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Between ideals and practice

Journalism students facing ethical dilemmas in online newsroom teaching-Lessons from Denmark

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Between ideals and practice: Journalism students facing ethical dilemmas in online newsroom teaching. Lessons from Denmark

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Abstract

This article looks at journalism students' experiences in a course that simulates an online newsroom. On the basis of a quantitative survey and more qualitative reflections from the students, we explore the dilemmas that students experience 'working' as online journalists in a course that simulates an online editorial and how these dilemmas are related to broader issues of journalistic ethics. Some of these experienced problems are, combined with the technological mechanisms, much embodied in online journalism and in journalistic practice in general. The survey indicates that the problems amplify the discrepancy between the students' expectation of good journalism and the perceived practice of online journalism. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of providing a course that simulates a real newsroom.

Background and literature review

Journalism students have long been a topic of media research, and journalistic ideals have been a strong component of these studies. In recent years, extensive surveys about Nordic journalism students' attitudes to journalistic ideals and the role of the journalist have been published (Hovden, 2008, 2014; Hovden & Ottosen, 2013; Willig, Zilliacus-Tikkanen, Ottosen, Hovden, & Bjørnsen, 2009)

Much of the existing research is based on surveys in which students relate to different types of hypothetical ethical dilemmas (Ball, Hanna, & Sanders, 2006; Conway & Groshek, 2009; Detenber, Cenite, Malik, & Neo, 2012; Kostyu, 1990; Sanders, Hanna,

Berganza, Javier, & Aranda, 2008) or examine students' values: above board, avoiding harm, civic minded, empathetic, fair and just (Plaisance, 2007). Others focus on how scholars teach media ethics, particularly in the USA (Lambeth, Christians, Fleming, & Lee, 2004; Richardson, 1994; Warnick & Silverman, 2011) and student perception of and expectations for mass media ethics education (Braun, 1999). However, none of these projects have focused specifically on how students express concerns about ethical dilemmas, and thereby express journalistic ideals, after they have participated in online newsroom teaching. New research on Danish journalism students shows that the dominating ideal is for students to be profound and curious journalists and not to be fast, effective and knowledgeable about what topics the audiences want (Møller Hartley & Olsen, forthcoming 2015). However, this research is based on the students' thoughts and ideals of journalistic practice, while we in this study aim to explore how 'working' as an online journalist in a simulated online environment challenges those ideals. The simulated online environment is centred around an online newspaper, www.navisen.dk. During the simulation, a course in online journalism, the students are working as journalists in the editorial, writing news and producing online television that's publicly available.

The most recent major study of Nordic journalism students found that the interest in working online and on multimedia platforms increased from 2005 to 2012 among Danish journalism students, although it is far from all students who dream about working online (Møller Hartley & Olsen, forthcoming). Furthermore, research in online journalism has documented that journalists feel pressure due to radicalized working conditions (Hartley, 2011a) when it comes to deadlines and time to do fact checking and verifying sources (García-avilés, 2014). This is also one of the conclusions of a book (Albrecht & Andreassen, 2014) about online media ethics based on a survey of Nordic journalists. A number of ethical challenges when working online were identified, including time pressure, lack of time for fact checking, errors that can spread rapidly, demands from sources, and news with only one source. In a similar way in the present article, we take the starting point of media ethics and explore this in a learning online newsroom environment. In the following, we present the Danish media ethics context.

Media ethics in Denmark

In Denmark, an independent press council has existed in its present form since the Danish Media Liability Act ('Medieansvarsloven') was passed in 1992. The law requires the Danish media to follow the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* ('De vejledende regler for god presseskik') that is part of the Act (Andersen, 2006; Blach-Ørsten, Hartley,

Flensburg, & Olsen, 2015; Pressenævnet, 2015). Citizens and companies can complain to the Press Council about the mass media in general, and the council has authority to determine cases where media publications are contrary to sound press ethics. Complaints are always interpreted in light of the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015; Jauert, 2015; Pressenævnet, 2015). The Press Council has the authority to demand that news media rectify an error in a story in different ways (Andersen, 2006; Blach-Ørsten & Burkal, 2014). There are, however, limits for the complaints:

> However, while the basis for the Press Council's authority is statutory, and failure to comply with the requirement to publish its decisions could in principle result in a fine or prison sentence of up to four months, its remit is narrow. Only the person affected by the material can make a complaint and the grounds for complaint are limited to issues of press ethics affecting them personally (for example, privacy) or to the legal right to correct factual inaccuracies if they cause significant damage (Fielden, 2012).

Most traditional and broadcast news media are registered at the Press Council. A research study in media ethics in Denmark has recently concluded that many of the news media also have their own internal ethical guidelines as a supplement to the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015). The online newspaper created for the purpose of this course, www.navisen.dk, is both registered at the Press Council and has additional internal ethical guidelines (Navisen.dk, n.d.).

Media ethics in the context of this study

In a Nordic context, several studies have pointed out that the ethical part of media ethics is unclear (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015; Brurås, 2009). In their point of view, the need for media ethics is not found in moral philosophy but in the potential damage that journalism can do to people, companies or institutions (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015; Buch, 2006). Buch has a pragmatic and practical understanding of media ethics that is closely related to the journalism profession (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015; Buch, 2006), just like the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* have. Inspired by this approach, we define media ethics like Blach-Ørsten et al. (2015): Media ethics are (our translation)

> (…) formal and informal guidelines on what journalists and media should and especially should not do in a certain journalistic situation to reduce the negative impact that journalism can have on society, the sources, the journalist herself and the journalist's place of employment (…) (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015, p. 7).

From that point of view, media ethics can be seen as a kind of tool. Fengler et al. also define media ethics as a tool or an instrument (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, Porlezza, & Russ-Mohl, 2014) that journalists can or should use at a time where they, according to several researchers, must fight for their own and the media's legitimacy (Blach-Ørsten & Burkal, 2014; Cook, 1998; Laitila, 1995a). In a new and comprehensive study in media accountability (Fengler et al., 2014), media ethics plays an essential role on five different levels[1] of media accountability instruments (Fengler et al., 2014, p. 20).[2] It is argued that different media ethics initiatives (for example, ethical codes, press councils, education) are instruments that can influence the media's accountability in a positive direction. In this article we focus on *the individual level*, which is concerned about what the individual journalist does and does not do when working as a journalist (Fengler et al., 2014, p. 20ff).

Survey methodology and background on context

In total, 284 students answered the survey in the six semesters from autumn 2012 to autumn 2014. Respondents are participants from the course in online journalism, that as previously stated simulates reality. The students act much like reporters of any traditional online news outlet. They produce content to the publicly available news site NetAvisen, available at www.navisen.dk, and using this platform, they train their skills as online journalists. For some students it is the first time publishing news to the public. The 14-day period in the online journalism course is meant to mimic reality. The students act like journalists when calling sources and engaging news stories, and in every respect possible, the challenges they face are very real - unapproachable sources, tight deadlines, feedback from both internal and external editors, as well as the many ethical problems relating to journalism. The course builds on the idea that you get the best understanding of ethical guidelines and the dilemmas of these by working as a journalist (Richardson, 1994, p. 113).

During the course, the students get a theoretical lecture on online journalism, and they read academic literature on the subject; thus, they get a notion of the problems already identified in the 'real world' of online news production. Prior to this course, the students

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[1] The levels are: 1) Individual level. At this level you find the journalist. 2) Professional standards level. At this level you find, for example, press councils. 3) Organizational level. At this level you find newsrooms and the media organization, ombudsmen and collective press codes. 4) Extra media level: At this level you find NGO's, social networks and watchblogs by citizens. 5) Transnational level. This is the ideological level.
[2] In her research on press codes in Europe, Laitilas (1995) points out that the function of the codes are: '(…) to specify accountability with regard to different outside interest (…)' and '(…) to protect the integrity and identity of the profession itself (…)' (Laitila, 1995b, p. 531).

have had several semesters where they studied taking courses not directly relevant to journalism but preparing them for journalism as an addition to their academic skills. They chose journalism prior to entering the university but did not start on the subject of journalism before two years into their bachelor studies. This means there is a great expectation to what journalism is, and many of these expectations are not necessarily met. Students have also had, prior to the online course, four weeks of practice-based teaching of research methods, interview techniques, journalistic genres and as part of this a lecture with a focus on journalistic ethics in news reporting. During the lecture the students are introduced to the Press Council *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* and the internal ethical guidelines on NetAvisen (Navisen.dk, n.d.).

The survey is distributed to the students on the last day of the course in online journalism. The response rate of the survey is 100 %[3] because it is mandatory for completing the course.

We combine quantitative and qualitative questions in the survey. For the quantitative data, the general structure of a five-point scale combined with general production questions is used. In the qualitative part, respondents can elaborate on the problems encountered and are nudged towards giving detailed and concrete examples[4].

The survey questions are an operationalization of the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics,* the content of which is divided into chapters: A) Correct information, B) Conduct contrary to sound press ethics and C) Court reporting (Pressenævnet, 2015). In the survey we ask questions related to two general areas inspired by the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics*: news sources and seeking the truth/correct information. They are in many ways closely related.

Survey questions

The following are a select part of the rules (Pressenævnet, 2015)[5] regarding sound press ethics in Denmark.

An entire chapter is about correct information, e.g. rules like the following:

A1: '*It is the duty of the media to publish information correctly and promptly. As far as possible it should be verified whether the information given or reproduced is correct*'.

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[3] Although the response rate is 100 %, there are different sample sizes as it is possible to skip questions.
[4] The overall data of the first part are available online at http://journalismdata.ruc.dk; however, the second part (qualitative) of the data is password protected due to privacy issues of the data.
[5] An English version of the rules is available at http://www.pressenaevnet.dk/Information-in-English/The-Press-Ethical-Rules.aspx

A6: '*The form and content of headlines and subheadlines shall be substantiated by the article or publication in question. The same rule shall apply to newspaper placards*'. (Pressenævnet, 2015)

In relation to this, we ask the students if they have published wrong facts both intended and unintended. Even if publishing wrong facts is unintended, it may result in a complaint to the Press Council, and therefore it becomes an ethical issue. We also ask if the students had to do headlines that were really sharp because headlines that are too sharp can result in a complaint to the Press Council for a potentially undocumented story.

A great part of the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics* is related to the use of sources in journalistic production, both in terms of being fair and taking care of the sources and in relation to protecting yourself (as a journalist/media) from sources trying to take over the story.

A2: '*The sources of news should be treated critically, in particular when their statements may be coloured by personal interest or tortious intent*'.

A3: '*Information which may be prejudicial or insulting or detract from the respect in which individuals should be held shall be very closely examined before publication, primarily by submission to the person concerned. Submission should be made so as to give the person concerned a reasonable time to reply*'.

A4: '*Attacks and replies should, where this is reasonable, be published together and in the same way. This particularly applies to insulting or prejudicial statements*'.

B6: '*At the collection or publication of information, the confidence, feelings, ignorance, lack of experience or lack of self-control should not be abused*'.

These rules were then operationalized into a set of questions. In the survey we ask if the students during the course experienced whether (the rule(s) the survey questions relate to is in parentheses):

1. Published wrong facts (A1)
2. Had to do headlines that were really sharp (A1, A6)
3. Part-sources in stories felt they were not heard enough (A3, A4)
4. Published articles without hearing relevant parties (A3, A4)
5. Could not publish an article because a part-source did not respond (A3, A4)
6. Sources felt misunderstood (A1, A6, B6)

7. Had to pressure sources to hurry up (B6)

8. Sources wanted to correct quotes (A1, A2)

It is worth noting that many of these rules and questions overlap, and some violate as well as affirm the advisory rules. For instance, 'sources wanted to correct quotes' could be a problem because of a potential overtake of the story by a source, but it could also support rule A1 in providing correct information. However, if perceived as a problem by the student, it is most likely not a positive outcome (a support of A1) but rather a loss of criticism towards the source (a violation of A2). The same applies to 'sources felt misunderstood' because sources could have been misunderstood and misquoted. Again, if perceived as a problem by the student, it is probably not an affirmation of the rules.

Findings

Students engaging in the online course produced between two and 12 articles[6] in the 14-day period of the course. The mean[7] production rate was 6.07 articles per student, and the median was 6.00 articles. For newcomers into journalism, this is a very high production rate because the articles are all published and have to meet a certain standard. The interesting part is the number of articles that caused problems for the students; the mean rate[8] was 1.90 articles with a median of 2.00. In short, about every third article published in the newspaper NetAvisen has yielded problems for the journalists doing the reporting. The nature of the problems is reported in the qualitative section but also measured in the quantitative section, as shown in Figure 1.

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[6] An article could also be a web television bit; however, because the majority are regular online text articles, we only refer to articles.

[7] This is a 5 % trimmed rate using SPSS to explore the data.
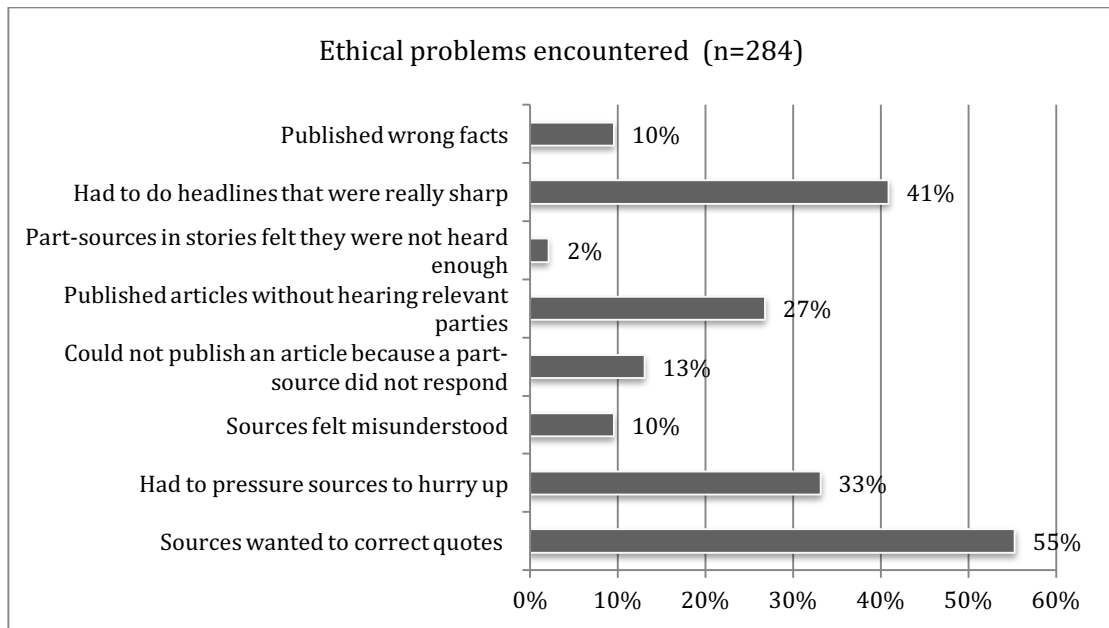
[8] See previous note.

Figure 1

The main problem encountered was that sources demand that their quotes be corrected or changed. This is an inevitable consequence of the online era where e-mails with quotes can be sent instantly; therefore, sources often request that quotes are approved prior to publishing. Journalists can see this as a loss of control. Secondary problems also circle around issues that are online-centric in their nature. Because the online news media has a very rapid pace, journalists feel they have to pressure their sources to 'hurry up', and because online media is in constant competition with other online media organizations, the headlines, often the only entrance to the article itself, must be very sharp.[9] This results in headlines often not covering the story in full but more focused on attracting the click of the user. In the literature, this is referred to as 'click bait' (Eberholst & Hartley, 2013) and is something that is inherent in the general tabloid nature of online news (Hartley, 2011b). This seems to have consequences for how students perceive online journalism and how it is in line or in conflict with their journalistic ideals.

Exploring the consequences of these encountered problems, the students are requested to rate their experiences with online journalism as to whether they are on par with what they perceive as 'good journalism'. Their responses are shown in Figure 2.

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[9] Teachers of this course have the function of editors, constantly working together with the students on making headlines and content better and more journalistic. As part of their learning process, the course functions as a mini apprenticeship.
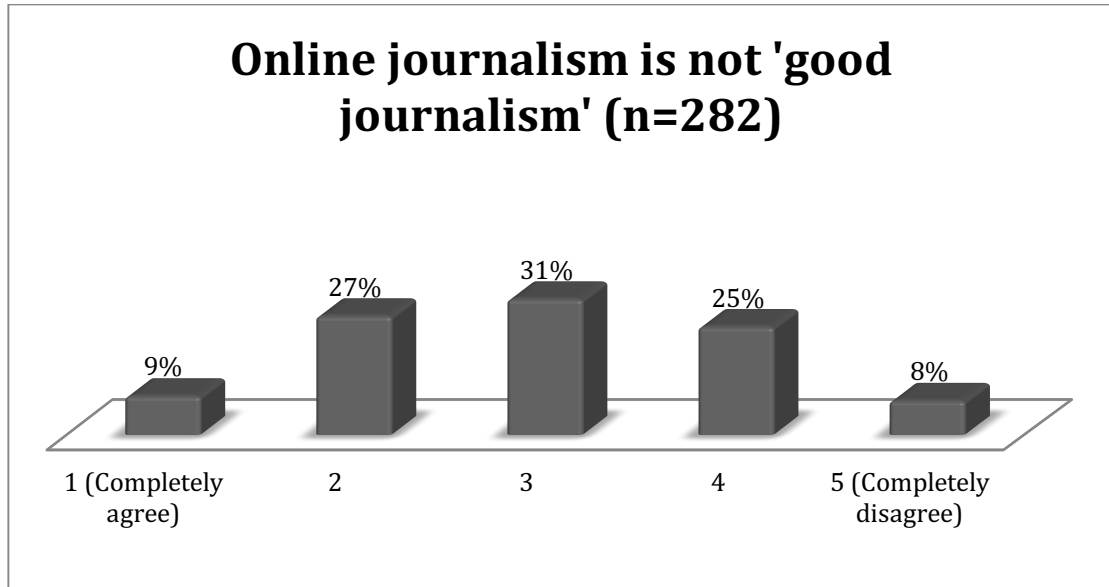
Online journalism is not 'good journalism' (n=282)

Figure 2

Exploring these results, roughly one-third (33 %) of the students fall on the positive side, another third (31 %) are undecided and the last third (36 %) are negative towards online journalism. Results shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are aggregated and not divided by semesters due to the low respondent numbers for some semesters[10]. For this reason, there is insufficient data to expand on whether there is any correlation, for example, between the one-third of the articles that gave problems and the semester.

The qualitative data provide elaborations to their answers and illustrate the complexity between ideals and ethics in online news production. The quotes are not meant to directly address the questions asked in the survey but rather to help understand more general perspectives.

Many responses indicate and identify the same problems: the fast paced need for 'new news', the headline of the story as a selling point and the lack of depth in reporting. As one student wrote:

> *With a massive and constant flow of news, the online journalist is working under conditions automatically breaking my expectations of good journalism. The demand for new news will always be on the behalf of thoughtfulness, nuances and perspective—three things that by default would bring quality to the journalistic product.*

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[10] Due to the different numbers of students each semester, the range of student numbers per semester is 24–91. On http://journalismdata.ruc.dk the data are divided by semesters and can be retrieved if needed. In this article we have chosen only to use aggregated data.

As Hartley found in 2011, this is very much on par with the reality that online journalists with established Danish media perceive as problems (Hartley, 2011a). It is worth noting that this is lectured to the students and also part of the reading material provided prior to the online course, which could allow for a great deal of bias. This is probably the reason why many students also write that they see both the problem and the solution:

> There is a lot of bad journalism online. But it is not bad because it is online. If the platform had more resources, I am sure it could deliver great journalism because online media can deliver so many things that print media can't.

Another student attacked the news criteria of online journalism. These are often somewhat more tabloid than print media and is constantly searching for a way to get users to click on articles; it is increasingly providing news that the audience requests.

> The role of the good journalist is to enlighten the public in a democratic society. Online, a lot of content is only produced because users want it—maybe it is on cute animals or reality shows [...] the headings are often misleading because they are solely created to attract clicks.

The quote shows a conflict between the ideals of journalism and the ethical dilemmas faced during the course. This student identified misleading articles as a way to attract readers—clearly something to be avoided and indeed something that is a rule in the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics*. However, the same student continued that it is not all bad because the key is that the journalists themselves must know the difference between right and wrong. They must know when to use the leading heading as a means of attraction because this could lead to a user reading an article that would not have been read if not for a 'sexy' headline or simply by prioritizing news so users still see them on the online newspapers:

> Journalists still write news on politics and foreign affairs, even though these stories are not attracting many clicks. I think that journalists prioritize 'dull news' at top of the site so users still read the other stories.

The student indicated that knowing the difference between 'good' journalism and 'bad' journalism as well as when to do 'bad journalism' to attract readers to 'good journalism' is important. An important factor is that the students have not yet tried journalism on other media platforms, and some of the issues they raise seem to be general; however, as they don't yet know this, they associate the problems with the fact that they publish their stories online as opposed to publishing on other platforms.

Conclusions and discussion

Overall the survey study of journalism students, who participated in a simulated learning environment, showed the following:

- They experience problems with around a third of the articles.
- Many of the problems experienced are perceived by the students to be a problem with online news production in general. This could be issues with sharp headlines, tight deadlines and constant negotiation with and pressure from sources. Even when articles are published, sources might apply pressure on the students.
- It could, however, be argued that many of the problems are not specific to online journalism as they are focused on dealing and negotiating with sources and doing stories that are not platform or online specific.
- Around a third of the students feel online journalism is 'good journalism', but around a third feel it is 'bad journalism'. The remainder are undecided. The fact that students feel it is less than good journalism can be linked to ethical questions and to the extent the students feel they have to compromise the ideals of journalism practice.

Research and product

The ethical dilemmas concerning *research* problems encountered often relate to sources or mechanisms inherent in online journalism, such as a fast pace and its tabloid nature. Thus, students experience many ethical dilemmas because of pressure from others (Kostyu, 1990). This is reflected in many of the survey responses related to sources. The results showed that 55 % of students experienced that sources wanted to correct their quotes, 33 % had to pressure sources to hurry up, and 10 % experienced that sources felt misunderstood (and probably also wanted a correction of a quote or fact). Many ethical dilemmas in the research phase are also connected to part-sources, but the very low number of sources (2 %) that did not feel they were being sufficiently heard could be due to underreporting or a consequence of the students still learning how to handle (often professional) sources in general. It is very likely that students give a more than necessary amount of attention and space to all sources encountered as they are new in the field. The 13 % of students that felt they were unable to publish due to part-sources not responding affirm the Press Council guidelines.

Looking at ethical dilemmas concerning the *product*, the survey showed that one of the main problems is with headlines; 41 % of students experienced publishing articles with

headlines they felt were too sharp. This could possibly be because it is the first time for many students working in an online newsroom environment where editors (the teachers of the course) constantly are rewriting parts of their articles and very often producing a sharper and often better headline.

Errors in reporting are part of working as a journalist (Blach-Ørsten & Burkal, 2014); 10 % of articles are reportedly published with wrong facts. We do not measure the severity of any mistakes, nor do we measure exactly what mistakes have been published or how the mistake is discovered. It is very likely that this number is underreported and could be significantly higher. However, as a journalistic ideal, the idea of a flawless article is admirable and one that students as well as journalists should attempt to follow. It is also an ideal that is an integrated rule in the *Advisory rules of sound press ethics*. However, exposing the students to the radicalized workflow of online journalism (Hartley, 2011a) means that the students feel they have too little time to do proper fact checking (García-avilés, 2014). In real life journalism, mistakes are made, and a rate of 10 % does not seem very high for first-year journalism students. This does not change the ideal though, which the students are very much aware of. Living up to this ideal, however, frustrates them. In a pedagogical sense, it is not necessarily a bad thing if we follow a theory of learning where 'frustration' is a cornerstone (Amsel, 1992).

For many students it is a first exposure to how sources and journalists interact and agree upon quotes and specifics in content. For students the idea of a journalistic product is not something to negotiate with sources. Therefore, the process of negotiating what sources will and will not be quoted on and what facts are right and wrong (in the eyes of the sources) is also affecting these results. That many sources want to have control of what they say and the context they say it in is not new to experienced journalists, but it is to newcomers. It is also worth noting that 27 % of students experience publishing articles without relevant sources. Finding and maintaining sources is a keystone to journalistic work. Publishing wrong facts with corrected quotes and often not relevant sources could affect the finding because around one-third of students find that online journalism is not good journalism probably because the experiences are not on par with what the students expect of journalism. One could argue that pedagogically it brings more reflection into journalism training as they not only learn the craft but also how ideals of different forms of journalism affect the carrying out of this craft.

Simulating an online newsroom in a learning environment means that students have hands-on experience with ethical dilemmas related to both research and product (Kostyu, 1990) that they might otherwise not have until after their studies. The ethics can in this way become an integrated part of how the students see their ideal journalistic role. Examples are 'I must have more than one source' or 'It's a good idea to have a sort of contract with my source'. Some students indicate that it is important to know the difference between the 'ideal' and the real-world mechanics of online journalism. As we can't change reality or the ideal of journalism, the students must embody the discrepancy previously described. The students can be made aware of this in a lecture of online journalism.

Simulating reality

Online journalism and a simulation course like this have the effect that some students might link the encountered ethical dilemmas to something online specific, which has the side effect of creating a bad reputation for online journalism amongst the students. This effect could, however, also be because we actually present them with online theories and studies indicating the reality that we are attempting to simulate.

A possible negative side effect of the course seems to be a somewhat negative attitude towards online journalism in general. Though the majority of students in the qualitative data report that they have learned many lessons and also had a good time doing so, there are still many that do not want to work with online journalism. The survey shows that only 25 % report a positive attitude towards future online work as opposed to 44 % reporting a negative attitude.

The overall journalistic ideals of the students seem to affect how they encounter and deal with ethical ideals in a simulated learning environment. So should we change the simulation?

We believe that the disadvantages in the simulation are less than the advantages. Many of the ethical choices and problems encountered may at first be linked to online journalism specifically, and some are online specific (Albrecht & Andreassen, 2014; García-avilés, 2014; Hartley, 2011b). However, as students progress and learn more about real-world journalism, they inevitably experience that ideals are elastic; many of the problems they have encountered are not online specific but general to journalism. At the same time they experience that ethical challenges are omnipresent at the individual level, and sometimes the challenges are far from the written ethical guidelines on an organizational level (Fengler et al., 2014). Thus, believing that a journalist's ethical

choices are affecting the accountability of the media (Fengler et al., 2014), the experience during the course www.navisen.dk is a positive one simply because the students are forced to make individual ethical choices based on specific experiences with online news work.

Online journalism and teaching may be on the frontline of ethical problems and for students a first glance into a scary world of elastic ideals; however, simulating reality is very difficult to provide in any other way. Most importantly, the individual student needs to be made aware of what the ideals are, how these are bended and how compromises are made in a newsroom; being able to follow this helps to self-embody this discrepancy.

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