronized investment in skill development and domain specialization.

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