



Review Article

# A Study of the Framework and Attributes of Ethical Standards in Journalism

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT



**Keywords:**

News ethics, Evaluation standards, Attributes

**Article History:**

Received: 11-06-2024

Accepted: 25-10-2024

Published: 01-11-2024

It has always been difficult to create fair evaluation criteria for journalists, especially when it comes to judging morality and ethical conduct in news reporting. These guidelines function as yardsticks for gauging the ethics of news topics and the objectivity of journalistic techniques. These criteria are becoming more and more difficult as journalism changes, especially in the digital age. Fostering ethical journalism requires an understanding of its categorization and internal structure. This analysis employs a conceptual framework to explore the evaluation standards of news ethics. The method involves: Literature Review: Examining existing academic literature, ethical codes, and industry guidelines to outline the prevailing evaluation standards in journalism. Thematic Analysis: Identifying and categorizing the components of evaluation standards into normative and quality standards, assessing their relevance to different aspects of journalistic practice. Case Studies: Analyzing specific instances where journalistic ethics were put to the test, allowing for a practical understanding of how these standards function in real-world scenarios. The primary objective of this study is to clarify the internal structure of journalistic ethics evaluation standards and highlight the distinctions between normative and quality standards. By doing so, the analysis aims to provide insights into how these standards can be effectively applied to evaluate news behaviors and moral character in journalism. What is deemed ethical in one context may not hold the same weight in another. This relativity underscores the importance of understanding the specific circumstances surrounding journalistic practices. Historical Context: The evolution of journalistic ethics is tied to historical events and societal changes. Standards that once sufficed may need reevaluation to address contemporary challenges, particularly with the rise of digital media and misinformation. Complex Internal Structure: The internal structure of evaluation standards can be multi-layered, with different levels of criteria applied depending on the context and specific ethical dilemmas faced by journalists. This complexity requires continuous dialogue and adjustment as new ethical challenges arise. Practical Implications: Journalists and media organizations must engage with these standards actively, incorporating them into training and policy development. By fostering an understanding of both normative and quality standards, the industry can promote a more ethical and accountable journalism practice.

**Cite this article:**

Rezaee, M. T., Sayes, A., & Bahaduri, J. khan. A Study of the Framework and Attributes of Ethical Standards in Journalism. Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(11), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v3i11.435>

**1. Introduction**

Evaluation means that the evaluation subject uses certain standards or scales to comment on and measure certain objects. News ethics evaluation means that the evaluation subject uses certain evaluation standards to make moral judgments on news behavior and the virtues of the news ethics subject. The eternal difficulty of any evaluation problem is the problem of evaluation standards. With moral evaluation standards, the actual moral evaluation problems can be solved in principle. In fact, the core theoretical problem of the entire news ethics philosophy, in my opinion, is the problem of news ethics standards. What standards are used as the moral standards for

news behavior and news virtues not only reflects and embodies what kind of news ethics theoretical beliefs people have, but also reflects and embodies what kind of news ethics people adhere to in news practice activities (Pilar et al., 2019).

**2. Objectives**

1. Analysis of Journalistic Ethical Standards: To examine the structure, significance, and implementation of ethical standards in various areas of journalism.
2. Assessment of Social and Cultural Impacts: To understand how journalistic ethical standards influence social and cultural contexts, and to determine how these standards affect the quality and credibility of news content.

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<https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v3i11.435>

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### 3. Research Questions

1. How are journalistic ethical standards constructed, and what are the variations in their application across different media outlets?
2. What impact does the failure to adhere to ethical standards have on societal trust and the credibility of information?

### 4. Importance

**Summary:** The evaluation of journalistic ethics standards is essential for understanding how these guidelines shape the practice of journalism. By analyzing their composition and attributes, we can identify the effectiveness of these standards in maintaining integrity, accountability, and professionalism in the media. This research sheds light on the implications of ethical journalism for the credibility of news and its role in shaping public perception.

**Importance in Afghanistan:** In the context of Afghanistan, where media has experienced significant challenges and transformations, the establishment and adherence to journalistic ethics are crucial. Ethical standards help protect journalists from censorship and violence, promote responsible reporting, and enhance public trust in the media. Given the diverse cultural landscape and ongoing political instability, ethical journalism can foster informed discourse, support democratic processes, and contribute to social cohesion by ensuring that all voices are heard and represented accurately.

### 5. The composition of news ethics evaluation standards

News ethics evaluation standards are used to measure and judge the morality of news behavior, evaluate news subjects, and the moral character of news. The core issue of moral philosophy is the issue of moral standards; the soul of any moral system is also the issue of moral standards; the value pursuit or moral ideal of a moral system is always condensed in moral standards. The core of moral evaluation is to find evaluation standards, to find correct and reasonable evaluation standards; to find evaluation standards is to find the way and method of evaluation fundamentally. Therefore, the key issue of news ethics evaluation theory is, in a certain sense, the composition of moral evaluation standards (Maini, 2013).

#### 5.1 The hierarchical composition of news ethics evaluation standards

The direct standard for news ethics evaluation is news ethics norms, and what is hidden behind them is the news ethics (value) concept that supports news ethics norms, which is the news ethics basis that fundamentally determines the news ethics concept. What kind of interpretation and recognition people have of the news ethics basis means what kind of news ethics evaluation standards people hold. But in any case, the direct moral evaluation standards are ultimately directly manifested as news ethics norms (Joseph, 2004). Therefore, in principle, the composition of news ethics norms is the composition of moral evaluation standards. If we put news ethics norms in different time and space together, and temporarily ignore the particularity of moral norms given by different social environments and media environments, and only analyze their unified composition methods, we will find that their content structure can basically be divided into two levels (or two categories): one is the abstract principle level (moral principles), which reflects and embodies the general news ethics concept; the other is the specific behavioral norm level (behavioral regulations), is a special, specific, and operational provision relative to universal concepts, and is the empiricalization of universal moral concepts or moral principles (Gu et al., 2024). In this way, we can say that the

evaluation standards of news ethics are composed of two levels: one is the relatively abstract moral principles; the other is the specific and operational moral provisions (Clayman et al., 2012).

In the evaluation activities, the universal level standards are more about evaluating the journalistic moral character of the subject, and the specific level standards are more about evaluating the journalistic behavior of the subject; The former is a relatively abstract, holistic, general and general evaluation, while the latter is a specific, directly understandable and graspable moral evaluation. Therefore, only by unifying the two levels can a relatively comprehensive moral evaluation be achieved, and only then can the moral norms be used comprehensively as evaluation criteria. It should be noted in particular that the correctness of principled evaluation can only be established on the basis of a large number of specific behavior evaluations. For example, we know that the object of professional news behavior is the public, and the ideal moral goal of professional news activities is to safeguard the interests of the public. Therefore, in terms of theoretical logic and practical logic, the public should be the most important and most important subject of moral evaluation, and whether the reasonable news needs of the public are met, that is, whether the interests of the public are realized and safeguarded, is the final or highest standard for measuring whether professional news behavior is moral and the level of professional ethics. In fact, people do see such principled clauses in many news ethics codes—serving the public and safeguarding the interests of the public. However, the overall moral principle of "serving the public and safeguarding the interests of the public" is a macro, general, highly abstract and general norm. If you want to use it as a standard (It is obviously impossible to directly measure the specific behavior of the news behavior subject (whether the news behavior subject serves the public, whether it maintains social justice through news methods, etc.), but it must be done through the secondary, specific normative standards. In fact, even the specific moral principles such as "reporting news truthfully" and "reporting news impartially" as evaluation standards are relatively general and must be concretized. To concretize and operationalize the principled standards, the core problem to be solved is: in the moral norms, clearly stipulate what kind of specific behavior is the behavior that serves the public interest, what kind of reporting method is true reporting, fair reporting, and so on. For example, when people judge whether a media or reporter is "honest" and "fair", it is difficult to do so by simply using the abstract principles of honesty and fairness. Only by judging a large number of specific news behaviors through specific behavioral norms that can explain, measure and verify "honesty" and "fairness" can we truly explain whether it is honest and fair.

#### 5.2 Behavior Standards and Quality Standards

The objects of news ethics evaluation can be divided into two interrelated aspects: one is the subject's news behavior; the other is the subject's news ethics quality. Whether the behavior is moral can be directly measured by moral norms. If it conforms to the norm, it is moral, otherwise it is immoral; whether the quality is good can be measured by moral quality standards. If it conforms to the quality standard, it is good, otherwise it is bad (Beck et al., 2020). Therefore, from the perspective of behavior and quality, the evaluation standards can be divided into "normative standards" and "quality standards". Between the subject's behavior and the subject's quality, people usually evaluate a person's moral quality (virtue) through the moral evaluation of the subject's behavior, because the subject's normal virtue (actually manifested as a behavioral motivation that is difficult to intuitively express) can only be expressed through the

behavioral process and behavioral results in principle (Care & Suppl, 2020). Therefore, compared with the evaluation of a person's character, the moral evaluation of behavior has logical priority. However, we should also pay attention to the complexity of things, that is, a person with good moral qualities may do wrong things (O'Connor et al., 2009). A person with good motives may do things that have bad results. At this point, it is difficult for us to infer the evaluation of a person's overall moral character through the evaluation of a specific behavior. In other words, the evaluation of behavior and the evaluation of character (motive) may lead to contradictory conclusions, that is, according to the evaluation of motivation, the subject of the behavior is kind (at least the motivation in a certain behavior is kind), and according to the evaluation of news methods and behavior results, the subject of the behavior is not kind. How to understand the contradiction here, I think we can separate the evaluation of motivation and the evaluation of behavior, so that there will be no biased evaluation conclusions. In fact, the moral evaluation of behavior should be specific, including the evaluation of the motivation of specific behavior. When there are contradictory evaluation conclusions, the goodness or badness of the motivation often has a greater weight, that is, the subject with good motivation and bad behavior is generally easier to be judged as moral. As someone said, "After the goodness or badness of the motivation and the effect are determined separately, it is obviously more reasonable and fair to judge the goodness or badness of the behavior by combining the motivation and the effect and focusing on the goodness or badness of the motivation (Curry, 2016)." But going further, in a general sense, if a person with so-called good qualities always does the wrong things, it is difficult to say that he has good qualities. People expect people with good qualities to do the right thing, not the wrong thing. From a long-term and overall perspective, whether a person's moral quality is good or not, although it cannot be necessarily concluded from one or two accidental behavior evaluations, can only be determined in the final sense through the evaluation of his habitual behavior. The nature of morality must be practical, not purely psychological or conceptual. Moral practical behavior can ultimately show whether a person is moral or immoral (Curry, 2016).

## 6. Main attributes of news ethics evaluation standards

Standard theory is the core of evaluation theory. Grasping standard theory means grasping the soul of evaluation theory. Understanding evaluation standards means understanding the purpose of evaluation. Evaluation standards "become the direct factor that restricts the evaluation results. The main reason for the difference in evaluation conclusions is the difference in evaluation standards." [2] Therefore, after analyzing the composition of evaluation standards, it is necessary to further explore the attributes or characteristics of news ethics evaluation standards from multiple perspectives.

### 6.1 Subjectivity of evaluation standards

News ethics evaluation standards are the standards of the evaluation subject. They are the standards constructed, set, recognized and applied by the evaluation subject. They have inherent subjectivity. The unity between subjects determines the unity of moral evaluation standards; the differences between subjects determine the diversity or pluralism of moral evaluation standards. Specifically, the subjectivity of evaluation standards is mainly manifested in the following points:

First, different evaluation subjects have different moral evaluation standards. This is rooted in the differences between subjects. The most fundamental reason is the differences in

subject needs and interests. In the actual news ethics evaluation, people see that the evaluation standards used by different news ethics evaluation subjects are often different. Although there are various existing news ethics, not all subjects will use existing ethics as their own evaluation standards. They will only use those ethics that they recognize. Different standards mean different evaluation results. Evaluation is always closely related to the value criteria and value ideals of the evaluation subject. The same behavior will present different values and meanings to different subjects due to different moral evaluation standards of different subjects (Kennedy, 2013). "The value and meaning of things to people are often inseparable from the value goals and ideals that people have, the value principles they accept, etc." [3] Second, different evaluation subjects will also have consistent moral evaluation standards. Objectively, there is always a historical and realistic unity between subjects, and there are always common needs and interests at different levels and scopes. This fundamentally determines that a certain society or a certain group (as a moral community) always has its relatively unified and dominant moral values and its basic moral norms that are commonly recognized and abided by. This is also true in specific areas of activity. Although different subjects may have different views on what kind of journalistic professional behavior is moral and what kind of behavior is immoral, and may have different evaluations of the moral value of the same behavior, we cannot deny that there is a relatively unified understanding and evaluation among different subjects, and different subjects have their commonly recognized moral standards and moral evaluation standards. This is also an important condition for the entire society and certain social activities to maintain unity and order. Third, no matter what kind of subject, the standard actually used to evaluate the morality of professional journalistic behavior is not a single standard, but multiple standards and multiple levels of standards, which can be said to be a "bundle of standards" or "cluster of standards". For example, the moral standards actually used by the general public to evaluate professional journalistic behavior include social moral standards, journalistic moral standards that he or she knows, and his or her own unique moral standards. When evaluating the moral value of a certain professional journalistic behavior, journalistic professionals may also use diverse and diversified standards, but in general, they may use more professional ethics standards for journalism. The diversification and multi-levelization of standards often make it possible for the same subject to have contradictory evaluation results when evaluating the morality of the same journalistic behavior, because different moral evaluation standards are often contradictory. The subjectivity of moral evaluation standards is a factual existence and belongs to the objective attribute of evaluation standards. In reality, people do see that different subjects will make different moral evaluations of the same news behavior. The core issue involved is: Among different subjective standards, what kind of or whose (which subject's) moral evaluation standard is the correct and reasonable standard? Is there an objective standard that transcends all standards? Is there a unique standard that can accurately evaluate the moral value of news behavior? It is impossible for us to fully answer this question here, but we can point out that news moral evaluation standards have right and wrong standards. Evaluation standards, as a standard with strong subjectivity, have the problem of right and wrong objectively, that is, some standards are correct and reasonable, while others may be wrong and unreasonable. It is precisely because evaluation standards have right and wrong that the evaluation results will have right and wrong differences.



## 6.2 Historicity of Evaluation Standards

Evaluation of news ethics is based on the existence of news ethics evaluation standards; without pre-existing moral evaluation standards, evaluation cannot be carried out logically. However, pre-existing moral evaluation standards are not the product of innateness, but are gradually generated in history. The formation of any moral evaluation standard is the result of a certain historical accumulation. Therefore, historicity, like subjectivity, is also an objective attribute of evaluation standards (Kennedy, 2013). The historicity of news ethics evaluation standards is determined by the historicity of news activities themselves and the historicity of people's understanding of news activities, and historicity is therefore inevitable. The historicity of moral evaluation standards explains the variability of moral evaluation standards (Graham et al., 2013). Existing moral evaluation standards, no matter what form they exist in, play an evaluation role on the one hand and change and update themselves on the other. That is to say, moral evaluation standards are historical existences and cannot transcend history. The fundamental driving force for updating them is the evolution and development of moral practice.

To be more specific, the historicity of moral evaluation standards means that different historical eras have different moral evaluation standards, and historicity is manifested as timeliness; secondly, the coherence, continuity and unity of history also determine those different historical eras have certain consistent, stable and relatively unified moral evaluation standards, and historicity is manifested as a certain transcendence of time. When discussing historicity, people tend to pay more attention to the former and despise the latter. However, only seeing the historicity in the former sense is an incomplete historicity, and it can even be said that it just ignores the inner red line and essence of historicity (Wayne Leach et al., 2007). The former historicity explains the differences and distinctions between histories, while the latter historicity explains the identity of history, the possibility of inheritance and dialogue between different historical eras; at the same time, it also provides a reason for dialogue and communication between countries and nations in different historical eras, that is, the reason why different news entities in the same time and space can communicate and dialogue is not only because of a certain identity between different subjects, but also because the history of human news activities has its own objective continuity and unity. With such an understanding of historicity, we can fundamentally understand the differences in the times and the historical unity of moral evaluation standards, that is, people have different news moral evaluation standards in different news eras, but there are also some unified and universal moral evaluation standards that run through different historical eras. In this way, we can also better understand the relativity (particularity) and absoluteness (universality) of moral evaluation standards and their unity in the historical dimension.

The historicity of moral evaluation standards shows that the correctness and rationality of moral evaluation standards can only be historical correctness and rationality; it is unimaginable to have absolutely correct and reasonable evaluation standards that transcend moral historicity. As the philosopher Spinoza pointed out, what is moral in the previous generation is evil in the next generation. But as mentioned above, this is only one side of the differences between historical eras, and the unity of history reminds us that some moral evaluation standards can transcend the times (note that they are not supra-historical), can be universalized, and should transcend the times (Beck et al., 2020). Moreover, the more moral evaluation standards have such characteristics, the more they can reflect and embody the essence of moral values. For example, it is immoral to falsify

news reports (regardless of the method and channel used), which is a moral standard and moral evaluation standard that can transcend the times (Gholampour et al., 2021).

### *In a certain historical era, the subjects within a certain social scope*

(And even the entire human subject) have relatively unified and dominant moral evaluation standards, and this phenomenon is also prevalent in various specific areas of society. If there is no such standard, society will inevitably be chaotic; if there is no such standard in a certain field (such as the news profession), the certain field will be chaotic. When society is in the process of historical transformation, the biggest, most profound, and most difficult transformation is the transformation of values and moral concepts (Kennedy, 2013). If a new relatively unified value concept system and moral concept system are formed, it means that the transformation is basically completed. This is true for society, and it is also true for the transformation of a specific social field. The turning point of history is not mainly the turning of the historical body, but the transformation of the values of the times; the change of concepts, The change of ideas is the beginning of a new era.

Within a certain social scope and within a certain era, constructing a relatively unified, stable and recognized standard for evaluating news ethics is the most difficult problem in the practice and research of news ethics. Without a relatively unified, correct and reasonable standard for evaluating ethics, evaluation itself is meaningless. John Rawls once wrote: "If people lose the universal guide in ethics, then there will never be any moral reason why people prefer to take this action rather than that action. This situation often makes it impossible for us to resolve moral disputes, thus leading to a general lack of attention to the moral thinking ability to resolve moral contradictions. We have also proved that judging a specific behavior as wrong actually implies appealing to a universal principle. If a certain behavior is indeed wrong, then all similar behaviors under the same circumstances must be wrong (Curry, 2016)."

## 6.3 Relativity (absoluteness) of evaluation standards

Subjectivity and historicity have explained and illustrated the relativity of moral evaluation standards from different perspectives. The core of the relativity of standards is actually the differences in standards between subjects and between different eras. However, relativity is relative to absoluteness. Therefore, it is difficult to fully understand the connotation of relativity by simply explaining the manifestation of relativity. It is also necessary to analyze the connotation of absoluteness. Specifically, to understand relativity, it is necessary to grasp the following key points: First, the relativity of evaluation standards mainly refers to the differences in standards between subjects and between different eras. However, to understand such differences, we must pay attention to the following points: (1) The differences have their objective reasons and have a necessary basis. For example, the objective environment itself is different. The general cognitive ability of the subject, especially the moral cognitive ability, is different; (2) The differences have their subjective reasons, for example, different subjects have different interest motivations and value orientations, so there must be differences in advantages and disadvantages, right and wrong between different standards. People cannot regard all moral evaluation standards as correct and reasonable. In that case, it is not to recognize the relativity of standards, but to slide into the subjectivism and relativism of moral philosophy, and moral evaluation becomes an arbitrary expression of subjective emotions.

Second, relativity also shows that the correctness and rationality of the moral evaluation standards possessed and used by any subject and any era are relative and limited, rather than absolute and universal. Therefore, people cannot arbitrarily and subjectively say that their own moral evaluation standards are universally valid standards or universal moral evaluation standards; people in any era also have no sufficient reason or basis to believe that the moral evaluation standards of their era are suitable for all eras or can surpass all eras. Later generations do not have absolute moral superiority over previous generations. However, the inherent difference of relativity means that different standards have the difference between good and bad, right and wrong as we mentioned above, and it also means that the correct standard with relativity always contains the component of approaching the absolutely correct standard. In this way, we can also explain that the general moral cognition and news moral cognition are a process of continuous evolution, continuous progress and improvement, and that in principle, the moral evaluation standards and news moral evaluation standards are getting closer and closer to the standards that should be, and closer and closer to the objective moral value standards.

Thirdly, this may be the key to the problem, that is, the absoluteness relative to relativity. I am afraid that only by understanding the absoluteness can we truly understand the relativity, and vice versa.

The absoluteness of the standard actually reflects what kind of connotation the correct and reasonable standard must have. In other words, only when an evaluation standard fully possesses the connotation of the correct standard and the reasonable standard, it is the absolute standard and the only standard. This absoluteness requires that all subjects and all times should approach such a standard, but the absoluteness also shows that such approach can only be a process of continuous approach, and no subject and any era can coincide with the absolute standard. On the one hand, this explains the abstractness and logic of the absoluteness of the standard, and on the other hand, it also explains the idealism and universality of the absoluteness of the standard. To put it simply, there is an absolutely correct and universally valid moral evaluation standard, which is the moral value standard. Whoever's evaluation standard can absolutely accurately and reasonably judge the moral value of a behavior or a subject has an absolutely correct and reasonable standard. So, what are the logical requirements of such a standard? First, the evaluation subject can absolutely correctly understand what the subject's behavior is; second, the evaluation subject has an absolutely correct and reasonable moral value standard.

#### **7. However, existing empirical facts and logical analysis have confirmed that**

No subject and no era can be absolutely correct in these two aspects. Therefore, all actual moral evaluation standards can only be relative, relatively correct and relatively reasonable. What may be more frustrating and worse is that: the moral standards adhered to by many subjects are wrong and unreasonable; the moral evaluation standards held by some eras may also be wrong and unreasonable. Therefore, in human history, in different societies, there will always be wrong eras and morally distorted eras, and there will always be terrible moral harm and moral killing phenomena. But such mistakes or irrationalities are only episodes and inevitable ups and downs for the entire human race. It objectively shows that in the real world, relativity has absoluteness, and absoluteness has only relativity; or the relative is absolute, and the absolute is relative. The pursuit of absolute correctness is an eternal process. As

researchers, we can only analyze such a logical line, and it is impossible to provide a specific, once-and-for-all, universal, absolutely correct moral evaluation standard, and there is no such specific standard; in the perspective of news moral evaluation theory, the same is true.

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