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**To cite this article:** Marie Fierens, Hedwig de Smaele, David Domingo, Florence Le Cam, Karin Raeymaeckers, Martina Temmerman & Florian Tixier (2023) Ethics as the backbone of the professional identity of Belgian journalism interns, *Media Practice and Education*, 24:4, 333-350, DOI: [10.1080/25741136.2023.2192575](https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2023.2192575)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2023.2192575>



Published online: 23 Mar 2023.



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## Ethics as the backbone of the professional identity of Belgian journalism interns

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the perceptions of professional ethics expressed by Belgian – both Francophone and Flemish – journalism students after their first internships. 13 focus groups including 59 students from 7 universities were organized. These young journalists detailed how ethics play a central role in the development of their professional identity, during their first professional experience. Results show that both Flemish and French-speaking journalists share a relative homogenous vision of journalistic ethics. Eventually, this article offers the foundations for further research dedicated to the professional identity of young professional Belgian journalists, beyond any stereotypes or allegedly linguistic characteristics.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 November 2022  
Accepted 15 March 2023

### KEYWORDS

Professional ethics; professional identity; journalism education; students; internships; focus groups

Ethical orientations are central to professional journalism and are likewise an essential dimension of journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch 2007). While ethics can be considered in abstract terms (as a set of norms and principles), it also has a very practical side (as a set of professional practices and decisions). Students first learn the principles during their education. Then, they usually get the chance to appreciate the ethical codes during their internships in news organizations (often part of their educational curriculum), in interaction and negotiation with their peers, sources and the public. The professional experience of the internship confronts them with the current working conditions in the media and how they challenge ethical principles.

The objective of this study is twofold. First, it wants to shed light on the perceptions and questions in relation to professional ethics expressed by Belgian journalism students who are in the process of discovering and adapting to the professional world and practices. It shows how internships participate in the understanding and appropriation of professional ethics by Belgian journalism students. These future journalists, partly because they are digital natives, have their own set of values and experiences connected to

media that may cause them to identify new ethical challenges, in the current digital era (Mackay 2012; Diaz-Campo and Segado-Boj 2015). Young journalists can thus be considered as crucial stakeholders in the evolution of the self-regulation of the journalistic profession and the activity of media councils, in a professional world that is in the midst of de-structuring and restructuring processes (Demers 2007).

Second, this article aims at interrogating the allegedly contrasted Francophone and Flemish media cultures in Belgium (Van Leuven et al. 2019) by investigating the relationship between Belgian journalism students and ethics from a national perspective. The analysis considers the specificities of the linguistic and journalistic communities' architectures without presupposing that they lead to differences in the way Dutch or French-speaking students consider ethics. Belgium's institutional structure consists indeed of three language-based communities: the Flemish, the French, and the (small) German community.<sup>1</sup> Neither the media nor the educational institutions in Belgium are organized on the federal level: they rather fall under the authority of the communities and are divided on linguistic grounds. Belgium resembles Switzerland in that respect, leading Hallin and Mancini (2004, 26) to state that 'language factors can (...) be significant, dividing media markets into separate segments'. In their typology of media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) situate Belgium 'partway between the Democratic Corporatist and Polarized Pluralist models' (145) and consequently partway between the German and Scandinavian countries on the one hand and the Roman, Mediterranean countries on the other. The Worlds of Journalism Study results (Hanitzsch et al. 2019) also suggest that journalism cultures can differ depending on the linguistic community they are a part of. Based on data from Belgium, Switzerland and Canada, Bonin et al. (2017, 536) suggest that Francophone journalists are more likely to identify with a politicized role that includes agenda-setting, citizen-motivation and scrutinizing power, and less likely to be driven by attracting and satisfying audiences. Flemish journalists, in contrast, would be more influenced by the Anglo-Saxon roles of the journalist as observer/commentator and/or entertainer. However, Belgian researchers show the similar overall functioning of both Flemish and Francophone media systems in Belgium (Van Leuven et al. 2019; Standaert and Mertens 2016).

The Belgian media system is, therefore, an interesting case study, halfway between two media cultures for some, structured in two journalistic worlds for others, or without many differences according to linguistic considerations for a third group. In this article, we draw on this ongoing academic discussion to interrogate the way Flemish and Francophone journalism Belgian students consider ethics.

Together with the media, the instruments of media accountability and ethics in Belgium are also divided along linguistic lines (Raeymaeckers et al. 2018). The main self-regulatory body in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium is the Council for Journalism (*Raad voor de Journalistiek, RvdJ*) which was founded in 2002. For both French and German-speaking media the Council for Journalistic Ethics (*Conseil de déontologie journalistique, CDJ*) was created in 2009. These media councils involve representatives from publishers and media companies, journalists, and external experts (including one of the co-authors of the study). These organs have formalized their own ethical frameworks: in Flanders, the Code of the Council for Journalism was published in 2010; on the Francophone side, the CDJ's Code of Journalistic Ethics was approved in 2013. Respectively, these ethical codes are the referent for Flemish and Francophone students participating in this study.

This article is structured as follows: first, we will give a short overview of the literature regarding the role played by internships and, more generally, newsroom experience on the perception of ethics by young journalists worldwide. We also point at the literature linking the topics of ethics and journalistic culture. In particular, we present the data available regarding the Belgian situation. Secondly, we will explain our methodological approach, based on focus groups. Thirdly, the discussion will present (1) the definitions and representations of ethics formulated by the students, (2) the tensions and deliberations that the discussions about ethics led to, and (3) the value judgments the students express regarding ethics. The student's conversations highlight the key role played by the internship experience in the critical positioning of Belgian journalism students towards ethics and question the existence of differences between the Flemish and Francophone media cultures. This article concludes that the attempts at applying their theoretical knowledge, as well as the resulting position they adopt regarding ethics, are keystones in the building of Belgian journalism students' professional identity.

### Literature review

A consensus seems to exist about the importance of an internship for journalism students as a crucial 'learning experience'. Work-based learning is vital in preparing students for professional positions, argue Mabweazara and Taylor (2012) who describe it as 'the point at which classroom-learning, whether skills-focused or theoretical, begins "to make sense"' (p.127). Although journalism ethics in school forms a strong foundation for the students when they get to the field (Alemoh, Ukwela, and Ogoshi 2018), both news managers and journalism students agree that the workplace is a better laboratory than the classroom (Hanson 2002; Pereira et al. 2016). Reinardy and Moore (2007) compared ethical perceptions of introductory journalism students to graduating students and concluded that the more students gain practical experience, the less absolute their ethical perceptions become. They moved from ethical theory to practice. Conway and Groshek (2009) specifically focused on the impact of internship on students' attitudes on the importance of ethics. They observed significant higher levels of concern for journalistic ethics among students with journalistic internship experience than among students with non-journalistic internships or no internship experience at all. Slightly different from these studies, Detenber et al. (2012) found in their study in Singapore that first- and final-year students did not differ in their levels of agreement with journalistic principles or in their level of idealism. First-year students, however, perceived journalism ethics codes to be more important than final-year students did. This observation does not have to contradict previous findings, also the authors point out, as 'it is possible that final-year students have a better understanding of ethical issues than first-year students and hence feel less of a need to rely on ethics codes' (60). Based on a study of Australian journalism students, Hanusch (2013) suggests that ethical views may be affected much more in the newsroom than in class, due to 'specific work circumstances, which are difficult to simulate at university' (56).

The literature on students' internships as a learning-by-doing experience rhymes with the vast amount of literature on the organization of the journalistic profession. Already in 1955, Breed (1955) described how young journalists learn by 'osmosis' in observing the work environment and internalizing its norms and values. Shoemaker and Reese (2014),

in their turn, described the influence of work routines and co-workers, as well as the broader environment, on the individual journalist. This also applies to the domain of ethics. Weaver et al. (2007) revealed that 'newsroom learning' appears as the 'number one influence' on ethical views of American professional journalists. Media superiors and co-workers rank higher in influence than teachers and professors (Weaver et al. 2007). A strong correlation between newsroom discussion and ethical awareness was also found by Voakes (1997, 1998). An organizational culture that leaves room for discussion and consultation is a good instrument to ensure ethical considerations play their part. The presence of an ombudsperson is another.

Students in journalism have been the object of study in countries as divergent as Great Britain (Ball, Hanna, and Sanders 2006), the USA (Reinardy and Moore 2007; Conway and Groshek 2009), Australia (Hanusch 2013; Hanusch et al. 2015), Nigeria (Alemoh, Ukwela, and Ogoshi 2018), Singapore (Detenber et al. 2012), Brazil (Pereira, Sousa, and Moura 2014, 2015), Spain (Rodríguez-Pallarés and Segado-Boj 2020; Suárez Villegas and Cruz Álvarez 2015) or France (Cappucio, Quiroga, and Tixier 2021). This diversity raises the question about the possible influence of different cultural environments. Ball, Hanna, and Sanders (2006) examined the attitudes towards journalism ethics held by first-year British undergraduates and compared them with similar data for British journalists. Their findings provide some evidence for a distinct British journalistic culture (as they name it) already embedded in students' attitudes. For example, British journalists and, to a greater extent, the students surveyed are very tolerant of methods such as payment of sources. This tolerance is not commonly found in other countries. Alonso, Calderon, and Perez (2019) described the pre-professional journalistic culture of Ecuador, Cuba and Venezuela based on the (low) degree of permissiveness held by journalism students concerning controversial ethical practices and their views of the journalistic profession. Yang and Arant (2014) compared how American and Chinese journalism students view ethical dilemmas faced by journalists. They found that Chinese journalism students found it more difficult than American journalism students to resolve conflicts of interest and to make a fair representation, but American students found it more difficult than Chinese students to reflect or uphold community standards. The authors point to the larger context of the political and social environment causing these differences. At the same time, they stress that both Chinese and American students share more similarities about the ethical standards than there are differences. That is also the overall conclusion of the mapping of countries worldwide in the Worlds of Journalism project (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Universal ethical principles are adhered to worldwide. Their perceived importance, however, may vary across countries. In general, journalists from non-western contexts tend to be more flexible in their ethical views than Western journalists, who adhere more to universal principles in their ethical decisions. When it comes to Belgium, adherence to ethical principles is included in the five-yearly surveys among both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking journalists. The last survey took place in 2018 and revealed only minor differences between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking journalists (Van Leuven et al. 2019). In their country report on Belgium, as part of the Worlds of Journalism study, Standaert and Mertens (2016) report no differences between Dutch- and French-speaking journalists concerning ethical views. For both groups, the role of context seems to be less important, which ranks them in the group of 'Western' countries (Hanitzsch et al. 2011).

## Method

The research was conducted as part of the larger research project *Media Councils in the Digital Age* funded by the European Commission. The initial 2019 study (Tixier et al. 2019) looked at journalism students in French-speaking Belgium. In 2021, the study was extended to Dutch-speaking Belgium. Whereas the vast majority of earlier studies use surveys to measure the degree of the journalists' ethical concern or the degree of permissiveness towards controversial journalistic practices (e.g. undercover practice, accepting presents or payments as a journalist, using confidential information), this research uses focus groups (Evans 2011) as a way to elicit the arguments that shape these attitudes. Focus groups allow researchers to capture rich qualitative data and are useful to get insight into people's experiences, beliefs, and reactions to a particular topic (Kitzinger 1994, 1995; Morgan 1998). Belgian students gave insights in their representations and experiences with ethics as well as concrete examples while discussing their views with other participants.

Focus groups are a useful instrument to identify group norms and cultural values (Kitzinger 1995). A classic strategy for encountering diversity is through the creation of groups that maximize the similarity of the participants within groups while emphasizing difference between groups (Morgan 1998). We followed that strategy by organizing focus groups in each institution, therefore not mixing Flemish- and French-speaking students in order to leave the comparison to the analysis phase. In total, 13 focus groups with 59 students from seven universities were organized, both face-to-face and online, due to the 2020 and 2021 health crisis.<sup>2</sup> Online focus group discussions have become increasingly popular and comparative research into differences in data quality between online and in person focus groups has shown that the content of the data generated by either type of focus groups is remarkably similar. Sensitive topics are discussed even more candidly in the online version (Woodyatt, Finneran, and Stephenson 2016).

Most studies concerning focus group suggest that the appropriate group size range from 4 to 12 participants (Muijeen, Kongvattananon, and Somprasert 2020). In our case, we opted for rather small groups (4–7 participants) because the participants are highly engaged with the topic with plenty of similar experiences to discuss. In both communities, the average duration of the online and offline discussions was 75 min. In a first phase, an inductive qualitative analysis of the transcripts was conducted separately by the research team in the French- and Dutch-speaking part of Belgium in order to identify the main themes and sub-themes emerging from the different discussions. In a second phase, the researchers looked for commonalities and differences between the two groups of students.

## Results

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the focus groups on the relationship between Belgian students and ethics: (1) definitions and representations expressed by the participants regarding professional ethics; (2) tensions experienced by the students during the internship and the deliberations about ethics they engaged in with colleagues at the newsroom; and (3) value judgements they made using normative frameworks as a reference to talk about their journalistic ideals and the media companies they worked with.

## Definitions and representations

'Ethics' – French-speakers use the word 'déontologie' – appears to involve a plurality of meanings in the eyes of the participants in the focus groups. Students from both communities used similar words to describe ethics in journalism, such as 'principles', 'rules', 'norms', '(moral) codes', 'guide(lines)', 'beacons' and 'tools'. They refer to both 'written' and 'unwritten' rules underlying professional behaviour, which should be 'decent' and 'respectful'. They also specify that journalists 'strive for' these principles but that they are not always necessarily attained nor respected, for a variety of reasons. They consider the whole set of norms to be 'flexible', and adaptable to specific situations. In the French-speaking focus groups, the word 'norm' was the one that came up most often in the speeches analysed. Its use could reflect the integration, by students, of the vocabulary used in their (future) professional field, since it is also the term 'norm' that is the keystone of the code of journalistic ethics adopted by the *Conseil de déontologie journalistique* (CDJ) in 2013. The element of 'credibility' was added to the definition. For some respondents, without journalistic ethics, everyone could be a journalist.

Four essential elements for a definition of ethics emerged from the examples and the illustrations Belgian students gave. The first has to do with **journalistic routines** in processing the news, such as checking (the right quantity of) sources, respecting privacy (in publishing names or images), handling confidential information and securing confidential sources, making sure that all parties involved are heard and are given the opportunity to give feedback, and quoting with permission. A second element often referred to is the **quality of the journalistic work**. The information should not be taken out of context. It should be brought in a precise, accurate and impartial way and in correct language, taking care of nuance. The societal impact and importance of the news must be considered critically, or as one student puts it: 'It's not because it's on social media that we have to bring it up'. Quotes and titles should not just make the story 'juicy', they have to be consistent with the content of the news. The third element concerns **journalistic behaviour towards others**: journalists 'have the right or even the duty to report about what goes on in society' but they must treat others in a respectful way. 'Ordinary people' should be treated with more care than sources who are used to working with the media, like politicians and experts. Examples of respectful behaviour are: making clear arrangements about the publication of interviews or data, giving interviewees the chance to read or view the interview before publishing it, taking into account that certain information can be detrimental to certain parties and that some topics are delicate for some people. The fourth element relates to **personal attitude** about the job. Here we saw some differences in opinions. For some students, showing their own feelings or at least empathy with the people involved in the news is part of a 'decent' approach in carrying out their job. Others report that they have grown tough during their internships, they have learned to 'dig deeper' and they think a form of indifference is characteristic of the journalistic identity.

To sum it up, students referred to journalistic ethics as the rules themselves (predominantly embodied in the codes of the Belgian councils for journalism); as the implementation of these rules in journalism practice and daily routine; and as rules and practices that are linked to the profession and that may cause tensions and deliberations and/or collide with personal ethics and convictions.

## *Tensions and deliberations*

For most of the students, the internship is their first professional experience. At university, they study ethics as a 'knowledge field', admittedly with lots of examples and concrete cases, and they might get a simulation of practice, at best. During the internship, they begin or continue their socialization process into a journalistic career. The domain of ethics is no longer isolated from other dimensions of journalism (economics, technology ...) and is integrated into specific contexts. Ethical principles, consequently, are 'negotiated' in relation to journalists' sources, superiors, peers and with the public. This sometimes results in tensions evoked in the focus groups, a number of which can be described in binary opposition.

### *University vs. workplace*

Some students attest to an interaction between the university training and the internship. The internship surely is an eye opener. Students get more insight into 'what is allowed and what is not' by doing it, they learn from making mistakes and receiving feedback. But others also point to the education they received in the first place ('because of the training you are more involved', 'glad that I learned the rules before in order to be stronger in practice'). One student contributed that the experiences during the internship made her better prepared for the exam dealing with ethics and enabled her to reflect critically on the course materials.

### *Constraint vs. protection*

In essence, according to the interviewees, the ethical codes outline the 'big lines', also described as 'a base to fall back on'. Students seem to accept certain borders that cannot be crossed. While some of the French-speaking students speak of a 'barrier' or a 'limitation', students from all groups also consider the codes to be a protection, enabling them to defend journalistic values and to guard them against illegitimate requests. For each of the students, journalistic thinking about ethics becomes also a tool to justify choices (for oneself or for others, mainly the news managers) or to distance oneself from others (most often from non-professional journalists). Students frequently reflect on their own journalistic work. They question their own journalistic behaviour ('did I not push that person too much?', 'do I take the strongest quotes or do I render the tone of the whole conversation?') and they question the end product ('does it have added value?', 'I really try to make sure it's as neutral as possible'). In the end, however, they often follow the instructions of their supervisors.

### *Flexibility vs. rigidity*

All students agree that the codes should not be applied rigidly, but rather that there is some 'leeway', 'room for consultation', and even a 'grey zone'. Through 'negotiation', students try to find a balance between sometimes-conflicting interests such as the right of the public to be informed, the editorial line of the media, personal judgements as well as external circumstances. Students report that they are 'learning by doing'. 'Experience' is deemed crucial. But sometimes 'it's also just using common sense'. Students realize they have to 'think about situations'. They expect to find their personal position vis-à-vis ethics by gaining experience. Making mistakes is part of that and is even considered to be useful to



master ethics. Some ethical principles are more open to discussion than others and more often the subject of negotiation. While a principle such as depicting people with their permission is rather straight-forward, principles such as 'fairness' or 'fair play' allow for more room for discussion. It is striking that several students report the use of undercover techniques, already so early in their careers, but only after serious deliberation.

### *Intern vs. professional*

In this negotiation and learning process, students report the importance of consultation with the editor-in-chief or the internship supervisor in the newsroom. Rather than consulting the codes, they tend to consult their colleagues and supervisors. Most of the students testify about deliberations and discussions with co-workers. Students admit that as interns, they often get the easier assignments without too many ethical complications. If the topic is more comprehensive, they often have no control over the whole process. For example, they are involved in research, pre-interviews, scenarios, but not in final editing and finishing the piece. However, there are some indications that students sometimes are very 'ethically aware'. One student points out that as an intern, one is still strongly connected to the educational institution and the lessons learned, while as a working journalist one becomes more dependent on the media institution as one receives an income from that organization. Strikingly, some students identify with the medium they worked for and tend to speak about 'we' ('we think about it, we speak about it') while others keep a distance and speak in terms of 'I did, I asked, ...'.

Focus groups revealed that there are many silences in the newsrooms surrounding the understanding of ethical issues by young journalists. Students sometimes lack the courage to speak up against experienced journalists ('I don't know how to react yet') and during the internship they remain silent about ethical ambivalences they might have. They attribute this to their status in the newsroom or to the fact that they want to make a good impression and do not want to jeopardize their evaluation or the possibility of being recruited after the internship. These considerations surfaced more often with the French-speaking than with the Dutch-speaking students. Nonetheless, there are examples of students who started a discussion and were listened to. One of the Dutch-speaking students went against the veto of her supervisor on using conditional formulations in a news article, and was able to convince her.

### *Journalism vs. public relations*

A frequent source of news is the world of public relations at large. While the French-speaking students often mention the difficulty of producing information without leaning towards the promotional content pushed by their sources, the Dutch-speaking students do not have as many concerns regarding that matter. They respond understandingly to companies that send out a press release, arguing that 'everyone does it' and they see it as their task as journalists to react critically and to bring a 'good story' without turning it into a 'promotional talk'. These students show great self-confidence in explaining how they resisted promotional talk.

### *Personal vs. professional ethics*

Participants in the focus groups argued that the role of the intern, or of the journalist, interacts with individual convictions and beliefs. For example, two francophone students

mention that they have a clear opinion about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but they were not allowed to let it influence their news reporting because of the requirement of impartiality. Next to convictions, one's character also plays its part. This was expressed, for example, in a tension between an intern's own feelings and the feelings of the people reported on, or between the demands of (good) journalism ('to dig deeper') and the feelings of those involved ('to spare them'). A few students feel they have grown harsher. Others make the distinction between 'your sensitivity as a journalist and your sensitivity as a person: as a journalist, you think differently'. Students try 'to find a balance' between their job as journalist and their perceptions as individual beings.

### *Value judgements*

Students have a fairly normative vision of what they consider to be 'good journalism', i.e. journalism that follows ethical norms, even if these norms are sometimes perceived as outdated. Not only do ethical codes help the students in their daily routines, but it is also considered as a kind of guarantee for the public for the reliability and quality of professional journalism. The way they talk about journalistic ethics in the daily routines of their internships reveals several underlying value judgments they have.

### *Judgements by others*

Some francophone students report that they felt very bad when interviewees accused them of not rendering their words correctly, while they were convinced they had quoted them accurately. In addition, the students know that journalism is often represented unfavourably. They say that people react in a negative way when they tell them they are studying journalism. They are aware of this stigma on journalism, but it does not keep most of them from being enthusiastic about the job. A negative attitude towards journalism is mentioned more often by the French-speaking than by the Dutch-speaking students. The first group also explicitly points out that professional media should not be exempt from scrutiny.

### *Judgements on the values of journalism*

Students find it important to reflect critically on their own work. They mention a number of rules for good journalism, but they also indicate that exceptions to these rules should be possible in specific situations. As far as the content of the news is concerned, according to the students, journalists should have access to all information available. If going undercover and lying about their own identity is the only way to obtain the information, this should be allowed. Journalists should also sketch the full story, but the students acknowledge that there are time and space limitations. For every story, a principle holds: if public interest is larger than personal interest, the story should be published, but the students reflect carefully and consciously on the added value of revealing names or pictures. The journalistic productions should be accurate and correct, but still understandable for a wide audience. Some students acknowledge that there is a need for accessible and easy-to-read news stories but add that they do not want to make that kind of news themselves. Students also mention a balanced use of language: the wording should be sufficiently nuanced, especially when reporting on delicate matters (e.g. a crime in which the suspect has not been found guilty yet). As for the approach of

sources and interviewees, journalists should behave in a respectful and decent way, but at the same time hold people accountable for their words and deeds. Some students feel less compassionate than before the internship: they have learned to insist when questioning interviewees and to make people repeat on camera what they first said off camera. At the same time, they have learned that they should be careful, for example in crime cases, not to pass on information which is not yet known by the family. Another example given is when interviewees could not be held accountable for what they said due to their mental state, and therefore the quotes had to be handled carefully. For some students, emotions (their own emotions as well as those of the people involved) are important in journalism, because without them, the tone of the stories would be too detached and there would be no appeal to the audience. Again, others indicate that this kind of journalism has value in its own right, but that they do not want to practice it themselves. The students all agree on what journalism should NOT be: activism, as a call for action or for protest, and a mere mirror of what goes on social media, with all the drama and unchecked information involved. Journalists should not take sides; they should not defend people under attack on social media. Neither should journalists promote certain brands or products, but focus groups participants (especially the Dutch-speaking students) still think it is possible to write critically about new information on commercial products. If the news cannot be brought in a way that sufficiently meets their criteria, the students prefer not to bring it.

### *Judgements on the work environment/the media companies*

In their internships, some students found themselves in situations they were not comfortable with. News managers or supervisors would ask for more sensational stories, focusing on the misery of people or highlighting quotes which were not representative of the story. One example is a case in which the face of an interviewee was blurred, but the student thought the interviewee was still recognizable. They didn't have a choice but to carry out the assignment, but they evaluated negatively the way journalism was practised in this newsroom. Other negative evaluations had to do with students feeling they did not receive sufficient coaching in reporting on delicate matters, such as suicide, or received it too late. In another case, students started to work on a news story, but had it taken out of their hands and developed in a different way than they had intended. Some students felt they had to follow the instructions of their supervisors, even if they were uncomfortable with the situation. For others, the journalist who writes the story has the final responsibility for what is published. ('you always have a choice'). Students developed a form of relativism about the design and application of ethical principles, considering it as a framework strongly linked to the identity of the media company. Both the structural and identity specificities of the media – mainly linked to the business model – as well as the organizational modalities are frequently mentioned in the discussions. The students seem to recognize a certain hierarchy among media outlets regarding their compliance with ethics. Public service broadcasters are considered to be media organizations that should set the standard and that work the closest to professional ethical norms. Television as a medium is perceived as 'worse' ('always black and white, not grey', 'short items') by the students when compared to newspapers (characterized by more nuances and 'longer items'), but the internet is considered the worst, as 'it's all about speed' and 'quantity above quality'. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are social

media, on which it seems there are no rules at all. Apart from the public service broadcasters – to a certain extent, all media are considered to be commercial: ‘it has to pay off’. Students experience the commercial pressure of their media institution as a ‘difficult balance’. They refer to competition as ‘the battle to be the first’, and report a trend towards sensational news. Students working for a news website, or for television, report more time pressure than students who work for ‘documentaries’, podcasts, newspapers or magazines. And time pressure is by far the most frequently cited factor that threatens compliance with ethics: ‘Then it goes through your head: “it has to be finished”, and not “we have to follow the rules and it has to be right”’, ‘so yes, then I did something that wasn’t really allowed, but that was because I had to go so fast.’ In their view, a tension between speed and quality is irrefutable. News headlines are especially pointed out as weak when it comes to ethics. And online news articles need to be ‘simple and short’, up until a point that ‘it is not correct anymore’.

### *Judgements on the relevance of the ethical codes*

In almost all focus groups, students state that in their opinion ethical codes are predominantly applicable to the traditional legacy media. Working practices to report and to act accordingly to ethical standards are said to be well elaborated for the printed press and specific elements in the codes were designed for the audiovisual media as well. However, students experienced that in the realm of digital media, ethical issues get another dimension and the codes do not offer sufficient guidelines for news websites, digital legacy media and social networking platforms. Students note that the ‘reality’ that is presented in social media feeds the content of legacy media, and that this relationship causes difficult situations with regard to ethics. The abundant flow of ‘news’ on social media challenges legacy media, students state. The ethical codes and editorial guidelines to act according to professional standards try to cope with this new reality but they are not yet adapted to this situation. Some students refer to this situation as ‘the legacy media are lagging behind’. Students recognize the fact that there are so many types of journalism that one regulatory framework that fits them all is impossible to achieve. Equally, the intertwining of legacy media adapting to ethical codes with the vast array of ‘news’ items in the digital world without any normative boundaries is an issue that cannot easily be solved. For the French-speaking participants, despite the existence of a code, professional ethics remained intangible and constantly changing when applied to social media, suggesting the need for an ‘update’ of the code. They felt anxious, struggling with defining their role in online platforms, especially when assigned task of community management, claiming they did not have the skills or the time to do it properly. In the interviews with the Dutch-speaking students, there are examples of cases in which additional ethical guidelines for the use of social media content would have been useful. In the first case, a picture of a young child surviving a major accident had been taken from a social media platform and published by the media. Even though the family of the child had given permission for this use, the students expressed concern regarding ethical standards. In a second case, the picture of a fugitive man had been taken from a social media platform and published in the media on police request. The students noticed that while legacy media acted upon ethical codes and agreements of good practice with police authorities, messages published on social media did not fall under any of these cautions. In the ‘news’ published on social media, there were no restrictions and many unnecessary details were

spread. Focus groups participants saw the risk that legacy media might be tempted to spread information in the same way. Students also give some examples of news or situations that popped up in social media and went viral in a split second. Students are critical of the so-called news value of these stories and reflect on the dilemma for legacy media whether to bring this type of sensationalist news. Some of the students think that legacy media must fulfil their role with more restrictions than social media at the risk of reducing the value of interest for their audiences. Some students contend that the more 'conservative' (read: ethical) attitude of legacy media might harm their credibility as audiences might suspect journalists to protect certain groups and to give them a preferential approach, while social media, in contrast, can provide the audience with the whole story without any content limitations. Some focus groups went further in reflecting on this difficult situation: should professional journalists play in another league? Should legacy media bring these topics with more background information, or with more reflection? Should they give information on the detrimental outcomes of some social media stories? The overarching line of these reflections was that students expected a more ethical approach from legacy media than from social media. In this respect, they show a qualitative normative framing of legacy media (regardless of whether it is print, broadcast or online). Thus, they strongly believe that legacy media can tap from the newsfeeds of social media but likewise that ethical professional standards of legacy media should remain at the forefront. An interesting quote in this respect is a student saying: 'we, as journalists in the traditional definition, are perhaps no longer the first who report specific news stories, but we make a selection in the endless stream of meaningful and less meaningful news items. We have to inform and to contextualize. We do not have to follow in the direction of shaming and blaming, in the direction of mere sensationalism'.

## Discussion

Even if the interviewees are not necessarily aware of this, internships undoubtedly lead them to consider ethics from new and diverse points of view. The discussion they took part in during the focus groups made clear that their professional experience allows them to adopt a critical stand towards a notion mainly approached from a theoretical point of view during their education, and that students from both Flemish and French communities share a lot of similar views on the subject.

### *Learning ethics by doing journalism*

Our results highlight a strong link between the possibility for discussion and deliberation in newsrooms and the awareness of the interns regarding ethical aspects of journalism and reporting. This finding is in line with Voakes (1997, 1998), who emphasized the importance of the organizational culture in which employees operate. This became even more obvious with trainees, who often did more than one internship, and could therefore be faced with very different ways of dealing with ethical issues. It is positively surprising that in a newsroom, an environment of intense and sometimes perplexing deliberation, students as interns feel quite safe to ask for more context about some of the decisions being made. They sometimes report critical remarks, but at the same time have great respect for the open discussion that is provided. Newsroom learning appears as the

'number one influence' on ethical conceptions of professional journalists; media superiors and co-workers rank high (way above teachers and professors), found Weaver et al. (2007). Our findings confirm this observation, as students tend to consult their colleagues rather than the codes when faced with an ethical issue. An organizational culture that fosters discussions and consultations increases the chances to take ethics under consideration (Voakes 1997, 1998). The results also point out striking silences about the understanding of some ethical questions by young journalists. Voicing these questions may seem difficult to students who anticipate problematic editorial choices (on the edge of ethical norms), and therefore prefer to protect themselves by remaining silent. This exercise of anticipation of the influence of ethics on a media company hints at how journalists must constantly articulate professional norms, expectations from their colleagues and peers, and their own ambitions and aspirations. The importance of ethics as perceived during the internship is part of an important 'learning experience' and 'the more students gain practical experience, the less absolute their ethical perceptions' grow (Reinardy and Moore 2007). Taking as a point of reference what they learned during their academic curriculum, the students express how their conception of ethics has evolved during their internship towards a greater understanding, something they did not anticipate. Their internship experiences revealed inherent tensions between the daily practice of journalism and the ethical codes as presented at university. Based on our research, we can confirm that internships are perceived as pivot moments and a crucial *learning experience* that causes a shift from a quite rigid and abstract conception of ethics (before) towards a more flexible and concrete comprehension (during and after). Initially seen as theoretical guidelines and rules studied more or less thoroughly at university, ethics becomes a set of practical norms young journalists can refer to. Therefore, the process of assimilation and 'interiorization' of ethics has its roots in academic curricula and is accelerated by field experience. Several students point out the importance of an academic perspective on ethics in addition to their experience during internship. Thus, in line with the results of Conway and Groshek (2009, 480), we can advocate that 'both coursework and applied media experiences are crucial to integrating and improving the ethical decision making of future journalists'.

### **Two journalistic cultures, same ethics**

Though our literature review started with references to the diversity of journalistic cultures in Belgium (Bonin et al. 2017), our results indicate strong similarities between the two subsamples. The students discuss ethical issues in relatively equivalent terms and seem to experience similar situations. Despite the fact that there are two separate councils in Belgium, the parallelisms in their structure, functioning and in the two codes of ethics (*Journalistieke code* in 2010<sup>3</sup>; *Code de déontologie journalistique* in 2013<sup>4</sup>), as well as their collaboration in common projects, can explain a shared conceptualization of ethics on both sides of the linguistic border.<sup>5</sup> However, there are still some differences between the two language communities regarding subsidization of information and links with advertising. Whereas the French-speaking students perceive the pressure of PR as a direct threat to ethical journalism, Dutch-speaking students tend to put it into perspective (as something 'that can be dealt with'). They consider the general commercial and competitive environment in which all media develop to be more threatening than the

influence of PR, which is deemed 'too obvious'. However, the interpretation of these differences needs a cautious analysis because of the different timing of the focus groups in the language communities. When it comes to expressing themselves about everyday ethical issues, the students (whether they are from Flanders, Wallonia or Brussels) develop quite similar discourses related to how ethics is discussed (or not) and problems managed (or not). Even if they are in media diversity of media and situations, or different organizational contexts, they highlight the importance of the media's editorial identity and the personal influence of experienced journalists (Alemoh, Ukwela, and Ogoshi 2018) on their interpretation of ethics. In addition, they point to their precarious status as trainees, which often invites them to follow the directives of their organization without always questioning them. This interiorization of precarity echoes recent research which shows that 'journalism interns face long, unpredictable work hours, rely on family support and side jobs to "afford" internships and use private resources to support their news production during internships. Their experiences often include a lack of mentorship and training', (Gollmitzer 2021). Despite the delicate position of trainees, some of the interns we interviewed were quite confident about questioning ethics. They considered ethical perspectives as the undisputed backbone of quality journalism.

These results are thus in line with those of Van Leuven et al. (2019) and Standaert and Mertens (2016) who conclude that Belgian journalists share a common vision of their profession, regardless of their linguistic belonging. Being a Flemish or a French-speaking student has little impact on the relationship that young Belgian journalism interns have with professional ethics.

## Conclusion

As both Flemish and French-speaking journalists share a relatively homogenous vision of journalistic ethics, we are now allowed to conclude on the relation that 'Belgian journalism interns' have with ethics, without specifying their language. More significantly, our results are the foundations to analyse further the professional identity of young professional Belgian journalists, beyond any stereotypes or alleged linguistic characteristics. They highlight the central role of professional ethics in the development of a professional identity for young Belgian journalists, and the importance of the internship as a crucial step in that process. The learning process of young journalists of professional ethics is structured in Belgium around at least three major points: the presence of ethics courses in training, the work of ethics regulation institutions, and the experience during their internship(s) in newsrooms. Ethics remains a stable backbone in the curricula of journalism programs in Belgium as well as a strong point of reference in the quotes of the interviewees. The journalism students participating in the focus groups address ethics not only as a way of speaking about journalism but also – and most importantly – as a way of defining their own professional identity. By referring to professional ethics, they express their views on what is ideal journalism. Ethics seems to be a tool for young journalists, inside and outside the newsroom, to position themselves and talk about journalism (do's and don'ts). This tool can be used or not, depending on the newsroom they work for and according to how they value and assess ethics. The students pointed out that professional ethics enables journalists to distinguish themselves from other actors in the diffusion of information (Ruellan 2011). Thus, they engage in 'boundary work' (Carlson and Lewis 2016) in order to define the contours of legitimate journalism. The

existence of ethical councils in both linguistic parts of the country has an essential impact on the professional socialization of young journalists. Such institutions, designed to regulate and discuss professional ethics, are a structuring element in the relationship of young journalists to ethics. Moreover, the mere existence of these institutions has a twofold implication. On the one hand, they have established the norms that serve as a set of rules on which young journalists rely. On the other hand, complaints can be addressed to the councils about the work of the trainees, their colleagues and the media companies in general. Hence, participants in the focus groups feel subjected to these rules, which encourages them to work with established journalistic practices, under the potential monitoring (real or projected) of an authority that defends a collective professional morality.

## Notes

1. There are also three regional institutions that borrowed their name from the name of the territory they represent: the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region.
2. In French-speaking Belgium, 8 focus groups were organized in 2019 in the facilities of the 4 participating institutions : *École de journalisme de Louvain* (UCLouvain), *Université de Liège* (ULiège), *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) and *Institut des Hautes Études des Communication Sociales* (IHECS). Students from the Francophone universities have to complete internships at 2–3 media newsrooms during 4–12 weeks. In Dutch-speaking Belgium, 5 focus groups were organized, in 2021, with students from three institutions: *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (KU Leuven), *Universiteit Gent* (UGent) and *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* (VUB). Flemish students do an (unpaid) internship of 6–10 weeks. Focus groups in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium were organized online, for two reasons. First, the corona safety measures in June 2021 did not allow a lot of physical group activities. Second, as some of the students had their internship still ongoing at the moment of the focus groups with divergent working circumstances and working places (at home or in the newsroom), an online meeting was more feasible for them. Because of the ‘Corona measures’ applicable at that time, Flemish students were also forced to work (mainly part-time only) from home and their (face-to-face) contacts with colleagues were sometimes reduced to a minimum, though with major differences between media. The pandemic also reduced the supply of internships, which meant that two students ended up in places different from the traditional newsrooms such as the press service of a non-profit organization and a political party.
3. <https://www.rvdj.be/pagina/journalistieke-code>
4. <https://www.lecdj.be/fr/deontologie/code/>
5. An Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe was established in 1999 in London, and the two Belgian media councils are current members. Since 2019, the Alliance has fostered research and reflection on the challenges facing media councils in the digital age, in a project funded by the EU DG CONNECT in collaboration with the European Federation of Journalists and several universities. This article is part of that initiative.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology: [grant number Connect/2019/1074575].



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