

Ethics in the Age of Networks: A Study on *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32* and Their Impact on the Audience

Ética en la era de las redes sociales: estudio sobre *La Hora Loja* y *Hora32* y su impacto en la audiencia

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ABSTRACT

Digital journalism, while offering a new interactive and participatory dimension, presents significant ethical challenges that impact the core values of the journalistic profession in Ecuador. This study analyzed two local media outlets, *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32*, to identify the ethical principles guiding their live content and its impact on the audience. Using a mixed-methods design, the research incorporated a content analysis matrix of 415 Facebook

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Live broadcasts, along with surveys and interviews with 383 respondents. The results show that both outlets demonstrate a strong ethical commitment, a practice that is reflected in the positive reception from the Loja community. The study concludes that there is a pressing need for ethical codes and enforceable regulations to ensure quality and transparency in digital journalism, ultimately protecting audiences and guaranteeing a responsible and truthful press.

KEYWORDS

Digital journalism, ethical practices, digital environments, real-time content, live broadcasts

RESUMEN

El periodismo digital, si bien ofrece una nueva dimensión interactiva y participativa, presenta importantes desafíos éticos que impactan los valores fundamentales de la profesión periodística en Ecuador. Este estudio analizó dos medios locales, *La Hora Loja* y *Hora32*, para identificar los principios éticos que rigen su contenido en vivo y su impacto en la audiencia. Mediante un diseño de métodos mixtos, la investigación incorporó una matriz de análisis de contenido de 415 transmisiones de Facebook Live, junto con encuestas y entrevistas a 383 encuestados. Los resultados muestran que ambos medios demuestran un sólido compromiso ético, una práctica que se refleja en la recepción positiva de la comunidad lojana. El estudio concluye que existe una necesidad apremiante de códigos éticos y regulaciones aplicables para garantizar la calidad y la transparencia en el periodismo digital, lo que protege en última instancia a las audiencias y garantiza una prensa responsable y veraz.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Periodismo digital, prácticas éticas, entornos digitales, contenidos en tiempo real, transmisiones en vivo

Introduction

The digital ecosystem has profoundly reshaped journalism, broadening its formats and reach through interactive tools and smart devices that enable real-time news production and transmission (Chaudhary et al., 2025). These developments have ushered in a new communicative

era that, while offering immediacy and active public participation, also presents serious challenges to traditional ethical principles such as truthfulness, impartiality, and social responsibility.

Social media and other digital platforms are essential to this new model. They provide a space in which audiences not only consume content, but actively participate in and shape the flow of information within a hyperconnected environment. The range of formats for creating and distributing information includes various options, among them the now widely used real-time broadcasts, or «live streams.» This tool is heavily used in journalism as a contemporary way of reporting directly from the scene, well adapted to the transformations of the modern media landscape (Albornoz and Luján, 2020; Gonzales García, 2024).

Indeed, most social networks used by media organizations offer built-in support for producing real-time content through streaming applications. Audiences consuming such content can interact through comments, reactions, and shares. However, the race to be first and the intense competition for attention have placed ethical rigor under pressure, prompting questions about digital journalism's continued commitment to its foundational values (López, 2008; Espinoza Guanilo, 2024; Salaverría, 2019).

This research responds to the following guiding question: Does ethics persist in digital journalism during real-time news coverage, where immediacy plays a pivotal role?

Multiple studies have addressed this dilemma. Aguilar (2023), for example, argues for the creation of specific regulations to protect the integrity of information, while Gutiérrez (2019) points out that many digital outlets lack even basic ethical standards, exposing journalism to criticism for superficiality and irresponsibility. In light of these challenges, this research focuses on the digital media outlets based in Loja: *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32*. The study examines the application of ethical principles in the production of live content, given the growing relevance of these formats in today's news environment.

The study's objectives are to: (1) identify the ethical principles and professional standards that guide journalistic work in these outlets, (2) describe the practices used during live coverage, and (3) evaluate audience perceptions regarding the truthfulness and reliability of the information. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines interviews, observation matrices, and surveys, this research aims to deepen our understanding of ethical practices in digital journalism and their implications for public trust and credibility in an age defined by speed and universal access to information.

Methodology

This study follows a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach. The initial quantitative phase consisted of a descriptive-comparative cross-sectional design to analyze digital content and survey public perception. The subsequent qualitative phase included interviews to delve deeper into the findings of the quantitative data (Hernández et al., 2014). Conducted in the city of Loja, Ecuador, the research seeks to explore relationships between variables and provide an integral view of the phenomenon. It combines qualitative and quantitative techniques and is grounded in the observation of content dissemination platforms, including the websites and social media pages of the two selected media outlets. The goal is to assess the quality of published content, its impact on the audience, and its adherence to ethical principles.

The methodological techniques include web observation, surveys, and interviews. Observation focuses on analyzing the outlets' websites and social media pages to identify the presence and nature of ethical policies and to assess the quality of real-time content (Santín-Picoita, 2024; Fierro-Erique, 2024). The quantitative instruments included a structured questionnaire and an observation matrix. The questionnaire, administered digitally using Google Forms, consisted of 14 closed-ended questions, including multiple-choice questions and a 5-point Likert scale to measure audience perceptions of content quality and ethical compliance. The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide with 10 open-ended questions, designed to explore journalists' ethical principles in their professional practice.

TABLE 1. Ethical Categories

Category Type	Ethical Indicators
Truthfulness	Source, Accuracy, Context, Diversity of Sources, Transparency, Corrections, Follow-up, Censorship
Impartiality	Objectivity
Responsibility	Accountability
Respect	Human Dignity, Privacy, Sensitivity

The target population consisted of the inhabitants of the Loja canton, estimated at 100,271 people according to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), including subscribers and followers of the selected media outlets. The study employed a dual sampling strategy. For content analysis, convenience sampling was used, selecting all digital content published by the two media outlets, *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32*,

during a specific period (January to March 2025). This was because the research focused on a specific set of media outlets that could not be generalized. For the survey, probability simple random sampling was used to ensure that the results were generalizable to the population of Loja, calculated based on a population proportion of $p = 0.5$ and $q = 0.5$, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a final sample size of 383 individuals.

The survey questionnaire and observation matrix were validated through expert judgment by three academic researchers specializing in communication and journalism. Their feedback was used to refine the instruments before administration. Survey reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.85, indicating good internal consistency.

Ethics Committee

Although this study was not subject to review by an institutional Ethics Committee, fundamental ethical principles for research involving human subjects were rigorously adopted. Thus, the procedures were carried out in compliance with ethical standards consistent with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were duly informed about the objectives of the study, the use of their testimonies, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. To protect their privacy, personal data was treated with strict confidentiality, and the interviews were anonymized during the analysis and writing process. The information collected was used exclusively for academic and publication purposes, respecting the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of the participants at all times.

Results and Expert Panel

Through observational techniques, the study identified the digital platforms with the highest frequency of real-time content. It was found that both *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32* primarily use social media—especially Facebook—as their main platform for live content broadcasting, positioning it as the favored channel for disseminating information.

TABLE 2. Number of Real-Time Broadcasts by Platform

Digital Platform	<i>La Hora Loja</i>	<i>Hora32</i>
Corporate Website	0	0
Facebook	217	198
Instagram	2	1
X (formerly Twitter)	0	0
TikTok	0	0

Note. Information collected using the observation log as part of the study methodology.

Once the primary platform for real-time content was identified, each media piece was individually analyzed.

TABLE 3. Ethical Principles and Practices in *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32*

Ethical Practice	<i>La Hora Loja</i>	<i>Hora32</i>
Accuracy	217 (100%)	198 (100%)
Source	217 (100%)	198 (100%)
Context	204 (94%)	182 (92%)
Objectivity	217 (100%)	198 (100%)
Diversity	217 (100%)	52 (26%)
Transparency	217 (100%)	198 (100%)
Corrections	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Follow-up	180 (83%)	46 (23%)
Privacy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Sensitivity	217 (100%)	198 (100%)
Image Ethics	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Note. Information collected using the observation log as part of the study methodology.

Both outlets demonstrate full commitment to accuracy and sourcing, each reaching 100 percent. *La Hora Loja* showed a slightly higher level of contextual reporting at 94 percent, compared to *Hora32*'s 92 percent. Both scored 100 percent in objectivity and transparency, signaling balanced coverage. However, *La Hora Loja* demonstrated superior diversity (100 percent) by incorporating multiple perspectives on reported topics, while *Hora32* scored just 26 percent due to its more limited interview-based format.

In terms of responsibility, neither outlet recorded corrections or managed privacy issues. *La Hora Loja* showed stronger follow-up (83

percent) compared to *Hora32* (23 percent). Both demonstrated sensitivity (100 percent), ensuring their content respects the dignity and rights of individuals. The category of image ethics was not applicable as participants in the live broadcasts gave prior consent to appear on screen.

Additionally, expert interviews revealed common ground on the need for validating real-time information, using multiple sources, and ethically managing sensitive material.

Expert Panel

Fabrizio Vela. Ecuadorian journalist with over 20 years of experience. Director of *A Primera Hora* on Radio Armónica, co-founder of *Primera Plana*, and former producer, writer, and anchor at TC Televisión.

Rubén Darío Buitrón. Award-winning journalist, storyteller, and poet with a master's degree in journalism. Former editor of major national newspapers, founder of *Loscronistas.net*, director of *La Otra Mirada*, columnist at *Plan V*, and author of 12 books.

Sandra Machuca. Journalist from Zamora Chinchipe. Former correspondent for RTS and Ecuador TV, with experience at Radio La Voz de Zamora. She served as communications head for the Zamora governorate and is the founder of *Estrategia Z*.

TABLE 4. Summary of Expert Responses

Topic	Fabrizio Vela	Rubén Darío Buitrón	Sandra Machuca
Concept of Ethics	Ethics is universal. It includes truth and verification to help the public think critically.	Ethics is personal, developed at home, not guaranteed by regulations.	Ethics is essential to personal and professional credibility.
Ethics in Digital Journalism	There are both ethical and unethical outlets; lack of regulation enables misinformation.	Same ethical standards apply to digital and traditional journalism.	Ethics is inconsistent; some pages serve specific interests.
Guaranteeing Ethics in Live Reporting	Validate sources and present multiple perspectives.	Depends on the preparation of the coverage team.	Most content is ethical, but it depends on the interviewee.
Verifying Real-Time Information	Continuous validation, even during broadcasts.	Reporting must be based on data; sharing information without it is unethical.	Prior analysis and source selection are essential.
Detecting False Sources	Check multiple sources and their history.	Emphasize data and corroborate with various sources.	Verify before coverage.

Context in Real-Time Coverage	Context is crucial to avoid misinterpretation.	Context is needed to explain the setting of events.	Adds credibility and completeness to the report.
Managing Sensitive Content	Sensitive stories must be handled with great care.	Respect dignity, inform with facts, and avoid sensationalism.	Differentiate news from sensationalism; platforms help moderate explicit content.
Accuracy in Reporting	Acknowledge and correct errors during broadcasts.	Learn from experienced peers; maintain editorial filters.	Apologize and correct mistakes in the same space they occurred.
Source Privacy	Legally protected; identity can be withheld.	Always ask permission; avoid invasive practices.	Difficult to guarantee during live reporting; act as intermediary.
Coverage of Developing Stories	Media must complete the story to maintain credibility.	«Developing news» is an excuse for lack of facts.	Confirm information despite challenges in investigative journalism.
Responsibility in Live Coverage	Shared between journalist and outlet; journalist is the visible face.	Responsibility lies with the media outlet; director is the main filter.	Mostly the journalist's responsibility to cross-check information on-site.
Key Ethical Challenges	Polarization has harmed credibility; we must return to basic ethical standards.	The main challenge is seeking truth, not exclusivity.	Improve journalist training and avoid compromising ethics when working with sources.

Note. Information collected through journalist interviews.

Journalist Interviews and Survey Results

The following summary tables (Tables 5 and 6) consolidate responses from journalists at the two media outlets studied. To ensure objectivity and protect anonymity, the researchers used coded initials. PHL refers to *Periodista La Hora* and PH32 to *Periodista Hora32*.

TABLE 5. Summary of Responses: *La Hora Loja* Journalists

Topic	PHL1	PHL2
Concept of Ethics	Values that honor the outlet's editorial line and respect for individual rights.	Personal and professional integrity; verify information to maintain objectivity.
Ethics in Digital Journalism	Depends on the journalist's responsibility and alignment with outlet ethics.	Many digital outlets lack ethics, though established ones follow a clear ethical code.

Guaranteeing Ethics	Training, teamwork, and internal communication.	Use of multiple sources, images, and accurate data.
Verifying Information	Preliminary investigation, listening, and comparing sources.	Field verification through direct sourcing.
Avoiding Fake News	Internal communication, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration with other media.	Emphasize cross-checking information.
Importance of Context	Clear, concise, and visual information showing setting and sources.	Be prepared with precise, corroborated data before broadcasting.
Reducing Sensitivity Risks	Respect human rights and avoid graphic images.	Professional and editorial training to avoid sensationalist headlines.
Managing Accuracy Live	Use terms like «approximately» to clarify uncertain data.	Correct errors and issue apologies.
Privacy of Sources	Ask before recording to minimize risks.	Avoid compromising visuals and obtain consent.
Developing Story Coverage	Recap evolving information.	Publish basic information first, then follow up with details.
Responsibility in Live Coverage	Outlet takes responsibility for minor errors.	Responsibility is shared between journalist and outlet.
Ethical Challenges	Ensure truthfulness, distinguish relevant news, and humanize reporting.	Avoid plagiarism; content must be original and credible.

TABLE 6. Summary of Responses: *Hora32* Journalists

Topic	PH32.1	PH32.2
Concept of Ethics	Honesty and adherence to legal and moral standards.	Academic ethics rooted in journalism education.
Ethics in Digital Journalism	Difficult to maintain ethics due to amateur content creators.	Ethics have eroded due to poor professional practices in the digital boom.
Guaranteeing Ethics	Experience, professional training, and acknowledging mistakes.	Use of ethical manuals, objective coverage, and rejection of sensationalism.
Verifying Information	Listen to the community and verify through multiple sources.	Consistent source cross-checking.
Avoiding Fake News	Check other portals, preferably official ones.	Validate rumors through corroborated sourcing.
Importance of Context	Provide quality information that educates.	Context builds credibility and acceptance.
Reducing Sensitivity Risks	Avoid graphic images; use appropriate language.	Avoid sensationalism and apply style and ethics guidelines.

Managing Accuracy Live	Recognize and correct errors; digital tools allow quick fixes.	Acknowledge and amend mistakes.
Privacy of Sources	Avoid showing faces or sensitive data.	Use blurring tools and prevent live identification.
Developing Story Coverage	Assign, develop, and verify content before publishing.	Publish objectively and invite further exploration.
Responsibility in Live Coverage	Responsibility lies with the outlet as a whole.	Shared responsibility.
Ethical Challenges	Verification and technological adaptation.	Maintain honest, responsible journalism and support marginalized groups.

Note. Information collected through journalist interviews.

A self-administered survey was completed by 383 residents of Loja canton. The researcher did not intervene in the survey process. Results are presented in Tables 7 to 9 and Table 11.

TABLE 7. Respondent Gender

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	199	52%
Female	174	45.4%
Other	10	2.6%

Note. Data gathered via structured survey.

TABLE 8. Survey Questions by Indicator

Question	Yes	No	Sometimes
Do you consume real-time content from media?	65.8%	8.6%	25.6%
Is the information in real-time content ethical?	56.7%	12.5%	30.8%
Do media verify information before live coverage?	59.8%	9.4%	30.8%
Do media provide appropriate context in real-time content?	61.1%	7.3%	31.6%
Is information in live content accurate?	55.9%	9.7%	34.5%
Are real-time broadcasts transparent?	56.7%	9.9%	33.4%
Is sensitivity maintained during tragic news coverage?	50.9%	16.7%	32.4%
Is privacy/image respected during live coverage?	40.7%	17.8%	41.5%

Note. Data gathered via structured survey.

The data show that 65.8% of respondents consume live content from the two media outlets. Of those, 56.7% believe that the content is framed ethically, and 59.8% state that information is adequately verified. Additionally, 61.1% feel context is sufficiently provided, while 55.9%

perceive the information as accurate. Transparency is recognized by 56.7%, privacy by 40.7%, and sensitivity by 50.9%.

TABLE 9. Frequency-Based Indicators (Likert Scale)

Question	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
How often do you consume this type of content?	20.6%	28.7%	26.6%	21.1%	2.9%
Have you seen official sources cited in real-time news?	19.8%	27.2%	34.2%	17.0%	1.8%
Have you noticed political or ideological bias in live content?	18.5%	23.8%	16.4%	33.7%	7.6%

Note. Data gathered via structured survey.

Frequent engagement with live content was confirmed by 49.3% of respondents (either very frequently or frequently). Another 47.7% engage occasionally or rarely, and only 2.9% do not engage at all.

Regarding official sourcing, 34.2% observed frequent citation of official data, although 18% claimed this happens rarely or never. Perceived political or ideological bias was reported by just 33.7% of respondents.

Likert Ratings

TABLE 10. Importance Ratings (Likert Scale)

Question	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Slightly Important	Not Important
As a news consumer, how important is it to you that the media quickly correct any error in live reporting?	56.9%	30.8%	8.9%	3.4%
Is it important to you that the media take responsibility for the information they share in real-time?	58.0%	28.2%	11.2%	2.6%

Note. Data collected using the structured survey instrument.

56.9% of respondents consider it very important that the media promptly correct errors, reflecting strong expectations for accuracy and reliability in journalism. An additional 30.8% regard this as somewhat important, while 12.3% assign little or no importance. Furthermore, 58% believe it is very important that media outlets assume responsibility for their real-time reporting, while 28.2% see this as somewhat important, and 13.8% assign low or no importance.

TABLE 11. Ethical Principles Recognized by Audiences in *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32*

Ethical Principle	Percentage	Respondents (n=383)
Truthfulness	32.9%	126
Impartiality	26.9%	103
Transparency	26.1%	100
Responsibility	21.9%	84
All equally important	0.5%	2

Note. Data collected using the structured survey instrument.

Truthfulness was prioritized by 32.9% of respondents. Impartiality and transparency followed closely at 26.9% and 26.1%, respectively. Responsibility was highlighted by 21.9%, while 0.5% (2 respondents) considered all principles equally important.

Discussion

Data confirm that Facebook is the most widely used platform for creating and distributing live content. Its intuitive Facebook Live interface provides a dedicated section for live video and integrates features that enable immediate notifications to followers when a broadcast begins.

Data from our study confirms that Facebook is the most widely used platform for creating and distributing live content. The evidence gathered shows that both *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32* maintain a strong commitment to ethical values and journalistic codes. *La Hora Loja* slightly leads in publication volume, with 9% more live broadcasts than its counterpart. Both outlets demonstrate notable engagement with truthfulness, impartiality, and transparency, as seen in audience participation and follow-up practices. This finding contrasts with those of Aguilar and Vargas (2023), who analyzed ethical compliance at *La Posta* and the application of Ecuador's Organic Communication Law, finding little adherence to ethical standards.

Media professionals have a duty to report using ethically sound and morally responsible processes. The uncertainty facing journalism today often arises from competitive pressures. As Buitrón argues, «There is no such thing as a developing story. It's a mask for missing data. The scoop is journalism's greatest ethical failure» (Buitrón, 2024).

In a fast-paced media environment, one core principle—truthfulness—is at risk when information is not cross-verified with credible sources. This raises ongoing questions about the presence of ethics in digital journalism, particularly in formats defined by immediacy like live streaming. Journalists at both outlets note that digital journalism, lacking regulatory

oversight, often sacrifices ethics due to the ease of publishing via social platforms. Therefore, evaluating the professionalism and credibility of both personnel and content is essential.

Audiences also play a vital role in holding media accountable. Survey results indicate that 65.8% of respondents regularly consume live content and 56.7% believe both outlets adhere to ethical principles, suggesting minimal interference from private interests.

These findings contrast with those of Aguilar and Vargas (2023), who analyzed ethical compliance at *La Posta* and the application of Ecuador's Organic Communication Law. Their research found little adherence to ethical standards such as truth, impartiality, and responsibility. Private interests often outweighed public service, and digital self-regulation was insufficient. Nonetheless, both studies agree on the urgent need to establish ethics-specific regulations for digital journalism.

While this study focused on live broadcasts, future research could explore other digital formats to develop a more comprehensive understanding of ethics in contemporary journalism.

Conclusions

Journalistic ethics remain a guiding principle in the local digital media outlets analyzed, although they face challenges derived from immediacy and a lack of regulation. Ethics in journalism—whether traditional or digital—remains rooted in universal principles that must guide all professional practice. Although the profession has evolved and adapted to a new digital environment for content production and dissemination, journalists must stay true to the ethical values that uphold truth, responsibility, and respect for the audience.

In a communication landscape dominated by immediacy and massive access, ethical values must not be abandoned. *La Hora Loja* and *Hora32* stand out for their ethical handling of information, a commitment recognized by their local audience in Loja. Public trust depends on transparency and responsible journalism, especially in a context of rapid technological change and information overload.

Social media platforms like Facebook are critical for reaching audiences, thanks to their ease of use and large follower bases. However, the veracity and ethical quality of all content shared in digital spaces must always be guaranteed.

There is an urgent need to establish ethical codes and enforceable regulations that ensure quality and transparency in digital journalism. These measures must aim to protect audiences from unethical practices

and uphold responsible journalism whose fundamental purpose is to inform truthfully.

Journalists and editors must engage in continuous training to meet the challenges of the digital environment. Ongoing education in ethics and emerging technologies is key to preserving professional standards and adapting to new platforms. To strengthen the bond between media outlets and their audiences, feedback channels should be created that allow the public to share concerns and suggestions, fostering trust and generating insights for improving journalism.

Ultimately, guaranteeing transparency in digital journalism is essential with ongoing training, regulation, and citizen participation being principles of journalistic ethics. Media portals that publish and abide by their own ethical codes can establish a robust framework that ensures the reliability, accuracy, and responsibility of the information they provide, thus honoring the public's right to access high-quality information.

Contribución de autoría

Cynthia-Yamileth Calva-Ortiz participó en las fases de conceptualización, curación de datos, investigación, metodología, redacción del borrador original, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

Franklin-Gustavo Santín-Picoita participó en las fases de conceptualización, curación de datos, análisis de datos, investigación, metodología y redacción del borrador original.

Eduardo-Fabio Henríquez-Mendoza participó en las fases de curación de datos, análisis de datos, investigación, metodología, validación, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

Walter-Federico Gadea-Aiello participó en las fases de metodología, supervisión, validación, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

María del Mar Rodríguez Rosell participó en las fases de metodología, supervisión, validación, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

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