

Rethinking Media Ethics in the Digital Age: Toward a Framework for Alternative Media Control

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Abstract

The growth of alternative media has challenged traditional media practices and structures, enabling new ways for participatory journalism and digital activism. However, the ethical frameworks governing these alternative platforms remain unclear and under theorized, largely operating in an ethical vacuum or borrowing from mainstream media ethics to guide online performances. This article identifies a critical ethical gap in alternative media practices. Through a systematic literature review, it examines the ethical tensions and regulatory gaps that emerge when non-professional actors engage in production of media content for public consumption. This article proposes principles for creating ethical guidelines that match with the values of transparency and inclusivity in the digital age. It guides to understand the present setting of media ethical frameworks, focusing on how ethical frameworks can be transformed to meet digital age's dynamic nature, helping policymakers, media practitioners, assess the implications and guide future studies. The article concludes that alternative media ethics are inevitable in the current digital environment and they offer theoretical guidance for producers and consumers to be free in the production and consumption of media content especially online content ethically, creating something different from the known mainstream media ethics purposely to help in regulating alternative media in the digital era for better services.

Key Words: Alternative Media, Media ethics, Ethical framework, Alternative media ethics, Digital age.

Introduction

Media is a vital form of communication through which individuals send, receive, and create information to accomplish their purposes (Katamba, 2018). To ensure media effectively serves its purposes, ethical principles guide media practitioners, operators, owners, and workers that must be implemented. These principles assist in guiding media actions and operations within laws and regulations that govern a society. Ethics, as defined by Uzun (2009), are moral principles that guide decision-making processes. This suggests that before making decisions, rules must be followed for effective decision-making.

In the media context, these moral rules are referred to as media ethics. Personal and organizational codes of conduct, as well as societal rules, are examples set by organizations or societies. In news coverage and media, ethics are the moral principles that guide media personnel in collecting, disseminating, and receiving media content (Uzun, 2009). These principles include impartiality, truthfulness, objectivity, balance, public interest, privacy, and avoiding bias (Atton, 2008). Media ethics extend beyond media workers to include operations of media organizations and their audience. On an institutional level, Gulyas and Baines (2020) noted that ethics may include media ownership, control, accountability, commercialization, taste, and decency, and obscenity, freedom of speech, advertising practices, and legal issues. These should comply with laws in a specific nation, as media ethics are essential for building trust, fostering understanding between stakeholders, and avoiding harm. Media ethics help maintain reputation, avoid bias, promote societal development, create informed citizens, solve political problems, and promote democracy.

These outcomes require clear media codes of conduct, implementation, empowerment, law enforcement, and addressing personal interests (Atton, 2006). As media operate nationally and internationally, everyone must ensure these ethics are followed. Unfortunately, in some societies,

media personnel work in systems that discourage ethical journalism, following personal and ideological guidelines of elites, leading to disinformation and undemocratic societies (Uzun, 2009), leading to the emergence of alternative media.

These outcomes require clear media codes of conduct, implementation, empowerment, law enforcement, and addressing personal interests (Atton, 2006). As media operate nationally and internationally, everyone must ensure these ethics are followed. Unfortunately, in some societies, media personnel work in systems that discourage ethical journalism, following personal and ideological guidelines of elites, leading to disinformation and undemocratic societies (Uzun, 2009), leading to the emergence of alternative media. Alternative media are not much different from mainstream media in their operations but may not effectively work under same ethical principles. In this article, alternative media is referred to as non-mainstream, participatory platforms (both online and offline) that operate “independently” of state ownership and prioritize social change over commercial gain. These involve activist blogs, citizen journalism initiatives, independent digital platforms, and community radio. While alternative media often challenge traditional media operations, their operational boundaries remain unclear, frequently overlapping with mainstream media in content, content production, distribution, and even funding models (Kenix, 2011; Rauch, 2016), which complicates the development of distinct ethical standards.

Regardless of the developing influence of alternative media, empirical research indicates persistent ethical failures including the replication of biased narratives, unverified information, and lack of editorial oversight (Atton, 2008; Tandoc et al., 2018). Studies reveal that over 60% of digital alternative media content sampled in global south perspective lacks basic source attribution or fact-checking (Katamba & Kayıhan, 2024). Yet no existing dedicated ethical framework to address these issues, and most alternative media practitioners either operate in un-ethical manner or improvise using legacy journalism codes, which are not suitable to participatory, non-hierarchical media environments.

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) critically examine the ethical challenges facing alternative media in the digital age; (2) evaluate the inadequacies of existing media ethics frameworks; and (3) suggest a set of alternative ethics and principles grounded in the values of transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. With these, the article contributes to the growing field of digital media ethics by presenting a replicable framework for ethical governance in non-mainstream media contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, a systematic literature review (SLR) was done using the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. This helped ensuring a clear and thorough review of studies about alternative media and ethics in the digital age (Punch, 2013; Fahad and Bulut, 2024). The search was conducted on Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Keywords like “alternative media,” “media ethics,” “digital journalism ethics,” “ethical framework,” and “participatory media” were used with Boolean operators. The studies included were peer-reviewed articles or academic books from 2000 to 2024, focusing on ethics in alternative, participatory, or digital media, and written in English. In this search, editorials, non-empirical essays, and opinion pieces were not included. Initially, 915 records were found. After screening titles and abstracts, 313 full-text articles were chosen for further review. Out of these, 84 studies met the criteria and were analyzed. The analysis used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis model to find common ethical issues, gaps, and solutions in the literature. The results were discussed to understand current media ethics and how they can be transformed to fit the digital age, especially for policymakers, media workers, and future media (Radwan and Russo, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISSUASION

Alternative Media in the digital age

The media are intended to serve their communities; however, they sometimes abandon this purpose. Consequently, some audiences create alternative media outlets that offer content to better serve their needs. The term "alternative" refers to an available option, implying that everything is alternative to something else (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Alternative media emerges when mainstream media fail to fulfill their objectives. "Alternative Media" refers to independently operated non-mainstream media forms, such as community radio, online platforms, community-owned broadcasting companies, discussion boards, and activist publications (Coyer et al., 2007).

However, this definition suggests difficulty in distinguishing between alternative and mainstream media, as they may only differ in operations while following similar structures. Like mainstream media, alternative media can be both offline and online, operating globally. Hence, a theoretical conceptualization of "alternative media" is necessary to understand it as either an alternative to mainstream media or a challenge to societal alternatives, such as capitalism, government institutions (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). So, alternative media can be viewed as an alternative society, replacing institutions in non-performing democracies. It indicates that media scholars face the task of distinguishing between alternative and mainstream media, particularly in the digital age. According to Rauch (2016), alternative media produces more critical content, less commercialization, and greater commitment to social change than mainstream media. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) noted that alternative media differ in organizational principles, including non-commercial financing, collective organization, and horizontal structures. These characteristics make alternative media a platform for free expression without many restrictions.

Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argue that in societies with structural inequalities, understanding alternative media as participatory media is insufficient. They suggested the term "critical media" as an alternative concept, as definitions of alternative media are built on criticism. Additionally, Kenix (2011) suggests that alternative media's practices and standards are fixed in those of mainstream media, meaning that despite differences in approaches, mainstream and alternative media function in the same environment and continue converging. The relationship between alternative and mainstream media remains essential to users, producers, and scholars (Rauch, 2016), creating confusion regarding their meanings.

While researchers contend that alternative media prioritize social missions over profits, Kenix (2011) argues in "Alternative and Mainstream Media: The Converging Spectrum" that both types operate on commercial ideology to generate profits. This compromises alternative media's reliability to independent press principles, especially in the digital age where everyone is both information consumer and producer (Katamba & Kayihan, 2024). Kenix states that contemporary mainstream media utilize communication techniques associated with non-profit media, blurring differences between these two types. Additionally, technological advancements have facilitated these changes, leading to contrary arguments regarding mainstream and alternative media. In the digital age, alternative media creates platforms for individuals to express opinions on issues like political debates and participate in view exchanges. As alternative media, Katamba (2023) stated that digital platforms promote development, social change, and democratization by allowing citizens to engage in relevant areas of their lives. However, participation levels vary depending on factors such as government rules, location, ethics, and policies (Katamba 2023).

As argued by Rauch (2016), some factors like ethics may be more applicable in liberal democracies than authoritarian governments, meaning that different factors leading to alternative media ethics can result in alternative facts, causing people to understand things differently based on the facts they consume. It indicates that, although people may not know how alternative media emerged, they began using it until scholars developed interest in the field. Alternative media enables ordinary people to express views regardless of expertise or education

level. While this allows various views to be shared, the production may not always follow clear ethical standards, as warned by Atton (2008), necessitating academics' intervention and considering production and ethics for its success.

However, when academics advocate for alternative media, they may overlook aspects affecting its current performance. According to Sandoval and Fuchs (2010), alternative media should be analyzed within capitalism to recognize its role in addressing structural inequalities and limiting power relations causing unequal resource distribution. They notably added that allowing people to participate in media production doesn't guarantee their voices to be heard. According to Atton (2006), this occurs because alternative media production is often determined by political agendas, differentiating it from commercial media and making it responsible to financing and political influence. Consequently, alternative media projects and content tend to be created, edited, and produced by nonprofessional groups of people, such as activists of social change, with political motives (Atton, 2006: 16) which limits the effectiveness of alternative media, or sometimes to their rapid growth and development as they focus on serving specific groups.

Alternative Media and Ethics

In the realm of alternative media and ethics, alternative ethics indicates that multiple sets of ethical guidelines can coexist and challenge each other in media ethics sphere. The prevailing media ethics and an alternative set may both be present. Alternative ethics are perceived as guidelines that question existing ethics (Gulyas and Baines, 2020). This situation exists in media and communication due to inadequate existing media ethics, technological development, and factors causing changes in media operations, content, and geographical reach (Jamil, 2021). These factors have made alterations in media ethics unavoidable as alternative media audiences might not be satisfied with content based on prevailing ethics.

Following formal media ethics, stories serving public interest may be suppressed due to ethical considerations. Alternative media and ethics may promote greater media freedoms and support listeners' access to restricted information (Aharoni, 2023). Some investigative reporting efforts have emerged from alternative media outlets. Digital media ethics can help audiences create better communities (Hess and Waller, 2017). However, Hess and Waller (2017) highlighted ethical challenges in determining what constitutes a 'community,' who belongs, and who needs representation, as many groups feel powerful to determine journalism practices. Meanwhile, some journalists consider funders, advertisers, and politicians as their communities (Katamba & Kayihan, 2024), potentially leading to inadequate public representation. Even alternative media may not meet expectations in journalism lacking clarity on its target communities (Aharoni, 2023; Bailey, 2007). Forde (2017) stated that alternative media ethics should guide entire media processes, not just content. This suggests alternative media ethics should influence the whole media industry, from information gathering to distribution. It means they should match with the existing ones.

Existing media ethics regulate content and assess industry performance and journalist character through codes of conduct and regulatory rules. Alternative media often conflict with traditional media, as the latter prioritizes profits over communities (Hess and Waller, 2017). While alternative media may be less concerned with industry regulations, they generally follow formal codes and focus on profits. Thus, alternative media codes may be more disadvantageous to the industry than regulatory.

Media's ethical challenges in digital age

The digital age has not only introduced alternative media but also new ethical challenges for using alternative media, including issues of privacy, misinformation, and algorithmic bias. The participatory culture of digital platforms that allows everyone with capability to join digital world can lead to the spread of unverified, fake and biased information (Katamba and Kayihan, 2024),

while the lack of digital editorial oversight raises questions about transparency and accountability. False information circulates rapidly, surpassing facts due to social media algorithms that prioritize engagement over accuracy (Tandoc et al. 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). The limited editorial ethics in online platforms complicates this challenge as both citizen and professional journalists can publish unchecked content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 30). This indicates that digital publishers rarely prioritize fact-checking as in traditional media, ethically damaging truth and facts.

The rush to publish quickly also compromises verification and other issues, leading to misinformation (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001). And the infiltration of artificial intelligence (AI) in news production raises questions about transparency, objectivity, and authority (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2016), decreasing public trust in journalism. Although AI can as well improve accuracy and fact-checking, it sometimes introduces challenges with algorithm transparency, accountability, and data privacy (Al-Zoubi et al., 2024; Sonni et al., 2024). AI acts as a double-edged sword in implementing journalism ethics, helping or discouraging depending on its use. Additionally, the relationship between journalists and automation varies across socio-cultural contexts, affecting media freedom through legal and ethical problems (Jamil, 2021). This uncertainty highlights the need for context-specific ethical frameworks for AI in journalism. Some governments have constitutional media laws regulating digital environment use. However self-regulation is needed to act as informal gatekeeping for information validity (Popović, 2024), it limits journalists' freedom due to fear of reprimand, challenging online journalism.

The ethical challenges in online journalism extends to audience engagement and trust. The integration of technology into media production processes has been marked by loss of individuals' trust in the information consumed from the digital media, political polarization, and the increasing impact of misinformation (Forja-Pena et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of developing new alternative ethical frameworks that address the unique challenges caused by technology particularly of AI in journalism. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) noted that the commercialization of digital media platforms poses a threat to the independence of journalists and media platforms. This can lead to sensationalism, as digital journalism outlets compete for audience attention. Furthermore, there is also the possibility of alternative media ethics challenging the existing ones. Media ethics are moral rules that guide decision-making in the media industry (Uzun, 2009), but today such moral ethics are not expressed by alternative media users as media often focus on making profits rather than serving communities.

Another ethical concern in online journalism is privacy erosion. Digital journalists face challenges regarding when to protect or disclose personal information in reporting. As Hermida (2014, p. 477) argues, pressure to publish quickly can lead to inadequate consideration of privacy rights, particularly in cases involving vulnerable people. Today's data-driven journalism raises concerns about surveillance and ethical use of personal data (Lewis & Westlund, 2015, p. 19). Journalists repeatedly rely on analytics and user tracking tools for content production, blurring lines between public interest and offensive reporting (Zubiaga, 2022, p. 5). This over-reliance violates privacy and creates laziness in journalists, causing irresponsible reporting.

Algorithmic influence and bias further complicate ethical journalism in the digital age. Algorithms used by platforms like Facebook and Google reinforce filter bubbles, limiting exposure to various views (Pariser, 2011, p. 10). Filter bubbles keep journalists and digital users in limited circles of data related to their frequent searches which leads to online ethnicity (Kayıhan & Katamba, 2025). These circles are likely to increase AI-generated content and its effectiveness. Therefore, introducing new ethical issues in the automated systems may lack human journalists' ethical judgment (Beckett, 2019). Finally, journalists must avoid these technological challenges by ensuring balanced reporting (Al-Zoubi et al., 2024), which can be implemented when journalists apply traditional media ethics in the digital age.

How to create alternative ethical standards in the digital age?

Alternative ethical standards can be developed through alternative media channels (Sen, 2017). Alternative media channels need alternative media ethics to differentiate from mainstream media, which seems ineffective in addressing community concerns. However, alternative media may not be easily managed unless established alternative media ethics exist, which workers must consider as a social responsibility in media operations. As Gulyas and Baines (2020) argue, alternative media ethics should be created independently of the current producer-audience relationship, which views the audience as mere content consumers. With digital media as an alternative medium where consumers can act as producers, the concept of media consumers need revision, and media ethics must be reformed to allow individuals to engage in both production and consumption, creating something ethically distinct (Gulyas and Baines, 2020). This implies that traditional ethics can coexist with new alternative ethics serving similar or different goals.

Technology and the internet have enabled inexpert individuals to engage in media work without payment or professional training (Bailey et al., 2007; Aharoni, 2023; Katamba & Kayihan, 2024). Consequently, Harcup (2015) suggests that alternative media ethics are likely to be developed by individuals with or without professional media knowledge, as content is produced by potential audience as alternative producers and citizen journalists to serve personal and public interests. Additionally, unlike mainstream media where most ethics are followed worldwide, alternative media ethics must be personalized to communities they serve, as noted by Atton (2013). This approach can foster ethics grounded in communities' cultures and interests, likely being more effective in addressing specific problems than current media ethics developed in Western societies and applied globally. Meanwhile, as alternative ethics can vary between communities, this may lead to different alternative facts based on views rather than evidence and truth.

Alternative media can serve as journalism or activism (Waltz, 2005), and their ethics should reflect this. Sen (2017) argues that alternative media ethics must align with operational formats. As technology has enabled alternative media channels to proliferate, particularly on social media, there is a growing need to establish ethical guidelines for their various goals and audiences. Some platforms may serve journalistic purposes, while others may be activism-oriented, making it challenging to form ethics that serve both situations. Therefore, alternative media ethics should accommodate both journalists who report and investigate and activists who engage in propaganda, commentary, sharing, and posting (Atton, 2006). However, these ethics may not prioritize conventional media ethics of plagiarism, truth, balance, and fairness (Atton, 2008) yet democracy relies on truth in media and communication.

However, when alternative media ethics are not formulated carefully, they may affect communities positively or negatively, as they interrelate with mainstream media ethics, norms, structures, constraints, and commodification. While mainstream media has addressed issues like violence, lies, and privacy, it has had limitations meeting societal expectations. Alternative media ethics can be based on journalistic principles of privacy, fairness, balance, attribution, protection of rights, objectivity, and avoiding bias (Atton, 2008). Creating new media ethics requires professionals with journalistic training to design alternative ethics, rather than untrained practitioners who may base their alternative media on personal motives (Atton, 2008).

Kamila and Jasrotia (2023) identified ethical concerns including bias, fairness, privacy, security, trust, reliability, and transparency for digital practices. So, in some African countries, governments have established alternative media ethics to regulate mainstream media alongside traditional ethics citing security issues and creating communication boundaries. Sadly, due to technology, people producing or consuming online content through digital alternative media may not follow alternative media ethics, possibly due to lack of communication boundaries. However, this doesn't mean they are unethical; ethics can be reflected in character, behavior, and

personality. According to Bartneck et al. (2021), personal ethics concerns doing right and avoiding wrong in one's work environment, even if it doesn't align with written codes.

Alternative media ethics have existed as individuals maintain moral characters when communicating within communities (Forde, 2017). While alternative media can operate without specific ethical guidelines, this approach may be dangerous. Furthermore, Impartiality, truth checking, and balance aren't always priorities for online journalists, who often focus on serving society's interests and intensifying unheard voices. However, local communities need accurate, multi-sourced news, as news production involves editing that expresses particular viewpoints (Aldridge, 2007; Atton, 2008). Mainstream media can be influenced by official sources, owners, elites, advertisers, and community resources (Devereux, 2014). As traditional media moves online, traditional media ethics need revision to create digital alternative ethics helping local media remain valuable to communities and citizen journalists.

In such cases, alternative media ethics can provide a framework for media to commit to serving the audience, by providing useful information and enabling democratic engagement (Harcup, 2016). This is particularly important when formal media ethics are silent on unethical media practices, and journalists give priority to their personal interests and those of their bosses over representing voiceless individuals in communities. In these situations, alternative media ethics can help to reflect and reinforce the views of the audience in the community.

Proposed Ethical Rules for Alternative Media

This article reviews 84 studies to suggest five key ideas for a new set of ethics for alternative media. These ideas are meant to work with, not replace, traditional media ethics. They address the unique ways alternative media operate and involve people. The ideas are: (1) Radical transparency. Alternative media should share not just sources and funding, but also corrections, how they use algorithms, and their editorial processes. This focuses on showing how things work rather than just protecting the media's reputation. (2) Participatory accountability. This means making sure that alternative media are accountable and that the communities they serve can correct, edit, and challenge content. This shifts responsibility from professionals to the public. (3) Inclusivity. Ethical practices should make sure that voices are not ignored because of gender, class, race, or location. (4) Resistance to control. Alternative media should resist commercial and political pressures like hidden sponsored content, political ads, and algorithmic tricks to boost engagement. (5) Algorithm literacy self-rule. Users of alternative media should understand how algorithms work so they can resist their influence and the automated decisions that affect what content is seen or hidden.

DISCUSSION

The relationship between alternative and mainstream media is characterized by both stiff and flexible systems, defined by factors such as producer perceptions, integrated content, and audience reception. These factors are determined by themes like novelty, conservatism, freedom, recognition, and authenticity (Aharoni, 2023) which should be achieved through ethics. While mainstream media ethics exist, these seem to focus on individual responsibility. The creation of alternative ethics requires a shift from top-down professionalized standards to bottom-up, community-driven practices, prioritizing collective social justice and accountability. This approach aligns with alternative media values, which seek to empower marginalized communities and challenge power structures. Katamba (2023) emphasized the need for media ethics to control individuals who lack knowledge and behave unethically due to freedom of expression and commercial ambitions. It is vital to establish rules to govern citizen journalists in the digital age who do not take their work seriously because they own personal platforms and can publish freely (Katamba & Kayihan, 2024), to promote social and ethical societies.

However, the creation of alternative ethics faces challenges, including resource constraints, co-optation by commercial interests, and technological barriers. Aldridge (2007) noted that

people often prioritize personal beliefs over established ethics when creating alternative media content, making it a "from below" ethics. This can be problematic, as police makers may choose ethical guidelines aligned with personal agendas rather than established standards serving common goals. To address these challenges, alternative media practitioners must collaborate with activists, technologists, and academics to develop practical and principled ethical frameworks (Atton, 2006).

This article proposes principles of alternative ethics including: inclusivity to ensure diverse voices are heard; transparency to disclose sources, funding, and potential biases; and accountability to address misinformation and harm. Participatory practices should facilitate community involvement in decision-making, and resistance to commercialization should maintain independence from corporate interests. For improved services and democracy, alternative media ethics can challenge mainstream media ethics, proceed with them, or challenge each other, provided they are created without considering the existing producer-audience relationship (Katamba, 2023) where ethics focus on industry performance and individual journalists' characters. Alternative media ethics are likely to be less concerned with industry performance and more focused on formal codes of practice to help this form of media remain relevant in societies.

CONCLUSION

This has established that the ethical problems faced by alternative media today are not just technical or practical. They are also about the structure and rules of media. Current media ethics, based on professional journalism, do not fit the open and activist nature of alternative media. The study found common ethical issues like lack of transparency, unverified news, and biased algorithms. These issues are not solved by current rules. The article suggests a new set of ethics called the Alternative Media Ethics Framework (AMEF). It has five main ideas: radical transparency, participatory accountability, inclusivity, and resistance to being controlled. These ideas provide a strong ethical guide for alternative media. They help alternative media stay true to their mission while dealing with digital challenges. The article suggests more research on changing media ethics and working together to create guidelines that help alternative media users. Future studies should test this framework in different settings, especially in non-Western and less wealthy areas. Working together with experts and platform developers is key to making these ideas work in real life.

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