

# Study finds that industry norms influence journalists' ethical behavior

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Tasked with feeding the 24-hour news cycle, journalists must constantly consider the ethical nature of their reporting. A new study from UT Dallas suggests that their behavior is heavily influenced by industry peers.

The study, published in the *Journal of Media Ethics*, found that if [journalists](#) believed that others would approve of unethical behavior, they would be more likely to act unethically. Conversely, if they believed others were acting ethically, they were more likely to act ethically.

Dr. Angela Lee, assistant professor of emerging media and communication and the study's author, divided her behavioral analysis into two types of social influence: descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Lee said that descriptive norms refer to what we think others do, whereas injunctive norms refer to what we think others want us to do.

"We applied these concepts from social psychology to journalism ethics and found that individual journalists may be more prone to act more ethically if they perceive [ethical behavior](#) is the norm in the field," she said. "They are also more prone to act unethically if they perceive that unethical behavior is 'approved of' in the field."

Lee found that descriptive norms account for almost half of the variance in ethical journalistic behaviors, while injunctive norms account for a little less than one-third of the variance in unethical journalistic behaviors.

She used the Reasoned Action Model (RAM), a classic persuasion model used in psychology, to explore the gap between journalists' moral intentions and their actual behavior.

"The RAM theorizes that behavioral intention is the best predictor of behavior," Lee said. "In other words, whether one is going to do 'x' is best predicted by whether one is ready and willing to engage in 'x.'"

The study focused on a random sample of 374 journalists from 33 leading news outlets across all mediums, including *The New York Times*, NBC, *USA Today* and the Huffington Post.

Lee formulated six scenarios common among journalists to examine the ways injunctive and descriptive norms influenced their behavior:

- Doing a story on an organization or club that you or someone in your family belongs to.
- Using press releases or video releases without any editing or rewriting.
- Editing elements of a photograph or video postproduction.
- Adjusting image quality in a photograph.
- Separating analysis and commentary from news reporting.
- Reporting diverse perspectives in a story.

When asked about their most recent experiences, 20.6 percent of respondents had done a story on an organization or club that they or someone in their family belongs to; 49.3 percent had used a press or video release without any editing; 3.3 percent had edited elements of a photograph or video postproduction; 42.3 percent had adjusted the [image quality](#) of a photograph or video; 87 percent had separated analysis and commentary from news reporting; and 95.2 percent had reported diverse perspectives in a story.

Lee said it's hard to say why the study shows descriptive norms have a stronger impact on ethical behavior, but research shows that journalists, compared with other professionals, are among the most capable of making good moral judgments. She said this weakens the impact of injunctive norms on unethical behavior.

Newsroom leaders can reinforce descriptive norms and curtail [unethical behavior](#) by regularly recognizing staff members who act ethically. On the other hand, news organizations also must make clear what is against the rules to reinforce injunctive norms, Lee said.

"Because of their special role in democratic societies, journalists have a professional obligation to deliver news information to the public responsibly and ethically," Lee states in her paper. "Despite their notable moral compass, journalists do not always act on their abilities. Ways to encourage them to do so should be discovered and put into practice in newsrooms."

**More information:** Angela M. Lee et al. From Thinking to Doing: Effects of Different Social Norms on Ethical Behavior in Journalism, *Journal of Media Ethics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/23736992.2016.1152898](https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2016.1152898)

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