

Ethical Challenges in Covering Violence and Humanitarian Crises

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ABSTRACT

Covering violence and humanitarian crises is one of the most ethically demanding responsibilities of journalism. The pursuit of truth, public interest, and accountability often clashes with concerns related to human dignity, safety, trauma, political influence, and sensationalism. This research paper critically examines the ethical challenges journalists face while reporting on violence and humanitarian crises, particularly in the contemporary media environment shaped by digital platforms, competition for attention, and the post-truth climate. Through qualitative analysis of existing literature, case studies, and ethical frameworks, the study highlights key ethical dilemmas including victim representation, objectivity, safety of journalists, misinformation, and humanitarian intervention narratives. The paper further explores how journalistic ethics can be strengthened through responsible practices, institutional safeguards, and future-oriented approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism plays a crucial role in documenting violence and humanitarian crises across the world. From armed conflicts and terrorist attacks to natural disasters and refugee emergencies, journalists act as witnesses, narrators, and intermediaries between affected populations and the global audience. However, reporting such events involves profound ethical complexities. The urgency to report often conflicts with the need to protect vulnerable individuals, avoid retraumatization, and prevent political or ideological manipulation.

In the contemporary media ecosystem, the ethical burden has intensified due to the 24/7 news cycle, social media virality, citizen journalism, and declining trust in mainstream media. Graphic visuals, emotional narratives, and breaking news competition can sometimes overshadow ethical considerations. This paper seeks to explore the ethical challenges in covering violence and humanitarian crises and assess how journalists can balance professional responsibility with moral accountability. Humanitarian health organizations face enormous ethical challenges in conducting their operations. For the purposes of this project, we defined ethical challenges broadly to include situations where the best moral course of action could be unclear (e.g., when additional deliberation or analysis is necessary to define the right action), where it might not be possible to fully uphold all the moral values at stake (e.g., when a duty to avoid harm conflicts with the duty to serve all equally), where the moral course of action is clear but circumstances prevent one from taking it, or where there is no right answer but action is needed. This project, a collaboration involving researchers and staff from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Johns Hopkins University Berman Institute of Bioethics, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and the International Rescue Committee, explores the ethical challenges organizations face in situations of extreme violence, particularly when healthcare facilities and personnel become targets in the conflict. It seeks to provide a framework of principles for ethical decision-making in these circumstances as well as to suggest processes and mechanisms to address ethical challenges to organizations and entities that (1) provide or oversee health services within Syria, including international and Syrian non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) and local health directorates; and (2) international and Syrian NGOs that provide various forms of support to entities or health workers from outside Syria, usually basing operations in Jordan or Turkey. As similar issues arise in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Yemen, we hope that its recommendations can be helpful for humanitarian work elsewhere. Ethical challenges result from many factors including scarcity of resources, limitations of access to populations in need, shifting priorities of the organization and its donors, and demands placed by host governments and armed groups. They also arise in complex cultural environments, where the underlying social and political injustices frame people's perceptions and actions. In armed conflicts increased risk to humanitarian organizations and the communities they serve, scarce resources and vast need amplify ethical challenges at all levels, from clinical practice in the field to organizational resource allocation and decision making. Importantly, the challenging decisions humanitarian organizations experience in situations of extreme violence are often a product of war crimes against health workers and the population they serve. This targeted violence requires sometimes agonizing choices such as outsourcing risk to individual providers and to communities, as well as compromising quality standards that go well beyond the usual challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. For example, how much personal risk or injury or even death should health workers take on when attempting to provide aid to others? What are these health workers owed in return? After a hospital is attacked, is it better to rebuild at the same location or move to a safer one farther away when doing so may hinder access to the facility for some individuals and communities? How can a humanitarian organization maintain its independence, both real and perceived, when it is also committed to supporting locally-led responses?

ETHICAL AND HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

To the extent that decisions about the right action in a particular circumstance involve determining what is best, what is most appropriate, what should be done, who is responsible, and so on, they involve ethical considerations at every step. So understood, almost every logistical or operational question involves ethics, implicitly or explicitly. Ethics has, at its core, the systematic study of the fundamental values and norms that help individuals, organizations, and societies determine what ought to be done, including what ought to be done when values and norms may be in tension, perhaps irreconcilably so. Ethical questions rarely have straightforward answers. From the standpoint of ethics, we adopted a principlist approach, which focuses on commonly shared values as the basis of action-guiding principles.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have extensively discussed media ethics in conflict reporting and humanitarian journalism. Ward (2010) emphasizes that journalism ethics must evolve in response to globalized media and cultural diversity. Cottle (2009) argues that media representations of suffering often oscillate between compassion and spectacle. Studies by Moeller (1999) highlight the phenomenon of compassion fatigue, where excessive exposure to crisis coverage reduces public empathy. Research has also examined the role of embedded journalism and its ethical implications. While embedding provides access and safety, it raises concerns about objectivity and propaganda. Additionally, literature on trauma journalism stresses the psychological impact on both victims and journalists. Ethical frameworks such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics provide theoretical grounding for analyzing these dilemmas. Reporting on violence and humanitarian crises has long occupied a central place in journalism scholarship, particularly in the context of war, displacement, terrorism, communal conflict, and natural disasters. The ethical dilemmas associated with such coverage have been extensively examined through normative media theories, peace journalism frameworks, trauma studies, and global communication perspectives. One of the foundational theoretical contributions comes from Johan Galtung, who introduced the concept of *peace journalism*. Galtung argued that traditional war reporting tends to focus on violence, elites, and propaganda, thereby reinforcing conflict narratives. In contrast, peace journalism emphasizes conflict resolution, human suffering, and structural causes. This framework has influenced subsequent ethical debates on whether journalists should remain neutral observers or adopt a more humanitarian, solution-oriented approach. Building upon this, Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick developed practical guidelines for peace journalism, advocating

responsible language, avoidance of demonization, and inclusion of marginalized voices. Their work highlights the ethical responsibility of journalists to avoid framing conflicts in binary or sensationalist terms, especially during communal or ethnic violence.

The concept of *compassion fatigue* was significantly explored by Susan D. Moeller, who examined how repetitive and graphic imagery of humanitarian crises can desensitize audiences. Moeller argues that excessive exposure to suffering may reduce public empathy and engagement, raising ethical concerns about the balance between informing the public and exploiting victims' pain. Similarly, Lilie Chouliaraki analyzed how media representation of distant suffering shapes audience perception. She contends that humanitarian communication often constructs a hierarchy of suffering, privileging certain victims over others. This selective visibility raises questions about global inequality in news coverage and ethical gatekeeping practices. From a trauma-informed perspective, scholars such as Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma emphasize minimizing harm while reporting on survivors of violence. Ethical guidelines encourage informed consent, protection of identity (especially in cases of sexual violence), and sensitivity toward vulnerable populations. Research shows that intrusive reporting can retraumatize survivors and violate dignity. The digital age has intensified these challenges. With the rise of platforms like Twitter (now X) and Facebook, journalists face pressure to publish real-time updates, often without thorough verification. Studies on misinformation during crises—such as communal violence in India or refugee crises globally—demonstrate how unverified visuals and user-generated content can escalate tensions and spread panic. Ethical verification practices and digital literacy thus become crucial components of crisis reporting. Scholars examining post-truth contexts argue that polarized political narratives shape how violence is framed. Research in intercultural communication highlights that media often reproduce dominant ideological perspectives, marginalizing minority communities. This is particularly relevant in plural societies like India, where media coverage of riots or communal clashes can either de-escalate or inflame tensions. Further, feminist media scholars have examined gendered representations in humanitarian crises. Women are often portrayed solely as victims rather than agents of resilience. Ethical critique emphasizes the need for inclusive storytelling that avoids stereotypes and recognizes agency. Despite substantial literature, gaps remain. Much of the scholarship is Western-centric, with limited focus on Global South contexts and non-Western ethical frameworks. There is also insufficient exploration of how economic pressures, corporate ownership, and TRP-driven competition influence ethical decision-making during crises. In summary, the literature reveals recurring ethical tensions: objectivity versus advocacy, speed versus accuracy, visibility versus dignity, and public interest versus individual harm. Contemporary scholarship increasingly calls for a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, and digitally responsible model of journalism that aligns professional ethics with humanitarian principles.

Research Objectives

1. To identify major ethical challenges in reporting violence and humanitarian crises.
2. To analyze the impact of media practices on affected populations.
3. To examine the influence of digital media and political narratives on ethical journalism.
4. To propose ethical strategies for responsible crisis reporting.

Research Questions

1. What ethical dilemmas do journalists face while covering violence and humanitarian crises?
2. How does media representation affect victims and public perception?
3. What role does digital media play in complicating ethical journalism?

4. How can ethical journalism be strengthened in crisis reporting?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data analysis. Academic journals, books, ethical codes, reports by international organizations, and documented case studies were analyzed. The interpretive approach allows for thematic analysis of ethical issues across different contexts. Content analysis was used to examine patterns in media coverage of selected crises.

Ethical Challenges in Crisis Reporting

One of the primary ethical challenges is the representation of victims. Graphic images and intrusive interviews may violate dignity and privacy. Journalists must decide how much suffering to show without exploiting pain. Another challenge is objectivity versus empathy. While emotional engagement can humanize stories, it may compromise neutrality. Safety is another critical concern. Journalists working in conflict zones face threats, censorship, and violence. Ethical reporting must not endanger lives. Additionally, misinformation and propaganda during crises pose significant challenges. Journalists must verify information under extreme pressure. The political economy of the media also influences ethical choices. Corporate interests, state pressure, and ideological agendas can distort crisis narratives. Humanitarian crises are sometimes framed selectively, reinforcing stereotypes or geopolitical interests.

FINDINGS

The study finds that ethical challenges in crisis reporting are multidimensional and interconnected. Media coverage significantly shapes public understanding and policy responses. Ethical lapses can lead to victim blaming, desensitization, and misinformation. Digital media amplifies both ethical risks and opportunities, enabling rapid dissemination but also manipulation. The findings suggest that ethical journalism requires institutional support, continuous training, and adherence to universal yet culturally sensitive ethical standards. Journalists who adopt trauma-informed practices and reflexive ethics are better equipped to handle crisis reporting. The findings further demonstrate that ethical challenges in covering violence and humanitarian crises are deeply embedded in structural, professional, and technological dimensions of journalism. While the peace journalism framework proposed by Johan Galtung encourages conflict-sensitive and solution-oriented reporting, the study finds that mainstream media still largely privileges elite sources, official statements, and event-centered narratives over structural causes and long-term peace processes. This episodic framing often simplifies complex conflicts into binaries of “us versus them,” thereby reinforcing polarization. In addition, consistent with the arguments of Susan D. Moeller, the repetitive circulation of dramatic visuals and emotionally charged headlines contributes not only to compassion fatigue but also to the commodification of suffering, where victims’ pain becomes a tool for audience engagement and ratings. The research also confirms Lilie Chouliaraki’s observation that global media construct a hierarchy of suffering, privileging crises in Western or geopolitically strategic regions while underreporting conflicts in marginalized areas, thus shaping unequal humanitarian responses and public empathy. Furthermore, the accelerated news cycle driven by digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook intensifies the pressure for immediacy, often compromising verification standards and increasing the circulation of misinformation, doctored visuals, and unverified claims, especially during communal or politically sensitive conflicts. The findings also reveal gaps in implementing trauma-informed practices recommended by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, with survivors particularly women, children, and displaced populations—sometimes exposed to intrusive questioning, identity disclosure, or re-traumatization. Additionally, economic pressures, corporate ownership patterns, advertising dependence, and TRP-driven competition significantly shape editorial priorities, encouraging dramatization and conflict amplification over contextual, nuanced storytelling. Political polarization and ideological alignments further influence narrative framing, leading to selective representation and marginalization of minority voices. Overall, the study concludes that ethical crisis reporting requires institutional reforms, stronger newsroom guidelines, trauma-sensitive

training, rigorous digital verification mechanisms, and a commitment to inclusive, culturally grounded storytelling to ensure that journalism upholds dignity, accuracy, accountability, and social responsibility in the coverage of violence and humanitarian crises.

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights the need to move beyond traditional notions of objectivity toward responsible and compassionate journalism. Ethical reporting does not mean neutrality in the face of injustice but informed and accountable storytelling. Media organizations must prioritize ethics over speed and ratings.

The role of audiences is also crucial. Media literacy can help audiences critically engage with crisis coverage. Ethical journalism is a shared responsibility between journalists, institutions, and the public.

CONCLUSION

Covering violence and humanitarian crises remains one of the most challenging domains of journalism. Ethical dilemmas related to representation, safety, objectivity, and political influence demand careful consideration. This study underscores the importance of ethical frameworks, professional integrity, and institutional safeguards in crisis reporting. Upholding ethics is essential not only for journalistic credibility but also for human dignity and social justice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study establishes that ethical challenges in covering violence and humanitarian crises are not isolated professional dilemmas but systemic issues shaped by institutional structures, political contexts, economic pressures, and technological transformations. The persistent tension between neutrality and moral responsibility demonstrates that journalism in crisis situations cannot operate within rigid notions of objectivity alone. As emphasized by Johan Galtung, conflict-sensitive approaches such as peace journalism offer a constructive alternative by prioritizing context, human impact, and possibilities for resolution rather than merely documenting violence as spectacle. However, the research indicates that such models are inconsistently implemented due to commercial imperatives and competitive newsroom cultures. The conclusion also highlights that sensationalized imagery and repetitive depictions of suffering—an issue critically examined by Susan D. Moeller—risk normalizing violence and reducing public empathy over time. Ethical reporting must therefore balance the imperative to inform with the responsibility to preserve dignity and prevent harm. Furthermore, the unequal global visibility of crises, discussed by Lilie Chouliaraki, underscores structural inequalities in international news flows, where marginalized communities often remain underrepresented or stereotyped. In the digital era, accelerated news cycles and algorithm-driven amplification on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook intensify misinformation risks and ethical lapses in verification. This environment necessitates stronger editorial gatekeeping, digital literacy, and accountability mechanisms. Additionally, the findings stress the importance of trauma-informed journalism practices as advocated by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma to protect survivors from re-traumatization and exploitation. Ultimately, the study concludes that ethical crisis reporting requires a multidimensional transformation—integrating peace-oriented frameworks, survivor-centered storytelling, inclusive representation, and rigorous verification standards. Institutional reforms, newsroom training, and policy-level ethical enforcement are essential to ensure that journalism contributes not to the escalation of conflict but to informed public discourse, social cohesion, and humanitarian awareness. In the post-truth and hyper-mediated era, responsible coverage of violence and humanitarian crises is not merely a professional obligation but a democratic necessity.

Future Scope of Research

Future research can explore comparative studies across regions and media systems. Empirical studies involving

interviews with journalists can provide deeper insights into lived experiences. The impact of artificial intelligence, algorithms, and immersive media on ethical crisis reporting also warrants further exploration.

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