

UNETHICALITY WITHIN THE EGYPTIAN MEDIA

Heba Alhamarna¹

Hala Harb²

^{1,2}American University in Dubai

*corresponding author: sora_yosra@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the unethicality of the Egyptian media in its response by analyzing two cases, including that of an opposing report by Guardian reporter Ruth Michaelson discussing the surging numbers of Covid cases undocumented by the Egyptian Government, as well as a video by a citizen journalist exposing the death of four Covid patients in El Husseineya Central Hospital due to lack of oxygenation. This study aims to examine the responsive coverage to the cases about general ethical analysis approaches in media, including the Potter box with regards to numerous scholars such as Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill. The analysis showed a lack of ethicality within the Egyptian media as they aimed to blur and conceal the truth behind pretenses and create rigid laws prohibiting journalistic freedom. The study also concluded that in both cases presented; the reporting parties presented ethical arguments. Simultaneously, the government and pro-government media outlets were deemed unethical due to their persistence in presenting the public with false reports despite being exposed through numerous incidents and witnesses.

Keywords: Egypt, Media, Ethical, Aristotle, Bentham and Mill, Egyptian Government, The Guardian, El Husseineya Central Hospital , Coronavirus

INTRODUCTION

As of the beginning of March 2020, on March 11 specifically, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 to be more than a public and global health concern, but rather a pandemic (“Archived: WHO timeline,” 2020). According to the WHO, Covid-19 is defined as an “infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus” (“Coronavirus”). The rise of a pandemic has altered the lives of nearly everyone on this planet. It has also impacted and disrupted the conditions on which countries were on, ruining their economies and forcing them into lockdown states. Amidst all the mayhem of the pandemic, the media scene has become even more of a center of attention as people remain in anticipation of news on the topic every

second of the day. Journalists are required to battle the war against false information, a deadly virus, as well as the need to deliver content under the constant pressure to perform under rigid, unknown circumstances. The dilemma in Egypt was no different from other countries. According to the Reporters Without Borders 2020 Press Freedom Index, Egypt has been oppressing its media for years, causing it to rank 166th out of 180 countries, showing little to no freedom to the journalists functioning within its borders and under its tyranny ("Egypt Arrests Journalist," 2020). Many journalists have suffered bitter consequences as a result of the publication of their daily reports regarding the country's control over the spreading virus. Some have lost their jobs or been imprisoned in Covid-infested prisons (Raghavan, 2020). In extreme cases, some lost their lives; more fortunate ones were merely exiled out of the country, and under no circumstances would they return (Raghavan, 2020). This study aims to analyze and provide a review of the unethical coverage of the Egyptian media in terms of an opposing report by the Guardian of the surging numbers of the case of Covid, as well as discussing the ethicality of a video filmed by a citizen journalist, which questioned the Egyptian media; this is through the analysis of the reports and the content of the video.

The Events' Explanations

Along with numerous other countries, Egypt aimed to create a utopia in which "the situation was under control," as Egypt's tourism minister, Khaled El-Enany, stated (Salem, 2020). The government presented their main consensus on the pandemic in Egypt as nothing to worry about, according to the words of Egypt's health minister, Hala Zayed, who "warned Egyptians not to exaggerate the problem" (Salem, 2020). According to Safi, in last year's Committee to Protect Journalists' annual, 26 reporters were detained in the country, and most had been prosecuted in groups on charges of terrorism and reporting false news (2020). To the Egyptian government, journalists are considered spreaders of panic (Michaelson, 2020 a). The situation included the Egyptian government enforcing a new "emergency" law that has criminalized spreading 'false news' about the disease (Michaelson, 2020 a). The law includes allowing for the arrests of "anyone contradicting state Covid-19 news, arrested critical doctors, and muzzled journalists" (Raghavan, 2020).

Case 1:

On the same spectrum, The Guardian journalist Ruth Michaelson was forced to leave Egypt by the authorities (Safi, 2020). This was after Michaelson covered a scientific study conducted by the University of Toronto, a trusted source, that insinuated that Egypt had more cases of coronavirus than suggested by the authorities (Safi, 2020). Michaelson was forced to leave the country as she was accused of 'misreporting an unreliable study and spreading panic.' The Middle Eastern Monitor reported the Egyptian authorities shut down the local office of the Guardian newspaper on March

17, as well as revoking Michaelson's press accreditation as "Egyptian officials demanded the story be retracted or that the Guardian publish an official apology" ("Egypt Shuts Guardian," 2020; Safi, 2020). The Guardian offered the Egyptian authorities the chance to write a letter for publication rebutting its report or the Canadian study but received no response to the offer (Safi, 2020). The study at the time estimated that in early March, the likely size of the outbreak was between 6,270 and 45,070 cases, with a median of 19,310 (Michaelson, 2020 a). According to her article, the scientists used data when the number of cases confirmed by the Egyptian government officials was "just three Covid-19 cases" (Michaelson, 2020 b). However, the number of cases in Egypt since March 1 and March 15, the day the article was published, ranged from 2 cases to 110 cases, with the only day confirming 3 cases being March 5, 2020 (Roser et al., 2020).

Case 2:

In a more recent case, a video recorded and posted on social media by Egyptian citizen Ahmed Mamdouh on the third of January claimed the lives of four patients in the intensive care unit of the quarantine section at Husseinia Central Hospital. The incident was attributed to a shortage of oxygenation in Egypt. The video was later shared by numerous media outlets, including state-owned televisions, Al Jazeera, The Middle East Eye, BBC, and others (El-Naggar, 2021). Mamdouh is being investigated regarding his aims, whether they were a cry for help or intended to tarnish Egypt's image and horrifying citizens (Egypt Today Staff, 2021). Government officials, including the ministry of health, issued a statement confirming that four patients had died at El Husseinia Central Hospital, stating, "they died at different times; most of them were elderly people with chronic illnesses who suffered from complications as a result of their infection with the coronavirus, which led to the deterioration of their health and their death." However, two witnesses told The New York Times that they "objected to the official narrative and described a moment of panic among hospital staff members that was followed by the sudden death of a number of patients" (El-Naggar, 2021).

ETHICAL ANALYSIS

The cases are of ethical importance due to their controversial content as they are opposing views, causing riots within the public and social media platforms (Salem, 2020). The views will be analyzed using the theories of Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill, as well as other ethical ideas presented within the Potter Box.

Case 1:

In order to begin assessing the cases within the Potter box, one must first observe the facts presented. The report published by Michaelson accusing Egypt of dishonesty regarding the number of Covid cases led to her immediate exile by the Egyptian government, the shutting down of the Guardian office in Cairo, and backlash from Egyptian media outlets as well as accusations by the government (Safi,

2020).

In terms of assessing the values, Michaelson's values and ethicality are in question due to the lack of a clear answer on the intentions behind running such an article. However, it can be concluded from her work that she favored her professional values, i.e., presenting and seeking the truth, providing the public with information which is deemed their right to know; specifically, in attempts to motivate the government and force the creation of transparency between the authorities and the Egyptian public, as well as aiming for accuracy. The State Information Services challenged the accuracy of the work as they claimed she "had relied on unreliable sources, instead of seeking the official reliable sources" ("Egypt Shuts Guardian," 2020). In fact, the article she referred to was by a widely accepted publication, thus refuting their claims ("Egypt Shuts Guardian," 2020). The values of the Egyptian media in response to her article are those of professional, patriotic, and legal. However, their approach to the values was to oppress information and only present Egyptian citizens with information the government believes is appropriate, thus, eradicating the idea of "right to know" and "need to know" as the citizens are also struggling with the consequences of the pandemic. The Egyptian, pro-government media claimed numerous times to be a transparent source yet resorted to extreme measures, unnecessary ones if they were "transparent," such as arresting and jailing journalists and doctors who opposed their views as well as setting up a hotline to prevent the spreading of 'rumors' (Abdelaziz, 2020).

Upon viewing the ethicality through the ethical approaches, Aristotle's 'moral mean' states, journalists should seek to be virtuous and avoid both defective and excessive practices (Dickson, 2009). Aristotle's argument in being a virtuous person within the media justifies The Guardian's journalist Ruth Michaelson, who wrote her article with empirical evidence as she cited a study accepted for publication in the *Lancet Infectious Diseases* journal. Upon reviewing the article, the content proved to focus upon cruise ships departing Egypt and the lack of compatibility between the cases leaving Egypt and those reported within Egypt. Michaelson's ethicality is derived from the inclusivity within her work, providing statements from the Egyptian Prime minister saying, 'we announce everything with complete transparency.' Michaelson also attempted to defend the low number of reported cases in her article by justifying, "Egypt has an overwhelmingly young population, meaning that fewer people will display serious symptoms of Covid-19," thus proving her article ethical as verified by Aristotle's 'golden mean' approach. Michaelson did not participate in cowardness or fear of reporting against the preexisting information but rather in a courageous yet careful approach.

Nonetheless, the unethicity lies within the response to her article by the Egyptian media in which they accused Michaelson of attempting to cause an uproar in the Egyptian streets (“Egyptian Minister of Media,” 2020). Here the media’s reaction is questioning the ethicality of Michaelson through attacking her intentions. However, in this case, the Egyptian media and authority-driven outlets are the ones unethical due to their lack of transparency and numerous attempts to cover up the real numbers of infected people as citizens began speaking out on social media, forcing the government to “cease manipulating its data remains to be seen” (Salem, 2020). Considering Aristotle’s virtue of ethics, the reports published by the government, reinforced by pro-government outlets, would be unethical due to their extreme direction and lack of ‘good character’ as they are not aiming to achieve eudaimonia but instead shamelessly falsifying facts.

Furthermore, Bentham and Mill, whose theory stated that “the consequences of actions are the key to assessing whether they are ethical,” would argue the consequences of Michaelson’s article are deemed ethical as they are aimed towards the benefit of the general public and spreading awareness regarding information that is vital at the moment (Patterson et al., 2019). Mill promotes the greater good and presents a sense of utilitarianism. Michaelson’s actions may not provide immediate or instant gratification, and happiness amongst citizens as the response to the release of an article such as hers was met with the denial at first; however, it later presented a form of utilitarianism as citizens become able to publicly share and increase awareness on the matter despite the government’s efforts to dispute them. Once reviewing the consequences of the actions by the government, such as forcing Michaelson to leave the country, shutting down the Guardian office, and revoking her press accreditation, it is immediately noticeable that neither Bentham nor Mill would label these acts as ethical as they do not hold the most significant amount of pleasure for the biggest number of people. By removing Michaelson from her position, the authorities harmed the people as they lost the only Guardian reporter in Egypt. Allowing her to keep her position would have been the lesser evil despite her opinions opposing the government and pro-government media outlets.

Michaelson’s Loyalties within this case are not limited to one as the content of her article shows she believes in humane loyalties such as communicating honestly and truthfully with all while also putting forth her loyalties that arise from her professional practice such as fulfilling the informational mission of the media, and understanding her audience’s needs, in this case, the needs being access to new information regarding the global pandemic. Finally, the loyalties arising from her role as a contributing factor to the media includes serving as a mirror of society and as a voice for the voiceless who were suffering from Covid but could not confess due to

governmental restrictions as well as the voiceless doctors and journalists who were arrested for attempting to raise their voices. The Egyptian media and government have in mind other loyalties considering the matter. Their loyalties lie in spreading a message of propaganda under false pretenses to maintain a sense of control over the citizens. Another loyalty they have in mind is their financial benefits as medical equipment is costly and considering Egypt's situation, which is further explained in the second case, demonstrates their lack of structure and financial ability and establishment to foster thousands and millions of infected citizens. In this situation, Egypt is considered to share responsibility as they failed to reliably justify their professional opinion as there may be just one journalist that recognizes their responsibility as a professional. In contrast, the others are merely loyal to their paychecks.

Thus, it is viewable that the potter box classifies Michaelson's article and actions as undeniably ethical as clarified; However, the response in which "Egyptian media affiliated with the regime has attacked foreign media, labeling its news as false and misguided when their reports contradicted official denials" is unethical and does not abide by the media ethics (Abdelaziz, 2020).

Case 2:

In the video case, the facts would include the video being published on social media by a citizen whose aunt was in El Husseineya Central hospital at the time, and the content of the video claims four patients were dead due to lack of oxygenation (Middle East Eye, 2021). Various media outlets reshared the video itself. Egypt has launched an investigation regarding the deaths. The assessment of its ethicality relies on the lack of censorship and regulation when resharing the video as well as the rigid response and misinformation again by the Egyptian government and their respective pro-government channels that allow the sharing of such content.

Government officials questioned the values of the video as the true intentions of the video may be biased considering the aims were unclear on purpose was to tarnish the Egyptian reputation on social media platforms and spread mayhem or as a genuine call for action by the authorities and the viewing public (Egypt Today Staff, 2021). Mamdouh, the man who took the video, despite being a citizen and not a professional journalist, still upheld professional journalistic values in his video as he filmed it as an attempt to spread the truth about the medical attention Covid patients were receiving in Egypt. Another professional value presented is the element of transparency, as the video aims to eradicate the barrier between the lies spread by the pro-government media, government officials, and the truth. His video also focuses on the public's right to know and need to know yet violates specific ethical

values such as those of a person's right to privacy as footage does showcase the faces of the deceased. The video also lacks accuracy as the media remains unsure whether or not the cause of death was due to lack of oxygen as the government provides a narrative while eyewitnesses provide an opposing one. While the ministry has opened an investigation, researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Ayman Sabae, states, "maybe there is no oxygen shortage, but then again the body that has been conducting the investigation is the ministry, which is also managing the hospitals, which is a reason for skepticism. There is a problem of credibility" (El-Naggar, 2021).

According to Aristotle and his ethical approach, Mamdouh presented great courageousness in his choice to film the situation as he sought to apply the golden mean, implying that all their individual acts are connected (Patterson et al., 2019). Mamdouh's ethicality is supported by the pure intentions and sound characteristics which Aristotle advocated. On the other hand, the Egyptian media and the government presented a great deal of cowardness and shamelessness in attempting to cover up the incident as "when the video of El Husseineya Central Hospital emerged, the response amounted to telling Egyptians not to believe what they saw" (El-Naggar & Yousur Al-Hlou, 2021). The government took another action apparently in response to the video, prohibiting visitors from bringing their phones to hospitals as they are "now required to leave their phones at the door" (El-Naggar & Yousur Al-Hlou, 2021). Such action is dubbed unethical by Aristotle as it would not provide a sense of eudaimonia.

Bentham and Mill would argue that the act of sharing the video, while unpleasant for the general public to view due to its explicit nature and the face of one dead victim is showing at 0:56, remains a positive act with good consequences as it raised awareness on various platforms including Twitter in which users widely shared an image of a nurse in the Intensive Care Unit that was "squatting on the floor in shock" causing the viewers "to express their anger and dismay," her image can be seen at 1:31 (Middle East Eye, 2021). The intentions of Mamdouh spreading the video were in place, and as a citizen journalist, in this case, he can not be prosecuted for his actions, dubbing them as ethical under the circumstances. However, it is the media outlets who carelessly shared the video without any blurring or censorship on the deceased's face, as it can be argued for as an invasion of privacy. It is also the lack of ethicality by pro-government media outlets that labeled the video as an attempt to cause panic and riots in public and denied the narrative presented in the video despite the presence of eyewitnesses who say otherwise. A New York Times investigator also found the result of the investigation tracing back to an oxygen shortage as "the medical experts who analyzed the video, including six doctors in the

United States and Egypt, spotted details that support the finding of an oxygen failure” (El-Naggar & Yousur Al-Hlou, 2021). This leads to the breach of journalism ethics as the Egyptian media outlets supported the government’s narrative, using deception and denying citizens of their “right to know.” Their lack of ethicality stems from the harsh consequences they presented, which oppose Bentham and Mill’s utilitarian approach as they are not seeking the happiness of the greater good but enraging them through frivolous attempts in deceiving them.

The loyalties presented in this video include loyalty to provide the public with the information necessary and serve as examples of open institutions where truth is required, much like in Egypt where any piece of information on Covid is essential information, foster open discussion and debate amongst viewers as they incorporate the media into their own lives, serve as a voice for the voiceless sufferers within the hospitals, and serve as a mirror of the society that society will not hold. Much like in the first case, The Egyptian media’s loyalties prioritize their organization and their country’s reputation through spreading a message of false accusations, false figures, and false pretenses to provide a sense of control and grasp over the citizens. Another loyalty is their economic interests as medical equipment is costly. Considering Egypt’s situation in which providing oxygen supply is a common problem in public hospitals, doctors struggle to provide a sense of stability to their patients as the government will not acknowledge their existence.

Concluding that while the circumstances are not ideal, Mamdouh’s footage is found to be ethical in the sense that it provides the Egyptian public with insight classified as a “need to know.” Nonetheless, the ethicality lies in the hands of media outlets who shared the video without blurring the face of the victim as well as the actions of the government and their respective media as they attempted to bluntly and unethically deceive the public rather than ethically controlling the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, this study firstly depicts and analyzes the media’s coverage on two different cases in which the Egyptian media attempted to oppress the truth, yet it prevailed. The study approaches the case of a Guardian reporter, Ruth Michaelson, who was forced to leave Egypt after reporting statistics on Covid cases that do not coincide with numbers reported by Egyptian media and government outlets. The study also tackles the case of Ahmed Mamdouh, a citizen who shared a video of four deaths in El Husseineya Central Hospital, which were due to the lack of government’s care within their citizens. The study analyzes the ethicality of the cases using the general ethical analysis guidelines and approaches presented by various scholars. The study concludes that in both cases, the reporter and the citizen were ethical, and it was the government and pro-government media outlets who were unethical due to

their insistence on providing the public with false information despite being exposed through numerous incidents and witnesses. The study recommends that media outlets that support the government beware of following a biased representation of the truth that is only reported by higher authorities as overseas news outlets such as The New York Times are investigating and aiming to provide a neutral platform where news can be free of manipulation, and the truth can be presented without the temperament. It is pivotal to highlight the coverage of Covid incidences, similar to the ones selected in the research, have been occurring ever since the pandemic started, and the Egyptian media remains to perform unethical coverage, undermining the real values of the Covid cases. The study hopes that it shed light on the matter, getting it the truthful media coverage it deserves.

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