

# Trust us, we are local journalists – how the desire to be trusted shapes early career practitioners’ understanding of ethical journalism in the UK legacy press

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## **Abstract**

*The workplace in the UK legacy press is an important learning environment for early career journalists where they are exposed to formal and informal learning opportunities. However, in the learning of ethical journalism there is an emergent tension between the formally facilitated work-based training schemes which frame ethics through the lens of a code of practice, and informal learning through social interactions with colleagues and members of their local community where the desire to be trusted is an important driver. This article draws on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with early career journalists and training managers in the British legacy press, working for local weekly and daily titles. In applying the social learning construct Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015) as an evaluative framework, the data indicated that while early career journalists’ learning was shaped in part by training schemes, their desire to be perceived as trusted by their community of interest, their imagined reader, as they sought to gain membership of that community was powerful in shaping their understanding of occupational ethics.*

**Keywords:** legacy press, community of practice, journalism ethics, trust, community

## **Introduction**

A crisis of trust has emerged in the British legacy press<sup>1</sup>. Poor ethical behaviours in some sections of the British newspaper industry as exposed in the Leveson Inquiry (2012), including the use of deception, hacking, phone tapping, and paying public officials for information, did much to damage the reputation not just of those tabloid journalists at the heart of the inquiry, but also of journalism in general, and it was inevitable that it would take time for the reputation of the British legacy press to recover (Barnett & Townend 2014; Mair 2013; Thomas & Finneman 2014; Trifonova-Price et al. 2021). Ten years on, low levels of trust continue to plague the British press which as a sector

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identifies the rebuilding of public trust a priority, a fundamental aim underpinning the financial wellbeing of the industry (Gazette 2021; WANP 2017).

According to Fletcher, longitudinal data gathered by the Reuters Institute signals a global decline in public trust in journalism, including that located in the legacy press. British journalism does not fare well in this study where the data suggests a fall in confidence in journalistic news production from 51 per cent in 2015 to 36 per cent in 2021, the fourth largest decline out of 36 countries surveyed (Fletcher 2020; Newman et al. 2021).

Fletcher notes that the reasons for the decline in trust are complex, with the political context in which journalists operate having an impact on the individual nation ratings, and while the promulgation of fake news through online media is widely understood to have undermined public confidence (Reed et al. 2020) the reputation of the individual journalist and their relationship with the reader were important predictors of trust. As Peters and Broersma (2013: 30) discuss, trust is the 'cement' which holds relationships together, including the relationship between the journalist and society, and it is based on the 'motivations, reliability and credibility' of the journalist and their ethical behaviours. Where credibility is damaged, trust is lost. Indeed, Harcup (2007: 144) observes that ethical journalism is a prerequisite to journalism which can be perceived as trusted, adding that good journalists take seriously the trust placed in them by their communities.

Coleman et al. (2012: 38), in a study of the relationship between local journalists and their readers, identified that the reputation of individual journalists and their track record for truthfulness was an important consideration in whether the reader trusted their account of news. Daniller et al. (2017) in a study in the United States found that where readers identify with a particular title which is known to them, where they have a relationship with that title, they are more predisposed to trust that particular source of news.

Journalists, however, receive little direct feedback from their audiences about when and how they can be more trustworthy as there is an absence of formally mediated space for such discussions. Early career journalists tend to rely on guidance from within their community of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) in determining what good ethical practice might look like, but as this article argues, the desire to earn the trust of the reader also shapes their development as ethical journalists.

This article takes as its context the British provincial legacy press, where journalists identify as serving a local readership. It focusses on the early career learning of journalists and how they acquire an understanding of what ethical journalism means. It argues that the desire to be perceived

as trusted in the production of news is important, and a powerful driver in their learning of ethical journalism, where the community within which they are located – that of their readers – informs their understanding. It identifies an emerging tension between the structural training of early career journalists in Britain where they are taught to view journalism ethics as synonymous with codes such as the *Editors' Code of Practice* (Editors' Code of Practice Committee 2021; NCTJ 2019b), and the informal influences on their learning of ethical journalism via the expectations of their communities and their desire to be trusted by those communities.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on data gathered during a wider study investigating early career learning of journalism ethics in the British legacy press. It uses qualitative inquiry methodology, based on semi-structured interviews with 14 early career journalists and six senior managers, conducted in 2017 and 2018 in the participants' places of work. Participants were drawn from 11 different provincial publications across England, including three daily regional titles and eight local weekly titles, covering three of the major legacy press groups in Britain.

The criteria for the selection of the early career participants was that they were within the first three years of employment, either working towards a senior journalism qualification or had recently completed this qualification. Eraut (2007: 415-419) in his study of workplace learning noted that it is within the first three years of employment that practitioners gain confidence and personal agency, encounter challenge, and gain feedback and developmental support, all of which contribute to a rich learning experience; essentially it is during this period that formative core occupational learning happens. The participants were located within different types of legacy newspapers, from small weekly titles to larger regional daily titles producing copy for print and online distribution.

Participants were not located on national titles as initial scoping for the study indicated that they did not employ staff who would be defined as 'early career'. The senior managers who participated each had responsibility for the training of early career journalists either at a strategic level or through direct contact with trainees. The study did not consider broadcast journalism which operates to a different context and regulatory framework in the UK to the legacy press.

A common question set was used in the interviews to elicit narrative responses from participants, and questions were designed to find out what the participants understood by the term 'journalism ethics', and who the key workplace influencers were in helping them develop this understanding. Their responses were transcribed, and a constructivist approach was taken to their analysis, informed by Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Each transcript underwent

multiple readings, and an open coding approach was taken which allowed for the emergence of new concepts (Gobo 2008: 227; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007 163-164; Urquhart 2013: 38).

### **Formal learning**

Eraut describes formal learning in the workplace as that which tends to be organised, leading to an award, and led by a trainer (Eraut 2000: 115). Early career journalists in this study each described formal learning structures and processes in which they participated, all followed a training scheme operated by either the National Council for Training Journalists (the NCTJ), a UK industry sponsored training body, or by Reach plc (formerly Trinity Mirror), one of the largest legacy press groups in the UK which developed in-house training. There was some homogeneity in the curricula followed for each qualification, in that they focused on the development of journalistic skills and an understanding of law and ethics as they relate to journalism practice. It is within the ethics curriculum where one might reasonably expect to find learning which focuses on what trust in journalism means, however it is not articulated as a topic of study in either scheme. Trust is perhaps a difficult concept to describe and explain in the context of a skills-based training programme, but it could be argued that debate about what journalists want people to hold their trust in, whether it is in truth telling or news selection, trust in dealing fairly with a community, or trust in holding politicians to account, is important. For example Pingree et al. (2021) discusses trust through the lens of journalists being trusted as truth seekers; Schudson in Peters and Broersma (2012: 196) discusses trust in the goodwill of others but makes the point that distrust and scepticism are also necessary to maintain a healthy questioning attitude; and Peters and Broersma (2012: 46) and Phillips in Trifonova-Price et al. (2021: 171) discuss trust as an essential facet of ethical journalism, in that ethical journalists should seek to be trusted as truthful and deal fairly with their audience.

Early career journalists in this study articulated a desire to be trusted but did not explicitly define trust or frame it as something which formed part of their formal learning. They did discuss learning journalism ethics as part of their training, but when asked what the nature of this learning was, they pointed towards being required to know and understand the *Editors' Code of Practice* (2021); their definition of journalism ethics focussed narrowly on following the code. The *Editors' Code of Practice* is supported by the Society of Editors – a British organisation representing editors from all sectors of the legacy press industry – and used as a basis for the regulatory framework operated by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Hanna & Dodd 2020: 14; IPSO 2018; Quinn 2018: 365). Each of the participants worked for a news title which was regulated by IPSO (IPSO 2019) therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that they were expected to learn and adhere to the code which underpins

this regulation. Sanders problematises the reliance on codes as the definers of ethical practice, as codes can be viewed as a list of dos and don'ts, and as such are not useful in promoting ethical behaviour or engendering a relationship built on trust as these concepts are too complex to be reduced to a simple list (Sanders 2008: 139). Frost argues that to focus on codes as a means of signalling ethical journalism could also undermine efforts to improve journalistic culture, which would foster greater trust. He notes that codes can serve a public relations function but cautions they can 'add an aura of respectability and fairness without necessarily forcing any real need for responsibility' (Frost 2000: 101). This might be translated as 'trust us, we work to a code of practice', without a full understanding of what trust should look like and ignoring the potential for damaging consequences when trust is lost.

That the code has found itself at the centre of any learning of what ethical journalism might look like is a discussion for a different paper, other than to suggest here that it is arguably the result of a combination of the historic dominance of a single journalism training body in Britain (the NCTJ) and its interpretation of ethics, the challenges in defining and agreeing what a curriculum in occupational ethics should encompass, an historic unwillingness on the part of the industry in Britain to accept that journalism ethics was an area which merited serious consideration as part of any journalism training programme and the convenience of having a code of practice in place to guide occupational behaviours. The relationship between learning how to be ethical practitioners and being trusted by readers has historically been overlooked. It was only post-Leveson that the NCTJ began to more explicitly recognise ethics as part of its formal syllabus, and even then, the focus was on the learning of the *Editors' Code of Practice* (NCTJ 2016, 2019a). Certainly, in terms of acquiring an understanding of what ethical journalism might mean, formal learning structures, in pointing early career journalists towards a single code of practice, takes them only so far. Journalists might advance an argument that by following the *Editors' Code* they can be trusted to practice ethical journalism, however, that argument is hard to fully substantiate when looking at the detail of the code. It sets out finite expectations of behaviour but doesn't address what ethical journalism might be in terms of its potential for positive societal impact, nor does it account for what a community of readers might define as ethical, or what a relationship of trust between the journalist and the community might look like. The code emphasises the importance of being accurate in reporting news, and it is of course important that journalists can be trusted to be accurate, and it does offer guidance on dealing with people who are vulnerable, for example victims of sexual assault or families who have been bereaved, however, it does not set out to consider the nature and tone of the stories produced by journalists or the societal role of the journalist as citizen. It does not discuss developing a sense of 'humanity' as a journalist for example, something which is included in the *Ethical Journalism*

*Network's Core Principles of Ethical Journalism* (2019). The concept of humanity and being 'aware of the impact of our words and images on the lives of others' might be difficult to bring into a code where it is used as a framework for the adjudication of complaints.

Bradshaw (2021: 19) observed in a study of sports journalists and their negotiation of ethical issues that there was limited reference to ethical codes when journalists were making editorial decisions, yet they were still able to make 'nuanced ethical and editorial judgements'. He argues that learning a code of practice is not necessarily a precursor to being a good ethical journalist.

It is perhaps unfair to expect the code to define ethical journalism as it was not designed for this purpose, rather it is a code of practice to guide occupational behaviours. It was never intended as a code of ethics, and has found itself at the centre of training curricula in ethics by accident, not design (Benson 2017).

### **Informal learning**

It is in looking at informal learning as described by Eraut (2000, 2007, 2008) that a clearer picture of the learning of ethical journalism and the role played by the desire to be trusted emerges. Eraut argues that in the workplace, learning happens through participation in work rather than solely through formally facilitated training, which when applied to the journalistic context, includes learning through interactions with other journalists and also with members of the community their news title serves. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) in their work on communities of practice discuss informal learning in the workplace, conceptualising learning as having a social dimension, learning being a function of travelling along a trajectory from the periphery of a work-based community to full membership of that community (Lave & Wenger 1991: 29). In so doing they are learning through practice, from experience and gaining meaning from their activity, through establishing their sense of occupational identity and through developing notions of belonging to that community.

As this paper suggests, in the case of the early career journalist, there are two distinct trajectories along which they travel, the first is towards full membership of the journalistic community located in the newsroom within which they operate, the second trajectory is towards full membership of the community of their notional readers, based in the geographical area their news title serves. In each case the interactions with others shaped their understanding of their role and behaviours. Lave and Wenger consider the social dimensions of learning in the workplace, with the desire to 'belong' to

that workplace community, to become part of it and gain full membership of that community, a powerful driver in learning (Lave & Wenger 1991).

### **Community of Practice**

Early career participants in this study each without exception clearly articulated the importance of membership of their community of practice in establishing their personal occupational identities, in this context the community of practice being that located in a newsroom, consisting of other journalists, including news editors and editors. While each participant was contracted to work for a particular news title in a journalistic capacity, their sense of identity was about more than an employment contract, and it was clear that being part of a community of journalists working collectively in the production of news was their vocation rather than just a job. It was also apparent that members of their community of practice shaped how they acquired their understanding of what ethical journalism meant, and while early career journalists' narratives were heavily dominated with how the *Editors' Code* informed their interactions and discussions, there were other influences evident, chiefly senior journalists who brought substantial experience to ethical decision-making.

Diane<sup>2</sup> worked on a large regional daily news title and her experience was typical of that described by all participants in the study, in that she drew on guidance from senior journalists in making ethical decisions:

...on our news desk we do have quite a free and open conversation nearly every day in terms of ethics, what we should be doing. Obviously, journalism isn't always a clear-cut thing, we have lots of guidelines to help us make decisions, but I think there will always be grey areas. I would go to our news editors and ask them for guidance...often I would get one of my news editors to check the content [of a story] before it goes online just to say look, have we got this right, do you think this is OK as it stands?

She identifies here one of the weaknesses of working with codes in that she talks about the 'grey areas' which cannot be coded for, but there is still the need to identify the 'right' course of action, and her community of practice influenced her determination of the 'right' thing.

Eddie worked for a local weekly news title and shared the office with seven other journalists working across five local publications in total. He described daily conversations across the office as difficult stories cropped up:

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...if you do have any issues yourself, it's an environment where you can bring them up and people will support you in that. At my level as a trainee, it is the informal discussions that are useful as they happen when a story comes up and helps me reach a decision really quickly. As you go through those early weeks and months you do pick up off people around you.

Each of the participants in the study, from the early career journalists to the training managers, to some extent described a similar culture where discussions about the ethical approach to difficult stories were encouraged. Each in some way discussed membership of their community of practice in terms of belonging, clearly identifying as part of that community through a common approach to the resolution of issues in the way stories might be framed, aligning with Wenger's conceptualisation of a community of practice as a learning enabler (Wenger 2008).

While it was clear that the community of practice was important in shaping understanding of what ethical journalism should look like, a strong narrative also emerged in relation to the influence of the community of the notional reader, the people the journalists understood they were writing for. To distinguish this particular community from that of the community of peers encountered in the journalists' newsrooms and described as a community of practice, I conceptualise the community of the imagined reader as the *community of interest* in that this allows for the inclusion of those readers who might not be domiciled in the circulation area of a particular news title and cannot be referred to members of a local community, but still have an interest in events which take place there – they may for example have family or work ties. They are not part of the local community itself, but hold an interest in it. The term community of interest also allows for the inclusion of those who might not be readers of the particular title but have a notional interest in the stories and information produced by that title because they are domiciled in the geographical area the title covers, and the information carried by that title.

### **Community of Interest**

Each of the participants in the study spoke about the importance of having a good relationship with the community of interest. What the reader – real or imagined – thought of them as journalists was important to them, and many expressed an explicit desire to be trusted in the production of news. Indeed, erosion of trust in journalists was cited by some participants in the study as one of the most important challenges they faced as early career practitioners. Alina, who was based in a small local



weekly newspaper office, said: ‘... people saying, “oh yes, it was in the local paper,” it is important to have that trust and maintain it....’

It is important to note here that a discussion about trust in journalism had not been prompted by the questions put to the study’s participants – the word trust was not used by the questioner – yet emerged primarily in response to the question ‘what do you see as being the biggest challenge faced by journalists today?’ Alina identified loss of trust in journalism as her major concern. Similarly, Penny, working for a small weekly title with just two others in her newsroom, articulated a desire to have a relationship with her community of interest built on trust, saying: ‘You want them [the readers] to feel that they can trust what you say.’ Alina spoke about the lack of trust in journalists as being a ‘major problem’ for the industry. She said she had been told ‘you can’t trust journalists’ on a number of occasions when interacting with people within her community of interest, which she felt hampered her in being able to do her job. She articulated a frustration that her readers did not distinguish between national journalism where practitioners had no allegiance or connection to the people they were writing about, and local journalism where the readers’ perception is important to the journalist.

Because we are a local paper, we are writing about people in our local community and you want to stay on the side of the local community, and that is how we have always seen it, for us to champion it and not to unnecessarily vilify people because it makes a better story, because these are people you know. The local approach is so different to the approach a national paper would have. They [national journalists] are going to do that story and never go back to it again, but we are reporting to that community again and again and again and there is a big difference.

In referencing the ‘they’ versus the ‘we’, Alina is articulating her sense of belonging to her community of practice, but also reveals through mention of ‘our’ community and wanting to ‘stay onside’ she is somewhere along the trajectory to membership of her community of interest – perhaps not yet at the stage of full membership (‘that community’ indicating some degree of separation). Alina indicates that building a relationship with readers where journalists can be trusted to operate in their interests (‘...stay on the side of...’) is important. She also signals that the difference between national and local journalism is a function of where they are in relation to their membership of the community of interest, where national journalists ‘never go back to it’, versus the local who revisit it ‘again and again and again’. She says that her desire to ‘stay onside’ influenced her journalistic behaviour and how she treated people she was interviewing, treating people with humanity particularly when someone had been bereaved.

Wenger (2008: 81) discusses learning as a function of negotiation of a joint enterprise within a community, where relationships emerge which are built on 'mutual accountability', through negotiation of what is important and why it is important. Alina's account of her relationship with her community of interest reveals she is learning a sense of this through her negotiation with that community, and in the context of the study, she is learning how to negotiate what being trusted as a journalist might consist of and what ethical journalism might look like to her. To some extent this learning is mediated by her peers in her community of practice who help her navigate her relationship within her community of interest, and Alina did identify colleagues who she would turn to when she needed guidance, however her relationship with her community of interest was personal to her and formative in terms of her own learning.

A closer analysis of the relationship between the community of interest and early career journalists in this study revealed that the desire to negotiate a relationship built on trust was important to each participant. The data signalled that there were two facets to the notion of trust that were articulated, where journalists wanted to be perceived as trustworthy in the accuracy of their work and also trusted to be 'on the side of' their community of interest, to align with and be part of that community. This perhaps indicates an awareness of the need for humanity in alignment with the *Ethical Journalism Network's* core principle, which states that: 'Journalists should do no harm. What we publish or broadcast may be hurtful but we should be aware of the impact of our words and images on the lives of others' (2019).

### **Trust and accuracy**

According to Tornberg (2018) the World Economic Forum identifies misinformation as a major international threat, with social media presenting opportunities for viral dissemination of what has become termed fake news. Berger in Ireton and Posetti (2018:7) notes the importance of accuracy in combatting misinformation, pointing to 'sloppy verification' and 'sensationalising that exaggerates for effect and hyper-partisan selection of facts at the expense of fairness' as markers of poor journalistic practice which risk tarnishing the news media and public trust in it. The majority of participants in this study were very aware of the impacts of the narratives around fake news, and articulated two key areas of concern; firstly, they find themselves in competition with social media platforms carrying unverified information, making the journalistic community look tardy if they take time to check the information prior to publication, or make it appear that they are hiding something by not republishing social media postings they were unable to verify; and secondly they have become targets for accusations that they are untrustworthy, that all journalists peddle fake news, shades of Berger's tarnishing reaching the local news ecology.

They expressed concern that news audiences aligned unfiltered and unverified social media postings with journalism, and that there was little differentiation in the mind of the reader between social media content creators and journalists who worked for the legacy press industry, operating to a code of practice which required them to fact check.

James, a training director for a large legacy press group, observed that it was important readers understood that journalists were different to social media content creators and disseminators because of the work put into fact checking.

It has always been my belief that when people pick up the local paper or go to its website, they do know that it's the result of responsible diligent journalism. That is something we aspire to, that we are trusted. In a world where there are so many places that you can get news, [including] fake news, we need to provide an oasis of sanity and trust in the middle of that.

Ian said that while members of his community turn to their local newspaper and its associated website because they are a trusted source of information, he found himself in competition with the unfiltered and unchecked social media posts which embellish and sensationalise stories, often publishing information which should not be in the public domain.

We keep an eye on social media and see comments which says oh there is a fire, or someone has been shot or murdered, and you get there and find out that someone has fallen down some stairs and there hasn't been a murder or stabbing. It is the newspaper's job to decide what is fact and fiction and I think that can be an issue, because if you go on what people say online and because you want to be there first [publishing the news] you can end up making the same mistakes that they do on social media and end up printing something that might be false or the wrong address or the wrong circumstances. You have to be accurate. You have to be 100 per cent certain that you are right, particularly when Joe Bloggs on twitter isn't.

Fact checking and accuracy in news production was cited by the majority of this study's participants as an important part of their work, shaping their occupational identity as journalists who can be trusted to verify information before publication, so that their work is seen to be reliable across their community of interest. While accuracy is a cornerstone of their code of practice, early career journalists identified being trusted by their community of interest as an important driver in their understanding of the importance of validating information, in alignment with the findings of Coleman et al. (2012).

### **Trusted to belong**

The desire to be perceived as part of the community of interest by early career journalists was also a driver in their formation of an understanding of ethics. Eddie spoke about having a relationship built on trust with his community and was aware that the tarnishing of journalism globally impacted on local news production.

People want different things from their local paper now... the feeling I get from our readers and the people I meet is that there is a perception that the industry is going down the pot, and it is about keeping those relationships going and making sure that you have that community engagement, and that stems from trust and from responsible reporting and being sensitive to the community you serve.

Here he frames journalism as a service and talks about community engagement with 'our' readers, his relationship with his community of interest and his sense of belonging to that community shaping his understanding of what he terms 'responsible reporting', an important part of his identity as a journalist on a large weekly news title.

Joe worked for a large city daily publication, and he too discussed his role in terms of his place within his community: '...we have a public duty and a duty of care towards everyone we deal with...'. He placed importance on being seen as trustworthy, respectable, responsible, and honest.

Lesley talked about learning about how to interact with his community of interest from his work-based mentor, Phil, an experienced journalist who lived in the community of interest himself, who would suggest different ways of treating a story, perhaps demonstrating compassion and sensitivity towards people who were having a difficult time. Phil's membership of the community of interest shaped his guidance towards Lesley. In turn, Lesley as an early career journalist articulated an appreciation of Phil's approach and talked about 'championing' the town and his desire to be perceived as 'onside' as a member of that community.

To understand what might be happening here it is helpful to turn consider Wenger (2008: 4-5) who discusses learning as a social activity with four components: learning as doing through practice, learning as experience and making meaning of occupational activity, learning as becoming through developing an occupational identity, and learning as belonging and identifying as part of a community. When considering this final component where Wenger is referring to belonging to a community of practice, in the context of this study this might be understood as the journalist

belonging to the community of their newsroom, being a journalist for a particular news brand and identifying as part of the team of news producers. However, it is possible to make a special case to extend Wenger's concept to consider that the early career journalists in this study were also aware of their place within the community of interest. Through striving to establish that place – to become part of that community and identify as belonging to that community – they were learning, in particular learning the importance of relationship-building based on trust and ethical conduct. While it is possible to argue that the understanding of their place within the community of interest may be mediated by members of their community of practice, it is the individual who is negotiating the journey towards membership of their community of interest, following their own learning journey through their encounters and experiences.

Lave and Wenger (1991) in their original study defined the learning arena as being boundaried by mutual engagement in a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire for it to be conceptualised as a legitimate space for work-based learning (2008: 72-73). Fuller (in Hughes et al. 2007: 21) observes that the difference between a community of practice and a casual network of social interactions is that 'social relations are formed, negotiated and sustained around the activity that has brought people together'. A more recent definition suggested by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner simplifies this concept to:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015)

When considering early career journalists working in the British legacy press then it is possible to identify two functional communities of practice which offer learning arenas, one inward facing towards the newsroom, and a second which looks outward towards the local geographic community where the notional reader is located – the community of interest – and which, while not a traditional workplace as initially envisaged by Lave and Wenger (1991), is more than a casual network of social interactions. There is a shared passion between the community of interest and the journalist in the production of news, from promoting local events to providing a platform for democratic debate, where work-like relationships are formed with key community stakeholders.

This resonates with literature from the field of communitarianism where scholars argue that trust and loyalty are forged through collaborative endeavour towards positive communal goals and the development of social interactions (Christians et al., 1993; Fackler 2020). Christians (in Land & Hornaday 2006: 65-66) discusses the relationship between journalists and their community of interest as being based on complex dialogue with the common aim of transforming civic life and

Pickard emphasises this in framing local journalism as an 'essential public service' where journalism is a key component of community life (Pickard 2020: 29). Communitarianism is a broad field and it is not intended to discuss it further here, other than to consider that in the context of the research underpinning this paper, which considers learning through work, it is possible to argue that the community of interest can be viewed as a workplace for the developing journalist. It is a place providing legitimate learning opportunities through interaction with members of that community, with the desire to belong and be perceived as a trusted and ethical component of that community.

An analysis of the data in this study indicated that the desire to be seen as part of the community of interest and trusted by readers impacted on ethical news selection and on the framing of particular stories.

Members of Eddie's community of interest had died in the bombing of the Manchester Arena in 2017. He had been able to establish the name of a local teenage victim in time to break the news on his title's early morning online bulletin but had been asked by the headteacher of the school where she was a pupil to delay publication to give the school time to break the news themselves during a school assembly so that they could offer appropriate support to the victim's friends. He agreed and delayed publication and explained that for him this was the ethical thing to do. The headteacher had placed trust in him in making the request for a delay and this was sufficiently important to him that he made the case to his news editor to hold back on publishing the story.

Early career journalists at other news titles who were impacted by the Manchester Arena bombing also spoke about how their membership of their community of interest impacted on their approach to news production around the incident, either through delaying publication of information at the request of families directly impacted or through careful selection of images from the scene to avoid causing distress – and as Diane articulated, such decisions were because they were part of that community, and were in contrast to decisions made by national news producers who had no community connectedness. She said that giving members of her community some sense of control over what was published during a time of crisis 'helped them to trust us going forward, so you know that it was the right thing to do'.

Lesley spoke about how his community membership impacted on his framing of news, turning what might be bad news towards a more positive focus.

We do see our role as championing the town. We have a lot of people come into our office, people off the street with stories, we have quite close relationships with lots of different groups within the town.... we want to be seen as a positive newspaper.

He worked with his news editor on a story about a training company that had failed an educational inspection and the options they faced of either criticising the company, where negative publicity might force its closure, or giving a more nuanced story which set out the historic problems the company had faced that had impacted on its failure and the measures which had been taken to turn the training provision around. They decided to publish the more positive story, and Lesley said their reasons were that the training providers were 'our people' who had experienced a difficult time, and that it was in the interests of the town to help them recover.

In each case here, the formation of understanding of what the ethical approach to stories might be was predicated on the individual journalist's developing sense of belonging to their community, to be a trusted part of that community.

Literature does point towards risks to objectivity and autonomy in becoming part of a community as discussed in the work of McDevitt (2003) and Hatcher and Haavik (2017), which David, a trainee on a small news title, alluded to when he talked about being rigorous as a journalist while ensuring he represented his readers fairly.

It's a daunting task being the sole reporter in a town to be able to keep that relationship up with everyone, keep everyone happy but also make sure you are doing your job and not just, you know, puffing up people's feathers. (David)

This paper focuses on the how and where of learning, and future research might further consider the extent to which becoming part of the community of interest exerts both positive and negative influences on the development of ethical understanding.

## **Conclusion**

Literature on the learning of journalism ethics has tended to focus on formal learning within recognised educational structures, including work by Thomas (1998) who conducted an early review of the journalism ethics curriculum in British colleges and universities and Sanders et al. (2008) who made a comparison of the ethical values of British and Spanish journalism students. Robinson (2017) investigated how to build better connections with communities through better teaching of journalism, drawing on the communitarian philosophy of John Dewey (1954) who argued that good journalists helped to foster community. In each case the focus was on the teaching of journalism students within academic structures rather than the learning of journalism in the workplace.

Research underpinning this paper focusses on work-based learning, and while formal learning does have a part to play in the learning of occupational codes, it is the informal learning opportunities

where the deeper learning of ethical journalism and an understanding of the importance of trust are located.

Journalists learn some understanding of occupational ethics through formally facilitated training programmes which focus on codes of conduct, however, work-based interactions help to shape early career journalists' occupational identities as they strive to belong to the communities in which they are located. While their community of practice is important in shaping their understanding of what ethical journalism might be, a desire to be part of the community of their notional reader, their community of interest, and to be seen as a trusted journalist, is also a strong driver in the development of this understanding.

The learning happens as they move from the periphery of their community towards full membership, where early career journalists articulated the importance of developing trust in them and their work as important. Striving to be viewed as trusted – treating stories about the community with accuracy, fairness, and humanity – enabled them to move towards community membership, and along that trajectory they developed an understanding of how to define what journalism ethics means to them, and the importance of operating within ethical boundaries.

That none of the participants in this particular study recognised their interactions with members of their communities as learning opportunities is something the legacy press sector might want to address. When asked about how they learned ethics, each early career journalist pointed towards formal training programmes and the learning of a code, with little recognition of the role played by the community of practice or community of interest. Developing a better understanding of how social learning impacts on ethical behaviours and practices, and making this learning more explicitly visible, may allow the sector to lay firmer foundations for a relationship of trust between the journalist and the notional reader. Where the journalist can claim the opinion of their community of interest matters to them as they develop their occupational identities as trusted practitioners, and fully recognise how this relationship impacts on their understanding of what ethical journalism means, then they may well be better able to defend the reputation of the legacy press as an institution where trust can be located.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The term 'legacy press' references the traditional British newspaper industry. The shift to multi-modal news distribution, using print and online technologies, means that the historic terminology 'newspaper' and 'press' no longer fully reflect how journalism is produced and disseminated by this particular part of the wider journalistic ecosystem. 'Legacy press' and 'press' is used in this paper as



a shorthand reference to that part of the industry which is located in historic newspaper titles as opposed to those sectors which identify as broadcast news producers or online-only news producers and disseminators.

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout when referring to participants in this study

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**Conflict of interest (please check this)**

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