Ethical use of Online and Social Media in News Reporting of Thai Newsroom

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Abstract

Online and social media have transformed journalism practices, forcing newsrooms to embrace a hybrid model of news reporting. The model includes newsgathering, news distribution, and the use of user-generated content, which allows media outlets to survive in a changing news culture. This research aims to study ethical issues that result from online and social media usage in news reporting, and ways to develop ethical codes of conduct by interviewing editors and journalists. These ethical issues include verification, transparency, accuracy, and news agenda-setting. The result reveal that journalists, editors, and news producers lack guidance and tools to respond appropriately to new ethical issues when using online and social media, which are not covered by current laws and ethical codes. This research categories ethical best practices for online and social media usage in news reporting including accuracy, objectivity, balance, transparency, issues of public space versus private space, and gatekeeping and agenda-setting. The paper also suggest a way to draft effective codes of conduct for social media and online media use in news reporting by considering five frames: public responsibility, law and regulations, professional responsibility, nature of online and social media, and marketing and business. The process of drafting a code of conduct should be a cooperative effort between news organizations, professional organizations, reporters, editors, and citizen journalists in order to set the same standard on social media and online media.

Keywords: Ethic, Social Media, Online Media

Introduction

The internet has transformed the way journalism works as a result of its connectivity, unlimited space, interactive features, multimediality, and hypertextuality. These characteristics give journalists new ways to do both "speed" and "in-depth" reporting, thus expanding the field beyond traditional journalism. Deuze (2003) explains that journalists must make decisions as to which media format(s) best convey a certain story (multimediality), consider options for public response and user interaction/customization (interactivity), and explore opportunities to connect the piece to other stories, archives, and resources through hyperlinks (hypertextuality).

The rise of social media, especially twitter and facebook, in news reporting is another factor shaping journalism. Hermida (2010) states, "social media technologies like Twitter are part of a range of Internet technologies enabling the disintermediation of news and undermining the gatekeeping function of journalists." This also shifts journalism to more two-way and participatory multimedia journalism. Nip (2006) defines participatory journalism as the process of news production via public participation in both news gathering and the distribution process. The spread of technology and internet access has paved the way for any member of the general public to describe an event as it unfolds in an informative and timely manner, leading to the notion that anyone and everyone can report news. Jarvis (2006) expanded on this notion with the idea of "networked journalism," which entails the collaboration of professional and amateur journalists working together to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, and perspectives in order to produce stories.

In addition to cooperation in the news process, there is also interactivity between professionals and amateurs in the exchanging of opinions, as any member of the public is able to give feedback directly and in real-time. Online media, digital technology, and the interactivity of social media have all contributed to the paradigm shift towards participatory journalism. Biggs (2007) considers this new way of reporting a collaborative effort between journalists and audiences using via methods such as crowdsourcing and distributed reporting.

In Thailand, online and social media are popular channels through which to receive news. Thai Internet users spend an average of 50.4 hours per week, or 7.2 hours a day, online. Some 78.2% of these respondents used their device to access social media, while 57.6% used their device to read news (DJS Research Ltd, 2014). Another study shows that, among Thais, both catching up on news and searching for information were among the top three internet activities in 2014 (ETDA survey,2014). As a result, the Thai news outlets must integrate online media and social media with news production in order to reach an audience that is migrating to digital media.

News organizations in Thailand must alter their reporting process and integrate social media and online media into their workflow.
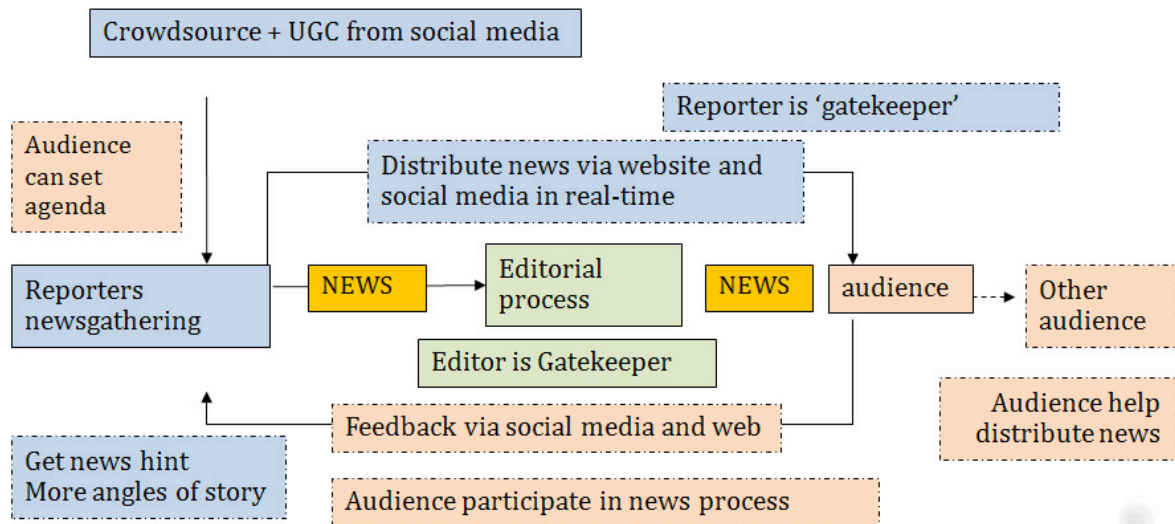
Chart 1: Social media integration in news reporting

The model above shows the relationship between journalists and their audience in the news reporting process, including the integration of online and social media into the workflow. First, communication shifts from one-way communication to two-way communication, where professionals can crowdsource information from the public and get feedback via online and social media. This relationship raises transparency questions regarding how and where journalists obtain information.

Also surfacing is the widely discussed issue of public and personal space: how journalists should balance their journalistic role with their personal beliefs when expressing opinions.

Further, due to interactivity and the speed of online and social media, journalists have to write and publish news quickly. This need for speed occasionally causes errors and fragmented information, ultimately affecting the journalist's credibility. Journalists must make decisions to report news without going through the editorial process, especially when reporting through social media. Thus, the journalist becomes the gatekeeper. This changing journalistic practice raises important questions about ethics regarding accuracy, impartiality, and the gatekeeper role.

Another issue being discussed in Thailand is the use of User Generated Content (UGC). Some journalists in Thailand have been caught using UGC without verifying the material, leading to the spread of rumors and distorted information. Moreover, sometimes UGC is used in news reports outside of its proper context. This has led to complaints of journalists neglecting the quality of their work.

This study aims to (1) examine ethical issues that arise when Thai journalists use online media and social media in news reporting, (2) to outline the best ethical practices when using online media and social media in news reporting, and (3) to develop an ethical code of conduct for online and social media for news organizations and professional associations.

Revolution in Digital Ethic

Scholars and professionals in many countries have discussed a "Revolution in Ethic," which has resulted from the integration of online media and social media into the news reporting process. News has become more immediate (due to the speed of the internet and social media) and interactive (people want to participate and interact with professionals on issues they are interested in), all while news is continuously distributed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This new ethical guideline should be implemented by both professional journalists and amateurs when reporting news across platforms.

"Revolution in Ethic" raises the most important issue, which regards speed and accuracy. Traditional media emphasizes accuracy of information with strong verification and a thorough editorial process before publishing. On the other hand, new media – online and social media – tend to focus on being first with speed reporting as well as interactive. However, speed and the interactive relationships between journalists and audience members can cause errors and biased information. Wasserman (2012) explains that the Internet has changed audience behavior and thus pushed news organizations to change how they work. He raises the issue of "standard of veracity": how journalists define truth when reporting online and the necessity of applying traditional standards of verification to new media. Ethical issues are even more notable regarding UGC. Overall, the fragmented information from various sources arriving to journalists via online media has led scholars to suggest that there should be a standard guideline on how to weigh the desire to quickly distribute news with the need to verify information.

Transparency is the process of showing people how and where journalists get their information. The rapidity and interactivity of news reporting requires journalists to be more transparent in order to establish credibility. Transparency has become more difficult due to the overload of unverified information available online.

Hermida (2009a) explains that blogs and blogging culture have challenged the accountability and transparency of journalism. Twitter presents an example of journalism sharing the role of gatekeeper between professionals, amateurs, and the general public. This forces news process to be more transparent.

What needs to be discussed is how newsrooms develop better procedures. Karlsson's research (2011) has shown that online journalism has led transparency to take precedence over objectivity when it comes to building credibility. In his previous research, Karlsson (2010) explains that there are two types of transparency; disclosure transparency and participatory transparency. Disclosure transparency entails being open to how news is produced, including issue selection, mistake correction, and sources. This transparency allows the audience to understand what shaped the news story. On the other hand, participatory transparency involves the audience's active involvement in news production, such as commenting and distribution.

Leach (2010) emphasis that credibility is the most important issue in the ethical practice of online journalism. Online media blurs the line separating personal opinion and unverified information from what journalists are reporting. Journalists can express their opinions on website and social media, but their remains a question as to

how they define impartiality. In the process of getting information from online users, journalists become gatekeepers themselves, which makes the processes by which they choose information without bias and verify that information important ethical issues.

Journalists have to act as ethical gatekeepers in the monitoring, selection, and distribution of news. The problem is that there is no guideline to help journalists make decisions as gatekeepers when they face sensitive and complex issues. Further, no guideline exists to illustrate how journalists ought to navigate the challenge of the need for speed in publishing their work.

Audience behavior centers around personalization, as they choose to consume what they are interested in. This drives newsrooms to choose between producing popular news and producing quality journalism. Scholars have also considered how the nature of online media challenges journalists to be impartial when they cover a story. (Robinson, 2007; Schudson and Anderson, 2008)

Codes of ethic on using social media and online media in news reporting serve as a crucial accountability tool. Codes of ethic of social media and online media in news reporting cover issues such as transparency, accuracy, verification, and balancing personal and professional opinions, all for the purpose of maintaining credibility and accountability of a news outlet. While individual journalists or news organizations may not consult codes or claim to make decision based on common sense, Marthews (1994) argues that ethical codes should be used to help journalists develop the right gut instinct. Whitehouse (2010) suggests that codes of ethics provide guidance across media platforms and management levels when it comes to philosophical approaches to decision making.

Ethical Issues Regarding Online and Social Media Facing Thai Media Outlets

The first part of the discussion involves journalists and editors considering ethical issues to be an important topic. Ethical issues of online and social media reporting occur during two procedures within news reporting – newsgathering & production and distribution – and these procedures affect journalism quality and the credibility of a given news organization.
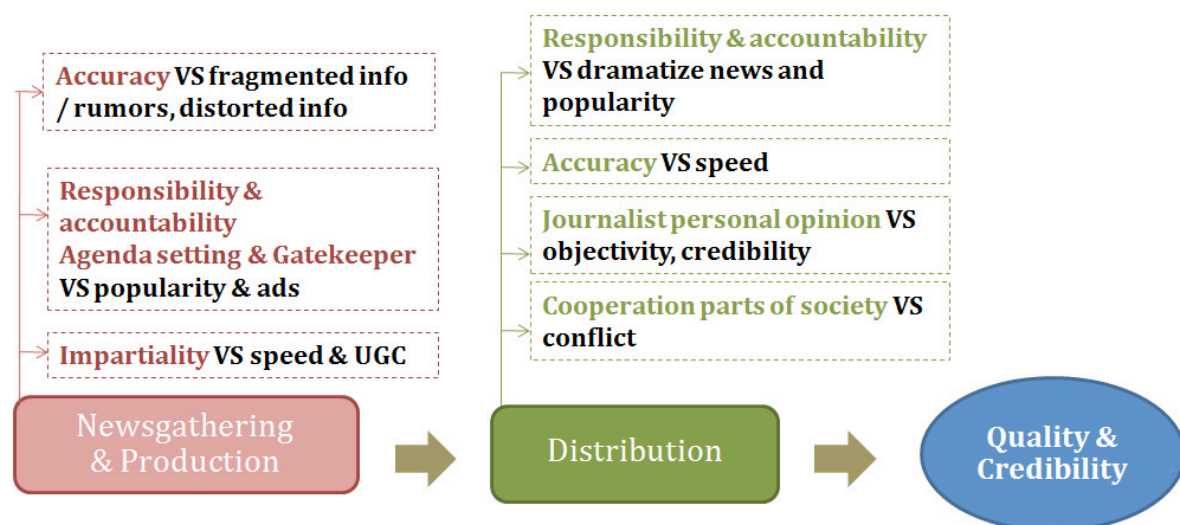

Chart 2: Ethical issues of news reporting via websites and social media

The chart 2 is categorized from data collecting during in-depth interviews. Journalists and editors involved in this study suggest that when reporting news via websites and social media, there are five main ethical issues to deal with: accuracy, responsibility and accountability as a gatekeeper, impartiality and transparency, journalists' discussing personal opinion in public spaces, and cooperation throughout society.

Accuracy Is Harder in Practice. During the process of newsgathering and production, accuracy is challenged by fragmented information, rumors, and distorted information that the journalist received via online media. Information comes quickly and from a variety of sources, necessitating that journalists put more effort into verification. However, sometimes it's difficult to verify and check thoroughly. The need for speed in digital journalism, as well as multi-platform reporting, can cause accuracy issues. For example, the reporting of the death toll in a disaster is common on social media, but is not always accurate.

The process of newsgathering and production is where journalists and editors find stories and sources, and gather information to produce news in various forms of storytelling across media. Online media highlights the two-way communication in this process, encouraging the audience to participate in many different forms, such as crowdsourcing, which builds a news community, or opening the newsroom for the audience to join the process of news gathering.

The accuracy issues concerning respondents of this study are (1) how to be accurate at information gathering from online and social media tools and (2) how to select, set an agenda, and be accurate as a gatekeeper despite fragmented information. This assumes being literate and knowing the purpose and agenda behind each piece of information being presented on websites and social media. If not, news will be inaccurate and journalism becomes a propaganda machine or a marketing tool.

Thai news organizations gather information and sources from social media and websites by monitoring what is being discussed in online communities and social network sites. Then, newsrooms report on social media buzz, sometimes adding context and explaining the phenomenon. However, verification remains the duty of journalists and editors, which occasionally proves a burden that overwhelms the capacity of the newsroom. Speed and the need to beat other news outlets or citizen journalists also pressure newsrooms to quickly check information, which sometimes results in the reporting of inaccurate information. However, Thai newsrooms have yet to install a unit responsible for checking and verifying UGC, as opposed to some overseas organizations such as the UCG Hub for BBC. Thus, accuracy during the distribution process includes correcting and verifying information, such as improving the language and correcting grammatical errors.

Responsibility and accountability as gatekeeper is at high stake when reporting news via website and social media. Gatekeeper is the process which journalists and editors select and set agenda on what to distribute to society. In Thailand, the most concerning issue is that popularity which can bring more digital advertisement leads news organization to dramatize news. Some news reporting on website caught to have no news value or impact to society, but contain human interest factors to drive traffic to website. Human interest news is violence and sexual story, which sometimes is the lead news on website and is share widely throughout social media, especially on

Facebook. Data from in-depth interview shows that news organization has to face challenge as keeper to choose between the popularity of news and ethical practice. Large number of page views on website and like and share on social media can determine the income from advertisement, which will help the media survive through the competitive market.

Impartiality and transparency is complex principle. When it downs to impartiality issue, respondents see online media and social media is a double-edged sword. Participatory journalism helps journalists getting and distributing better-rounded stories. Good plan inviting amateur to the process and using UGC brings variety of using information to construct quality news. On the other hand, nature of conversation on online and social media connect people with the same ideas, beliefs, and opinion altogether. When community built on emotional connects, discussion and expression tend to become biased or partisan. Personalization behavior also pushes people to stand on strong different point of view, without listening to others. During the political turmoil in Thailand, some journalists use social media and online space to (1) gather opinions (2) and express journalist's own opinion. The ethical issue is that some reports contain one-said opinion gathering from online communities. Some journalists express his/her opinion about conflict issue freely on social media. It leads to question of 'impartially' in news reporting. This also related to the forth ethical issue – personal opinion in public space. If do it unsuitably, the organization become incredibility.
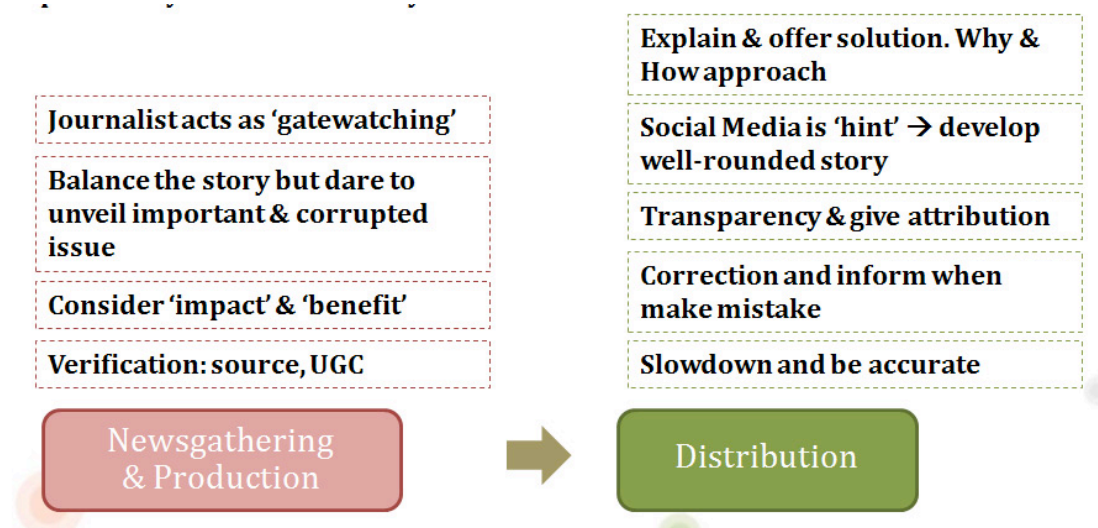
Moreover, journalists and editors interviewed in this study all agree that transparency is one of the big issues for online journalism. Information comes from many places and from new sources, journalists should make it clear where and how they get information. Citizen journalists working as a group in online platform sometimes recheck and examine what has been reported by professional to double-check truth and give some other aspect of stories.

Last ethical issue is cooperation parts of society. There are complaints by society during political conflict in Thailand that news organization can't achieve the duty of easing conflict and bridging differences in society. Some news organization has even seen to be bias and is blamed to bring more conflict in society.

Respondents aware of all the ethical issues think organizations and professional associations should find ways to tackle this issue wisely. However, respondents also see that traditional code of ethics should be applied when reporting news online. However, website and social media has different characteristics from traditional media so journalists should also make ethical decision based on understanding nature of new media. Respondents also point out that online media ethic is something new and new cases happen every day in different situation, so Thai newsroom is on the process of learning and adapting.

Best Practice

The first group of best practice is the guideline to tackle ethical issues of accuracy, gatekeeper, agenda setting, UGC, impartiality, responsibility and accountability issues.

Journalist acts as 'gatewatching'		Explain & offer solution. Why & How approach
Balance the story but dare to unveil important & corrupted issue		Social Media is 'hint' → develop well-rounded story
Consider 'impact' & 'benefit'		Transparency & give attribution
Verification: source, UGC		Correction and inform when make mistake
		Slowdown and be accurate
Newsgathering & Production	→	**Distribution**

In the process of newsgathering and news production, there are four best practices journalists can follow to avoid being unethical in professional practice. First is the change of gatekeeper role to 'gatewatching'. This means that journalists shouldn't just act to select and distribute selective information, but should also monitor what happening closely from online community by using social media tools. Then, gathering verified information and offer what people want to know and should know by giving context and presenting more than one angle in story.

Gatekeeper and agenda setting needs to stick to 'news value' even more than it used to be in order to separate between news to make money from news to make a better society. Newsroom should install guideline on how to pick up stories from social media and how to develop content around the buzz topic of social media. There should be guideline on how professionals can give better explanation to human interest topics. Journalists accept that news organization can't resist on reporting stories which generate large page views on website. Respondents of this study suggest news organizations to use 'impact approach', which means news desks weigh story from how it impacts society as a whole. This approach can help when journalist needs to make decision between dramatization news and quality news, and between benefit of the public and income of the organization. One journalist suggests that news selection should be consider by the timeliness and should be the story reporters cover it himself. This means journalists can get hints of story from online and social media but should dig deeper in to story by using traditional style of journalism to gather information, verify and produce news. Information or UGC from internet can be part of the coverage but not the main elements.

Journalists and editors emphasis that professionals must act as 'explainer' to give context to story and explain why and how story happens. Journalists should extend the value of story by explaining, giving variety aspects of stories, and having more than two sides of opinion and information in story. This practice will build dimension of story and it create credibility for newsroom.

Best practice on remain accuracy both in newsgathering and distribution process, the key is 'verification'.

Issues	Best practice
Sources	Before choosing sources from online or social media, journalists should follow them to see how the persons communicate and check timeline history to weigh whether the person is credible. Journalists should find tools and method to benefit from interactivity nature of social media by cooperate verified people and sources to news process.
Verification	Obtaining information from bias sources, journalist should monitor to get sense of what is going on and verify information with other sources. Always check with reporter on location before believe in information online. Newsroom should install process and technology to help verify information.
Distribution	-always check information before distribute and give attribution and credit. -find context and expand story in many angles -story need to be published quickly should be later update with context. If story break online is incomplete, journalists should inform audience and when story is updated, audience should be informed again. -be careful on language usage. Headline should be attractive but presents fact, not opinion. -do not shorter or summarize to change meaning on Twitter. Use words wisely that don't fuel tension, emotion, conflict, which can lead to misunderstand.
User-generated content (UGC)	-Unverified UGC can be used only as a hint to story but do not include in report. -Rely on information from only citizen journalists who are really at the location of incident, and should be able to verify. -Always check UGC with expert or official. -Newsroom should establish team working especially on gathering and verifying UGC
Correction	-correct any mistake as soon as journalist can. If mistake happen on twitter and the information is already retweeted, journalists should mention to inform people about the correct information. When correcting information on twitter journalist should indicate 'correction' in tweet so people know. -correction made on website should be informed to the public so they click on the link again to read correct story.

Table 1: Best practice for accuracy when reporting news via website and social media

Toward 'impartiality and transparency', the best practice is implementing in news reporting include: (1) be impartial when distributing news by giving space for both side of conflict. (2) State clearly that this is 'personal' or 'opinion' when expressing opinion or adding personal information to report via social media. (3) Journalist can analyze or criticize about news issues based on fact and information, not personal bias. (4) Balancing the story but dare to unveil important & corrupted issue.

Journalists also suggest that impartiality' should be redefined because media consumption and media landscape has changed. Also during time of political conflict,

Thai society needs journalists to stand up and dare to take side on public interest by investigating and exposing truth. Journalists should balance between exposing corrupted activities and journalistic impartiality role. However, impartiality isn't about staying in comfort zone but it is courage to take side of the public.

Best practice on journalist expressing personal opinion on social media. Most of the journalists said that journalist shouldn't be partial toward issues because it will affect objectivity and credibility in the long run. The rule is journalist should not be partisans or be activists for causes or political movements. Moreover one should not reject the idea of objective or neutral analysis. 'Impartiality is long-term credibility'. Thus, one should indicate and separate clearly between 'fact' and 'personal opinion' if journalist want to express something on topics. Organization policy should be clear on how to express oneself on social media. However, further debate on this issue is needed to be discussed about official account and journalist branding on social media.

Cooperation parts of society and role of journalism to ease conflict and bridge society together is important thing to emphasis in Thailand. Respondents suggest that journalists should avoid 'hate speech' and embrace transparency, act as gatekeeper to verify issues and don't fall for rumors and distorted information. Journalists must dig deep into story and report verified information in more than one angle. Balance in news report is needed so give opportunity for all stakeholders to speak. Most of all, journalists should stick to 'fact', not taking side or join the conflict with personal belief, and always respect people right, freedom and privacy.

Code of Ethic Guideline Development

This study also further discuss with journalists, editors and officials from professional association on code of ethic when reporting news via website and social media. In Thailand, there are some existing codes and guidelines develop in the past 4-5 years when social media become an important tools and web news become popular channels for Thais to consume news.

Ethical issues	Already stated in professional guidelines	Suggestion to add-on and develop guideline
Accuracy	Verification	How to & decision making guideline
Gatekeeper	Follow traditional ethic code	Guideline on decision
Transparency	Attribution, always identify oneself and organization	Technique
Impartiality	Follow traditional ethic code	Define 'impartiality' in vary situation & decision making guideline
Personal VS Public Space	Information presented online is regulated by laws	Identify what kind of 'personal expression' is ethically appropriated
Cooperate parts of society & ease conflict	Avoid delivering messages that rise tension and conflict	How to report news in conflict situation
User-generate content in news report	Attribution, copyright and privacy	Develop verification method

Table 2: existing code of ethic and suggestion to develop new codes

Data in table 2 suggests that overall existing codes of reporting news via website and social media cover ethical issue in general ideas. There are some issues – gatekeeper and impartiality – still hasn't had specific guideline that suitable for adaptation in online journalism. Journalists and editors answered during interview that they hasn't yet rely much on the codes and guideline because it can't give them clear picture on how to make decision. From the operation point of view, codes and guideline should be more practical, well-respond to the true nature of online media. It should state some case study as examples and also need to revisit and redefine some value of journalism.

This study, therefore, suggest the framework to develop codes of ethic and guideline for news reporting via website and social media:
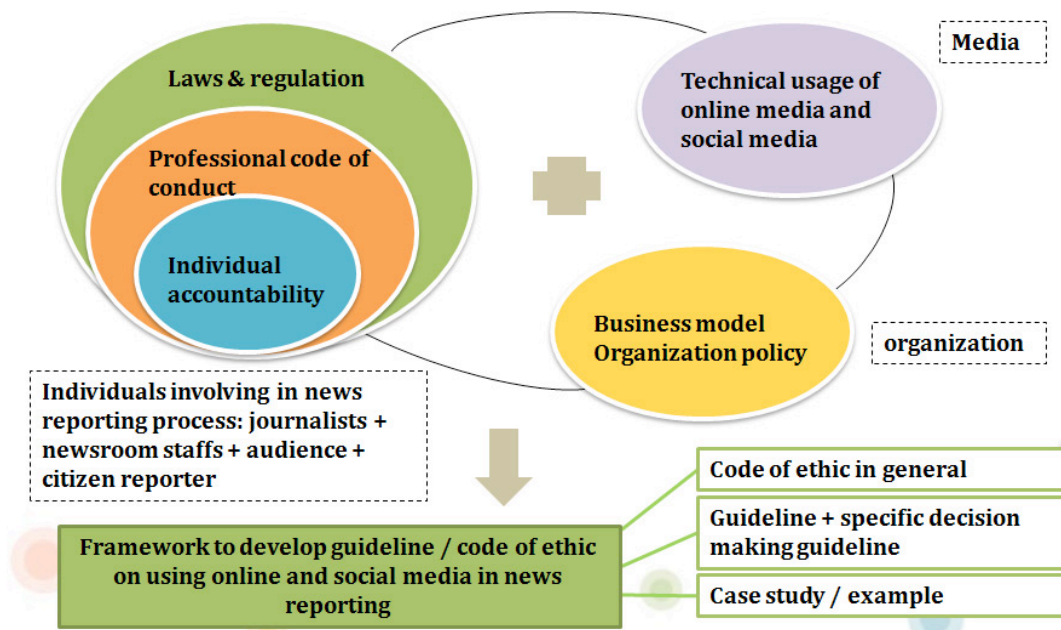
Chart 3: Framework to develop code of ethic for online and social media news reporting

When drafting practical-based code of ethic and guideline, there are three areas need to be studied–individuals involving in news reporting process (journalists, newsroom staffs, audience, citizen reporter), media aspect to understand technical usage of online media and social media, and organization business model and policy. Traditional code of conduct, individual accountability, as well as, laws and regulation are method of self-regulation which can adapt or develop to match online media environment. Technical usage need to be stated in the guideline to give ideas of how to react to ethical issue relate to media technique. Last, business model and organization policies are different. If organization wants to draft the guideline for newsroom staffs, balance between ethic principle and business model should be identified and clearly stated in the codes. Thus, information needed to include in the code of ethic and guideline are: (1) code of ethic in general (2) guideline and specific decision making guideline and (3) case study and example.

However, code of ethic and guideline of news reporting via website and social media is necessary to be undated and reviewed frequently. To make code more up to date as possible will help practically guide newsroom and effective self-regulate journalism professional to stay ethical.

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