

This is a first draft of this text and I would very much appreciate feedback foremost on the theoretical framework and on the analysis. Thank you!

Challenges to Visual Journalism Ethics Imperiled by AI

1. Introduction

Leading technology companies have warned that photo-realistic deepfakes that easily deceive citizens are their greatest concern with artificial intelligence (AI), as they pose a risk of undermining people's trust in real images, exacerbating the challenge of distinguishing between genuine and fabricated images. This potentially creates a broad distrust in all types of imagery, including those produced by legacy media, which impacts photojournalism practices and, thus, affects the future of democracy.

This paper identifies key determinants influencing how Swedish legacy news media view the ethics of utilizing AI technology in their in-house image production in the early stages of this technology in relation to the concept of authenticity and establishes some points of contention between the application of in-house generated AI media, such as audio, video or still images and the journalism Code of Ethics and the Rules of Professional Conduct (Medieombudsmannen, n.d.). Most previous research has focused on journalism practices which have been extensively scrutinized (Birrer & Just, 2024; Pitluk et al., 2025). The methodology used are semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 Swedish journalists from all major legacy news media outlets. And the theoretical framework is based on the relationship between theoretical ethics and applied journalistic ethics, as the ethical guides serve as the foundation for the legacy media's norms and values in shaping the professional standards of journalism and visual journalism and its established Code of Ethics (Medieombudsmannen, n.d.).

The opportunities created by AI have been embraced by Swedish legacy media as Swedes are often early adopters of new technology (Internetstiftelsen, n.d.). Most news outlets publish multi-media journalism on their websites and use AI in their production processes; however, the privately owned Swedish broadcaster TV4 has taken the technology one step further and utilized an AI speaker voice for their online news series on the American election *US-rapporten 2024* (TV4 Play, 2024; Lindström, 2024), which differs from using an AI-tool for editing or streamlining production. The public service media (PSM) Swedish Television (SVT) has also utilized an AI-generated speaker voice in their documentary *Clock – Socialist Burgers Inc.* (SVT Play, 2025b) and AI visuals to simulate court trials in *The Trial with Jens Lapidus* (SVT Play, 2025a).

This actualizes the discussion on the ethical boundaries of using AI-technology and its consequences. When combining words whether written or spoken with images, the meaning of what is then communicated is greater than each part (Newton, 2020), which brings to the forefront the discussion on the role of AI-generated audio and virtual images versus a human voice and lens-based images (Barrett, 2021) in the context of news and documentaries. Photography has never been truly objective even though that is an intent of photojournalism (Åker, 2012), yet, AI-generated visuals has more patently shifted the playing field from the principles of objectivity to authenticity (Enli, 2015).

Thus, the aim of this study is: To identify key determinants influencing how Swedish legacy news media view the ethics of utilizing AI technology in their in-house image production in the early stages of this technology in relation to the concept of authenticity.

RQ1: What ethical and procedural prerequisites needs to be met when integrating in-house AI-generated audio and visual content into journalistic and documentary production?

RQ2: What editorial and organizational measures are implemented to ensure ethical compliance in the use of in-house AI-generated audio and visual content in journalism and documentary production?

RQ3: What are the ethical, professional, and societal implications of using in-house AI-generated audio and visual content in journalistic and documentary production?

2. The foundations of AI ethics in visual journalism

This section of the paper will provide a brief background and discuss relevant terminology as there is limited research on how AI impacts visual journalism, largely due to what scholars call a “scholarly ambivalence” towards visuals (Nilsson & Hege Simonsen, 2025:11). Media accountability operates through four forces: policy, professionalism, public discourse, and market forces (von Krogh & Svensson, 2019). These shape journalism ethics and affect how legacy media integrate AI technologies while striving to maintain credibility in visual and image-based reporting. Algorithmic journalism raises concerns about a growing digital divide, especially in under-resourced newsrooms that struggle to keep up with AI advancements (Beckett, 2019), particularly in visual journalism where many photo departments have been downsized (Paik et al, 2023).

One of the major assets of visual journalism is transparency and without it, journalism struggles to keep its credibility. Yet, transparency does not only concern the use of AI technology but also journalistic practices and labelling of genres (Svenska fotografers förbund, n.d; Nordic AI Journalism and Utgivarna, 2024). The rise of visual disinformation, particularly through AI-generated imagery, is creating widespread distrust in visual media, including legitimate photojournalism. Chesney and Citron (2019) argue this erosion of trust threatens democratic values, as the public may begin to question the authenticity of all images. Visual journalism, due to its immediacy and emotional impact, is especially vulnerable. As Newton (2020) notes, people often accept visuals as truth without question, blurring the line between reality and fiction. Studies like Paik et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of transparency and caution when using AI-generated images, as they can distort audience perceptions and compromise journalistic integrity. Not all news images are photojournalism; many are genre or illustrative images used to attract readers. Kędra (2016) classifies different types of news images such as documentary photography, news photography, and genre images, each requiring distinct ethical considerations. This is a potential problem, as many viewers lack the visual literacy (Thomson, 2024) to distinguish between authentic and synthetic visuals, which complicates ethical standards. Visual literacy becomes essential—not just for audiences, but also for journalists who may lack photojournalism training, as Newton (2020) insists that everyone involved in visual journalism shares responsibility for maintaining visual truth. Scholars like Hausken (2024) advocate for using terms like “photorealism” rather than “photography” when discussing AI-generated imagery to elevate discourse around visual ethics and preserve the credibility of photojournalism.

2.1 The Swedish model—theoretical and applied ethics

The ethical discussions in Sweden go back to the onset of mass media and the establishment of the professional Code of Ethics in 1923 (Medieombudsmannen, n.d). The Swedish media organizations have established the *Code of Ethics for Press, Radio and Television in Sweden*, in which the paragraphs that are relevant from the perspective of AI-technology are “4. Check the authenticity of pictures. See to it that pictures and graphical illustrations are correct and are not used in a misleading way.” And the following section which the clarifying headline “Exercise care in the use of pictures”, and then: “11. Whenever appropriate, these rules also apply to pictures” and “12. “Montage, electronic retouch and captions should be handled in such a way as not to mislead or deceive the reader.

Whenever a picture has been altered through montage or retouch this should be stated. This also applies to such material when it is filed in picture libraries.” The Rules of professional conduct according to the Swedish Union of Journalists states: “9. Do not falsify interviews or images; 11. Show due respect when on photographic assignments and when obtaining pictures, especially in connection with accidents and crimes; 12. Respect copyright rules regarding text, images and sound; 13. State the source when an account is based largely on someone else’s information.”

The Swedish fundamental laws the Freedom of the Press Act and the Freedom of Expression Act provide the media a broad scope to publish (Rantakrans, 2024), and the code of ethics provide journalists with guidelines for how to protect individuals beyond these laws while conducting ethical journalism. It is guarded by a voluntary self-disciplinary system that is organized by the four major press organizations and the four major broadcasting companies, to which most legacy media outlets belong and is overseen by the Swedish Media Council and the Media ombudsman (Medieombudsmannen, n.d.). There is also the Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority which oversees that broadcasting companies adhere to the broadcasting laws and regulations regarding factuality and fairness as stated in their broadcasting permits (Medieombudsmannen, n.d.). The ethical guidelines align with international code of ethics and general journalism ethics. Ethics for photojournalism have the same foundation and is a set of guidelines for everyday work (Barrett, 2021) such as those listed by Medieombudsmannen (n.d.), the SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.), SFF (Svenska fotografers förbund, n.d), or the NPPA (National Press Photographers Association).

3. Theoretical framework–journalism ethics

Against this background, the theoretical framework for this study is based on the relationship between theoretical ethics and applied journalistic ethics (Santos Silva & Eldridge II, 2020; Fox & Saunders, 2020), as the autonomy and neutrality of a free press in a democracy is based on Mill’s theory of utilitarianism that is pivotal for journalism ethics (Christians, 2007).

3.1 Moral responsibility

In Swedish newsrooms reporters and multi-journalists have vast autonomy and although assignments are designated, each reporter works independently on their own news stories (Westlund & Ekström, 2020). Although, the news editor is involved in the news-making process, the moral responsibility based on virtue ethics are generally placed on the individual reporter or photojournalist, even when a journalist prompts synthetic AI-images or oversees robot journalism though other actors are involved (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017; Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Ward, 2020). With the rise of algorithmic journalism, the individual journalist becomes less influential while the media organization and the overall system gain ethical influence (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017). In the end, the decision of what gets published is a managerial one.

According to Wiik (2024:21), journalism management is the determining factor of successful implementation of AI tools for journalism ethics, diversity, and credibility, as the journalistic values along with practices that form routines are the hallmarks of professional journalism (Usher, 2014; Tuchman, 1978). The responsibility for what is published in Swedish mass media lies with the publisher and not with the individual journalist and is regulated in the Freedom of the Press Act and the Freedom of Expression Act (Utgivarna, n.d.). Thus, individual journalists cannot be held accountable legally for their journalism, and the ultimate responsibility always lies with the publisher who oftentimes is the editor-in-chief. The system focuses on virtue ethics that guards several norms in

journalism such as truth, fairness, and respect. The professionalization of a reporter is to achieve fairness in their reporting, according to a virtue ethics perspective. This can be either objective or subjective depending on the ideology of the reporter. It also depends on if virtue ethics is applied to the theory of consequential neutrality or to social responsibility, though it most often is applied to social responsibility theory (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019). Routines and credible sources are also examples of ethical journalism and epistemic dissonance potentially undermines the authority of news journalism and its authenticity contract with the audience or readers (Ekström et al., 2021; Enli, 2015).

3.2 Social responsibility

Among Swedish journalists, the social responsibility theory is most common (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019; van Dalen, 2020), which prioritizes fairness, relevance, and respect, over truth and objectivity. Thus, Bentham's and Mill's thoughts on press freedom as opposed to responsibility are a contention in journalism ethics and the concept of objectivity becomes problematic, as according to Mill, the aim is for good measures to benefit as many as possible. For example, a reporter acting socially responsible would abstain from reporting if they thought the truth would cause greater injustices, whereas, a reporter acting consequentially neutral would think that reporting the facts would be justified regardless of consequences (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019). Instead, those arguing for a global journalism ethics emphasize social responsibility and human rights, which can be seen in for example, war reporting and climate change reporting (Christians, 2005; Ward, 2020).

The concepts of truthfulness, accuracy, and objectivity in journalism are thus under scrutiny (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Santos Silva & Eldridge II, 2020; Fox & Saunders, 2020). While objectivity has traditionally been a standard, critics argue for more nuanced values like fairness, transparency, and thoroughness (Meyers, 2020; Deuze, 2005; Figdor, 2020). This is part of the concept of "balanced" reporting by making neutral news stories where journalism acts as watchdog and weighs the facts. And, which goes beyond "accurate" reporting that is merely interviewing opposing sides in a conflict where arguments may appear equally valid though they are not, and the responsibility of interpreting the arguments is left to the audience. However, algorithms have a built-in bias that results in stereotyping and continued discrimination of minorities due to existing flawed material that AI is trained on (Broussard et al., 2019; Broussard, 2023). Journalism's duty to uphold this social contract is, according to Sjøvaag (2010), reciprocal with its audiences by the understanding "with regard to its expectations of balanced rights and obligations within the democratic order" and as the fourth estate.

3.3 Consequential neutrality

Swedish PSM enjoys the highest trust from the public and local newspapers are not far behind (Westerlund, 2024), as autonomy enables the news media to hold power to account when reporting truth (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022). According to the theory of consequential neutrality, publishing news to enlighten the public despite compromising the privacy of a few, is preferable to suppressing knowledge that would reduce enlightenment in society (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019). However, neutrality is not necessarily compatible with Kant's categorical imperative. Therefore, according to consequential neutrality theory, the reporter does not own the truth but only reports it neutrally (Christians 2007). Consequential neutrality that prioritizes truth and relevance, is based on Kant's theory of deontological ethics of acting truthful in ways that is generalizable (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019). Thus, the news has to be factually true, and the perspective of consequential neutrality stresses objectivity, relevance and fairness. According to Christians (2007), in

journalism ethics Kant's duty ethics compensate for the perceived weakness in Mill's utilitarianism where quantitative outcome is more important than qualitative. However, according to consequentialist ethics, being transparent with the news outlet's ideology or bias such as in political reporting, can be combined with Mill's argument for truth, only if multiple perspectives are taken into consideration as if there is only one perspective presented the truth criteria fails (Hammarlin & Wigort Yngvesson, 2019).

4. Methodology

The design of this study adopts a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews with 21 Swedish journalists from legacy media newsrooms. This method is selected as it is the most advantageous based on the research questions for this study. The interviewees hold positions at various levels in news organizations for the study to get a slice of Swedish journalism. They were selected with a strategic selection on a national, regional, and local level in PSM Swedish Television and Swedish Radio, a private broadcaster, and newspapers belonging to all the major news corporations and organizations in Sweden as a most-different-case selection. The interviews were conducted between June 2024 and February 2025 and they were granted anonymity according to standard research practice (Swedish Research Council, n.d.). Of the 21 interviewees five were editors-in-chief, four held the position of photo editors, seven were editors, and five were reporters, and whereof 14 were male and seven female. The media types were represented in the following categories: there were two agencies; seven national news media including tabloids, broadsheets, and broadcasters; three regional news media consisting of broadsheets; and nine local news outlets consisting of broadsheets and local broadcasters, including PSM (Appendix 1).

The interviews were conducted as one hour video-call interviews in Swedish that were recorded and then transcribed and translated into English. The interview guide reflects the code of ethics and the interview questions were based on the Code of Ethics and the Rules of Professional Conduct (Medieombudsmannen, n.d) in order to reflect the compliance and contentions within journalism ethics and practices. Of special interest were questions that relate to the paragraphs listed above in these documents in the Code of Ethics: §4, §11, §12; and in the Rules of Professional Conduct: §9, §11, §12, §13, as they deal with visual journalism and authenticity, truthfulness, carefulness, transparency, respect, and copyright. In the analysis, the themes in the interviewees' answers were then identified and thematized abductively as they are based on the articles in the Code of Ethics and the Rules of Professional Conduct along with the themes found in the material, which has been a process in tandem with the theoretical framework. The final stage of the analysis was then to systematize the various themes found in the interview material and categorize them into broader categories that were identified as: prerequisites, measures, and consequences of ethics that facilitated answering the research questions.

5. Results

The findings and analysis of this study is organized according to the categories identified as: prerequisites, measures, and implications of ethics. The newsrooms where the interviewees are employed, have most of them experimented with AI-generated in-house visual or audio materials. Most of them do not publish it, though others do but with claims of strict adherence to their AI-policy. The first research question to be addressed is the ethical and procedural prerequisites that needs to be met. *(So far, only the prerequisites are discussed, though, the measures and implications will be discussed in the same manner.)*

5.1 Prerequisites for ethical measures

Most newsrooms have experimented with generating AI visuals as genre images that resemble drawings or sketches and some have even experimented with photorealistic images. It is often encouraged by management but not demanded, yet, the technical enthusiasts are ahead and those less interested in AI technology are left behind.

5.1.2 Bias, copyright, and visual literacy

The themes of bias, copyright and visual literacy were identified as prerequisites for applying ethical AI visuals according to journalism ethics. Despite adhering to the social responsibility theory many interviewees have not considered built-in bias in the technology notwithstanding ample discussions (Broussard, 2023). However, most who prompt AI visuals are aware of such bias and actively work with it and prompt in ways that minimizes it by being very specific and refining the prompts as they usually need the AI-generated image for a specific purpose. Those who already actively cover minorities show a greater awareness of bias in AI than others. Thus, AI does not cause bias but the algorithms risk amplifying it, which is in accordance with Broussard's research (2023). Since AI-models are trained on existing material online, thus all the flaws in contemporary society are replicated. One interviewee noted that it takes several refined attempts to get an AI-generated genre image that works with a story. For example, a prompt of a nurse caught stealing medication generated a stereotype image of a female nurse robbing someone with a gun. The prompts needed to be reworked and finetuned. This example also pinpoints the issue of visual literacy and visual training as interviewees with visual competency made more profound reflections on the issue as a prerequisite for ethical visual journalism (Thomson, 2024), since AI interprets concepts in very specific cultural ways:

“One obvious thing that we have often seen has been that if we ask AI to make a picture of a carpenter it often turns out to be a man. If we ask AI to make a nurse, it almost always turns out to be a woman. In that situation, it is partly about the news story but also about giving clear instructions. [...] But I think that when it comes to images, there is a bigger problem. [AI] reads things into the concepts that we use like a nurse caught stealing medication.” L8

Another interviewee framed another ethical bias dilemma of AI technology when she points out that AI generates images based on history while journalism attempts to look to the future, a feature that is inherent in the technology:

“AI is always looking back while journalism looks forward. I don't think any newsroom wants to recreate that kind of stereotypes. Or I hope no newsroom is interested in that anyway. We want to take journalism and thinking to the next level.” L9

This historical perspective that is inherent in AI-technology is also something that newsrooms deal with regardless of AI bias that is ubiquitous in society, especially when reporting on ethnic minorities which is in accordance with the social responsibility theory. Being aware of stereotypes are thus essential when prompting AI for genre images.

“Regardless of whether you use genuine photography, you still have to think about [bias], so that you don't give a distorted view of reality so that it becomes some kind of exoticism. We really want to portray everyday life. It's not like we put on our pith

helmets and go into the jungle for a one-off visit. [Minorities] are part of the area that we cover, so I don't see any major risks that I can see right now." R3

The interviewees are also aware that anything that is AI-generated needs to be quality checked by a journalist despite them losing some agency, as they lose ethical influence to the organization (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017). Hence, the journalist is still ethically responsible for the technology, in accordance with virtue ethics.

Many local news outlets have not considered copyright as a prerequisite for ethical measures, neither concerning the material that the AI model is trained on nor that their own online news material is used for the same purpose without their consent. This is regardless of the paragraph in the Code of Ethics reading: "§12 Respect copyright rules regarding text, images and sound" (Medieombudsmannen, n.d.). Most interviewees refer to the media outlet's legal department and that they adhere to their in-house guidelines, while others say that they leave that for the legal department and thus abdicates on virtue ethics. This lack of knowledge is significant among the interviewees regardless of professional position within the newsroom. However, there are some interviewees that have actually considered the issue. With the exception of one local editor-in-chief who actively discusses copyright issues with his staff, it is mainly photo editors at national media outlets who are aware of the importance of copyright laws and why the discussions on AI and copyright concern ethics:

"We live on our copyright when it comes to text and images. It's our livelihood. We don't allow any of our partners to use our images to train AI. We don't upload our images to ChatGPT and we're very restrictive about that." A1

5.2. Measures (What media outlets are doing)

5.2.1 Truthfulness and transparency

5.3 Implications (Ethical risks and consequences)

5.3.1 Credibility and authenticity

6. Concluding discussion

RQ1: Prerequisites for ethical journalism

- Ethical discussions center around bias, copyright, and there is a general lack of visual literacy among non-visual/multi-journalists prompting AI-visuals
- Smaller newsrooms often lack resources and photo editors, and a lack of access to high-quality visuals making AI tools appealing

RQ2: Measures for ethical journalism

- Some legacy media outlets publish in-house AI-generated visuals. It is imperative to avoid photorealism to maintain ethical standards and transparent labelling practices
- Larger, resource-rich newsrooms are generally more cautious and interpret ethical guidelines more strictly

- A few larger outlets diverge, using AI in more experimental, potentially ethically problematic ways, which actualizes labelling practices of AI-generated material
- **RQ3: Implications of ethical journalism**
- Credibility deficits emerge if audiences cannot tell AI visuals from photojournalism threatening journalism's authenticity and public trust and challenges the Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct, especially when visuals appear too photorealistic
- Visual bias may be introduced unintentionally by journalists lacking design or visual training
- There is a growing paradox: audiences trust what they see and hear more than what they read, yet these forms are most vulnerable to AI manipulation

7. Further research

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