

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS IN COVERING HYBRID WARS IN THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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Hybrid warfare, which integrates military and non-military instruments such as disinformation, cyber operations, psychological influence, and economic pressure, has significantly transformed the global media landscape. In such conditions, journalism becomes not only a source of information but also a strategic element of information confrontation. This article examines the ethical dimensions of journalistic practice in reporting hybrid wars, focusing on verification standards, propaganda resistance, digital platform influence, and the tension between public interest and national security. The study argues that modern journalism requires strengthened ethical frameworks and digital competencies to prevent manipulation and maintain informational integrity.

**Introduction.** The concept of hybrid warfare has gained prominence in the 21st century due to the increasing complexity of global conflicts. Unlike traditional wars that rely primarily on military force, hybrid warfare combines multiple instruments of power, including cyberattacks, political destabilization, economic coercion, and large-scale information manipulation. Within this context, the media environment becomes a critical battleground. Journalists are no longer passive observers of conflict; they are active participants in shaping public perception. The speed of digital communication, combined with the rise of social media platforms, has intensified the spread of information—both accurate and deliberately misleading. As a result, journalistic ethics has become a central issue in ensuring the reliability of information during hybrid conflicts. Ethical violations or failures in verification can lead to escalation of tensions, misinformation cascades, and manipulation of public opinion at both domestic and international levels.

Hybrid warfare has become one of the most characteristic features of contemporary global conflicts, where military actions are combined with non-military instruments such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, psychological operations, and economic pressure.

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In such conditions, the media environment transforms into an active battlefield, where information itself becomes a strategic weapon. Journalism, which traditionally serves as a mediator between events and the public, now plays a much more complex role, as it not only reports events but also influences perceptions, narratives, and even political processes. Therefore, journalistic ethics in reporting hybrid wars has become a critically important academic and practical issue in modern media studies.

Hybrid warfare is defined by the integration of multiple tools of influence aimed at destabilizing opponents and shaping public opinion. Unlike conventional warfare, hybrid strategies rely heavily on information manipulation and narrative control. In this context, media platforms—especially digital and social networks—become primary channels for spreading both factual and manipulated content.<sup>98</sup> The speed and accessibility of digital communication significantly increase the risk of misinformation, making it difficult for journalists to distinguish between verified facts and intentionally constructed false narratives. As a result, the responsibility of journalists increases, requiring stronger ethical standards and more advanced verification practices.

One of the most significant ethical challenges in reporting hybrid wars is the verification of information. In conflict situations, sources may be biased, politically motivated, or deliberately misleading. Journalists often work under time pressure, especially in the digital news cycle, where speed is highly valued. However, prioritizing speed over accuracy can lead to the spread of disinformation, which may further escalate conflicts or distort public understanding.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, ethical journalism requires strict adherence to verification procedures, including cross-checking multiple independent sources and critically evaluating the credibility of information providers.

Another important ethical issue is the problem of propaganda. Hybrid warfare frequently involves coordinated propaganda campaigns designed to influence public opinion both domestically and internationally. Journalists may unintentionally become instruments of such campaigns if they reproduce unverified or one-sided narratives. This creates a serious ethical responsibility to identify potential propaganda sources, analyze their motivations, and ensure balanced reporting. Objectivity in this context does not simply mean neutrality but also the ability to critically assess information and provide contextualized reporting.

The issue of objectivity is closely related to the need for contextual truth. In hybrid warfare environments, isolated facts can easily be manipulated if they are presented without proper background information.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, journalists must ensure that their reports include sufficient geopolitical, historical, and social context to prevent misinterpretation.

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<sup>98</sup> McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage Publications.

<sup>99</sup> Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*. Council of Europe.

<sup>100</sup> Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

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This approach strengthens informational integrity and reduces the risk of narrative distortion.

Source protection is another key ethical dimension in reporting hybrid conflicts. Journalists often rely on confidential informants who may face significant risks if their identities are exposed. In hybrid warfare conditions, such risks are even higher due to political repression, cyber surveillance, and potential physical harm. Ethical journalism therefore requires strict protection of sources, secure communication methods, and careful consideration of the consequences of publication.

A further ethical dilemma arises between national security and the public right to information. While transparency is a fundamental principle of journalism, publishing sensitive information may endanger lives or compromise security operations. Journalists must carefully evaluate the potential consequences of disclosure and balance public interest with possible harm. This requires not only professional judgment but also adherence to ethical codes and editorial standards. Digital media platforms have significantly transformed the nature of hybrid warfare and journalistic practice. Social networks such as X (Twitter), Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube allow rapid dissemination of information without traditional editorial control.<sup>101</sup> This environment facilitates the spread of misinformation, especially through automated bots, fake accounts, and algorithm-driven content amplification. Additionally, the rise of citizen journalism has blurred the boundaries between professional reporting and user-generated content, making ethical regulation more complex and challenging.

In response to these challenges, several ethical principles become essential for journalists reporting on hybrid wars. First, accuracy must always take priority over speed. Second, transparency regarding sources and uncertainty must be maintained. Third, journalists must preserve independence from political or ideological influence. Fourth, accountability requires that errors are corrected openly and promptly. Fifth, reporting must include adequate contextualization to prevent misinterpretation. Finally, digital literacy has become a necessary professional skill, enabling journalists to recognize algorithmic manipulation, deepfakes, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.<sup>102</sup>

**In conclusion**, journalistic ethics in reporting hybrid wars is a fundamental component of modern media practice. Hybrid warfare transforms information into a strategic instrument, placing journalists in a highly sensitive and complex environment. In such conditions, ethical journalism serves as a protective mechanism against manipulation and misinformation. Strengthening ethical standards, improving verification processes, and enhancing digital competencies are essential steps to ensure that journalism continues to function as a reliable source of truth and a stabilizing force in society.

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<sup>101</sup> Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model. RAND Corporation.

<sup>102</sup> Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236.

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