

Journalists view co-workers as more ethical than peers, study finds

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American media is grappling with an image problem. Accusations of "fake news," foreign companies meddling in Facebook's data and a further polarization of how the Fourth Estate should operate in the

digital age have turned journalistic ethics into a common talking point on the evening news.

In an effort to position ethics in a more objective light for examination, The University of Texas at Dallas' Dr. Angela Lee explored journalists' opinions about one another—both their co-workers and their peers. As it turns out, they act much like the general public by trusting the actions of professionals working with them more than journalists at other outlets.

"The purpose of this study is to understand the connections between organizational ethical climate and third-person dynamic among [professional journalists](#) at leading U.S. newspaper, cable, broadcast and online-only news outlets," said Lee, assistant professor in the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication.

Lee and her colleague, Dr. Renita Coleman, a professor in the School of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin, developed a study to investigate whether American journalists were more or less likely to judge the actions of their co-workers as ethical or not. They then compared those results to how the same individuals felt about journalists at other news outlets.

The paper, titled "'We're more ethical than they are': Third-person and first-person perceptions of the ethical climate of American journalists," recently appeared in the journal *Journalism*.

"I have always been passionate about studying ways in which to not only promote news consumption among the public, but also how to promote quality, ethical news reporting among journalists," Lee said. "After all, what is the point for news consumption if content isn't worthy of people's time?"

The Way We See Ourselves and Others

The effect of media messaging on both individuals and populations has been extensively studied. A part of that body of research focuses on third-person perception (TPP), or the tendency for people to deem others as affected more by negative messaging or framing. Individuals may say that they are not affected by advertising meant to evoke sadness or pity but that other people are.

The other side of this coin is first-person perception (FPP)—individuals see themselves as more receptive than others to positive messaging, such as intellectual appeals or public service announcements.

Their research begins to define and test TPP and FPP within a newsroom setting, where ethical decision-making is all part of the job.

"Individual differences alone are insufficient to explain moral judgment and ethical behavior; social factors, in this case, perceptions of prevailing [ethical norms](#) of the organization, must also be considered," Lee and Coleman wrote in their paper.

Scenario Testing Methods

The pair first tested a number of scenarios based on professional decisions journalists might have to make on the job. These scenarios fell into one of two categories: ethical or unethical. When possible, Lee and Coleman drew inspiration from formalized codes of ethics to ensure some salience, whether they were asking a traditional print news reporter, an online data journalist or a sports photographer.

Unethical behaviors included actions like editing certain elements of photos or videos, while ethical behaviors might include diverse or representative perspectives in a news story.

Respondents were asked to rate these behaviors for three groups: their co-workers, peers in the same industry but different [news outlets](#), and peers in different industries. Their responses were quantified on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (very often).

"Our theoretical contributions show that the American journalists in this study were subject to TPP and FPP when they evaluated the ethical climate of their organizations compared to others," Lee said. "Whereas they believe those closest to them act unethically less frequently than journalists in different organizations or industries, they also believe that those closest to them act ethically more frequently."

Like the general public, journalists were inclined to think other journalists are either more or less ethical, depending on how similar (e.g., close in social proximity, such as either belonging to the same organization or not) they were to the respondent.

What does this mean for news agencies? Lee and Coleman's findings could help steer a news outlet's choices toward better business practices.

"News organizations can more frequently highlight the good/ethical things their journalists have done, which may not only cultivate an organizational climate that cares about ethical [news](#) reporting, but also remind everyone in the organization that they can do better because they are better than those in other organizations or industries," Lee said.

Their research further suggests that emphasis on an increasingly ethical environment could help journalists resist the "occasional peer pressure to behave unethically."

One example from their research was the coverage of the 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California, in which photos and information of the suspects' child and mother were aired on television, an act seen as an

invasion of privacy. While reporters later apologized for the ethical lapse, Lee and Coleman posit that holding up one's organization as more ethical can help reinforce standards and practices already in place, rather than admonishing someone and telling them to do better after the fact.

"Such reminders are particularly important in today's media ecology where [journalists](#) are facing greater challenges and are expected to meet more demands than ever before," Lee said.

More information: Angela M Lee et al, 'We're more ethical than they are': Third-person and first-person perceptions of the ethical climate of American journalists, *Journalism* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1464884918778249](#)

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