

Challenges of Media Ethics Education in Lebanon in the Midst of Political and Economic Pressure

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Abstract

The Lebanese media sector has played a pioneering role in the Arab world due to its free and diverse system. However, the lack of professional and ethical structures in journalistic practices can be attributed to political and economic pressures. Through both a quantitative and qualitative methodology, this study contributes to the complex boundaries of the Lebanese media landscape that make the gap between media ethics education and real-world pressures in need of sustained analysis. This research aims to explore the challenges media ethics education in Lebanon faces, along with the perceptions formed by media students about journalistic practices and the application of moral reasoning in the field. In addition, the study investigates whether media ethics courses prepare students for settling moral dilemmas in the professional arena. To address the multiple factors affecting ethics education, it is significant to understand the relationship between journalists and power, democratic norms, technological change, global community, and academic critiques. Survey and focus groups results indicated that the majority of students rated moral reasoning as important for their future media professions, and that the media ethics course prepares them for professional life. On the other hand, the majority believe that the corrupt system in Lebanon makes journalists resort to unethical practices which in turn compromise journalists' credibility and integrity. Students consider that journalists have power as the so-called fourth estate, yet that power seems minimal when journalists lack the freedom to write facts without fear from editors and/or gatekeepers' political views, economic pressure, and on-the-job demands, placing journalistic integrity again at stake.

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The Lebanese media sector's pioneering role in the Arab world is due to Lebanon's free and diverse system, yet the country suffers from a fragile political situation that affects the industry negatively, leading to a lack of professionalism and ethical structures (Dajani, 2006; Dajani & Najjar, 2003; Nötzold, 2008). The media reinforce the country's deep-seated political and sectarian divisions, driving journalists to choose between particularistic duty aimed at credibility and their loyalty to a media organization (Mahdawi, 2010). Complicating the problem further is the current financial and general economic crisis, especially the loss of advertisement revenue (Kraidy, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to assess the multifaceted boundaries derived from the Lebanese media landscape that make the gap between media ethics education and the real-world pressures immense. Thus, this research utilizes the ethical codes of conduct in journalistic practices as the guiding framework in exploring the challenges media ethics education in Lebanon faces, along with the perceptions formed by media students about journalistic practices and application of moral reasoning in the field. The study also investigates whether media ethics courses prepare students for resolving moral and ethical dilemmas in the professional arena. While discussing these different perspectives, it is significant to understand the relationship between journalists and power, democratic norms, technological change, global community, and academic critiques.

Literature Review

Ethics is conceived as the study of morality (Wiggins, 2006). While media ethics can be defined as the study of morality in the framework of media professional practice and content (Horner, 2015), it is a branch of applied ethics that helps professionals make decisions where there are challenging moral choices to make (Thompson, 2000). Fengler et al. (2014) offer a definition of media ethics as a tool that journalists can or should use to cement their own credibility. The need for media ethics resides mainly in the potential damage that journalism can do to the public, companies, or institutions (Black-Orsten & Burkhal, 2014; Buch, 2006).

Journalism or media ethics education provides a rich learning environment for students as it incorporates traditional philosophical theories from figures such as Kant, Mill, Rawls, and Aristotle, with an application to ethical problems in media production and consumption (Auger & Gee, 2016; Buch, 2006). But the question as to whether media ethics education makes a difference is still both open-ended and controversial. At the very least, ethics education should help students identify, evaluate, and assess ethical matters, as well as apply ethics in real-life decisions (Rossouw, 2002; Sims, 2000).

The rising number of ethical violations in the Lebanese media field cultivates skepticism over the efficacy of ethics education. Canary (2007) examined both the

instructional method and the effect of media ethics education on students. He found no significant relationship between the extent to which ethical issues were addressed in the classroom and the changes in moral reasoning. This diverges from the results of other studies concluding that ethics education matters. Lau (2010), for example, found that contrary to some common beliefs ethical behavior is inborn and that education does matter by finding a positive correlation between ethics education and students' ethical perception and moral reasoning.

Meadows (2001) concluded that one of the major problem areas affecting ethical application to journalistic practices is that most of journalism education relies on traditional teaching methods such as "note taking" and lectures where students are mostly passive. To make teaching more interactive and effective, Brislin (1992) encourages "critical thinking strategies to transform the student from a passive container to a direct participant in knowledge." As he sees it, students should be given "the prospects to practice their ethical decision-making skills in real-world scenarios in order to boost their ethical growth" (Reinardy & Moore, 2007). Rossouw (2002) concludes that one of the main objectives of ethics education is to enhance moral reasoning among students, defining moral reasoning as the aptitude to compare, weigh, and assess different ethical perspectives. It is the skill to evaluate ethical matters with the aid of tools, such as theories, frameworks, models, and concepts, and to take a rational standpoint on them. Nonetheless, pedagogical inferences and effectiveness of teaching do not fall within the scope of this article.

Over the past 30 years, a number of schools have moved increasingly to incorporate ethics courses in their curricula. However, there is much exhortation, but little empirical research, on the outcomes of ethics education. Rather, ethics education seems to reinforce the basic value system that the student brings to their program of study (Alvin Day, 2006).

Media ethics education is of particular importance in Lebanon, especially as the vast majority of media outlets are owned, managed, or financed by local or regional powers. In some cases, reporters transform into political activists who reproduce received narratives without adhering to professional ethics standards (Trombetta, 2018).

Media Education in Lebanon

According to Henry Jenkins, media education helps foster a strong participatory culture and helps youth become empowered and engaged citizens. Media education in Lebanon is still in its infancy and exhibits a dire need to move toward a pedagogy of liberation and cultural change to bridge the social and political divisions in Lebanon (Melki, 2019).

Historically, Lebanese students have had little interest in journalism and media studies, preferring to enroll in majors such as medicine, law, and engineering (Melki, 2019). Although this is still the case, more and more students are pursuing the field of media studies (Melki, 2019). Demographic analyses of students show a low preference for enrollment in print journalism compared with other specializations such as broadcast journalism and advertising. Such analyses also show a preference by women over men

in journalistic career choices, raising questions of the “gendering” of print journalism in Lebanon (Melki, 2019).

Currently and in terms of numbers, 49 universities and colleges are accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Education: 36 private and 1 public, 9 private university institutes and colleges, and 3 institutes for religious studies that are also all private (Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2019). In this diverse context, 19 faculties/units/departments of media and or communication do have media programs (former Minister of Information M. Riachi, personal communication, October 10, 2017). The competition to recruit students is fierce among these universities and institutes, pushing established programs to improve curricula and adopt state of the art practices. In addition, the majority of media programs offered are at the undergraduate (i.e., bachelor degrees) level, with only a few universities offering graduate studies in the field. The sole PhD program is available at the Lebanese University, Lebanon’s sole public institution of higher learning.

A Q analysis of Lebanese instructors conducted by Melki (2009) revealed three groups of opinions toward journalism studies in Lebanon: a professional approach, a communication arts focus, and a theoretical research-intensive orientation. Nevertheless, there was a consensus among surveyed faculty members that journalism and media studies programs in the country need more qualified faculty as well as locally tailored research studies.

Another point of convergence in responses to the query of journalism education in Lebanon is the expressed importance of the need for media ethics courses to prepare students for challenging social and political divisions (Abu-Fadil, 2013), especially those in which practitioners deviate from the learned code of ethics.

In general, journalists worldwide follow codes of ethics to deal with the complex dilemmas they often face. These codes serve as “an attempt to at least recognize the fundamental values and principles for which the media organizations stand” (Alvin Day, 2006, p. 46). Journalistic “codes of ethics” were acknowledged worldwide for decades (Dajani, 2012); however, as Lebanon’s sectarianism and politics seep into its media landscape, these codes seem to be neglected in the country.

The Lebanese Media Landscape

The Lebanese constitution clearly states that “Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic based on respect for public liberties especially the freedom of opinion,” while article 13 stipulates that “the freedom to express one’s opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by law.” However, freedom of the press in Lebanon has always been precarious. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019) published a report revealing that 100 summons of journalists were recorded in Lebanon between 2016 and 2019.

Another problem is the strong polarization of politically owned media outlets that affects journalists’ impartiality and objectivity (Morcos, 2019). Lebanese media do not

rely on circulation records or ratings, but rather on political funding as a source of income; thus, the inherent competition in the profession does not necessarily produce quality journalism.

What compounds the problem is the country's current financial crisis, especially given that the advertising "pie" has been continuously cut and remaining slices are increasingly insufficient to feed such a small market (Kraidy, 1998). It has become common to bribe journalists to publish a certain piece of information or, on the contrary, to incite them to kill stories that do not serve the political ruling elite. In addition, with the financial crisis newsrooms have been facing, it is even harder for journalists to resist such financial temptations (Trombetta, 2018).

In Lebanon, "all codes of ethics are inoperative" (Ibrahim Arab cited in Pies et al., 2011). Honesty and integrity are usually tarnished by numerous problems. Among these problems are commercial exploitation, sensationalism in reporting, conflicts of interest of media owners and their commercial and/or political interests, and the new media technologies that allow manipulation and the production of fake material.

Research Questions

Due to the significance of understanding the practicality of the journalism education system and its influence on the different players involved, and to fill a gap in the literature about ethics education and journalistic practices in Lebanon, the following research questions were posed for this study.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the perceived contributions of the media ethics course?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Do students believe moral reasoning skills are important for their professional media careers?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What are students' attitudes about professional journalistic practices in Lebanon or professional practices of Lebanese journalists?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): Are Lebanese students aware of and ready to deal with the ethical challenges they may face in the marketplace?

Research Question 5 (RQ5): What are the challenges and barriers journalism students face as future journalists?

Methodology

To answer the research questions posed in this study, both a quantitative and qualitative methodology were used. A quantitative survey was administered to all students enrolled in the media ethics course during the fall 2018 semester at Notre Dame University–Louaize (NDU). In addition, this was triangulated with two focus group sessions of all journalism students in the department who have taken the media ethics course or are currently enrolled in it.

Sample

The researchers retrieved the full list of students registered in the multi-section media ethics course at NDU and thus were able to obtain a probability sample because each member of the population study had an equal chance at being selected. Out of a total of 113 enrolled students, 94 were willing to voluntarily participate and complete the questionnaire 10 of which also participated in the focus groups. Students were between the ages of 18 and 26 years ($M = 20.79$ years, $SD = 1.671$ years). Overall, 47.87% of the 94 participants identified themselves as males and 52.13% as females. As for class standing from the total participating sample (94), 35.11% were sophomore, 25.53% juniors, and 39.36% seniors. Not all students taking the media ethics course were majoring in media; however, 41.46% of the participants were students enrolled in related fields (e.g., audiovisual arts, electronic media and journalism, advertising and marketing). By the time the study was conducted toward the final weeks of the semester, the remaining participants were sufficiently knowledgeable about the discipline of media studies, showing competency through their analytical and critical skills of media related information. As such, though a segment of the student sample is not technically majoring in media, it is clear that they have become well immersed in the media environment as consumers and students.

Procedure

Survey. One of the researchers visited the classrooms to invite participants. They were briefed about the study and given the URL link to the questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics. Respondents took approximately 5 to 10 min to complete the study. The participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were first asked a sequence of demographic questions such as age, gender, classification, and major. The questionnaire included two open-ended questions: “What does ethics mean to you?” and “In the Lebanese marketplace, what are the things that might allow you to behave unethically in your profession or might lead you to behave unethically in your profession?” Remaining questions employed Likert-type scales. Participants were asked to rate the level of importance of having moral reasoning skills as future professionals. In addition, they were asked to rate how often certain specified unethical journalistic practices occur in the field (e.g., bribes, deception), as well as their attitudes on whether journalists in Lebanon behave ethically and are credible versus their opinion on journalists in other countries. The questionnaire then ended with statements gauging their attitude toward the media ethics course they are taking and its impact on their professional training, as well as whether they believe they can always act in an ethical way when dealing with problems in the profession. The data were entered into SPSS and analyzed using descriptive and correlation analysis.

Focus groups. Journalism students were contacted and asked to participate in focus group sessions. Two focus groups were held with a total of five participants each, all of which were currently working in a news organization or have been interns. The researchers moderated the session. Each session was video recorded for the sole

purpose of analysis. Once all participants signed a consent form, the session began. The participants' real names are not revealed in this study; instead, pseudonyms have been assigned to each one. The focus groups participants were given the previously administered questionnaire to fill out as well. Then, the participants were asked to discuss the definition of ethics, questions regarding the challenges facing journalists in the workplace, whether moral reasoning skills and ethical standards learned in the classrooms are applied by journalists today, as well as the relationship of journalism to the following: power, economic pressure, academia, technological change, global community, and democratic norms. The sessions ended by asking students to propose ethical guidelines for Lebanese journalists to follow. Results from the focus groups were analyzed using a thematic approach based on the aforementioned. Then, linkages between and among the different categories were made to find associations from the responses.

Results

Survey

RQ1: Contributions of the media ethics course. When asked about what ethics means to them, various responses were given, such as "ethics are based on reasoning, without ethics our life will be un-organized, professional code of conduct, guidelines to live by, ethics is the most important tool of communication, it's too essential for the business world" (a full list of answers can be found in Appendix A, available online). Only one student answered that "there is no ethics. So mainly it doesn't mean anything." The answers given reflect the definitions discussed in class as well as in the course reading materials.

In relation to whether the media course prepares students for the marketplace, the majority of the students responded in agreement to all of the different factors (e.g., moral development, skills for dealing with work ethical dilemmas, exposure to sample controversial cases, increase in understanding and analytical skills). See Table 1 below for detailed responses.

In addition, Welsh's Independent t test indicated that there is no significant difference between gender and the contributors of the class; in other words, the two groups (males and females) were similar in their attitudes about the media ethics course and how well it prepares them for the marketplace, Welsh's $t(1, 82.801) = -1.798, p > .05$.

RQ2: Moral reasoning skills and professional media careers. When asked to rate the level of importance of knowing moral reasoning skills as a future professional, the majority of the students rated moral reasoning as extremely important (41.49%) or very important (42.55%), whereas the rest indicated moderate (14.89%) or slight (1.06%) importance; none of the students replied "not at all important." This shows that students, at the very least, acknowledge the importance of these skills in the so-called real world.

RQ3: Attitudes about journalists and ethical practices. Students were more likely to answer negatively than positively when asked if journalists in Lebanon behave ethically and are credible. Overall, 53.26% of participants do not think that journalists

Table 1. Contribution of the Media Ethics Course ($N = 94$).

The media ethics course I am taking or took . . .	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
contributes to my moral development as a student.	0.00	2.30	22.99	50.57	24.14
prepares me as a student for professional work ethical dilemmas.	0.00	6.90	11.49	58.62	22.99
provides me with sample real case ethical situations journalists encounter.	1.15	1.15	12.64	56.32	28.74
increases my understanding of ethical theories and philosophies.	1.15	1.15	11.49	52.87	33.33
advances my skills as a future professional.	1.15	6.90	18.39	55.17	18.39

in Lebanon behave ethically, whereas only 8.69% think they do, and 38.04% remained neutral. In comparison to journalists in other countries, a reverse in responses occurred where 33.69% think that journalists from other countries behave ethically, 21.47% thought otherwise, and 44.57% neither agreed nor disagreed. Only 10.87% of participants think that journalists in Lebanon are credible, whereas 51.09% do not. This can be explained by the fact that a majority of participants, 68.47%, think that the system forces journalists resort to unethical practices, with 13.04% disagreeing and 18.48% neutral. Similarly, in relation to integrity, 36.96% of participants do not think journalists in Lebanon have integrity, 25% though think they do, and 38.04% remained neutral.

RQ4: Factors for unethical behavior. Lebanese students are aware of the ethical challenges they may face in the marketplace. When asked about what are the factors that might allow or lead them to behave unethically in their profession, the answers varied. The reasons given by the respondents were mainly “the system itself, being threatened by someone, because it is the only way, economic pressures, belonging to a specific political sect, the corruption in the government, and bribery.” One respondent offered no answer, whereas another expressed that there was no other way to do it.

However, participants predominately agreed (67.4%) about their belief in their own individual role in acting ethically when dealing with problems in the profession: 15.22% disagreed and 17.39% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Focus Groups

RQ5: Challenges and barriers for journalism students. All focus groups participants had interned or were currently working in news organizations at the time of the sessions,

so their responses reflect their academic training and personal experiences within this gap (between theory and practice). The focus groups responses indicated that journalism students believe that ethics are guidelines for people to know how to behave. They agreed that the media ethics course is beneficial in the sense that it gives them the necessary tools for moral reasoning, in addition to offering them real-life examples of unethical practices. However, they were pessimistic about the actual practice of journalism in Lebanon due to the “corrupt” system (which is dependent on political affiliations) that drives journalists to behave unethically (e.g., taking bribes). To further answer this question, the sessions focused on four main themes: (a) journalists and their relation to power, (b) democratic norms, (c) technological change, and (d) academic critiques.

Journalists and power. Participants acknowledged that journalists should hold significant power (e.g., the term “fourth branch of government” appeared on multiple occasions), yet that power seems minimal in the absence of freedom to report facts without fear from editors’ and/or gatekeepers’ political views, as well as on-the-job demands. Participants expressed the view that in the workplace journalists resort to unethical practices (e.g., using sources out of context, not crediting footage, conflicting relationships).

Journalists and democratic norms. In relation to democratic norms, members of the focus groups agreed that Lebanese journalists attempt to provide the public with ample information about, for example, government elections, but that unfortunately the audience has stopped believing them. The main consequence is their loss of credibility in people’s minds and the perception of a lack of integrity because of the system and political affiliations.

Journalists and technological change in a global community. Respondents believe that technological change has accelerated the news cycle and prompted a race to be the first to get out the news, affecting the quality of reporting due to a lack of fact checking, plagiarism, and digital manipulation. This, they claimed, is a global phenomenon. At the same time, however, respondents expressed the view that technology can facilitate positive changes in the profession and expand journalists’ horizons though the latter should use technology properly and fight the temptation to become trapped in unethical practices. Importantly, participants expressed the need for the establishment of media digital laws.

Journalists and academic critique. In relation to academia, the participants stated that due to the media ethics course requirement they have become well informed of right/wrong practices, have a deeper belief in themselves as professionals, and are committed to the idea of journalists are “change makers if given the opportunity” despite all the risks of the profession. In the midst of pessimism about the professional workplace, they remain optimistic. The focus group sessions came to an end with suggestions to create guidelines, including a standard of governance (rules and regulations),

for journalists to follow. These guidelines include the need for transparency, objectivity, respect for others as ends rather than means, truth and accuracy in reporting, and a respect for privacy. "Be hopeful!" is a message transmitted by the young individuals who aspire to conquer a system that is experiencing, in their opinions, an ethical "epidemic numbness."

Discussion

Participants were able to properly define ethics as discussed in class and course readings. Participants acknowledged that the ethical course prepared them for the marketplace insofar as dealing with ethical dilemmas in the workplace is concerned. The course also contributed to their moral development as students. It provided students with a sample of real case ethical situations journalists encounter as well as advancing their skills as future professionals. The course also increased their understanding of ethical theories and philosophy and challenged their analytical and critical capabilities.

Participants' attitudes about ethics and the media ethics course in particular were similar for both males and females, implying that regardless of gender differences all participants perceive ethics similarly.

The literature pertaining to the effect of gender on individuals' sensitivity to ethical issues is rich (Beltramini et al., 1984; Borkowski & Ugras, 1998; Smith & Oakley, 1997; Weber & Glyptis, 2000). Both males and females are concerned with ethics; however, the way ethics is dealt with differs. Further investigation should focus on whether gender difference in the dealing with ethical issues is reproduced in the workplace and the implications of this, as well as if there are any differences pertaining to how the unethical issue is or is not handled.

Results indicated that the majority of participants believed that moral reasoning skills are important for media professionals, meaning at the very least that respondents acknowledged the importance of such skills in the so-called real world.

Moral reasoning as alluded to earlier is the skill to evaluate ethical matters with the aid of tools, such as theories, frameworks, models, and concepts, and to take a rational standpoint on them (Rossouw, 2002). Previous research proposes "that education in moral reasoning can be effective in the development of student journalists and their sense of responsibility to society" (Yoder & Bleske, 1997, p. 227). This sense of responsibility would perhaps allow one to view their work through the lens of the greater community and explore any harm done to the stakeholders involved before publicizing information. The importance of moral responsibility then is based on a person's capacity to assess and act with integrity.

The majority of participants did not believe journalists in Lebanon behave ethically; journalists are perceived as taking bribes, receiving payment for stories, and resorting to deceptive means to get the facts. On the other hand, they viewed journalists from other countries as behaving in more ethical ways than in Lebanon.

The numbers from the results (as seen in Table 2) reflect a severe trustworthiness crisis that is pervasive in Lebanon with clear effects on the country's youth. This is

Table 2. Journalist Unethical Behaviors ($N = 94$).

It is acceptable for a journalist to . . .	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
bribe someone to get information.	31.52	33.70	20.65	10.87	3.26
get paid for writing a story.	27.17	19.57	11.96	29.35	11.96
get paid for deleting a part of the story.	43.48	38.04	10.87	4.35	3.26
deceive someone to get facts.	29.35	39.13	13.04	16.30	2.17

seemingly hard to overturn: especially with the ongoing political corruption and economic problems propelled by the unlawful acts of government—acts continuously reported on by journalists across the different local news stations in Lebanon (e.g., MTV, OTV, New TV, and Future TV) which are politically affiliated. This lack of credibility pin-pointed by the students is of great significance because “credibility becomes an important heuristic for content selection at a time of information overload” (Abdulla et al., 2002, p. 7). Also important is the power derived from attaining knowledge, knowledge that is credible.

As reported by the participants, some of the unethical behavior journalists fall victim to that may hinder objectivity and influence perceptions of credibility are as follows: taking bribes, paying someone for information, getting paid for deleting part of the story, and deception. The majority of participants disagreed that it is acceptable for journalists to bribe someone to get information, or to get paid for writing a story, or even deleting a part of the story, and definitely not appropriate for a journalist to deceive someone to get facts. All of these unethical practices constitute a conflict of interest and at the same time reflect the struggles and pressures of a system infused with the political and economic pressures.

Participants claimed that unethical behavior is prompted by several factors such as economic pressure, bribery (e.g., acceptance of gifts and perks), government corruption, others’ unethical behavior, political sect/parties, the system itself, and threats by someone or something. The Lebanese system is allowing people to pursue unethical means in journalistic practices, especially because of currently existing economic pressure, deep politicization, and government corruption which is perceived to be inevitable.

These factors can impact the autonomy of the Lebanese journalist and other media professionals, especially because their messages are intended for a wide, heterogeneous audience, one that is geographically dispersed, in other words, to the mass.

Despite the negativity and pessimism evident from the responses, participants still believe in their capacity to act in ethical ways when facing such dilemmas. This last

point gives hope to a generation that still has confidence in the possibility of abiding by ethical standards in the professional arena. They are ready to deal with the ethical challenges through belief in self. This can be further explored through an understanding of how other types of media influence self-beliefs via the framework of social cognitive theory, which refers to the ability in oneself to be able to reach a desired goal (Bandura, 1997).

In today's fast evolving media landscape, the gap between campus and newsroom, the size of the perceived "relationship deficit," to give it a name, is too large to ignore.

Participants from the focus groups agreed that journalists should have power, yet that power is distorted due to media professionals' unethical behavior caused by a governmental/political system which leaves its constituents facing economic turmoil. The context of this vulnerability is largely the regulations governing the Lebanese press. The system contributes to a highly conservative conception of journalism, based on a corporatist approach and treating the press as a distinct and insular profession rather than as a general activity that any person may engage in. In this context, the National Council for Audiovisual Media has only a consultative power. Violations perpetrated by politicians, parties, and intelligence services against the press go unheeded. Moreover, suspension of the press and confiscation of journalists' press cards can occur easily under the pretext of defamation of heads of states, threat to national integrity, and security (Trombetta, 2018).

Participants from the focus groups stated that journalism is vital for a democratic system; for a democracy to succeed, citizens should be empowered with accurate and credible information—information they can trust and according to which they can base decisions. However, they reported that many journalists fall short of this duty.

This as well relates to the economic pressures journalists face, which can lead them to behave unethically; instead of transparency, journalists are left with no choice but to take bribes. This lack in professional standards is also explained by the infrastructure of the Lebanese media system that survives on political funding. Lebanese journalists are not assuming their most sacred role in instructing informed citizens, a pillar function of democratic systems. Thus, journalists should believe in their role as a fourth estate and as watchdogs.

Many participants of the survey along with all the participants in the focus groups mentioned that media laws should be made and/or edited and then enforced. According to Abu-Fadil (2011), Lebanon's media laws are archaic and have not coped with the technological advancements of this era; thus, Lebanon is in need of a new media law—a law that would account for technological developments. The respondents claimed that technology has aided and abetted different news outlets in providing their citizens with inaccurate information: information that is plagiarized or that has undergone digital manipulation primarily due to competition. On the other hand, technology was seen as a tool that assisted journalists in communicating and engaging with a global community.

Participants from the focus groups stated that guidelines should be created in an academic context and transferred over to the professional domain. These guidelines,

such as objectivity and transparency, allow individuals to analyze truthful accounts of everyday life.

According to many studies, ethics education does not necessarily result in internalized ethical values, but it can at least affect ethical behavior. Calls for increased ethics education have been made for decades (Bedford et al., 1986; Langenderfer & Rockness, 1989). Developing ethics education in a higher education context is nowadays even more of a necessity. The pressures of the marketplace amplify the discrepancy between student expectations of good journalism and the perceived practice of journalism. In the face of all of this, the groups had hope that this system would be reformed.

Limitations, Further Suggestions, and Conclusion

A limitation of this study is the sample size which, though representative of the media ethics course student population, cannot be generalized for all students enrolled in media ethics courses across the country. However, this specificity allowed the researchers to triangulate methods and thus reach a deeper understanding of the questions posed. As a suggestion to address this limitation, in the near future, the researchers plan to conduct focus groups with alumni working in newsrooms to compare with above results, as well as contrasting student attitudes across universities offering a media ethics course. To further this, a comparison can also be made on an international level with collaboration from university professors from different countries.

Another limitation is the scarcity of research done related to the subject in a local context. This highlights the greater need of actually conducting such a study, providing empirical information and counting as the first study (to the author's knowledge) to tackle such an issue. Thus, the study's findings can help educators work on curricula, and for professionals to understand the aspiring, new media professionals' viewpoints about current practices. Such research may also encourage the creation of new standards that can be accounted for both internally and externally.

When students have no other choice than to behave unethically in their own countries, as members of a profession that supposedly holds significant power, these same skilled individuals will eventually gravitate toward countries viewed as having less corruptive measures, or with systems with baseline ethical guidelines, such as those similar to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). The belief in one's own country is important for the welfare of the country. Journalists have an important role in society, one that involves promoting understanding through truthful, accurate, objective, fair, and balanced reports of daily events.

The results of this study emphasize the need for media ethics education to attempt to remedy the corrupt Lebanese system from its roots. Academic programs and courses should train and prepare future media professionals to assume their role as contributors to the proper mechanisms of democracy. Also, perhaps this research can be used as a call to action for those involved in making the journalistic profession uphold its values and standards, by asking for better work conditions and pay. Better wages allow the journalists to feel more at ease, not resort to bribes, all to retain their credibility in the minds of the public.

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Supplemental Material

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