Low-Stakes Decisions and High-Stakes Dilemmas: Considering the Ethics Decision-Making of Freelance Magazine Journalists

Abstract

Freelance journalists face many of the same ethical dilemmas as journalists working in newsrooms. Because they work independently for various organizations, however, they may develop different strategies for making ethical decisions. This study used in-depth interviews with freelance magazine journalists ($N = 14$) to explore how they define ethical dilemmas, the types of ethical questions they face, and the individual and organizational influences guiding their decision-making. The study sheds light on the normative frameworks guiding ethical deliberations among this group of journalists, particularly in the context of magazine journalism.

In November 2014, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article on a student named Jackie, who said she was beaten and sexually assaulted by seven men at a fraternity party at the University of Virginia in 2012 (Erdely, 2014). The article prompted University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan to order a full investigation of the incident and reexamine the university's approaches to sexual assault allegations (Erdely, 2014). Within days, however, news organizations raised questions about the accuracy of the article (Perez-Pena & Somaiya, 2014). In December, *Rolling Stone* commissioned the Columbia Journalism School to conduct an independent review, and in March 2015 local police reported that their investigation raised no evidence to support Jackie's account (Hartmann, 2015). *Rolling Stone* officially retracted the article in April 2015 and said newsroom processes would become more stringent (Somaiya, 2015).

Scholarship focuses on a wide range of considerations for ethics practices and understandings among journalists working in newsrooms, including social influences on ethics (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Voakes, 1997); ethical frameworks (Borden, 2007; Christians, 2007; Craig & Ferré, 2006; Steiner & Okrusch, 2006); and organizations' ethical codes and practices (Christians, 1985; Lambeth, 1992; McManus, 1997; Meyer, 1987; Wilkins & Brennen, 2004). However, those who contribute to the news-creation process but who work outside of news organizations, such as freelance writers, are particularly vulnerable (Ladendorf, 2012), as they may not be privy to the newsroom discussions in which ethical dilemmas are addressed. Even so, freelance journalists benefit from enhanced autonomy in news-gathering, which could result in higher levels of moral ethical reasoning (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004).

Magazine journalists seem particularly suited for ethical consideration in that

they, perhaps, have an even deeper understanding of and regard for their readers than their peers at other media outlets, and they boast a "finely tuned understanding of the culture and power nexus in a specific subject matter" (Holmes & Nice, 2012, p. 52). They also often spend significant time absorbed in their subject matter, which can result in complicated source-journalist interactions when considering the final journalistic product. Magazine journalists face ethical challenges that affect newspapers and others that are unique (Sumner & Rhoades, 2006). Therefore, understanding the nature of these challenges and how magazine writers communicate about them is important.

This study explored how freelance magazine journalists, an under-studied subset of journalists (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012), define ethical dilemmas and the individual and organizational influences shaping their ethical deliberation. Using in-depth interviews, the researcher asked freelance magazine journalists from around the country ($N = 14$) to describe particular ethical dilemmas they faced and how they responded. The findings reveal that freelance magazine journalists face similar dilemmas as other journalists, as well as distinctive challenges. In contrast to newspaper journalists, magazine journalists addressed the problems associated with producing diverse types of content for multiple publications and determining whether soft-news topics carry the same ethical weight as hard news (Tuchman, 1978). This study also sheds light on how journalists approach ethical decision-making removed from an organizational context.

Literature Review

The application of ethics to journalism as a profession is a relatively recent phenomenon. Further, "much of the research is still descriptive, narrowly focused, searching for normative prescriptions to justify making decisions" (Starck, 2001, p. 144).

Thus, Starck (2001) suggested questions that could guide future research, including, and important to this study, "What is the role of the news organization (as opposed to that of the individual journalist) in the promulgation of ethical journalistic performance? How can institutional and individual responsibility be reconciled?" (p. 146). Christians (2008) suggested a new kind of theorizing that "must account for what humans are ultimately committed to." Within social philosophy, Christians (2008) recommended grounding media ethics in the "moral dimension of everyday life" (p. 7), which calls upon empirical work to consider not only the personal and corporate ethical guidelines directing journalists in their daily practice but also how they talk about applying them.

Media Ethics Frameworks

Three primary philosophies have come to dominate Western ethics: duty ethics, consequentialist ethics, and virtue ethics (Plaisance, 2014). Duty or deontological ethics suggests that individuals are bound by moral obligations that should motivate behaviors, and judgments are driven by intent and the rights of individuals (Plaisance, 2014). Patterson and Wilkins (2011) suggested the *prima facie* duties of William David Ross as a framework for considering how different ethical values, such as fidelity, justice, beneficence, and not injuring others, compete for preeminence, also adding the duty to tell the truth (veracity) and to nurture. Rather, consequentialist ethics focuses less on intent than on outcomes and the good a decision will offer society (Plaisance, 2014). In particular, Christians (2007) argued that Mill's utilitarianism appeals to media organizations because of its focus on individual autonomy and humanism, in that it does not rely on religious ideologies but on "ordinary human motivation to avoid pain and pursue pleasure" (p. 115). Christians also described some of the weaknesses of

utilitarianism. For example, while focusing on consequences can be beneficial in some media situations, this may not be useful for understanding crucial issues such as truth telling, digital manipulation, and conflicts of interest, whose impact may not be easily discernable. These are also common issues facing magazines.

Virtue ethics focuses on "what it means to be a good journalist in the context of journalism's mission" (Borden, 2007, p. 17). Borden (2007) used a virtue approach in the normative concept *journalism as practice*, which considers journalism's role in human flourishing, pursuing the common good, pushing reform, engaging in reporting an newsmaking, and providing a living for journalists (Borden, 2007). Although virtue ethics has been criticized for its lack of specificity, virtuous behavior can manifest differently depending on an individual's personal and professional experiences and the context of the dilemma (Plaisance, 2014). This approach is beneficial because it removes ethics from situational applications and considers "issues relevant across all domains of life and one's entire lifespan" (Cheney et al. 2010, p. 238). Therefore, virtue ethics allows individuals to consider how ethics affects not just their workplace decisions and overall professions but also their lives and the people they desire to become. Sanders (2003) listed key attributes of virtue ethics: character, practical judgment ("good sense"), experience, education of the emotions, and teleological ethics ("that virtues are *for* something") (p. 38). Plaisance (2015) investigated virtue ethics using a "moral exemplars" approach, examining the experiences of journalism and public relations professionals. The exemplars were notable for their development of a "moral identity" (p. 203) shaped by their moral development, ethical ideology, personality, and professional environment. They also emphasized principles such as moral courage, the welfare of

others, collaboration, social justice, and anticipation of harm. Other scholars emphasize ethics rooted in care, including its potential to help journalists better listen to marginalized populations; avoid stereotypes; and adequately report on the work of caring in particular relationships, policies, and institutions (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006).

Influences on Ethical Decision-Making

Journalism ethics scholarship reveals various factors affecting how journalists make decisions. Voakes (1997) surveyed 118 Wisconsin journalists working in print and broadcast media. The findings refined a theoretical model that addresses the simultaneous effect of seven social factors on ethical decision-making — individual, small group, organization, competition, occupation, extramedia, and law — that have a greater influence than that of the individual. Voakes (1997) focused primarily on the newsroom and emphasized two dimensions of influence, socialization and interaction. Ultimately, small groups had power over individuals' decision-making, and peers and editors could influence individual journalists' willingness to take ethical risks and counter other influences, such as occupational norms. Although organizational influence was also strong, it could be subverted by journalists' peers.

Berkowitz and Limor (2003) presented three hypothetical situations to journalists to assess the influences of five social dimensions: individual, peer group, organizational, professional, and societal. At first, the results showed that journalists shared a somewhat consistent ethical decision-making framework and employed it in a similar way across situations. Further analysis, however, showed differences according to the degree of professional confidence, or the amount of time a journalist had worked. The authors viewed journalists who focused on individual, professional, and societal influences as

having a higher level of professional confidence than those who focused on responses of their peers and organization. These levels could also vary by situation, as the degree of journalistic confidence affected ethical frameworks more heavily when journalists interacted with news sources.

The newsroom remains an important site for assessing ethics decision-making. Journalists' knowledge of professional standards and norms comes from learning on the job (Pritchard, 2014). Newsrooms also shape the values, goals, and strategies of journalists (Deuze, 2005). However, organizational influence can vary according to policies, size, cultures, ownership, and goals (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). News organizations form a culture or climate through which journalists learn how to relate to the world, recognize formal and informal standards for acceptable behavior, and are exposed to leaders who emphasize certain values (Wilkins, 2014). Some newsrooms constrain individual agency and prevent journalists from expressing ethical concerns (Harcup, 2014). But the newsroom can also serve as a space for recognizing group norms, building solidarity, meeting the common good, providing moral support for colleagues, preserving individual moral integrity, and challenging organizations to defend the "internal goods" of virtuous journalism as practice (Borden, 2007).

How Journalists Make Ethical Decisions

Journalists may face a tension in meeting organizational-level and individual-level expectations for moral behavior. Organizational influences may suggest that journalistic work serves only to fulfill bureaucratic and economic functions, whereas, as Adam (Adam, Craft, & Cohen, 2004) suggested, journalists "should be more conscious and appreciative of the complexities and moral significance of their work and allow

themselves, through study and reflection, to be invigorated and inspired by the work of their most accomplished colleagues" (p. 256). This reflection can strengthen journalists' attachment to their democratic function. Further, Craft (Adam et al., 2004) called upon corporations to consider themselves as "the home in which exercises of virtues takes place" (p. 261). That is, because corporations that own news organizations "straddle two realms, business and public service" (p. 263), they should be held accountable for collective behavior, particularly when it affects journalistic practice, a quality Craft termed "corporate moral agency."

Ethicists suggest that journalists often consider two key questions: how to meet the special responsibilities attached to their societal role and whether causing harm in pursuit of that role is justified (Elliott & Ozar, 2010). Elliott and Ozar (2010) proposed additional questions: whether the actions respect all affected, whether people get what they're entitled and have a right to, what overall good is promoted by the action, what a person's ethical heroes might do, and whether each person in the situation is getting what he or she needs (Elliott & Ozar, 2010). To answer these questions, journalists should consult newsroom policies, editors, or colleagues as well as reflect on how to balance "their journalistic principles and practices against [their] personal values and instincts" (Banaszynski, 2010, p. 237). However, journalists' decisions are often constrained by vested interests, routinized working practices, and hierarchal organizational structures (Keeble, 2008). These concerns are connected to autonomy and journalists' ability to present news impartially and fairly free of external influences (Plaisance, 2014). Threats to independence can come in the form of individual conflicts of interest or corporate-level influences, such as pressure to create advertiser-friendly editorial environments

(Plaisance, 2014).

Journalists do not initially learn about ethics in a newsroom or journalism class. Parents, friends, clergy, teachers, and others influence their moral reasoning over the course of their lives (Coleman, 2010). Therefore, individual characteristics of journalists also play a role in ethical reasoning (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004). Guided by the theories of Kohlberg (1981), including his three primary stages of moral development, Coleman and Wilkins (2004) used Rest's (1979) Defining Issues Test (DIT) to assess journalists' potential for high-level moral reasoning. Ultimately, journalists ranked fourth-highest among all professionals who had taken the test. The five predictors of high levels of moral development were: working in investigative journalism because these journalists had to regularly practice and refine their ethical decision-making; viewing the law and organizational rules as less important than other factors; having autonomy at work; a moderate level of religious influence; and a strong sense of right and wrong. Overall, these journalists reached a level of moral development that well prepared them to handle ethical challenges. The processes through which individuals address these challenges within the complexities of news production, however, should be addressed. The role of codes of ethics is also key. Scholarship on codes has offered insight into the influence of ethics and moral philosophy, norms and ideals for journalistic practice, how news managers and workers develop and apply codes, and whether they are held accountable for breaches, although scholars should also consider codes as "efforts to 'idealize' and 'rationalize' specific journalistic practices" (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 308).

Studies have addressed the ethical decision-making considerations of reporters, editors, and managers at newspapers and radio and television stations. This research has

revealed that journalists recognize the importance of engaging in ethical decision-making and seem to be equipped with individual and organizational resources to guide these discussions. What is less clear, however, is how ethics may change in an age when more journalists work outside of the newsroom (Wyatt & Clasen, 2014). Newsrooms can provide moral mentors, supporters, and advocates as well as ethical accountability; working in solitude, however, may allow journalists to develop their own approaches to moral reasoning away from collective norms and pressures (Wyatt & Clasen, 2014).

Magazine Journalists and Ethics

Research has assessed consumer magazines' ethical standards (Hesterman, 1987); media ethics debates in magazine letters to the editor (Thornton, 1998); case studies of ethical breaches at magazines (Freedman, 2003); ethical problems arising from magazine advertorial usage (Cameron, Ju-Pak, & Kim, 1996); and the ethics of magazine rock criticism (Powers, 2009). Magazine journalists, however, have been the subjects of fewer studies, particularly how they communicate about and understand ethics. Magazine journalists face ethical challenges that affect newspaper journalists, such as plagiarism, libel, invasion of privacy, and conflicts of interest, and those that are unique to magazines, particularly the influence of advertising on editorial content (Sumner & Rhoades, 2006). The rise of the Internet as a means of distributing content also raises questions of declining standards in magazines, including the prevalence of public relations-driven material and the blurring of the lines between editorial and advertising content (Holmes & Nice, 2012).

Lifestyle and consumer journalists have been designated as members of "smiling professions" who "interface with the public in the name of pleasure, entertainment,

attractiveness, appeal" (Hartley, 2000, p. 40), and some may not hold them in the same regard as hard-news-focused journalists. Other characteristics also potentially differentiate magazine journalists. Abrahamson (2007) proposed a concept called "magazine exceptionalism," which describes magazine journalists' shared interests with readers and their focus on creating content that motivates readers to action. These journalists may more carefully consider magazines' influence on readers and the consequences of ethical decisions. They may also emphasize an enhanced intimacy toward sources than other types of journalists to convey personal experiences or emotions (Steensen, 2009).

Self-employed journalists who create coverage for news organizations — a staple of magazines — have rarely been studied (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012), although they represent a particularly vulnerable group in the media industries (Ladendorf, 2012). These journalists work closely with editors to produce content, but they often do not operate within a newsroom. Therefore, freelance journalists may invoke different resources and understandings when making ethical decisions, such as relying on an individual sense of ethics rather than professional principles when navigating dual roles (Fröhlich, Koch, & Obermaier, 2013). Indeed, research has shown that freelance journalists report greater satisfaction in terms of work autonomy, and they are better positioned to act ethically than traditional newsroom workers because they can walk away from questionable assignments (Ryan, 2009). Even so, freelancers face challenges such as adapting to different editorial styles and tones depending on the publication; adjusting to clients' needs; and navigating between journalism, information, and advertising without jeopardizing their integrity (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012; Ladendorf,

2012). Freelancers also combine journalistic ideals, principles, and norms with commercial considerations, which they process according to an individual ethic (Ladendorf, 2012).

Building on literature addressing how journalists communicate about ethical decision-making and particular considerations facing freelance magazine journalists, this study addressed how these journalists define ethical dilemmas, as well as how they describe the processes through which they make ethical decisions. Lastly, the study considered the influences, both individual and organizational, and normative ethical frameworks guiding these journalists' decision-making.

Method

This study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to address magazine journalists' perceptions of the ethical dilemmas they face and how they respond to them. Much research on media ethics has often focused on outcomes rather than the quality of the process through which journalists contemplate moral claims (Plaisance, 2014), or the "nature of the 'facts' of ethical deliberation" (Plaisance, 2011, pp. 99-11). Rather, an interpretive, inductive approach can explore the factors that shape ethical decision-making, including personality, values, and ideologies (Plaisance, 2011).

Qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand subjects' experiences and perspectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This approach is effective in capturing respondents' "native conceptualizations of communication," processes that cannot otherwise be observed, and past occurrences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Semi-structured interviews also provide researchers with the flexibility to investigate complex concepts without the burden of a structured framework (Frey & Fontana, 1994). This

method allowed respondents to explore how they made ethical decisions, the influences guiding those decisions, and the freedoms and constraints they experienced.

Sample and Procedure

This study used a purposive sample of magazine journalists. Participants had written at least one article for a magazine on a freelance basis. Initial participants were identified using the Freelance Marketplace on the website Media Bistro.com. Other participants were identified using a purposive snowball sample. The researcher included both award-winning and non-award-winning journalists covering a variety of topics and working for print and online magazines nationwide. Interviews were sought until repetition occurred, no additional information was emerging from new participants, and concepts were developed (Rakow, 2011). The final sample included 14 journalists, and participants ranged in age from 22 to 57 years and averaged 14 years of experience as freelance journalists, meaning that they were self-employed, rather than working for a particular news organization. Four of the journalists were male, and 10 were female.

The freelance journalists represented a variety of educational backgrounds and wrote for a range of publications, from trade magazines to city and regional magazines to websites with magazine-style content to national consumer magazines. Their specialties included social issues, criminal justice, technology, education, the environment, history, religion, crime, entertainment, business, health and wellness, science, women's issues, architecture, travel, and food. They had written long-form narrative pieces, investigative reports, personal essays, reader-service articles, and personality profiles.

The researcher contacted each of these journalists individually via e-mail to request their participation in the study. Interviews, which were conducted by phone,

lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, with an average length of 46 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions, some of which were replicated from Dougherty and Drumheller (2006), addressed types of ethical issues magazine journalists faced, resources informing their decision-making, and their process for resolving an ethical dilemma. Participants were also asked to relate a particular ethical challenge and how it was handled. The researcher also listened for other subjects arising in participants' responses and followed up accordingly (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

Coding

The researcher coded and analyzed the data using the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through this process, researchers assess data, compare incidents, and categorize them. The researcher then begins to discern the "theoretical properties" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106) of the categories and how they relate to one another, which informs continued coding. Ultimately, this approach to coding "causes the accumulated knowledge pertaining to a property of the category to readily start to become integrated; that is, related in many different ways, resulting in a unified whole" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 109). For this study, using the constant comparative approach revealed themes addressing how participants discussed their ethical decision-making, the unique ethical challenges they faced, and other theories related to individual and organizational ethical decision-making for magazines.

Findings

The freelance journalists in this study addressed an array of ethical issues, including whether to allow sources to review articles before publication, accepting gifts, privacy and objectivity concerns in source interactions, and balancing their personal and

their editors' preferences when preparing articles for publication.

RQ1: Defining Ethical Dilemmas

More than half of the journalists interviewed for this study focus on lifestyle coverage, such as health, travel, and food. Many of these journalists suggested that because they emphasize topics that have traditionally been considered "soft news," rather than more controversial or politically oriented coverage, the challenges they face might not constitute ethical dilemmas. This dichotomy was particularly evident in Journalist K's discussion of "high stakes" and "low stakes" dilemmas. This distinction was evident both in the types of stories she produced — covering business transactions and company acquisitions — and interactions with sources, such as sources wanting to see a draft of the piece and companies sending free products.

Other journalists seemed to rely on similar implicit hierarchies, suggesting that because they focused on topics such as food, travel, relationships, and health, their decision-making carried less consequentialist weight and, thus, lower stakes. Journalist E described a source who wanted to read a story before it went to print:

> I ended up having to find someone else because I became uncomfortable with her discomfort even though I said, 'Look, there are things you don't want to talk about or issues that you feel like journalists get wrong, let's bring those up.' But in the end I kind of felt like this is a travel story. […] What could I get wrong really, you know?

Although this journalist said she often encounters sources who do not trust journalists, she questioned whether this situation represented an ethical dilemma because, as a travel and food writer, "I'm certainly not gonna bring someone down from political office."

Journalist J said that while writing a profile on a dating expert, she learned through her research that he had been divorced, but she did not include this detail in the story. She said, "I mean, and I don't know that it — 'cause like part of me, I wasn't trying to write anything controversial. I was just trying to appeal to people who struggle to date, and people who struggle to date get divorced." Because this journalist's focus was not to reveal sensitive information about the source, she did consider this an ethical dilemma.

Journalists also used this "low stakes" consideration to differentiate themselves from other types of journalists, particularly investigative or newspaper journalists. Journalist M, who writes about architecture and design for regional and national consumer magazines, distinguished herself from investigative journalists, saying:

> The vast majority of people that I speak to are thrilled to talk to me, because I'm usually interviewing them about something that they're very interested in, usually their passion or something that they have a lot of knowledge on. They are really excited about sharing that with the world.

This comment suggests that because this journalist focuses on highlighting sources' successes, rather than revealing potentially inflammatory information, sources are willing to talk with her and she is not concerned that information she seeks or reveals will create an ethical dilemma. Journalist J, who has written for regional and national magazines, said she takes a different view of writing than traditional journalists: "I think a lot of journalists are all about just getting the news out there, but I'm more about showing people that they're not alone in things." Journalist G, who has written for regional and national magazines and websites, said he adopts different standards for forming relationships with sources when writing about lifestyle-focused topics than when writing

on politics or social issues. He said, “In lifestyle what I’m doing is just, like, trying to punch rich people in the face with words,” suggesting that when writing for a “glossy city magazine,” for example, he focuses on connecting with the affluent audience and can set aside some of the restrictions associated with other approaches to journalism, such as becoming close to a source to capture a compelling narrative.

Another journalist (H) said that while newspaper journalists say they cannot interview sources they know, such as friends or family members, she does not feel this pressure. She said:

> I’m doing a piece on infertility, and one of my friends went through infertility. Why shouldn’t I use her? She’s gonna be a good source. But people who come from the newspaper world are like, “Oh, no, you can absolutely not do that.”

This journalist recognized that writing on a freelance basis allows her to choose what sources are appropriate, rather than deferring to an organizational or professional mandate. Journalist M also contrasted his role as a freelancer with the more defined identity of newspaper journalists. She said, “If I was doing investigative journalism, I would probably handle myself differently, but I tend to keep things very conversational. You know — just like, ‘Hey, we’re friends,’ that type of thing — because I think it helps people to relax.” As a freelancer, this journalist said she has greater flexibility in determining how she should interview and interact with sources.

Respondents also discussed the flexibility freelancing gave them to determine how and when to identify themselves as journalists. Journalist D, a longtime freelancer who has written several high-profile articles for national consumer magazines, said that when covering a story in Rwanda, he hesitated to identify himself as a journalist because

doing so "could have kept me out of some scenes that I really wanted to witness," such as meetings with government officials. Journalist E, in writing a travel story about post-Hurricane Katrina Louisiana, said, "I found that people were kind of sick of talking about it, so I just wanted to people to be — I just feel like just being upfront with what my intent is helps put people at ease." This journalist used the focus of her story — the resilience of Louisiana residents — to break the ice with her sources rather than aligning herself with a particular news organization.

Overall, these comments suggest that magazine journalists' desire to distinguish themselves from "hard news" journalists as well as their status as freelancers removed from organizational constraints reduced tension associated with breaching ethical norms. That is, the journalists used their status as lifestyle or "soft news" journalists to suggest that they do not face dilemmas in their coverage, despite the complexity of covering topics such as business, health, and travel. However, this distinction also allowed journalists to personally define their understanding of journalism's mission, such as building community and recognizing achievements.

RQ2: Ethical Decision-Making Processes

This emphasis on defining ethical dilemmas based on "high stakes" and "low stakes" considerations was also evident in how the freelance journalists discussed their ethics decision-making processes. The journalists were influenced by occupational norms, particularly the practices and preferences of editors. However, they also said they appreciated the autonomy afforded by working outside of an organization, which allowed them to develop and apply their sense of right and wrong. These tensions illuminated the

situations in which journalists were willing to compromise their journalistic principles and those that drew more focused considerations.

Journalist K discussed the negotiation that occurs with balancing a magazine's preferred approach to content with her need to explain complex topics. For example, "The way that science is covered for a women's publication, it tends to — it tends to be that the voice is very positive and very simple, which I think is a good thing. But it can — it can put you in a position where you are storifying things" (K). This journalist said a magazine must present topics in an engaging way to appeal to its readers, which limits how freelance journalists can write stories. Journalist M expressed frustration with having to sacrifice her preferred approach to a story to maintain a magazine's style, saying, "Stories are getting shorter and shorter, so I end up having to leave a lot of things out that I think are really important."

Journalist D described a story in which the argument being made did not reflect research he had conducted, but his editor insisted on the angle: "It was a question of, do I want to go the mat for this? Is this something I'm willing to quit for? […] Am I doing a disservice to the readers by giving this guy's point of view? Can I live with it? Ultimately I decided I could live with it. It was very unpleasant." Although these journalists felt conflicted about the ways their stories were presented, they recognized their role in the editorial relationship — as a writer for a paying client. Therefore, as journalist K said, "If you're living freelance assignment to freelance assignment, it can be really hard to push back. You want to just go with whatever just so you get your check." Although the journalists expressed concern over how their reporting would be presented to the public,

they were willing to compromise these considerations to protect their relationship with a particular publication.

However, the journalists also described incidents when a news organization crossed the line, such as making edits that did not reflect their reporting. Journalist G suggested that although a magazine for which he was writing often took a critical or sarcastic stance toward subjects, he did not want his article to reflect his sources negatively. Thus, "I tried to be very careful not to do that; to allow myself to analyze and speak critically about the things I was seeing without indulging in cruelty" (G). This journalist challenged his editor's preference because taking a critical stance could harm his sources. Similarly, journalist A said that when an editor tried to compare her sources in an article about a twins convention to a "freak show," she confronted him:

> I don't know if he just wanted to increase traffic or thought it would be kind of sensationalized, or I don't really know why he did that, but it didn't reflect my reporting. So I had a conversation with the editor above him who was more understanding to my side of it, and after I threatened to take my byline off of it, they let me rewrite it.

This journalist aimed to represent her sources in the way she perceived them, which led her to challenge her editor. Journalist E said that when an editor asked her to "dumb down" the ending of a story, "I really pushed hard back on that because I just didn't think it was necessary and I ended up winning. […] Editors kind of edit from a very detached POV, so, again, I just try to pick and choose things that are very important." This journalist said she wants her stories to challenge readers, and although she does not

question all of her editor's decisions, she defends this approach. This response reflected the journalist's dedication to journalistic duties such as veracity.

Influences on decision-making. Discussing how they addressed ethical dilemmas, the journalists reflected on personal ethical standards informed by a variety of sources, including education, previous job positions, and their peers. These standards could be applied in situations ranging from how to report stories to how to engage with editors to how to handle freelance business decisions. The journalists also discussed how the organizations with which they work shaped their decision-making, although rarely through formal ethics codes. Rather, they emphasized a more virtue-oriented approach emphasizing individual practices and standards and moral reasoning.

The freelance journalists highlighted their reliance on a sense of the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable journalistic practice, which at times contrasted with the standards of the news organizations with which they worked. Journalist K said, "I think what it always comes down to is, you just have to have an inner sense of where the line is because you can really easily see how a freelance journalist just has no power in terms of negotiating with the editors because they can just kill the piece." This journalist referred to the lack of job security associated with freelancing as a reason for maintaining an individual moral code, which contrasts the freelance journalists who suggested that the need to maintain relationships results in them compromising ethical standards. Journalist N said, "As a freelancer, it's easier for me to have firmer boundaries because I'm not exposed to people bending the rules, which I think probably happens a lot more now than ever in the past." This journalist suggested that because she does not work within a

newsroom, she is not as heavily influenced by the practices of her co-workers, which allows her to develop a firmer sense of ethics.

Journalist D said he feels more emotionally implicated in the outcome of an ethical dilemma than the news organizations for which he writes: “I have always felt most ambivalent about the part of the journalism that makes you pry into people’s lives and sort of badger them, so I stay up nights worrying about this. I don’t think my editor was staying up nights worrying about it.” Another journalist (F) described a situation in which a fact error was printed in a profile she wrote, although the magazine editors for whom she produced the piece were unaware of the error. She said she felt foolish in the end and “should have been more diligent in listening to my tape,” suggesting that she placed the ethical burden on herself. Journalist J said that acting ethically is up to her because:

> When I write for magazines, I can make the call. It’s like, I can have all this research. No one else was there for these interviews, so if I don’t wanna put this thing in the piece, I don’t have to, and no one will know about it.

This journalist realized that ultimately, she knows her piece best, so her decisions reflect the most highly considered ethical standard.

The journalists also cited a variety of sources that shaped their individual ethics. However, rather than citing formal professional or institutional standards or codes learned in journalism school or other formal training, they referred to specific background experiences or a sense of intuition. Journalist B said he did not learn ethics in a classroom but from working with sources and covering challenging stories:

> You own those skills just by doing it over and over, and the more you do it, the more you learn from what you took away from it. So […] it's just my own instinct at this point.

Some journalists said they did not study journalism, so their ethics were informed by their personal views of morality. Journalist C said her journalism-school training informed her ethics, "but also I want to say common sense, but then again I don't know how common it is." Journalist E referred to her basic instinct, saying, "I just want people to be happy with what I write, and I want to be happy with what I write." These approaches suggested an individually mandated ethics but one that seemed "common" or "basic," suggesting that these standards do not veer far from how any moral person would approach a dilemma.

These understandings shaped how the freelance journalists' viewed their professional missions and helped them determine when a "high stakes" dilemma necessitated a drastic response. Journalist D said he once quit a job as a staff member at a major national magazine because his work there did not reflect his view of what journalism should be. He said,

> I'd gotten into journalism to try to tell some kind of a truth about the world, and the kind of truth I wanted to tell was sort of like a deeper truth. That's very arrogant to say, but what spoke to me as something that wasn't obvious, and the very fact at having to just crank out the obvious week after week and make everything seem so tidy and clear just bothered me to the point where I just couldn't do it anymore. (D)

This journalist said he values freelance writing because it allows him to pursue stories that reflect his standards for the profession, rather than being constrained by working at a news organization. Journalist H said a prominent magazine had a common practice of rewriting quotes to reflect a particular voice or angle, so she stopped writing for that publication. Another journalist (M) said she turned down a major assignment with a national publication because it focused on marketing a corporation whose practices she morally opposes. Yet another journalist (N), who has written for regional and national trade and consumer magazines, said she does not work with publications that let public relations or marketing professionals write entire articles. She said, "I don't feel like people in companies have the same understanding of ethics and what's appropriate and not."

The freelance journalists, however, also deferred to the approaches of news organizations when doing so was strategic or eased ethical decision-making, suggesting that organizational influence played a more influential role than acknowledged. Journalist F said she seeks input from her editors because they are more aware of typical practices: "Since they're fielding all the different stories that come in, they are most likely dealing with that on a more frequent basis than I am." Thus, because these editors work in a newsroom, they may have more expertise with specific situations. More often, however, journalists relied on organizational frameworks when facing particular ethical questions, such as how to respond to sources asking for prior review of an article. Journalist K said:

> A lot of times it's just pretty simple to say, "I'm just a freelancer. My editors really insist on this point," or, "The fact-checkers are gonna be all over this, so I just really need to make sure that … " And when people are asking to see the

> piece or something, I have to just say, “Oh, yeah, that's not really something we do.”

Journalist M said, “I think what that comes down to is every publication has its policy, and as a freelance writer you don’t have much control over that kind of thing.” Therefore, freelancers were willing to cite their lack of control when doing so would help them address a commonly occurring ethical dilemma that they viewed as low stakes.

Some journalists considered their journalistic peers in developing their ethical reasoning. Journalist D said he does not follow a formal code of ethics but thinks about “how the journalists who I admire would do it. It’s kinda like that ‘What would Jesus do’ kind of thing.” Journalist M was part of a freelance writer’s group, and she approached them with ethical questions. She said, “So I guess that’s my new camaraderie, my new water-cooler bunch.” This group of freelance writers supplements the ethical decision-making that might typically occur in a newsroom. These responses reflect an emphasis on virtue ethics, or emulating the responses of others deemed virtuous. Other journalists aimed to meet the ethical standards of organizations they viewed highly, including national magazines and newspapers. Journalist N said, “I think I probably err on the side of the strictest work experience I have.” These comments suggest that multiple factors, from editors to other journalists, serve as organizational and individual exemplars to shape these journalists’ sense of acceptable journalistic practices.

Discussion

This study examined the ethical decision-making practices of freelance magazine journalists. Because these journalists write for a variety of publications, and are often removed from the newsroom, they described themselves and their ethical dilemmas in

distinctive ways. In particular, the journalists distinguished themselves from reporters covering hard-news topics, such as social issues or politics, emphasizing their focus on lifestyle topics, such as health, travel, and food. They questioned whether the challenges they face, including protecting the privacy of sources, sources asking to review drafts of articles, or editors changing stories' facts or focus, truly represent ethical dilemmas. This is despite the fact that these situations present themselves regularly and lead the journalists to question how to morally respond. Often, rather than citing formal ethical codes, which can rationalize journalistic practices (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004), they relied on past journalism experiences, peers' approaches, and their journalistic intuition to make decisions (Fröhlich et al., 2013). Some journalists, however, deferred to the ethical tactics of their organizations when doing so served a strategic function, although they also eschewed these criteria when they conflicted with their personal ethical standards.

Scholars often consider the relationship between the individual and the organization in ethical journalistic performance (Borden, 2007; Harcup, 2014; Starck, 2001). The journalists in this study described different relationships with organizations than journalists working in newsroom settings. For freelance journalists, the lack of an organizational affiliation offers both flexibility and constraints when determining how to respond to ethical dilemmas. In many cases, the journalists minimized the fact that they face dilemmas at all, suggesting that because they cover soft-news topics, which they construed as uncontroversial, their ethical concerns may not rise to the level of hard-news journalists. This finding reflects Hartley's (2000) description of lifestyle journalists as members of a "smiling profession" while reinforcing the ways feature journalists

distinguish themselves to justify certain professional practices, such as developing close relationships with sources (Steensen, 2009).

When these journalists faced challenges, such as source mistrust, sources aiming to control how they were presented in articles, or editors who wanted to change their stories in problematic ways, they engaged in internal negotiations about how to challenge the outcome of these situations. In some cases, the journalists created an ethical hierarchy, including low-stakes ethical decisions, such as whether to allow a source prior review of an article, and high-stakes dilemmas, such as an editor changing the tone of a story. In low-stakes situations, the journalists often engaged organizational ethical rules. That is, they deferred to how a particular news organization might approach the situation, such as citing a magazine's policy of not granting prior review or suggesting that a source could verify a quote during the fact-checking process. The journalists downplayed their individual autonomy as freelance journalists because taking an organizational stance lessened the ethical burden and allowed them to rely upon established standards for behavior and leaders reinforcing particular values (Wilkins, 2014).

Although the journalists upheld organizational rules on some occasions, and recognized the influence of vested interests, work routines, and hierarchal organizational structures on their decision-making (Keeble, 2008), they challenged them when they conflicted with their personal sense of journalistic obligation. In these high-stakes ethical dilemmas, the journalists valued the objectivity and autonomy with which they could pursue their reporting. For example, some journalists suggested that they felt more emotionally affected by the outcome of their reporting, in terms of effects on sources and the public, than their editors. Therefore, they viewed these ethical implications as more

important than organizational rules. The journalists also said they could approach stories with a particular goal or angle, whether aiming to present a deeper truth, reflect sources intimately, or cause readers to question taken-for-granted assumptions. This emphasis suggested that magazine journalists recognized the moral significance of their work (Adam, 2004). The journalists seemed to reflect a virtue ethics emphasis on following personal standards and practices that benefit society (Plaisance, 2014) as well as contributing to human flourishing, the common good, and reform (Borden, 2007).

However, these values occasionally created internal challenges for journalists when determining how to interact with sources. Several journalists desired to address sources in a more casual way, so the lack of an organizational affiliation allowed them that flexibility. Others said that because they did not represent a particular publication, they could better understand their sources and topics, which may contrast with how their editor views the story. Harm, then, might manifest as representing a source or topic in a false light, revealing private information about a source, or changing a source's words in print. Therefore, the journalists considered how their actions affected people and the overall good promoted by their actions (Elliott & Ozar, 2010). Ultimately, the journalists relied on news organizations for payment, so they balanced commercial considerations with individual priorities (Ladendorf, 2012). If news organizations exercised corporate moral agency (Craft, 2004), they might reconcile individual and corporate concerns.

The fact that these journalists created their own ethical hierarchies and developed strategies for responding to ethical dilemmas suggests a high level of journalistic confidence (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003). That is, rather than focusing primarily on their peers and organizational responses, they relied on their intuition, morality, and values to

address challenges. Because several of the journalists were experienced freelance reporters, they also refined strategies for approaching stories and working with sources, situations in which professional confidence affects ethical decision-making more highly (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003). These journalists also created tactics for working with organizations and described an internal barometer for determining what types of challenges in the editing process merit their intervention. In some cases, the influence of editors resulted in journalists accepting certain occupational norms, such as adapting to different editorial styles and tones or adjusting to clients' needs (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012). In other cases, journalists referred to their peers when determining how to handle situations, such as working with difficult editors or balancing source concerns, whether in a writer's group or in reflecting on the practices of "ethical heroes" (Elliott & Ozar, 2010). These responses reflect Plaisance's (2015) finding that when making ethical decisions, professionals' moral identity may be shaped by multiple factors, including an ethical ideology, personality traits, and their professional environment.

This study included a few limitations, particularly the length of the interviews, which ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. This is expected in that the interview subjects balance multiple responsibilities and have limited time to participate in research. Future research should explore the ethical dilemmas these journalists face most often, including how they interact with sources, their work processes with editors, and how they ethically pursue their own business interests. Research should also compare the ethical reasoning of freelance journalists covering hard-news topics and those addressing soft-news topics. Lastly, an observational study of how magazines approach and view ethical decision-making from within a magazine organization would be beneficial.

Freelance magazine writers represent an under-studied group of journalists but one facing a range of ethical dilemmas. These journalists do not reap the benefits associated with making ethical decisions in a newsroom, such as norms, standards, role models, and peer support (Borden, 2007; Wilkins, 2014). Rather, they often rely on their own sense of moral reasoning that may challenge collective norms (Wyatt & Clasen, 2014). This journalistic intuition, in many cases, has been developed over many years, allowing the journalists to address a range of ethical questions. They, however, continue to express uncertainty in navigating the dichotomy between political and lifestyle journalism and their place within it. As such, this group of journalists can shed light on how ethics is defined and how journalists should respond when dilemmas arise.

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