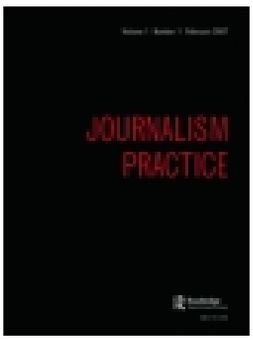

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Unethical Newsroom Behavior: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm

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ABSTRACT

Unethical behavior in newsrooms has come to public attention, and despite the glare of publicity, it persists. This research examines the question of why newsrooms provide a context conducive to persistent unethical workplace behaviors. We conducted 25 in-depth interviews with reporters, editors, anchors, producers, and news executives. Sexual harassment has been in the public eye, but our informants also described other unethical workplace behaviors such as bullying, discrimination, and incivility. Behavioral ethics emerged as a theoretical lens to help interpret our data. Five explanatory themes arose: 1) conceiving of work solely as creating journalistic content; 2) toxic rituals, rites of passage, and norms; 3) high power differentials and acquiescent behavior; 4) ineffective organizational mechanisms; and 5) a disruptive industry context. Networks of complicity enabled the bad behavior, and together with the themes, created a perfect storm that permitted unethical behavior to persist. Two paradoxes resulted: 1) the ethics paradox in which journalists had high ethical sensitivity in reporting but were blind to unethical behavior within newsrooms and 2) the power paradox in which journalists experienced role conflict caused by the need for initiative, courage, independence, and resistance to intimidation in reporting versus the dependence, obedience, and acquiescence required within newsrooms.

KEYWORDS

Ethics; journalism; leadership; management; newsrooms; networks of complicity

Unethical behavior has thrived and persisted in news organizations for long periods of time. The #MeToo movement revealed that women in newsrooms have suffered mistreatment ranging from bullying to sexual abuse, often for years, by the likes of Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, Roger Ailes, and recently Ed Henry, to name a few—whose highly problematic behavior appeared to be widespread, tacitly supported, and hidden from the public (Brittain and Carmon 2018; Fianagan 2019; Mangan 2020). Nearly two thirds of women working in media said that they had experienced some form of intimidation, threats, or abuse at work, the majority of which were inflicted by male supervisors and co-workers and were never reported (Barton and Storm 2018). Amidst reporting on Black Lives Matter, newsrooms in both Canada and the U.S. have had a "racial reckoning" as journalists at influential news organizations such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *New York Times* raised concerns about problematic newsroom behavior and called for an overhaul of newsroom culture (Farhi and Ellison 2020; Szklarski 2020).

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Unethical workplace behavior in organizations may involve a range of behaviors including abusive behavior, bullying, discrimination, favoritism, flaunting policies, incivility, microaggression, ostracism, and slander (Berdahl and Raver 2011). Newsrooms are no different. Such conduct in a profession that is rooted in high ethical standards and challenges abuse of power seems paradoxical. The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (2014) focuses on the four principles that form the foundation of ethical journalism—seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent. The Code of Ethics—like much of the journalism ethics literature—focuses on the ethics of reporting rather than ethical conduct in the workplace. Understanding the paradox of why and how unethical workplace behavior could persist in a profession as ethically grounded as journalism drove our research.

Background

While there is a significant body of research examining the ethics of reporting and content development, research on the ethics associated with leading or managing news organizations is scant. We address this gap and build on studies of newsroom demographics and culture. Such factors can influence unethical behavior in organizations (Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds 2006). Our study also emanates from our previous research on "networks of complicity"—social networks that enable persistent unethical behavior. This study draws its conceptual and theoretical underpinnings from behavioral ethics.

Extant Literature

The topics of ethics and journalism have long been linked (e.g., Anderson and Leigh 1992; McBride and Rosenstiel 2013), but the focus in much of the literature has been on the ethics of reporting and content creation and not on how people doing the reporting should be managed or how they should treat each other in the workplace. A notable exception is the U.K's National Union of Journalists' book *Stop Bullying* (2008), which identified characteristics of news organizations conducive to bullying and harassment and the actions that victims can take. Hollifield's (2019) review of the academic research in the area of newsroom management showed that it emerged in the 1950s, and its focus has been on organizational profitability, news decision making, the effects of organizational structures, market competition, and technologies' impact on news content and quality. The topic of ethics in managing newsrooms is notably absent. Nonetheless, there are exceptions in the literature. Examples include studies of the effectiveness of training on codes of ethics (Boeyink 1994; Lee and Coleman 2018). Killebrew (2009) examined ethical leadership, journalists' satisfaction, and newsroom culture, and Bunce (2019) explored the strategies used by managers to discipline and incentivize journalists' reporting priorities. Despite these exceptions, such work represents a small minority of journalism research.

Newsroom Demographics and Culture

Newsroom demographics, as elsewhere, likely impact behavior and culture. A half century of research has characterized newsroom demographics beginning with the foundational work of Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1971) and continuing through four books in

the *American Journalist* series. The most recent research was published by Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit (2017) based on a survey of journalists conducted in 2013. Most germane to our study is the fact that the statistical profile of the North American journalist has remained largely the same through the past half century—a white, married male (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017; Malik and Fatah 2019). The percentage of women working as fulltime journalists in mainstream U.S. media hovered around 35 percent from the early 1980's until 2013—substantially lower than the percentage of women in the U.S. civilian work force (47 percent)—and unequal pay and poor retention have remained persistent problems (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017; Beard et al. 2020). More balance (41.7% women employees, and 41.8 female newsroom managers) has been achieved recently (ASNE 2018). A 2015 Canadian study found that 43 percent of reporters in major news outlets were female, but few were in decision making roles; 79.1 percent of news directors were male (El Azrak 2018).

In 1971, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1971) concluded that American journalists predominately came from dominant and established cultural groups, and this remained the case in the U.S. and Canada a half century later (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017; Gonzales 2019). Canadian newsrooms have resisted reporting their diversity statistics (Malik and Fatah 2019), and about 22.6 percent of U.S. journalists were minorities versus 40 percent ethnic and racial minorities in the population (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017; ASNE 2018). Like women, minorities tended to leave journalism more quickly than whites, and fifty percent of minority journalists were women (Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit 2017).

Given newsroom demographics, it is not surprising that newsroom cultures have been characterized as patriarchal (Elmore 2007) and mono-dimensional with respect to cultural and racial diversity (Bodinger-de Uriarte and Valgeirsson 2015). Strong male networks have given men social capital that enabled them to get better assignments, more promotions, and greater decision-making power (Elmore 2007). Women in newsrooms have perceived that they must be tough and unemotional (Gilger and Wallace 2019), and to succeed, they have had to take on the characteristics of male journalists (Robinson 2005). Regarding diversity, Bodinger-de Uriarte and Valgeirsson (2015) found that more than 60 percent of the 613 U.S. journalists they interviewed had no clear concept of what diversity meant within their news organizations, and only 3.1 percent identified diversity as an important ethical concern in journalism. Theyconcluded that a large gap exists between newsroom diversity pledges and newsroom practices and culture.

Networks of Complicity

Questions for the current research emanated from an earlier project in which we explored the causes of persistent sex harassment in the workplace (Cunningham, Drumwright, and Foster 2019). Sex harassment is defined as "harassment based on sex—behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex" (Berdahl 2007, 641). We conducted 28 in-depth interviews with people in business, journalism, education, the military, and the nonprofit sector using the same approach to qualitative research described in the methods section below. Two findings immediately emerged. First, our interviews revealed that a major explanatory factor that accounted for persistent sex harassment across professions and sectors was the presence of what we labeled "networks of

complicity." Using various types of power and their vast array of connections within and outside the focal organization, perpetrators of sex harassment formed social networks that enabled them to continue their unethical conduct and increase their power and influence. Perpetrators also used benefits, fear, favoritism, information control, and manipulation to draw others into their networks and maintain their loyalty. Perpetrators were myth builders and information manipulators, who often exaggerated their own achievements and importance to the organization. Members of the network of complicity were active or passive supporters of the perpetrator, and they typically benefitted from their association with the perpetrator. In return, network members insulated, enabled, and protected the perpetrator. Enablement varied from actions taken to "fix" problems, to stigmatizing and isolating those who resisted, to rewarding those who complied with the network's norms, to turning a blind eye to the perpetrator's bad behavior. The networks helped create and perpetuate a toxic organizational culture,which tended to metastasize throughout the organization. The network of complicity was institutionalized over time and often persisted even after the perpetrator was disenfranchised. Social network theory emerged as the theoretical underpinning for our findings. Concepts from social network theory, such as the network centrality, strength of ties, the ability to control information flows, contagion, and groupthink helped us understand how these networks formed and operated to sustain sex harassment.

Second, our initial interviews suggested that mainstream news organizations (both print and broadcast) were especially fertile breeding grounds for networks of complicity and a wide range of persistent unethical behaviors, not just sex harassment. Informants described some unique aspects of journalism practice that also caught our attention. For example, some informants described the high ethical standards perpetrators held regarding the journalistic content they and others created, but paradoxically, perpetrators often seemed blind to their own persistent unethical workplace behavior. Informants' comments led us to the questions for this study: why and how can unethical workplace behavior persist in a profession as ethically grounded as journalism, and what makes newsrooms so conducive to persistent unethical workplace behavior and the development of networks of complicity?

Behavioral Ethics

Behavioral ethics focuses on why and how individuals make ethical and unethical decisions (e.g., Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds 2006; Bazerman and Tenbrunsel 2011; Prentice 2014; Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci 2015). In a special issue of *Personnel Psychology* on behavioral ethics, the editors, Mitchell, Reynolds, and Trevino (2019, 5), claimed that "ethics has emerged as one of the most critical issues facing organizations," and even though "there have been many strides in the behavioral ethics literature, more work is needed" especially with regard to unpacking the causes, consequences, and ways to prevent unethical behavior that has been so harmful to many organizations. They stressed that studying actual workplaces is essential since most research has relied on experiments and non-representative samples.

Behavioral ethics emerged from our data as a theoretical lens that helped explain our findings. It uses sociological and psychological approaches to augment philosophical approaches to understand why and how good people, who do not intend to do wrong,

make unethical decisions (Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci 2015). Behavioral ethics demonstrates that people make most of their decisions, including ethical decisions, instinctively rather than rationally. Cognitive errors, social and organizational pressures, and situational factors often sabotage the ethical decision making of people who believe they are leading ethical lives.

Cognitive Errors

Research on biases and heuristics (rules of thumb) demonstrates that people generally are not rational actors, and many cognitive errors influence people's decision making in ways they do not understand or notice (Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman 2002). People are often blind to a self-serving bias affecting their decision making. They perceive, remember, and use information in a self-serving way (Mlodinow 2012), which causes well-intended people to make decisions that others, who are more objective, find utterly selfish (Eldred 2012). Incrementalism is another cognitive error. People generally are not adept at detecting gradual changes in their environment, so well-intentioned people may not notice as ethical infractions grow larger and larger (Gino 2013). As such, an individual can move from breaking a minor rule to committing a felony almost without noticing (Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004).

Social and Organizational Pressures

Two of the most common social and organizational pressures that can cause well-intentioned people to make poor ethical choices are the obedience to authority bias and the conformity bias. The obedience to authority bias occurs when people defer to authority figures rather than making their own ethical judgments (Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci 2015). While following the instructions of ethical supervisors is generally a good thing, people may do terrible things if they comply with unethical leaders (Glover 2012). People are also wired to follow the crowd—to conform to the behavior of others (Matousek 2011). This conformity bias can be especially strong when people conform to the values of their peers (Ferrell and Gresham 1985). While the conformity bias can be beneficial in some situations, if it causes people to suspend their own ethical judgment and conform to others who are unethical, it can be calamitous (Norris 2014).

Situational Factors

Many situational factors affect ethical decision making adversely in ways that people do not notice. For example, when people are under time pressure, they often act less ethically, and they do not realize the impact that time pressure has on them (Darley and Batson 1963). Lack of transparency is another important situational factor. Integrity is often described as doing what is right, even when no one is watching. When people feel that they are not being watched, they often will act less ethically (Gino 2013).

Behavioral ethics helped explain how and why journalists act as they do in newsrooms as our findings will demonstrate. Fortunately, human reasoning can play a larger role in ethical decision making (Johnson 2014), but only if people are aware of the types of vulnerabilities described above.

Study Design and Method

When the goal of research is to understand complex interactions, the meaning of actions to participants, and deeply embedded perceptions, beliefs, and values, field-based approaches are often appropriate (McCraken 1988). As Queirós, Faria, and Almeida (2017) noted, they help researchers explore aspects of reality that are difficult to quantify, see the broad context in which behavior occurs over long time periods, and focus on explaining the dynamics of social relationships. Given the complexities, subtleties, and perceptions involved in understanding why newsrooms create a context that is conducive to persistent unethical workplace behavior, we selected a field-based approach using in-depth interviews.

We interviewed 25 individuals (15 females and 10 males) who had worked in major mainstream print and broadcast organizations as reporters, editors, anchors, producers, or news executives. Twelve had worked in management positions. Ten resided in Canada, and 15 resided in the U.S. All but one of the news organizations were commercial; one Canadian news organization received some government support. We drew informants from our professional networks and then used a snowballing technique to find additional informants. Twenty interviews were conducted in-person, and five were conducted by Skype or phone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Informants were told that our study would explore persistent unethical behavior so they would understand that we were not focusing on one-time, minor infractions. Following standard practice for interviews (Queirós, Faria, and Almeida 2017), we began with a generic question: "Describe problematic behavior that you experienced, witnessed, or heard about in your organization." We let informants determine what "problematic behavior" entailed. We used follow-up questions such as "What enabled this problematic behavior to continue?" However, we adjusted our follow-up questions to encourage informants to speak freely and explore the issues they deemed most relevant.

Our data set consisted of 76 cases of persistent unethical conduct described by our informants. Each case involved a separate perpetrator whose unethical behavior was observed or experienced by the informant. Some perpetrators repeatedly committed one type of unethical action, while others exhibited multiple types of persistent unethical behavior. Instances of sexual harassment, incivility, bullying, favoritism, and discrimination were the most prevalent types of persistent unethical conduct within newsrooms. The data were analyzed systematically and intensively using standard qualitative methods (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Themes that were common across multiple informants were identified and are reported in the Findings section.

The limitations of in-depth interviews are well known, so we attempted to mitigate them. For example, to minimize the tendency of respondents to give "canned" or self-serving answers (Jensen and Jankowski 1991), we asked broad, open-ended questions that encouraged informants to define the situation and determine what was important. We encouraged participants to think out loud in an unrestrained manner of guided introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). We assured informants of anonymity and confidentiality to mitigate the social desirability bias. We recruited informants who held a variety of positions and had differing levels of experience in different news organizations. As evidenced by our 76 cases, they reported encountering unethical behavior in many varied ways. Portraying the range of the phenomenon is important to developing

theory in qualitative research (Bonoma 1985). To guard against subjectivity and to establish reliability, both authors analyzed all of the interview transcripts and identified themes independently (Dexter 1970). When our findings differed, we revisited the transcripts before having additional discussions. We reported only findings that we both agreed upon. We used quotations representative of what was expressed by many informants to add objectivity and depth of understanding to our findings.

Findings

The overriding finding was that newsrooms encompassed a perfect storm of factors that prompted unethical behavior and explained its persistence. The factors were categorized as five explanatory themes: 1) conceptions of work solely as creating journalistic content, 2) toxic rituals, rites of passage, and norms, 3) high power differentials and acquiescent behavior, 4) ineffective organizational mechanisms, and 5) a disruptive industry context.

Theme 1: Conceptions of Work Solely as Creating Journalistic Content

Informants frequently reported that they and their colleagues were deeply aware of and concerned about the ethics of the journalistic content they created, but they recognized upon reflection that they were virtually blind to persistent unethical behavior in their own workplaces. This blindness was due, at least in part, to the sole focus on producing news to the exclusion of all other issues. As one informant noted:

> What's the most important thing in that [newsroom] atmosphere? Putting out a decent product on deadline. … No one says it is [putting out] a decent product on deadline in an ethical work environment.

Another observed, "You can be a good journalist—and be an ethical journalist—and have zero ethics when it comes to human interaction." When asked specifically about issues of workplace ethics, one informant said, "I never really thought about that." Newsroom managers defined their jobs as being in charge of news content, and they often trivialized the management of people. One said:

> And we saw it [being a manager] as being in charge of content—not in charge of employees. … I felt like my people management part of the job was just dealing with people's vacation requests.

It is not that ethical breaches do not occur with respect to the creation of journalistic content—they certainly do. Informants gave accounts of journalists who had committed ethical breaches such as fabricating quotes and stories, having a conflict of interest by accepting gifts in return for shaping stories, plagiarizing, not giving credit for contributions to a story, suppressing information, or sleeping with sources. Our informants unequivocally viewed these practices as unethical. When such conduct was exposed, offenders were quickly and summarily disciplined or fired. Informants described organizational safeguards—e.g., fact checkers and editors—to detect and halt problematic unethical behavior with respect to journalistic content. As one informant said, "If I were an unethical journalist, it would come out."

In contrast, informants described accomplished reporters, anchors, and editors who were high-minded about their reporting and upstanding regarding their ethical standards for treating the people on whom they were reporting but horribly abusive to fellow journalists. For example, one informant described a well-known, national news anchor who was consistently abusive to co-workers, but "when it came to journalism and empathy towards [the anchor's] subjects and for people that were being exploited in the world, [the anchor] was incredibly ethical, empathetic, committed; [the anchor] wanted to make the world a better place."

Informants also described journalists who were keenly attuned to revealing and reporting on unethical behavior outside the newsroom—e.g., sexual harassment by politicians and public figures—but were blind to that same behavior in their own newsrooms. This inconsistency was not lost on some journalists. For example, one informant described her own disillusionment as a young journalist when she realized that the prominent journalist who was sexually harassing her was concurrently exposing a public figure for his sexual misconduct:

> Within your own walls, this [sexual harassment] happens. … And for me, it [the sexual harassment by a journalist] was so traumatizing because it was about the integrity of the press, the institution that I believed in and became very disillusioned about.

Another informant noted the inconsistency, "We're reporting on other people, but we would not want anyone to reverse the mirror … bad stuff is only done by other people." Even victims of sexual harassment were affected by the conception of work as focusing only on content. One victim lamented that she had not reached out to potential allies because she just wanted to do her job—creating content:

> I should have been more courageous to reach out to my fellow female reporters … and I didn't because I just wanted this [sexual harassment] to go away. I had a huge job I was doing … and it was intense, so I just wanted to do my job, and I didn't want to deal with this [sexual harassment]—so that would have taken a lot of effort.

Conceiving of work as solely creating journalistic content illustrates four cognitive biases: 1) framing, 2) appeal to higher loyalties, 3) overconfidence, and 4) moral licensing. Framing posits that ethical judgments are influenced by how they are viewed or posed (Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci 2015). Viewing work solely as creating content leaves many ethical issues related to workplace dynamics, management, and leadership out of the frame. The appeal to higher loyalties bias occurs when people perceive that some ethical norms need to be breached to fulfill more important goals, such as producing content or getting the newspaper out on time (Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2004). In newsrooms, abuse of journalists can be rationalized using this bias, which leads to the belief that this is the only way high quality reporting can be accomplished. Unlike other biases, the appeal to higher loyalties bias may not just cause people to overlook persistent unethical conduct, it may cause such conduct to become valued (Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2004). The overconfidence bias refers to people's inclination to believe they are more ethical than they actually are and to act without sufficient reflection (Chambliss 2012). Because of the emphasis on the ethics of journalistic content in the profession and their high calling, journalists can become overconfident in themselves as ethical individuals and fail to reflect on the ramifications of their workplace behavior. Journalists also can fall prey to moral licensing, which occurs when people give themselves permission to

act unethically because of other virtuous behavior they have exhibited (Klotz and Bolino 2013). That is, journalists could give themselves permission to act unethically toward others in the newsroom because of their ethical behavior in creating content and the positive role that they play in a democratic society.

Framing, appeal to higher loyalties, overconfidence, and moral licensing may contribute to several distortions of moral vision: "moral myopia" (Drumwright and Murphy 2004), a condition in which ethical issues do not come into focus; "moral blindness" (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel 2011), a condition in which ethical issues are not seen at all; or "moral disengagement" (Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds 2006), a condition in which individuals disengage from normal self-regulatory processes that prevent them from undertaking unethical actions in other contexts. How could such moral myopia, moral blindness, and moral disengagement about workplace issues exist among journalists who were ethically sensitive about the journalistic content that they created?

Theme 2: Toxic Rituals, Rites of Passage, and Norms

Newsrooms have long been what informants characterized as "rough and tumble" places. A variety of potentially problematic rituals, rites of passage, and norms can develop and become part of newsroom culture when the conception of ethical work excludes workplace behaviors—especially when combined with toughness and domination. "You have to have toughness for the job … because we are dealing with just terrible things a lot of the time," said one informant. Indeed, the news is full of tragedies and harsh realities that require toughness to be embedded in the newsroom culture and professional identity of journalists. However, journalistic norms of toughness are complicated. When blended with "macho" behavior, they have encouraged and perpetuated persistent bullying and uncivil behavior that informants characterized as "adolescent male behavior."

Informants reported that bullying and incivility in newsrooms were persistent and pervasive behaviors and were often exhibited by those with the greatest influence in news organizations—editors and other leaders. A senior leader at a national newspaper noted, "There has been male bullying behavior in newsrooms for decades. … I've been tougher on people than I should have been." Others said that bullying of young reporters by editors was a rite of passage akin to hazing:

> I was bullied by editors. There was a pecking order, and there was almost a feeling that you had to go through this. … We called it "university hazing."

In fact, some informants reported that bullying was seen as a form of prestige and a sign of strength:

> The executive producer was a screamer. … Whenever I would make mistakes, he would rip up my script and scream at me … and then bully me and then ignore me. … That type of bullying, screaming behavior was rewarded. It was seen as a sign of strength.

The pervasive bullying had side effects. As one informant said, experienced journalists used "bullying to suppress the ability of young journalists to have the impact in the newsroom that any young person wants to have."

Gilger and Wallace's (2019) book title proclaims a well-accepted newsroom norm emanating from the sense of toughness—*There Is No Crying In Newsrooms*. Not only is there no

crying, there is no whining or complaining either. One informant noted, "You can't complain about anythin. … You just buck up and deal." Another informant explained that she did not go to her boss to object to the racially derogatory language of her co-workers because "the culture accepts it" and she would be seen as "a wimp or 'that black woman.'" One informant described a woman who spoke up objecting to uncivil behavior, "She's the one who is always complaining about stuff, and so, then you have the idea, 'Well, O.K., I don't want to be a complainer.'" Yet another informant articulated the often-conveyed message: "Put your head down. Get your work done. Shut up. Laugh it off. You're tough." When bad workplace behavior was treated as a joke, it conveyed that the behavior was condoned. Another informant recounted how she did not object to uncivil behavior because the editor did not object:

> In my head then and now, I think, "Well, the editor knows this. If the editor doesn't stop it, why would I stop it, or how would I stop it?"

Newsroom managers are socialized to enforce the norm related to toughness. For example, when a newly promoted newsroom manager lent a sympathetic ear to a reporter with a complaint, he was told by his boss, "She's a whiner, and you're a manager now; you can't get sucked in by the whiners." Informants noted that the newsroom norm of toughness was influenced by decades of male leadership and under representation of women. One observed, "There's always been more men in a position of leadership, and you get that sort of men's club thing going on." Another expressed the sentiment of many women informants: "Women in newsrooms must join the boys' club to survive." Informants noted that men and women were treated differently, which is the case in many professions, but they perceived that in journalism the "treatment of women was more extreme than in other disciplines." Membership in the boy's club afforded many work and career related advantages as described by one female informant:

> There was a bar in the … building and a culture of drinking [among male journalists]. There was a twice-yearly fishing trip that was for men only, and the Super Bowl party. Women were always excluded. The result was that you had different relationships. Men were able to go around layers of management—they could go to the news editor and get a story accepted for page one—bypassing five layers of management. If I tried to do this, I would have been sanctioned.

Male leadership and under representation of women in newsrooms—blended with toughness, bullying, and macho norms—enabled sexual harassment to persist in some newsrooms. In addition, this blending of newsroom norms kept some women journalists from even recognizing sex harassment when they encountered it—a further indication of moral myopia and moral blindness. As one informant stated:

> We did not even know that we had been harassed until the #MeToo Movement. … We didn't know how to recognize the behavior.

Some even construed the inappropriate behavior as a way to be accepted by her male colleagues:

> As a young reporter, I was the subject of what would be called sexual harassment today or bullying, but I just never considered it that. … Their inappropriate joking, and that sort of thing, almost felt like an invitation to join the boys club.

Others recognized sexual harassment as inappropriate but acquiesced to its presence noting, "It was kind of part of the deal," while another felt that she had to become part of this inappropriate culture:

> This [sexual harassment; unwanted advances] is what you expect in a male environment. … So it was, "OK, I'm being tested here, right? I'm going to be macho. I'm going to join the ethos."

The mandate to endure the bad behavior was reinforced by another aspect of the newsroom norms that one informant described as a "pay-your-dues mentality":

> You do whatever is asked, and that is how you get ahead, and if you don't do what's asked, it is presumed that you just don't want it enough. … [It's] a cultural norm of do whatever it takes to get ahead and be glad for the experience. … You're paying your dues. It has been ingrained in you that you pay your dues if you want to succeed in this business.

How can such toxic rituals, rites of passage, and norms persist? Behavioral ethics offers insights. Role morality is a cognitive bias that occurs when people do not live up to their own ethical standards—for example, the journalistic value of humanity—because of a role that they perceive that they must play at work (Gibson 2003). The role of "tough journalist" enabled journalists to harm others as they played this role—a role that is accepted and perceived to be essential to survival as a journalist. The conformity bias also contributes in that when journalists see others—especially their peers who are successful—bullying and acting in an uncivil manner, they conform to that behavior and even view it as normal and acceptable. Denial of responsibility (Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2004) occurs when people believe they have no real choices and that the circumstances demand that they behave in a certain way (e.g., bullying, managing through fear, being uncivil) to produce desired outcomes (e.g., deal with harsh realities and produce stories by deadlines).

Theme 3: High Power Differentials and Acquiescent Behavior

Unethical behavior thrives in contexts exhibiting a complicated blend of major power differentials and consent or acquiescence (Trevino et al. 1999), and our data reflected this reality. Newsrooms were described as "very hierarchical" and characterized by authoritarian leadership:

> Newsrooms allow people who are very authoritative to climb up the ranks. … People who are quiet champions don't rise. The toughest people get promoted further up the ranks. They have seen the people they have worked for get away with this type of [authoritarian] behavior.

Newsrooms have multiple sources of power differentials—editors, star reporters, anchors, and executives. "The editors rule the roost," said one informant. Yet another explained, "The power to fire, to control the quality of life for reporters … . We really were at the behest of the editors, and they could ruin you in a minute." Editors control which stories get done and who gets to do them as they give or withhold assignments and resources—a power that can compel acquiescent behavior.

News anchors and star reporters wield informal power, which is based on their fame, ability to draw audiences, and connections. One word from a high visibility, on-air talent "would have been a career ender … if anyone would have called [network news anchor] on his behavior." Informants gave numerous accounts of talented young

women reporters who were lured into meetings with powerful editors, anchors, or executives under the guise of getting career advice and then actually receiving unwanted sexual attention instead. The power differentials made the costs of speaking up too high.

People with power in news organizations had certain liberties to do as they pleased—a type of "entitlement":

> There's a cultural norm … set up that the people at the top basically have liberties. … Once they [bosses] got to the point where they could be the abuser, they felt like they had earned it; they had earned that right.

In addition, newsroom leaders seemed to have immunity regarding unethical behavior:

> People in authority are always right. It is rare for people to get removed from organizations due to ethical lapses.

In the context of high power differentials, three behavioral ethics biases—obedience to authority, denial of responsibility, and the self serving bias—come into play. The obedience to authority bias inclines people to follow the lead of their superiors and go along with the behavior that they believe their bosses condone even if it is unethical (Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci 2015). In a context with high power differentials, the obedience to authority bias is especially potent because superiors have the power to reward and punish in compelling, authoritarian ways. The denial of responsibility bias is heightened in authoritarian cultures since people come to believe they have no choice or freedom of action to address issues they would view as unethical under different circumstances. They perceive that authority figures are responsible for determining and maintaining ethical norms (Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2004). Why would people in authority fail to see the errors of their ways? The self-serving bias comes into play (Mlodinow 2012). Newsroom managers and senior executives become accustomed to the privileges their leadership roles create for them, and they continue to act and make decisions in unethical ways that serve their own interests.

Theme 4: Ineffective Organizational Mechanisms

Ethical organizations typically have strong governance mechanisms—departments, functions, policies, and practices—that constrain abuses of power (Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser 2007). In contrast, our informants characterized newsrooms as having limited or ineffective governance mechanisms. Some informants characterized newsrooms as doing a poor job of any organizational tasks other than producing news. Weak organizational practices and policies were compounded by what some informants described as a certain arrogance—that journalists and newsrooms are so unique that typical organizational practices do not apply to them. One informant asserted, "In the newsroom, … we're different than other people" and elaborated with respect to training:

> Every once in a while, they'll do these trainings. And they don't really feel very real-world applicable. It feels like they're training you for some corporate job somewhere. But that's not how we work in the newsroom. Whether that's good or bad, that's not what we do.

Human resource (HR) departments can provide organizational mechanisms that create checks and balances to limit abuses of power; however, the tremendous distrust of them

among journalists worked to counter any benefits that they could provide. This distrust is not unique to news organizations, but our informants perceived that it seemed especially pronounced among journalists, as one informant said:

> If they [women journalists who were sexually harassed] were to go to HR, the human resources people would have been there to protect the company and to protect the assets of the company, and an anchorman is their primary asset, and so they would not have advocated on behalf of the employee. … Ultimately, the employee would have suffered the consequences regardless.

Another noted:

> HR is not your friend. They work for the company—for management. That is who signs their paychecks.

Informants believed that there was little emphasis on management processes in general or on ethical management skills in particular in their news organizations. One informant decried such lack of training:

> As a newsroom, we always have done a really poor job of all those things that are outside of putting out the paper—training, from the most basic things of how to use a new phone system … to how to deal with an employee. … It's like, "Well, here it is. Come on, figure it out."

People were put into leadership positions based on their journalistic expertise rather than on leadership or management capability as noted by a senior executive:

> Say, you've been a very good producer, writer—one of the craft areas. If you've been good, you are given a more senior position—if you are successful, then you get picked to be a managing editor. A whole range of upward mobility is craft-based not leadership or management-based.

He noted that this practice created "a lot anxiety … a lot of confusion about how to do the job" and that there was a "dearth of training" for those in middle management. Another informant commented on the lack of training in talent management:

> When you look at the HR functions and talent development executives at a lot of networks, they are former journalists. They are not necessarily trained in talent management.

When training did exist, it was perceived as "something to be endured, something that takes away from time that we need to be doing work to get the paper out." It was ridiculed in some newsrooms and characterized as "an office joke" even when it focused on issues like sexual harassment.

The lack of training in management skills and talent management resulted in rewards and promotions being based on relationships and favoritism rather than objective performance criteria. Those in power—whether they were anchors, editors, or executives—rewarded their favorites (their "groupies"):

> [National news anchor] had his groupies—and they were male and female—who just liked to be around him. [Female national news anchor] had them too. They all had them. … Oftentimes, those groupies got the good assignments and got to go with [national news anchor] anywhere in the world. … There certainly were perks of being a groupie!

Other female informants described senior male leaders who made a possible promotion seem contingent on accepting their sexual advances. One informant described the predicament of a fellow journalist:

> She wanted to make the transition from editor to producer, which was always very difficult to do, and her entire career was in the hands of this one man to help her make the transition, and he was coming on to her. … [I] remember him pounding on her hotel room late at night.

These problematic talent management practices led to the creation of self-perpetuating organizations, which crowded out attempts at diversity:

> Hiring those like you or only promoting those who are like you—it's really hard not to promote the people you see in the mirror, right? Who look like you, sound like you, have the same values.

Often policies and practices were so informal as to appear nonexistent, and without a clear policy, some journalists unintentionally succumbed to unethical workplace behavior as another informant explained:

> I feel like a lot of times we're just deciding on a case-by-case basis rather than it necessarily being a real clear policy. And I think because of that, there can be people unintentionally … doing things that they shouldn't, taking part in activities that they shouldn't without even realizing it.

Journalists fall prey to the in-group/out-group bias when they believe that they are so unique and different from other professionals that the tenets and practices of sound management do not apply to them. This bias causes one to view the in-group—journalists—much more favorably than the out-group—everyone else (Prentice 2014)—and it supports the perception that journalists and news organizations are exempt from needing sound organizational mechanisms that support ethical management. In addition, the context that ineffective or nonexistent organizational functions, policies, and practices create gives rise to the behavioral ethics situational factor of transparency. A lack of transparency existed related to important management tasks such as hiring, rewards and promotions. As such, these practices were often riddled with unethical behavior. If people feel that their actions are not visible to others and not open to scrutiny, they will behave less ethically than when their actions are visible and open to scrutiny (Gino 2013).

Theme 5: Disruptive Industry Context

A confluence of trends has created ever increasing pressure, tensions, and conflicts for journalists and news organizations (Chadha and Wells 2016). Newspapers have been closed. Budgets have been slashed. Traditional media are being challenged by declining readership and viewership, social media, fake news, populism, and declining public trust, along with pressures for increased productivity (Carter, Cushion, and Garcia-Blanco 2018). Technological changes are transforming how news is produced (Blakenship 2016). Full-time journalists are being replaced by freelancers and contract workers (Nies and Pedersini 2003), and the 24/7 news cycle wreaks havoc on family life. Journalism is a profession in turmoil.

Our informants lamented the general lack of leadership in news organizations in responding to the immense changes affecting the profession and highlighted the negative effects of these major disruptions on workplace behavior. As one informant declared, "I don't think that there is any industry as ill-prepared for the changes that are facing it than the broadcast industry, and the #MeToo movement is just a piece of it." Financial

pressures created by failing business models at the organizational level—along with the resulting job insecurity at the individual level—typically work at cross-purposes with ethical behavior. An informant elaborated:

> Journalists do not have the luxury [to treat co-workers with respect] because they don't have a great business model, and it's so competitive, and people don't get paid well. There's insecurity. … You're in survival mode all the time … reporting on these issues every day … school shootings, Iraq wars, horrible things—and then you go home, and you can barely pay your bills, and you're being sexually harassed, and you're getting screamed at by your colleagues. So it's awful. … There's a need for good leadership, good management, and ethical business training.

Because of the pressures caused by radical change, informants reported that they often did not have the time or the bandwidth to deal with issues of workplace ethics as one editor explained:

> You have thrown all your energies and all your imagination into being a great editor, and you've got a rogue employee who's hitting on interns. And what do you do? [Your response is,] "Well I'm too exhausted to deal with that right now."

Another informant noted:

> I think that the competitive nature of the news business enables people to overlook the obvious ethical breaches.

Some of these pressures undoubtedly are due to the radical changes that the news industry is undergoing. However, some informants asserted that competitiveness has been exacerbated by a long-time leadership philosophy that "how you get the best out of people is to make them compete."

Research has demonstrated that the work environment impacts moral judgement, and time pressure and short-term financial pressures have negative effects on ethical behavior (Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds 2006). People make less ethical decisions when they are under time pressure, and alarmingly, they typically are not aware of the effect of time pressure on their decisions. A focus on short-term financial goals can prompt the tangible and the abstract bias (Prentice 2014). That is, short-term financial considerations dominate because they seem tangible and proximate, while ethical considerations, which have long-term ramifications, seem abstract and distant. With increasing time and financial pressures, incrementalism also may come into play, so people fail to see as they move from minor ethical infractions to major ethical breaches. The obedience to authority bias may also increase unethical actions if leaders of news organizations put high value on the reputation of the organization and exert pressure on units such as HR departments to do whatever they can to protect organizational reputation. Table 1 summarizes the five themes and the behavioral ethics factors leading to and perpetuating unethical conduct and the development and institutionalization of networks of complicity.

Discussion

The confluence of factors organized by our five themes created a perfect storm within newsrooms. They enabled networks of complicity and unethical workplace behavior to occur and persist. They also highlighted two important paradoxes. The first was the

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Behavioral Ethics Factors Conducive to the Creation and Perpetuation of Networks of Complicity.

Theme	Behavioral Ethics Factors	Brief Factor Description
Theme 1: Conceptions of Work Solely as Creating Journalistic Content	Framing, Appeal to higher loyalties, Overconfidence, Moral licensing	Ethical judgments are influenced by how they are viewed, posed, or "framed," e.g., ethics applying only to content creation. Important goals trump ethical behavior. Believing that one is more ethical than one actually is and acting without sufficient reflection. Giving oneself permission to act unethically because of one's other good behavior.
Theme 2: Toxic Rituals, Rites of Passage, and Norms	Role morality, Conformity, Denial of responsibility	Failing to live up to one's own ethical standards because of a role that one perceives that one must play at work, e.g., "tough" journalist. Conforming to the unethical behavior of others. Believing that one has no choice but to be unethical because others determine and are responsible for maintaining ethical standards.
Theme 3: High Power Differentials and Acquiescent Behavior	Obedience to authority, Denial of responsibility, Self-serving	Adopting the unethical behavior that one's superior condones. Believing that one has no choice but to be unethical because others, authority figures, determine and maintain ethical standards. Acting in an unethical manner that benefits one's self.
Theme 4: Ineffective Organizational Mechanisms	In-group/out-group, Lack of transparency	In-group/out-group leads to double standards. Acting less ethically when one perceives that one's actions are not visible to others or subject to scrutiny.
Theme 5: Disruptive Industry Context	Time pressure, Financial pressure, Tangible and abstract, Incrementalism, Obedience to authority	Making less ethical decisions under time pressure. Making less ethical decisions because of financial pressure. Giving attention to tangible, short-term factors at the expense of abstract, long-term factors. Failing to notice gradual increases in unethical behavior. Adopting the unethical behavior that one's superior condones.

ethics paradox. Journalists in our study were highly sensitive to ethics as it related to the creation of their journalistic content, but they were simultaneously morally disengaged, morally myopic, and sometimes even morally blind to unethical workplace behavior. These tendencies were supported by the various behavioral ethicsfactors summarized in Table 1. The second paradox was the power paradox. Externally, journalists are expected to be courageous, challenging, independent, and resistant to intimidation (Lee and Coleman 2018). They play a vital role in a democratic society by speaking truth to power, exposing the lies of governmental officials, and calling attention to important social issues. They cannot allow themselves to be intimidated; they must be assertive. Witness the COVID-19 pandemic or instances of police brutality where journalists frequently challenged government officials and gave voice to public concerns. Internally, in contrast, our informants felt that they needed to be obedient to authority. Sometimes this obedience was to serve a "higher purpose." Other times, it involved self protection. Our informants described hierarchical organizational structures where editors' word was the law. Inconsistent expectations such as these create role conflict, which leads to unethical behavior that is supported and reinforced by the behavioral ethics biases outlined above.

The #MeToo movement shined a light on bad leadership in newsrooms and news organizations. The typical reaction of many is that the problem was rooted largely in perpetrators who were bad people and bad leaders. Our findings illustrated the importance of context in understanding persistent unethical behavior. Bad leaders are part of the explanation, but only a part. Though much of the research on leadership has focused largely on leaders' characteristics and behaviors (Kellerman 2004), bad leadership is more appropriately understood as the result of an interaction among three factors: 1) a bad leader, 2) susceptible followers, and 3) a context that is conducive to unethical behavior—what Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) characterized as the "toxic triangle." These three factors created a context particularly susceptible to perpetrators who formed networks of complicity that not only protected them from sanction, but also entrenched and institutionalized bad behavior. We identified factors within the newsrooms that make them particularly conducive to unethical behavior. Our findings also highlighted how those factors make followers more susceptible to accepting and conforming to the unethical behavior of bad leaders because of the behavioral ethics factors that came into play. When attempting to halt unethical behavior, it is not enough to remove bad leaders and bad followers; the context must be fundamentally transformed, and people must become aware of the behavioral ethics factors influencing their choices.

Practical Implications

The problems that our findings document shined a bright light on a failure of leadership and management in mainstream news organizations. Leaders can address these problems through understanding organizational culture and using the practices and policies of good management and leadership to change organizational culture, which encompasses underlying dimensions such as the beliefs, assumptions, values, and ways of interacting that create the social context of an organization (Deal and Kennedy 2000). The first step is to make these underlying dimensions explicit, so that they can be scrutinized and changed as needed. For example, our informants described an underlying belief that it is acceptable—perhaps even advantageous—for editors to bully and berate journalists, and that the only area where ethics is important is in creating journalistic content. Good leaders can discern the underlying dimensions of organizational culture by creating various forums to listen to the concerns of employees including those who are not their direct reports. Consultants can help by conducting confidential, in-depth interviews or anonymous surveys. Once the underlying dimensions have been made explicit, they can be evaluated critically, and leaders can determine which ones are detrimental and need to be changed, and which are constructive and should be perpetuated.

Changing organizational culture is a difficult, long-term endeavor, but it is possible. Leaders can influence organizational culture in three ways: 1) through the messages that they send overtly and implicitly, 2) through their own actions and behaviors, and 3) through the policies and practices that form the basis of good management. What leaders communicate and how they conduct themselves, the values their behavior models, and the behaviors of others they reward are important in making change. Killebrew (2009), for example, found that managers who showed concern for the journalists in their organizations increased journalists' satisfaction.

Organizational practices and policies shape organizational culture in profound ways. For example, if hiring practices are equitable with regard to gender and race, it sends positive signals about a newsroom's underlying beliefs and values, and those individuals, in turn, shape culture. If the people who are rewarded and promoted are respectful in their behavior, it sends a signal that these behaviors are valued. If promotions are based on merit and clearly defined criteria rather than on favoritism, the organization will be viewed as just. Organizational justice, which exists when employees perceive that organizational practices and policies are fair, deters persistent unethical behavior (Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds 2006)

Relevant training plays a role in influencing culture both by signaling what is important and by increasing the capabilities of those trained. Training in ethical leadership and management is especially important in fields like journalism in which people often are promoted because they are outstanding individual performers rather than experienced, successful managers. Like newsrooms, collegiate journalism programs focus largely on teaching students to create content. Broadening the curricula to include education on ethical leadership and management is critical to future change. Leadership and management must be appreciated and rewarded as important dimensions of news organizations, and conceptions of work must be expanded to include treating coworkers with respect and leading and managing in a manner that creates ethical workplaces.

Changing organizational culture is challenging. Moments may arise that give hope that change has occurred in an organization or profession and that there will be a new world. These moments, such as the #MeToo Movement, are important and have brought about some important changes in journalism, but more needs to be done. Bad leaders have been removed, but if their networks of complicity are not dissolved, the toxic culture will remain and bad behavior will reemerge. This is true, of course, in any organization or profession, and journalism is not unique. That said, we think our most important finding is the confounding nature of the two paradoxes that typify the journalism profession—1) the ethics paradox in which journalists have high ethical sensitivity in reporting and moral myopia to unethical behavior within newsrooms and 2) the power paradox in which journalists perceive role conflict. These paradoxes and the factors categorized as our themes make organizational change more difficult.

Much remains to be learned about newsroom culture and leadership. Our study was conducted in mainstream news organizations. More studies are needed to understand the culture, norms, management, and leadership in other types of news organizations such as start-up and nonprofit news organizations. Studies comparing the culture, norms, and leadership of news organizations with those of other industries and professions that are also undergoing major changes and disruption could also be informative (e.g., academia, advertising, and technology-based sectors). Studies of organizations—especially news organizations—that have successfully implemented change programs to halt persistent unethical behavior or avoid it altogether are urgently needed.

Journalists play a crucial role in democratic societies. Effective, ethical leadership and management and ethical workplace behavior must become defining characteristics of newsrooms and news organizations, so that a diverse group of journalists can do their best work. Democracies depend on it.

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