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Journalism–Business Tension in Swedish Newsroom Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

From Kohlberg’s moral reasoning approach, this study analyzes the decision-making process of a group of Swedish newspaper editors. We use a qualitative methodology to examine how editors respond to three ethical dilemmas related to company loyalty, journalistic values, and newsroom diversity. Findings suggest that commercial considerations do not outweigh the inherent ethical/journalistic influence on decisions concerning the newsroom. Further categorization reveals that ethical and managerial reasoning co-exist in a news media landscape that requires capturing readers and investors without neglecting journalistic values and norms. In investigating the moral, ethical, and business aspects of newspaper editors’ decision-making process, our findings reveal the delicate balance Swedish editors strive for during an increasingly difficult and transitional period in journalism.

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Newspapers face numerous challenges, including continuing readership losses (Barthel, 2015), increasing competition (Edmonds et al., 2013), investor pressure for profit growth (Picard, 2006), and recession-induced efficiency measures (Guskin, 2013). This has created considerable uncertainty among journalists and editors (Gade & Lowery, 2011). To regain readers or develop more appealing content, newspaper managers must quickly redirect their journalistic directives to conform more to the taste of readers or at least make news more engaging (Batsell, 2015). Such a change may require some reconsideration of newsroom decision-making processes. But newsroom personnel often lack time to think of new strategies and discuss decisions while deadlines impede strong chances for thought and dialogue (Russial, 1994; Overby, 1995; Latif, 2014). It is no secret that many journalists find business-related policy, practices, and content difficult to accept (Underwood, 1993; Sylvie & Witherspoon, 2002), particularly at the time this study was conducted (Schultz & Sheffer, 2012). The United States has no exclusive rights to these problems. Although Nordic newspapers have some of the world’s highest readerships—Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark rank in the top fifth of countries in total average newspaper circulation per capita (NationMaster, 2014)—newspaper circulation has declined overall in these countries, and the traditional role of the newspaper in everyday life may be changing.

We use Swedish newsrooms as a case study to examine the role of these tensions on editors’ decision making. For Swedish newspapers to attract more readers and continue their central influence in the culture, they must quickly change their journalistic directives to conform more to readers’ tastes or at least adopt a more reader-friendly presentation (Sylvie, Lewis, & Xu, 2010). Such change may require reconsideration of newsroom decision-making processes. Therefore, this study aims to understand how front-line editors at Swedish daily newspapers negotiate the tensions between journalistic and business decision-making. Through qualitative analysis, we examine a group of mid-level editors regarding practical aspects of developing the news to reveal the thinking underlying decision-making involving business-related reasoning.
Theoretical background

Several studies have explored how journalists make news decisions and what kind of influences they face (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001; Powers & Fico, 1994; Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1987; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2013), for example, argue that “the message, or media content is influenced by a wide variety of factors both inside and outside of media organizations” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 9). They grouped these factors into five levels of influence which function hierarchically from macro to micro: social systems, social institutions, organizations, routines, and individuals. From a sociological perspective, the authors reflected on the ways mass media content is subject to internal and external constraints. According to some scholars, the background of journalists and personal orientations can affect what they consider newsworthy and what information sources they use. Powers and Fico (1994) found that the dominant effect on news content and sourcing stemmed from a reporter’s judgment. “Overall, the results failed to support the view that organizational pressures dominate. Rather, news content was found to be most powerfully shaped by journalists’ own orientations toward key source qualities” (p. 94).

These studies focus mainly on the influences on news production but have mostly neglected what may influence business-related decisions. In fact, few studies have explicitly connected business concerns and decision-making processes. Borden (2007) pit journalistic principles against business objectives by analyzing journalist focus group discussions. Her findings suggest that journalists tend to rely more on journalistic claims than on business claims when trying to manage the ethical ambivalence” (Borden, 2007; p. 289). And while they may acknowledge business concerns, journalists also may try to evade or circumvent those issues via subtle, concealed use of news criteria or by compromising in return for attainment of other, journalistic objectives (Borden, 2000). Plaisance and Skewes (2003) discovered a modest but adversarial relationship in how American newspaper journalists ranked values and their perceived journalistic priorities. Their findings suggest that values and role perceptions interact to shape behavior. The study documented the need for additional research on values in “the various ‘environments’ in which particular values and role conceptions are formed” (Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; p. 844). Subsequent examination of journalism ethics students (Plaisance, 2007) showed that an ethics course could impact students’ value systems, with discussion of corporatism apparently influencing declines in idealism and relativism. Both studies suggested that increasing corporate consolidation may influence values of rank-and-file journalists.

But what can journalists do when their values openly conflict with managerial needs? Farrel (1983) proposed an exit-neglect-loyalty-voice typology of responses to job dissatisfaction. The exit and neglect categories have more negative connotations, as exit implies leaving the organization while neglect means passively allowing conditions to worsen. Loyalty involves support toward the organization despite one’s level of dissatisfaction. In contrast, voice is seen as the most constructive option since it includes formal and informal attempts to improve bad conditions by discussing the organization’s problems. Therefore, journalists could choose from these four options when dealing with business constraints on their daily job. This schema typifies the range of responses journalists may have to business constraints, which reflects a journalist’s sense of morality. Borden (2000) suggests three reasons why resistance to business constraints is morally required. First, because journalists provide a social good, organizations should not threaten their professional functions. Second, journalists are moral agents, and as such, they have an obligation to safeguard their integrity and journalistic role. Third, employees in general should not follow orders blindly but reflect on whether those orders are issued for the best interests of the organization itself and society as a whole. Borden emphasizes that organizational interests must also be considered, since most organizational goals do not pose moral problems in and of themselves. “Failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of certain organizational goals may goad individual journalists into resisting when such resistance is neither desirable nor necessary. This is unfair and usually harmful to both parties” (Borden, 2000, p. 154).

A journalist’s decision to resist business constraints by either voicing her opinion or quitting her job in consequence to her beliefs will be mediated by one’s level of moral reasoning. According to previous
research, journalists present high levels of moral reasoning. Using the Defining Issues Test (DIT), Coleman and Wilkins (2002) found that journalists ranked fourth highest of all professions tested, behind seminarians/philosophers, medical students, and physicians, but ahead of dental students, nurses, graduate students, undergraduate college students, veterinary students, and adults in general. A subsequent study found journalists scored higher than three groups whose members had higher education levels than the average journalist (dental, veterinary, and graduate students) although education is considered an important predictor of moral development (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004). They also found that awareness and involvement play an important role. While the ethical reasoning abilities of journalists measure up to those of other professionals, those with a high moral awareness score higher than those with lower levels of moral awareness, as do those journalists in jobs where making choices plays a role (Wilkins & Coleman, 2005). Coleman and Wilkins’s studies draw upon Kohlberg’s seminal work on moral development. Kohlberg (1969, 1981, 1984) developed a widely used theory that draws from the classical ethical philosophies of Kant, Mills, Rawls and Aristotle, among others. It categorizes the quality of ethical reasoning into six stages that represent more universal ethical principles at higher stages (postconventional level) and more self-focused considerations at lower stages (preconventional level). The middle stages (conventional level) represent social norms of following rules and laws because of societal expectations. This theory has been commonly used to study and improve the ethical decision-making of professionals, including journalists.

Further studies have built upon Kohlberg’s work. Gilligan (1982), a former student of Kohlberg, criticized his work for not considering differences between men and women. She called into question the assumption that a morality of justice is equally valid for men and women, and claimed that women place more emphasis on caring for others. This issue was not initially considered in Kohlberg’s test, where women usually scored lower than men. Kohlberg later revised his framework to include an ethic of care along with his rights-based model (Thoma, 1986; Coleman & Wilkins, 2009). Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) translated Kohlberg’s stages into a quantitative instrument called the Defining Issues Test (DIT), which measures the percentage of time that people use universal principles when making decisions. The DIT poses six ethical dilemmas and asks respondents to make a decision about what they would do, ranking 12 statements about each dilemma. More than 400 published studies using the DIT have confirmed its validity and generalizability (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

For this study, we adapted elements of Kohlberg’s and Rest et al.’s work to build our methodology. Specifically, we conducted in-depth personal interviews with Swedish editors to discuss dilemmas related to journalistic values and business constraints. The DIT can be modified to include up to two original dilemmas, and studies following the DIT method have incorporated their own dilemmas in order to match their research goals (Coleman & Wilkins, 2002; Shawver & Sennetti, 2009). Although we did use ethical dilemmas to engage our participants, we did not apply a paper-and-pencil test to rank statements. Instead, we interviewed the editors and encouraged them to describe aloud their impressions about each dilemma. Interviews have been questioned as a valid technique because of the inability of individuals to verbally explain how their minds work (Rest et al, 1999). However, the richness of our data relies on the variety of responses the same person can give for the same situation. Therefore, we created three dilemmas dealing with three journalistic-business tensions we have observed in the literature: company loyalty (Farrel, 1983), values versus profits (Gardner et al., 2001; Picard, 2006), and newsroom diversity (Whitehouse, 2009).

Three scenarios to explore moral reasoning and decision making

Scenario one: Newspaper closing

We aim to understand how different scenarios might trigger different levels of moral reasoning and, in consequence, different decision-making outcomes. The first scenario deals with company loyalty;
we explore how editors act when the upper-level management directly asks them to be loyal to the company during a complicated situation. This scenario poses the following ethical dilemma:

As with all the news industry, profits at your newspaper are way down and the organization has been laying off workers. Your publisher tells you that the paper is going to shut down, but you are not at liberty to disclose this for a month. As management, you will be transferred to a sister paper. You know of employees who are planning to buy houses and take out loans to send their children to college. Others are nearing retirement, are the only income earners in their household, or have ill family members who rely on the health insurance. What would you do? Would you jeopardize your transfer and tell the most vulnerable employees? Should you sell your house before news gets out and the market is flooded? Please say out loud everything that goes through your mind as you think through how you would handle this.

Similar dilemmas have been indirectly observed in previous research. For example, Aldridge and Evetts (2003) suggested employers have co-opted “professionalism” to persuade rank-and-file journalists to change the nature of their jobs. Berkowitz and Limor (2003) contend that situations often fraught with tensions between professional values and organizational directives still determine the rank-and-file’s reasoning structure: a survey of U.S. newspaper reporters found that context and level of professional confidence strongly influenced decisions, particularly concerning “the journalism-business dialectic” (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003, p. 799). Qualitative interviews of 15 U.S. newspaper journalists showed that in terms of philosophical underpinnings, those journalists valued autonomy, transparency, and minimizing harm when pondering ethical matters (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009).

Different models have been offered to explain what affects ethical decision making (Vitell, Nwachukwu & Barnes, 1993), but legitimate efforts to test these models did not occur until Harrington (1997) examined the strength and effect of social consensus on moral judgment and intent. The study found that rule-oriented editors and those who deny any personal responsibility in a situation, without the benefit of an apparent social consensus, tend to frequently endorse unethical behaviors (Harrington, 1997). In this scenario in particular, we are interested in seeing whether editors are able to assume responsibilities when their own job might be jeopardized and, if that is the case, what kind of responses (exit, voice, loyalty, neglect) they use to resist business constraints.

**Scenario two: The bottom line versus news values**

This scenario is designed to explore how editors respond when facing the bottom line vs. news values controversy. Our second scenario poses the following ethical dilemma:

After several years as a reporter, you became a managing editor at a newspaper with a circulation of 50,000. You realized after just months in the new position that your job has a lot to do with meeting the bottom line. Now, in these hard economic times, your publisher has asked you to coordinate special sections with the advertising department, discuss layout and design with the marketing staff, and invite a representative of the circulation department to the afternoon news meeting so that sales could be maximized. What would you do? What would you tell the news staff? What issues would you be most concerned about? Please say out loud everything that goes through your mind as you think through how you would handle this.

We cannot analyze this dilemma without taking into account forces considerably more powerful than an individual actor. Major advertisers, for example, play a relevant role in shaping editorial decisions (Lesly, 1991). Media ownership and market context also have a significant impact on newsroom decision making. A recent study on Latin American journalists found that media ownership inhibits journalists who practice investigative reporting—some publishers simply do not see the need for a more specialized type of journalism (Saldaña & Mourao, 2015). Corporate-owned newspapers were found to produce less coverage of political events in comparison to privately owned newspapers (Dunaway, 2008). And the commitment of journalists and editors to cover specific beats is not always enough to persuade media owners to put journalism values ahead of monetary profits. In the end, all members of a media organization must answer to the owners and top management, and from a wider perspective, all of them are involved in the maintenance of the system (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Adam, 2004).
Journalism practice has long been constrained by a variety of factors, but current constraining systems are larger, more powerful, and the outcomes more concerning (Adam, 2004). Scholars argue that a journalist’s role is to stand against any restricting power by relying on principles of honesty, responsibility, fairness, and loyalty to the journalistic faith, even to the extent of personal sacrifice. “It is not only cowardly to remain silent; it is journalistically incompetent” (Cohen, 2004, p. 270).

Problems arise when internal factors such as profits threaten the public role of journalism (Gardner et al., 2001). Classic media sociology work identifies economic concerns as a relevant influence on newsrooms’ decisions (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973), suggesting that the balance between good journalism and economic profit has always been a delicate matter. “News organizations, in particular, have faced highly visible economic pressures in recent years that now play a greater role in dictating journalistic decisions” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013, p. 163). The disconnection between the interest of media owners in selling, and the interest of journalists in serving the public, frustrates the practice of journalism and the owner’s ability to sustain that practice (Craft, 2004; McManus, 1992).

There are two sides to every issue. On the one hand, journalism has a commitment to public trust, social understanding, and democracy (Cohen, 2004; Adam, 2004). But on the other, journalists and editors are involved in the maintenance of the organization and have an obligation to it, not only contractual but also moral (Craft, 2004). Society expects them to not betray their values for commercial or political reasons, but at the same time, they rely on the success of the organization to perform their work. What kind of moral reasoning will editors take to manage relations with business and advertising offices without betraying their inherent public role?

**Scenario three: Diversity hire**

Finally, in this scenario we observe how editors respond to diversity and discrimination issues. Our third scenario poses the following ethical dilemma:

As executive editor you recognize the importance of diversity. One of the leading candidates for promotion to city editor is a black woman. You have heard talk in the newsroom that some people think she does not have strong leadership qualities or the kinds of organizational skills that will be needed. Furthermore, there is talk that if she fails at the job, this will only reinforce the prevailing skepticism at the newspaper about women and minorities’ ability to handle senior position responsibilities. You have final say over the hire. The other two applicants are white men outside the organization who are comparably qualified. What would you do? What would you tell the staff? What issues would you be most concerned about? Please say out loud everything that goes through your mind as you think through how you would handle this.

All major U.S. professional and educational journalism organizations include diversity as a primary ethic, value, goal, or mission (Whitehouse, 2009), yet news media coverage of minority groups is far from fair. The lack of news coverage is not the only concern for scholars, but the misrepresentation also is a concern. Dominant cultures usually attribute stereotypical characteristics to minority groups, and these stereotypes are transferred from the media to the audience (Whitehouse, 2009).

In a study of 146 cable and network news programs aired between 2008 and 2012, Dixon and Williams (2015) found that blacks were commonly portrayed as both violent perpetrators and victims of crime; Latinos were depicted as undocumented immigrants, while Muslims were over-represented as terrorists. Whites, on the other hand, often appear as sources and experts, dominating network news coverage (Owens, 2008). A large body of scholarship has documented the impact of the media on public opinion (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; McCombs, 2014), and the influence that constant misrepresentation of certain groups has on people’s attitudes toward those groups (Dixon, 2008; Gilliam, & Iyengar, 2000; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). Heider (2000) points out that journalists’ tendency to associate social problems with race, ethnicity, or religion is influenced by unconscious stereotypical bias, which Heider terms “incognizant racism.” This phenomenon is more common among journalists who do not belong to minority groups, and still most U.S. newsrooms do not reflect current demographics in society (De Uriarte, 2003; Martin & Pineda, 2004; Whitehouse, 2009).
All ethical implications considered, business aspects also must be taken into account. The risk of having a nondiverse staff is the risk to miss stories, angles of a particular story, and readership. For a newspaper (or any type of news organization), the consequence of this misrepresentation is disengagement—those minority groups portrayed in limited settings will not have incentives to become a loyal news media audience. In this study, we want to explore if any of these ethical and business concerns have an influence on diversity hiring. Following Whitehouse (2009), diversity in the newsroom can only bring positive outcomes, not just in economic terms, but also in the closeness a news outlet can build with specific groups: “improving professional practice will foster more ethical responses to cultural conflicts and provide the whole community with better understanding of all its parts” (Whitehouse, 2009; p.104). How willing are Swedish editors to foster such ethical responses through the hiring of a black female?

**Research questions**

Previous quantitative research has uncovered factors that predict high or low moral reasoning. Through our interview and qualitative analysis approach, what we aim to uncover are the moral mechanisms by which journalists deal with these dilemmas. This study enhances our understanding of previous work by shedding light on the moral processing of journalists. Our goal is to understand how ethical and managerial reasoning coexist in a news media landscape that requires capturing readers and investors without neglecting journalistic values and norms. Drawing upon Kohlberg’s cognitive moral development theory, we seek to determine:

**RQ1: What scenario will editors address from the preconventional level of cognitive moral reasoning?** According to Kohlberg’s model, at the preconventional level of moral reasoning, people tend to make decisions based on potential rewards or punishment they might receive for their actions. What decisions will editors make using the lowest level of moral reasoning, if at all?

**RQ2: What scenario will editors address from the conventional level of cognitive moral reasoning?** At this level, people tend to behave according to social and organizational expectations. Do editors’ decision-making processes tend to follow this level while considering journalistic- and business-related decisions?

**RQ3: What scenario will editors address from the postconventional level of cognitive moral reasoning?** This is the highest level of moral reasoning. Individuals at this level of moral reasoning make decisions based on what is universally understood as good or bad, following the principle of justice. When do editors ignore social expectations and follow their own concepts about right or wrong?

Also, we aim to understand if editors’ decision-making process is different when considering a more managerially focused approach. In this study, we understand ethical approach to mean those decisions based on ethical reasoning, while managerial approach involves organizational, business-oriented reasoning. It is important to examine the inevitable conflict between the financial bottom-line and journalistic ethics. When do editors turn to professional-norm ethics to reason through decisions, and when are their decisions guided more by the pressure from the business end of the newsroom? Do editors emphasize different moral reasoning levels depending of the kind of decision they have to make? Therefore, we ask:

**RQ4: What scenario will editors address by applying stronger managerial reasoning as compared to ethical reasoning?**

In service of these questions, we analyzed a group of Swedish newspaper managers for two reasons. First, the Swedish context provides a good example of the struggles journalists may face when considering business-oriented decisions. Traditionally strong until the international recession, in 2014 Swedish newspapers experienced their worst year in recent memory (Swedish Press Subsidies Council, 2014),
with the country’s provincial newspapers (its local daily press) hardest hit by losses in circulation and advertising. Local publishers find their business model threatened and the time-honored habit of local newspaper reading being supplanted by digital pursuits. Industry leaders worry that because Swedes’ Internet use is uncommonly high, Sweden and other Nordic countries “are exposed to the global and therefore razor sharp competition that exists online…” and that exposure places Nordic-based advertising (and with it, Swedish businesses) in peril (Swedish Press Subsidies Council, 2014; p. 51). We collected our data in 2012, as Swedish newsrooms were feeling the pressure of the international recession and a growing digital readership. Second, Sweden, although a northern European country, has a culture and newspaper industry that often mimics its American counterpart. Therefore, insights into the American system may be gleaned as well: as in the United States, Swedish newspapers have a predominantly local orientation, covering and focusing on readers’ individual and social concerns not fulfilled by other media, making them community-oriented. And relative to other news media, Sweden’s newspapers serve an informative role (Weibull, 1992). Sweden also has similar strong belief in freedom of the press and freedom of speech. History shows that Sweden was an early adoptee of a constitutional press freedom clause and, among more technologically advanced countries, has been a strident opponent of censorship (Moore, 2015).

Methods

Data collection

We used the “think-aloud protocol” to gather the observations of Swedish front-line editors—those directly supervising others while reporting to newsroom upper-management (Sylvie & Huang, 2008) —since they think aloud about how they make decisions including ethical components. This method tests cognitive procedures that primarily gather observations of subjects as they process their knowledge regarding a certain action or behavior (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Shapiro, 1994). To avoid interference from the interviewer, the procedure uses a nondirective probe soliciting responses immediately after reading a managerial dilemma. In other words, subjects read a dilemma and then work through their decision by thinking aloud, or saying everything that comes into their mind. In the case of this study, participants were trained and prompted by one of the authors to “keep talking” and “say out loud what you are thinking.” They were instructed not to explain why they did what they did, but to say out loud everything in their stream of consciousness.

Nineteen front-line editors at four daily newspapers in Sweden participated in this study. The newspapers were selected purposively, using personal contacts of the authors while attempting to include those publications representative of the general Swedish daily newspaper population; that is, concerning circulation and staffing size, demographic makeup, and managerial experience. Given the large quantity of data obtained by think-aloud interviews, this method normally requires small samples of between 10 and 30 participants (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2000). The 19 editors were interviewed in English by one of the authors during May 2012.

Following the steps of previous research in ethical reasoning (Shawver & Sennetti, 2009), one of the authors presented the editors with three brief decision-making scenarios. As described above, each scenario presented the editor with hypothetical but reality-based details that constitute a conflict of journalistic and business interests. The researcher then asked the editor to describe aloud the steps s/he normally would take in such a situation, and recorded the editor’s response. The process was repeated with each editor who consented to be interviewed.

Analysis

Once the researcher completed the interviews, results were transcribed and analyzed via a standard qualitative content analysis software program, NVivo 10. We coded our data by looking for patterns according to Kohlberg’s cognitive moral development theory. In the first round of coding, we coded...
each sentence of our interviews by using intuitive categories that emerged from the data, such as “credibility,” “loyal to the company,” or “good business.” In a second round of coding, we determined whether the sentence was related to ethical decisions (ethical approach) or about business decisions (managerial approach). Finally, in a third round of coding, we determined whether the sentence belonged to the preconventional, conventional, or postconventional levels of Kohlberg’s moral reasoning. For example, if a respondent made a decision purely based on whether s/he would be punished or rewarded, we coded that sentence as “preconventional.” If decisions were made because “that’s what I was told to do,” we considered the response to represent that the editor responded from a conventional level of moral reasoning, and behaved according to societal expectations. If a respondent decided to, for instance, quit her job following universal principles of right and wrong, we coded that behavior as “postconventional.” It is important to mention, however, that the same individual can react in different ways depending on the situation. Even more, the same person can respond from the three levels of moral reasoning while analyzing different aspects of the same dilemma. In other words, each assertion from an editor is assigned a reasoning level, but we did not aggregate these to the respondent level in an attempt to “classify” each editor by reasoning level. Editors may reason through all three moral reasoning levels as they “think aloud” their response.

**Findings**

Our first research question explores what scenario editors addressed from the preconventional level of moral reasoning. At the lowest level of cognitive moral development, people decide what is right and wrong based on personal consequences, such as expected punishment or reward (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). Among our participants, most of those responding from the preconventional level of moral reasoning did so in response to scenario one. In this scenario, editors were told the newspaper where they worked would shut down, and their job would be relocated, but most staff would lose their jobs. Editors were not at liberty to disclose this information for a month, although they knew colleagues were planning to buy houses or obtain loans to send their children to college. We observed that seven of the 19 interviewed editors responded to scenario one with preconventional moral reasoning. Editors decided whether to tell their colleagues about the newspaper closing based on the consequences such action would have on their personal situation. If editors assumed that telling co-workers about the newspaper shutdown would have no personal consequences, then they decided to give this information to some co-workers:

“I would probably have to discuss it with my family and… In case I would be, you know, easily identified, it would be much more difficult (to tell).” Subject 1

One editor showed preoccupation for more vulnerable colleagues once the newspaper closed. This reasoning involved, however, making sure that this editor would assess his/her own job situation beforehand.

“Well, with my future secured about me continuing in the same business or in the newspaper, my first concern would be those people that I know won’t manage to get a new job.” Subject 7

Neither did Swedish editors challenge the order. Because people behave according to possible rewards or punishments in this level, the two editors who intended to speak up still used the caveat of “if nothing happens to me.”

“So if I count the heads… how many share the information, and I found there is no or little risk for me personally, I would definitely spread the news, despite my contract.” Subject 1

Although scenario one is the only dilemma where explicit rewards (getting a job at a sister paper) and punishments (losing that job) were posed, we did find some preconventional reasoning in the other scenarios. In scenario two, for instance, editors had to decide whether to work in conjunction with the advertising, marketing and circulation departments so that sales could be maximized. Some
respondents were concerned about their staff seeing them as less credible, which could be seen as a punishment and, therefore, a reason for not doing collaborative work with other departments.

“I know my staff… they would never have any confidence on me if I did these compromises.” Subject 10

“I would try to make somebody else do it (coordinate the work together), because of the credibility. That would be a problem, if people don’t trust me.” Subject 12

Thus, the issue in this case is not so much working with other departments, but the fact that subordinates would not approve it. Subject 12 said she would get somebody else to do it, meaning that she is still fine with this—she just does not want to do it herself. Other respondents indicated they did not want to deal with this responsibility.

“I would just go alone with this until it reaches a point where I can’t take responsibility for it anymore.” Subject 8

Similarly, editors reasoning at the preconventional level in scenario three also were concerned about other people’s opinion. In this scenario, they had to decide whether to promote a black woman that the staff considered not strongly qualified. We found two editors making ethical decisions at the preconventional level. They recognized hiring the black woman would foster newsroom diversity, but the punishment they could get from their superiors and subordinates constrained them. They would not come to a decision without having the blessing of their supervisors, even if against their own beliefs. But at the same time, they did not want to appear racist for giving (or not giving) the job to the black applicant.

“So, for me, it is very important and I think I had to make conversation with my supervisors and ask them how important is for them that we have diversity. If not… if they say diversity is not a priority, I would just make sure that we hire the best editor we can find.” Subject 4

“...and if she gets the job, that she got it just because of her being a woman, and a black woman, or Arabic woman, so whatever I do, I think it’s difficult to make the decision here…” Subject 11

If these individualistic thoughts showed mostly in scenario one, then the conventional level of moral reasoning was more evenly spread throughout the three scenarios, providing a more nuanced answer to our second research question. At the conventional level, decisions about right or wrong conform to society’s expectations, family, or peer groups as opposed to the lower level. In this particular case, conventional reasoning is related to organizational routines inside the newspaper.

Broadly speaking, our respondents addressed the three scenarios from a conventional perspective. They struggled between what they were expected to do, as opposed to what they really wanted to do. For instance, in scenario one, they knew jobs required loyalty to their superiors and company, but it was difficult not to tell anyone about the paper closing.

“If he (the publisher) tells me ‘you can’t tell,’ I’m kind of… my hands are tied, really… but I would tell a few close ones, and ask for advice … If they ask me, I would tell. I wouldn’t go out and tell them, but if they ask me I would reply to them.” Subject 11

This situation is even more complicated for respondents in scenario two because they have two sets of expectations to meet. On the one hand, they felt compelled to be loyal to journalistic values and rejected the idea of working with other departments. But on the other hand, they realized that following instructions is not only desirable but, most of the times, required. Thus, most editors argued that “news judgment is a priority” in running the newsroom and found sharing news decision making with other departments undesirable, making clear they are journalists and would not tolerate nonjournalistic criteria in deciding news.

“When it comes to ‘You should write about this person who is advertising a lot,’ this is something inappropriate.” Subject 1

“If it starts affecting how the newspaper looks, or our work, I wouldn’t agree to this influence on what stories we made.” Subject 9
Some editors said they would try to convince superiors that the joint-work idea was a mistake. And quitting became viable if they saw they would not be heard.

“First, when I get the information I would try to talk to whoever makes these decisions, if it’s the director, or the economic people who make economic decisions, that it’s not acceptable and we can’t go on working like this, because our credibility is put at stake. We can’t really go on to our readers and say that we work like they see… they see that! They wouldn’t believe that we stand free.” Subject 11

“First of all, I would discuss it with the chief editor and probably I would set a time that is an ultimatum, otherwise they go back on this or I will quit.” Subject 10

Other respondents accepted working in consort with other departments and internalizing these changes for the newspaper’s benefits. They still saw news judgment as a priority, but with some business-orientation overlap. In that case, they saw integrity as a parameter of how far they would take inter-departmental cooperation, and how “not to cross the line.”

“But having a discussion about ‘OK, we should write more about cars,’ people buy cars for 100 million every year; it’s an important market for us. OK, let’s discuss what should we write about cars, that is OK.” Subject 1

“When the commercial side crosses over to the autonomy and the journalistic aspect of our work, then there is a problem but… until then it’s pretty much fine.” Subject 8

Business-wise, editors recognized profits as necessary to keep the newspaper afloat, a necessity possibly satisfied by working together with other departments.

“It would be important for me to show the reporters I’m on your side.’ But I also understand that we need to make money to stay in the game, so let’s see what we can do together.” Subject 3

“We are one company, we are dedicated to news and we are dedicated to business, and we need to work together. This is how we look upon this question today.” Subject 1

In scenario three, the expression “hire her if she is the right one” was one of the main responses as related to what is expected in the newsroom. Diversity and equality created a tension between socially desired behavior and necessary organizational action. Some editors mentioned the need for newsroom diversity as it directly related to readers’ diversity. But, simultaneously, they were reluctant to “favor” a minority group instead of treating all applicants equally, since they were equally qualified.

“It depends on what problems you have in the newspaper. In our newspaper, there is a problem that we are too many white men. So… having another cultural background would be an assert here.” Subject 1

“We would need the chief editor or the CEO of the company… I mean, if they have a good policy concerning this, saying that we need more diversity, this kind of rumors wouldn’t be strong, like this, and it would be easier for me as editor.” Subject 10

In this dilemma, some people think the black woman does not have strong leadership qualities or the kind of organizational skills needed in the newsroom. Editors believed it is the black staffer’s duty to win people’s approval. So, they were concerned that she would be the boss of those who did not like her, but she had to demonstrate to the staff that she was good enough.

“She has to win, obviously, the confidence. I mean, the people’s love, she has to win that. And I would try to assist and support her in doing that.” Subject 1

Conventional levels of moral reasoning relate to what is expected or desirable, despite what would be the best outcome in terms of social justice or universal principles. Those who wanted to hire this woman just because of her qualifications and ignoring her gender or ethnic background, still are approaching this dilemma from a conventional standpoint.

“This skepticism… I don’t know what it is based upon, but if I have the feeling she is the right one, I would never hesitate to give her the job, absolutely not. What would I do? Hire her if she’s the right one for the job.” Subject 1
Our third research question examines the decisions of the editors from the postconventional level of cognitive moral reasoning. This level refers to influences by universal values or principles, moral values and reasoning relying upon self-chosen, and nonarbitrary principles of justice and rights. In scenario one, editors responding from the postconventional approach refused to keep quiet about the newspaper shutdown, claiming universal values such as “integrity,” “trust,” and “commitment,” and not caring about jeopardizing transfers to a sister paper. More important problems, such as friends, families, and vulnerable people, were cited.

“I would jeopardize my own position on the other newspaper, cause I think it would be difficult to live with a decision where I didn’t care about my present colleagues... it would be difficult to have that... to take that with me.” Subject 11

Similarly, editors not only suggested talking to superiors to find other solutions, but also directly challenged the order as the right thing to do:

“To be quite honest, I would respond to my boss and say ‘I think it’s very unwise not to tell people about this,’ and I would say ‘I don’t want to be part of it if we don’t tell everyone.” Subject 11

In scenario two, editors reasoning from the postconventional level responded based on what they considered was the right thing to do, despite the expectations of managers and the financial needs of the paper. Negative reactions, anger and frustration toward a superior’s directive emerged at this level.

“I could never do this (working together), I could never work in a newspaper in this way; it’s not why I’m here. I would probably quit.” Subject 17

“I would quit my job immediately.” Subject 10

However, most of the high-level moral reasoning showed up in response to scenario three. Editors were highly concerned about the need of diversity inside the newsroom. Whether to hire a black woman was not at issue; because of her race, she was clearly “the right one for the job.” With three equally qualified candidates, then the job must be hers, or anyone’s with a different background in terms of ethnicity, gender, or special abilities.

“I would definitely hire this black woman, because I think diversity is very important for the newspaper. I mean, everyone wants more diversity in the organization, so I wouldn’t have any problem telling the staff about this.” Subject 6

“If it’s clear that the black woman is not as good as the men, then we have to make another decision: what’s the most important thing? I would also say about this situation... from my point of view, diversity is very important.” Subject 4

“If everybody is middle age, white, men, it should be good to have somebody else. Then it could be somebody in a wheelchair, or a black woman, or whatever...” Subject 12

Editors at this level of reasoning considered equality as a parameter of how people should be treated. They mentioned gender bias while analyzing the discussion of the black woman’s skills, and how equality can lead to diversity as well.

“I would hire her, because that’s very important for people and for our survival... people are treated equally but also we have to have a diversity of backgrounds and equality between the sexes in the workplace.” Subject 9

Some editors also were reluctant to pay attention to others, making their final decision based on what was good for the newspaper alone. Also, they would not tolerate unfriendly attitudes from the staff toward the black woman. They expressed themselves strongly on these issues.

“If she is quite capable and these other two guys are just as capable, I would definitely go for the black female, just because diversity is a big issue and we talk about this a lot on my workplace so... I can’t just base that on what people think and what people talk about in the hallway... I will pick her.” Subject 8
Because of their commitment to diversity, editors were motivated to help the black woman get this job. From the postconventional level, they saw the need to protect her from newsroom talk and to help her succeed. This behavior did not emerge in lower levels.

"I don't have many concerns, but if I have to point at one, I would say I would do my best to help her to manage the job. And I would make sure that she has the support that she needs." Subject 6

"I think it's very important to have a diverse leadership. We live in a society where people come from everywhere, all over the world, and that should be the same in the newspaper and in the newspaper leadership, so I would take a fight for her and I would tell my staff that this is the editor we need." Subject 18

Our last research question explores whether these ethical dilemmas could be addressed from a managerial perspective as well. Although our respondents showed high levels of ethical reasoning in the three scenarios, they also applied managerial reasoning to explain how they would act in these hypothetical situations. For example, in scenario one, some editors argued they would not share what they were told to keep confidential, because they believed they had to be loyal to the company and their jobs. Company loyalty, duty to publisher commands, and confidentiality requirements showed in the comments of the editors.

"My first thought is that I won't tell the most vulnerable employees, because being in the management means a special code of conduct... when I started I agreed to keep things to myself that concern the future of the company." Subject 7

"I don't think so much about jeopardizing my transfer in this case, that's not my first thought. My first thought is sticking with my publisher and trusting him in this case." Subject 17

"As a part of the management, I think my duty is to look after the interest of the company." Subject 5

Most of the managerial thinking was found in scenario two. Eleven of the 19 editors used expressions such as "good product/good business," suggesting that working with other departments could be a good strategy to better know readers and to understand the market.

"For instance, today we talked about mobile flashes, pop up flash, we would need to market those, because we have a new mobile app coming up. So, the more the marketing division understands the rationale of what we are doing, the better they can market it. So, I don't think there is a genuine conflict as long as you know what is not for sale." Subject 5

"I would think that having money is very important when we want to do good journalism, so I would do my very best to cooperate with the marketing staff and the other people to maximize the sales, and I would also try to be very open about the way I think towards the staff." Subject 6

In scenario three, just a few editors made decisions from a managerial approach. But those who did were more concerned about finding a person with the abilities and skills the job requires. They recognized it is easier to find these skills in current subordinates who know how things are done, prompting editors’ belief in staff promotions as well. This scenario forced them to choose between an internal candidate equally qualified as the rest of the applicants and trying to be very conservative when giving their opinion.

"I mean, when someone is inside you know what their strengths and weakness are, and if you think they can handle it, I mean... you would be pretty sure that they can, because you have worked with them for a few years... but if it's someone from outside, it's more like a wild card..." Subject 9

"Or, it might be true that she has no strong leadership qualities so, whatever. But I still think this woman would have an advantage, because she is in the organization, and I think it's good if you know someone... so, she would have an advantage in that." Subject 11

Besides the need for newsroom diversity, hiring this editor may help them understand their readers: some reader groups were excluded because the newspaper did not know them, which reflects a lack of diversity in their organizations. So, becoming more diverse was needed to create a better paper.
“Our staff does not match our readers on this regard, and I think it’s really important now.” Subject 3

“We need to diversify, because this is the way it looks. There are blacks or Serbians; I think about all the young people here, we have a lot of people from other countries. We are not going to... we don’t write about certain things. I don’t know what things are that we don’t write about because I don’t see them. And it’s not that I don’t try but it’s very hard. And you need people from different types.” Subject 15

“If we just apply male, white persons, it wouldn’t be an interesting paper.” Subject 16

Our interviews showed that managerial thinking is not opposed to ethical reasoning, although some editors addressed some situations from a purely business-oriented perspective. In no case does this mean they are less ethical than other respondents—it just reflects the variety of approaches from which an ethical dilemma may be understood.

Discussion

Our study is motivated by a curiosity about the role of ethics in the decision-making process of newspaper editors. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews with Swedish front-line editors, we uncover some of the moral mechanisms by which editors come to various levels of moral reasoning in business and managerial decisions. Our study captures a pivotal moment in journalism, where ethical and managerial reasoning was forced into tight quarters by the bottom line and increased expectations of engagement. In sum, the three scenarios depicting journalism-business tension evoked all levels of moral reasoning from the editors, but certain patterns emerged. In scenario one, where the rewards and/or punishments were most clear, editors often considered options at a low level of moral reasoning. Editors often addressed scenario two from the conventional level of moral reasoning. Yet it was scenario three, the story about the role of diversity in the hiring process, that brought out the highest level of moral reasoning in the editors interviewed. Journalism scholars should be encouraged that these editors reasoned workplace diversity is desirable from both an ethical and business standpoint.

These editors concluded that a diverse workplace spells good business and that good ethics should hearten journalism scholars.

Scenario one, about whether to spread news of the newspapers’ eminent closure, inspired the most preconventional moral reasoning from editors. Given this scenario, almost half the editors considered withholding the information entirely or sharing news of the closure only after evaluating their beliefs on likely future outcomes. These outcome-expectancies likely stem from shifting outside influences; in increasingly lean newsrooms, pragmatic editors have learned it is important to prioritize self-preservation, reflecting a more micro-level influence in place of macro influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). In these expressions, we also see what Farrel (1983) terms neglect, by which these editors passively allowed the conditions in the newsroom to worsen. In scenarios two and three, some editors did express a low level of cognitive moral reasoning, but again it was mainly in terms of protecting their own credibility or reputation at the newspaper. These findings suggest that in situations where news managers might receive future consequences, a fair amount of moral reasoning from the preconventional level is applied, which appears to be triggered by micro-level influences.

Among the three dilemmas, scenario two was mostly addressed from the conventional level of moral reasoning. This scenario well typifies the dueling sets of values working editors now face. Here, statements that espoused journalistic values such as “the wall between editorial and advertising” as well as more business-oriented statements about “cooperating with the marketing staff to maximize sales” were both coded as conventional level moral reasoning. Sticking to journalistic values, however lofty in comparison to other professions, still means an editor adheres to norms and expresses loyalty (Farrel, 1983). Likewise, following directions from one’s boss represents conventional level moral reasoning, as editors saying this are trying to live up to workplace expectations and express a desire to maintain rules.
Finally, it was in scenario three about a hiring decision involving diversity, to which editors applied the highest level of moral reasoning and acted most autonomously. Editors expressed a strong commitment to diversity, especially in terms of trying to more closely mirror their audiences and to tackle the increasingly diverse issues within their coverage areas. Editors also spoke of their commitment to promote the black, female, in-house candidate “if she’s the right one” without consideration for what other people in the newsroom might say or think about it and regardless race and/or gender. This scenario prompted the most of what Farrel (1983) would term voice, whereby editors expressed a desire to improve the conditions in their newsrooms and openly confront rumors. The almost-unanimous application of the highest level of cognitive moral reasoning by editors here demonstrated a first-rate commitment to equality and the support of diversity. Editors clearly saw that the bottom-line and journalism are well served by a diverse newsroom.

This study makes at least two contributions to the understanding of news media ethics and business decision making. First, we show the type of situations where newspaper editors might distance themselves from traditional journalistic values to make self-oriented choices and those in which they make decisions related to universal values such as tolerance or justice. Second, we analyze not the editors but rather their reflections regarding ethical versus managerial decision making. Our aim was not to categorize editors based on who is “more” or “less” ethical but to understand how the same editor might demonstrate high levels of ethical reasoning in certain situations yet show strong managerial orientations in others. Both approaches coexist in the decision-making processes and, as such, our analysis aimed to understand how those processes unfold. Fortunately for journalists, it seems as if commercial considerations do not outweigh the inherent ethical/journalistic influence on editor’s decisions, based on the emphasis they placed on ethical reasoning.

There are some limitations to this study, nonetheless. Interviews are a form of self-reporting, which may account for a bias of editors toward self-reporting more ethical behavior than they may actually demonstrate in practice. And as we mentioned before, some scholars have criticized the validity of interviews as a data-collection method. However, we believe our study has greatly benefited from this technique. We observed some editors gave the same answer to questions such as “what would you do” or “what would you say,” and still, their moral reasoning was different. The fact that we could record their mental process while they thought aloud enabled us to identify the type of moral reasoning they were applying. Thus, two editors could say they would not work with the advertising department, but for completely different reasons. Future research might improve our findings by conducting participant observation in newsrooms, paying especial attention to situations that recreate (in real life) the dilemmas we used in our study.

References


