

Media Ethics in the Context of Covering Religious Issues. According to the Guidelines and Ethical Coverage Manuals of Western and Georgian Media Organizations

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The coverage of religious issues represents one of the most sensitive areas of contemporary journalism, requiring a high degree of professional responsibility, ethical awareness, and respect for democratic values. Religion influences social identities, cultural traditions, and public discourse, making ethical standards particularly important in media reporting. This study examines the ethical principles governing the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations and assesses their relevance within the contemporary Georgian media environment. The research employs a qualitative comparative design based on a multi-method approach combining qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis. The study analyzes ethical codes, editorial guidelines, and professional standards of leading Western media organizations, including the BBC, The Guardian, Associated Press, National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union, as well as key Georgian media ethical frameworks, including the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, the internal guidelines of Channel One, and the editorial standards of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Georgian Service. The findings reveal a substantial degree of convergence between Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks. Core principles such as accuracy and verification, impartiality and balance, editorial independence, accountability, protection of human dignity, prevention of hate speech, and respect for religious diversity are consistently emphasized across the analyzed documents. At the same time, the study identifies differences in the level of institutional development and practical elaboration of these standards, with Western media organizations generally providing more detailed guidance concerning religious sensitivity, minority representation, and conflict-sensitive reporting. The research demonstrates that the principal challenge within the Georgian media environment is not the absence of ethical regulations but the consistent implementation of existing standards in everyday journalistic practice. The study highlights the importance of professional education, ethical self-regulation, and institutional support in strengthening responsible religious reporting. It concludes that media ethics should be understood not merely as a set of professional rules but as a democratic framework that protects public trust, promotes pluralism, safeguards human rights, and contributes to informed public discourse.

Keywords: *media ethics, religious reporting, journalism ethics, Western media, Georgian media, editorial guidelines, human rights, religious diversity, democratic communication.*

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Introduction

The discussion on the spiritual and moral values of mass media activity began long ago. The establishment of ethical norms in professional practice has become an essential requirement. In his essay *The Best Job in the World*, Gabriel García Márquez wrote that all journalistic training should be based on three fundamental principles. The foremost requirement is talent and skill; secondly, the understanding that journalistic investigation is not a distinct genre, since all forms of journalism are based on investigation. It is also essential to recognize that ethics is not merely an insignificant condition of professional mastery but an inseparable part of it.

Ethics is no more separate from the profession than the buzzing is from the fly. In the modern world, media is a key defining feature that determines the level of democracy in states and the openness of society. On the one hand, media independence, and on the other hand, accountability toward citizens and society as a whole, represent a crucial challenge faced by civilized states, societies, and individuals. The fulfillment of this task largely depends on media activity. Therefore, contemporary journalism has developed and adopted professional standards and ethical norms as operational rules, which are codified in relevant codes, editorial guidelines, and self-regulatory mechanisms.

The coverage of religious issues is one of the most sensitive and challenging areas of contemporary journalism. Religion is not only a matter of personal belief but also a social, cultural, and political phenomenon that influences collective identities, value systems, and public discourse. Consequently, media coverage of religion requires particular sensitivity, contextualization, editorial independence, and adherence to professional ethical standards. Inadequate reporting on religious issues may contribute to social polarization, stereotyping, discrimination, and the spread of misinformation, whereas responsible journalism can promote social cohesion, pluralism, and democratic dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several normative approaches to media ethics that have significantly influenced contemporary journalism. First, the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press emphasizes that media freedom must be accompanied by responsibility toward society and the public interest. According to this perspective, journalism serves democracy by providing accurate, balanced, and socially relevant information.

Second, the research draws upon deontological approaches to media ethics, which stress the importance of adherence to professional duties and ethical principles regardless of consequences. From this perspective, journalists are obliged to pursue truth, verify information, maintain editorial independence, and protect human dignity.

Third, the study incorporates elements of virtue ethics, which highlights professional integrity, honesty, fairness, and responsibility as essential characteristics of ethical journalism. These philosophical orientations are reflected in the ethical guidelines and editorial policies of leading Western media organizations and constitute the normative foundation of responsible religious reporting.

The ethical principles examined in this article should therefore be understood not merely as organizational regulations but as manifestations of broader philosophical traditions that shape journalism in democratic societies.

Georgian Media Context and Research Gap

The contemporary Georgian media environment represents a particularly important context for examining media ethics in the coverage of religious issues. Georgia is a transitional democracy characterized by an evolving media system, political polarization, and ongoing public debates concerning religion, identity, and democratic values. The Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a significant place within the country's historical and cultural identity, while issues related to religious freedom, minority rights, and freedom of expression frequently become subjects of public discussion.

Media studies conducted in Georgia indicate that religious issues are often covered within broader political and ideological debates, which increases the importance of ethical standards and professional responsibility. In such circumstances, journalists are expected to ensure accuracy, impartiality, pluralism, and contextual analysis while avoiding discriminatory narratives and stereotyping.

Despite the growing significance of religious reporting, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the comparative examination of Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks in this field. Ethical guidelines and editorial standards of major Western media organizations remain insufficiently studied in Georgian academic literature, particularly regarding their relevance and applicability to the Georgian media environment. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic comparative analysis of ethical standards governing the coverage of religious issues.

The comparative approach is particularly important because it enables the identification of similarities and differences between internationally recognized ethical standards and those operating within the Georgian media environment. Such analysis contributes to a better understanding of the extent to which Georgian media ethics corresponds to international professional standards and offers practical recommendations for further development.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to identify the fundamental principles of media ethics that define responsible coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations and to assess the possibilities of their application within the Georgian media environment. The study also seeks to examine the concepts of media freedom and editorial independence in the context of professional responsibility, ethical self-regulation, and democratic communication.

Research Objectives

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To examine the ethical guidelines and editorial standards of leading Western media organizations regarding the coverage of religious issues.
- To analyze the ethical frameworks and professional standards governing religious reporting within the Georgian media environment.
- To identify the key ethical principles underlying responsible religious coverage, including accuracy, impartiality, balance, accountability, editorial independence, and respect for human dignity.
- To compare Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks and determine the extent of their convergence and divergence.
- To assess the relevance and applicability of international media ethics standards within the Georgian media context.
- To formulate practical recommendations aimed at improving the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgian media.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What ethical principles characterize the coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations?
- **RQ2:** To what extent do Georgian media ethical frameworks correspond to these principles?
- **RQ3:** What recommendations can be derived from international media experience to improve the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgia?

Object and Subject of the Study

The object of the study is the ethical codes and editorial guidelines of Western and Georgian media organizations.

The subject of the research is the principles of journalistic ethics governing the coverage of religious issues and their practical relevance for the Georgian media environment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the research lies in its attempt to analyze both theoretical and practical aspects of media ethics in the context of religious reporting. Responsible coverage of religious topics represents not only a matter of journalistic professionalism but also an important prerequisite for democratic communication, social cohesion, and the protection of human rights.

The study contributes to a better understanding of professional media standards, highlights the importance of ethical self-regulation, and provides practical

recommendations for improving the quality of religious reporting in Georgia. Furthermore, it establishes a theoretical and methodological foundation for future empirical studies examining the discursive and institutional dimensions of religion-related media coverage.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design aimed at identifying, systematizing, and evaluating the ethical principles that regulate the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations. The methodological framework was developed in accordance with the main aim of the article: to examine how responsible religious reporting is conceptualized in leading Western media ethical guidelines and to assess the extent to which these principles correspond to the ethical and professional standards operating within the Georgian media environment.

The research is based on a multi-method qualitative approach combining qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis. This methodological combination was selected because the study does not seek to measure the frequency of media representations or analyze particular news stories, but rather to examine the normative, institutional, and professional principles that guide journalistic practice. Therefore, the central empirical material of the study consists of ethical codes, editorial guidelines, professional standards, and self-regulatory documents produced by selected Western and Georgian media organizations.

The study does not analyze news content directly. It does not examine specific broadcasts, articles, or journalistic products as primary empirical units. Instead, it focuses on the ethical and professional documents that define the standards according to which media organizations are expected to operate. This clarification is methodologically important, as the purpose of the article is not to evaluate individual cases of religious coverage, but to identify the normative principles that shape responsible journalistic practice in the field of religious reporting. The findings therefore concern ethical frameworks, institutional standards, and professional guidelines rather than the practical performance of particular media outlets in specific news situations.

A qualitative comparative design was chosen because the article is concerned with the relationship between Western media ethics and the Georgian media context. Comparative analysis allows the study to identify similarities, differences, convergences, and context-specific characteristics in the ethical regulation of religious reporting. Since the article examines whether internationally recognized principles of media ethics can be meaningfully interpreted and applied within the Georgian media environment, the comparative method provides an appropriate framework for evaluating both normative compatibility and contextual limitations.

The comparative approach is particularly relevant in this study because Western media organizations have developed extensive editorial guidelines concerning accuracy, impartiality, editorial independence, diversity, hate speech, human dignity, and religious sensitivity. Georgian media ethics documents, including the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, also contain similar principles, but their formulation, institutional scope, and practical

elaboration differ. By comparing these frameworks, the study seeks to determine not only whether similar ethical principles exist, but also how they are articulated, justified, and connected to broader democratic values such as pluralism, public interest, and human rights protection.

The study uses purposive sampling. The selection of media organizations and ethical documents was not random, but theoretically and methodologically justified. The sample was formed according to three principal criteria. First, the selected organizations had to possess international or national significance in the field of journalism and public communication. Second, their editorial guidelines, ethical codes, or professional standards had to be publicly available and accessible for scholarly analysis. Third, the selected documents had to contain principles relevant to the coverage of religion, diversity, minorities, human rights, hate speech, public interest, editorial independence, and journalistic accountability.

On the basis of these criteria, the Western media sample included the BBC, The Guardian, the Associated Press, National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union. These organizations were selected because they represent influential models of professional journalism and have developed detailed editorial standards that address issues of accuracy, impartiality, fairness, accountability, diversity, and religious or cultural sensitivity. Their guidelines are widely recognized within democratic media systems and are often used as reference points in discussions of international journalistic standards.

For the Georgian context, the study examined the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the internal editorial and organizational guidelines of Channel One, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, and the editorial standards relevant to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Georgian Service. These documents were selected because they represent important normative and self-regulatory sources within the Georgian media environment. They define the professional responsibilities of journalists, establish principles of truthfulness, balance, impartiality, human dignity, and non-discrimination, and provide the basis for evaluating how Georgian media ethics corresponds to international standards.

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the ethical document. More specifically, the study examines individual provisions, principles, definitions, and recommendations contained in media codes, editorial manuals, and professional guidelines. These textual units were analyzed in relation to the main conceptual categories of the research. The analysis focused on how the documents define journalistic responsibility, how they regulate sensitive topics, how they approach religious and minority representation, and how they connect media freedom with ethical accountability.

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis. The selected ethical codes, editorial manuals, professional guidelines, and self-regulatory documents were collected from official institutional sources. Each document was examined in full in order to identify passages related to religious reporting, diversity, human dignity, hate speech, editorial independence, accuracy, impartiality, verification, and accountability. Particular attention was paid to sections that directly or indirectly regulate the coverage of religious issues, the representation of religious communities, the use of potentially offensive language, the treatment of minorities, and the distinction between fact, opinion, analysis, and commentary.

The analytical framework was based on thematic coding. The coding categories were developed both deductively and inductively. Deductively, the categories were informed by major principles of media ethics and by the theoretical framework of the article, including social responsibility theory, deontological approaches to journalism, virtue ethics, and the democratic function of media. Inductively, the categories were refined through repeated reading of the selected ethical documents, which made it possible to identify recurring themes and institutionally specific formulations.

The following thematic categories were used in the analysis: accuracy and verification; impartiality and balance; editorial independence; human dignity and human rights protection; religious sensitivity; prevention of hate speech and discrimination; accountability and transparency; public interest; source reliability; distinction between fact and opinion; treatment of minority groups; and avoidance of stereotyping and sensationalism. These categories made it possible to compare the ethical logic of different media organizations while maintaining a clear connection with the research questions.

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify and classify the ethical principles contained in the selected documents. This method was appropriate because it allowed the study to move beyond descriptive summary and systematically examine the content of the documents according to predefined analytical categories. Through content analysis, the study identified which ethical principles were most consistently emphasized, how religious sensitivity was addressed, and how journalistic responsibility was linked to democratic communication and public trust.

Comparative analysis was then used to examine the relationship between Western and Georgian ethical frameworks. The comparison was conducted at two levels. First, the study compared the presence of similar ethical principles in Western and Georgian documents, such as accuracy, verification, impartiality, balance, public interest, and human dignity. Second, it examined the depth and specificity with which these principles were formulated. This made it possible to identify not only formal similarities but also differences in institutional elaboration, practical guidance, and contextual emphasis.

Elements of discourse analysis were also employed in order to examine how ethical responsibility, religion, diversity, and professional journalism are conceptually framed in the selected documents. This was particularly important because ethical codes do not merely list rules; they also construct a certain understanding of journalism's role in society. The analysis therefore considered how media organizations define their responsibility toward the public, how they understand editorial freedom, how they justify restrictions on harmful speech, and how they balance freedom of expression with respect for religious and cultural diversity.

The use of multiple methods contributes to methodological triangulation. In this study, triangulation does not mean the comparison of different types of empirical data such as interviews, surveys, and media content. Rather, it refers to the use of different qualitative analytical procedures for examining the same type of material — ethical and editorial documents. Content analysis identifies and organizes the main principles; comparative analysis evaluates similarities and differences between media systems; and discourse analysis interprets the broader meaning and normative logic of these

principles. Together, these methods provide a more comprehensive understanding of how responsible religious reporting is institutionally defined.

The research questions were directly connected to the methodological procedures.

RQ1 — What ethical principles characterize the coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations? — was addressed primarily through qualitative content analysis of Western editorial guidelines and ethical codes.

RQ2 — To what extent do Georgian media ethical frameworks correspond to these principles? — was addressed through comparative analysis of Georgian and Western ethical documents.

RQ3 — What recommendations can be derived from international media experience to improve the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgia? — was addressed through comparative interpretation and synthesis of the findings.

This alignment between research questions and methods was important for strengthening the internal coherence of the study. The first stage of the analysis identified the key principles in Western media ethics. The second stage examined whether similar principles appear in Georgian ethical documents. The third stage interpreted the practical significance of these similarities and differences for the Georgian media environment. In this way, the structure of the methodology corresponds directly to the structure of the article and to the logic of the findings and recommendations.

The study also acknowledges certain methodological limitations. Since the research analyzes ethical documents rather than actual media content, it cannot determine the extent to which journalists and media organizations fully implement these standards in everyday practice. Ethical codes establish normative expectations, but they do not automatically guarantee ethical reporting. Therefore, the conclusions of this study concern the existence, formulation, and comparative relevance of professional standards, rather than the empirical measurement of journalistic behavior. Future research could complement this study through content analysis of actual media materials, interviews with journalists and editors, and audience research.

Despite this limitation, the selected methodology is appropriate for the aims of the article. The study seeks to establish a conceptual and normative foundation for understanding ethical religious reporting in the Georgian context. By analyzing editorial guidelines and professional standards, the article identifies the principles that should guide journalistic practice and evaluates their relevance for Georgian media. This approach is particularly useful in a transitional democratic context, where the strengthening of ethical self-regulation, professional education, and institutional accountability remains an important condition for the development of responsible journalism.

Overall, the methodological combination of qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis enables a comprehensive assessment of ethical standards in the coverage of religious issues. It allows the study to identify the main normative principles of Western media ethics, compare them with Georgian ethical frameworks, and formulate practical recommendations for improving religious reporting in Georgia. The methodology therefore supports the central argument of the article: that media ethics is not merely a set of formal restrictions, but

a professional and democratic framework that protects public trust, human dignity, pluralism, and responsible communication.

Overview of Western Media Organizations' Guidelines

The contemporary media environment, characterized by rapid digital transformation, increasing intensity of information dissemination, and diversity of platforms, significantly strengthens the role of journalistic ethics. The rapid circulation of information increases both the level of public awareness and the risks of disinformation, which further emphasizes the importance of adhering to professional standards.

Journalistic ethics constitutes a normative system that defines media responsibility toward society. The concept of ethical journalism is based on the idea of free and responsible circulation of information, which is a necessary precondition for the functioning of a democratic society. Media organizations are expected to maintain internal rules with a systematic editorial process in order to ensure content accuracy and compliance with editorial guidelines. This may include content verification procedures and editorial oversight mechanisms.

The Journalism Trust Initiative, implemented since 2016 by the Ethical Journalism Network in partnership with UNESCO and with the support of the European Union, is a modern tool that offers media organizations mechanisms for ethical self-regulation, including enhanced transparency and accountability in editorial policy. According to the document, media outlets are required to disclose their editorial mission, which must be consistent with the fundamental ethical principles of credible journalism and include: ethical practice, good governance, self-regulation, and public engagement. Ethical journalism requires not only the dissemination of information but also its critical interpretation, contextualization, and consideration of public interest.

The Declaration of Principles of the International Federation of Journalists, which represents approximately 600,000 journalists, explicitly rejects state authority in editorial matters:

“Within the general laws of each country, the journalist shall recognize only the jurisdiction of colleagues in professional matters, excluding any interference by governments or others.”

The declaration also specifies forms of journalistic conduct that are incompatible with professional ethics. According to the document, respect for facts and for the public's right to truth is the journalist's primary duty. In fulfilling this duty, journalists must adhere to the principles of independence, freedom of publication, and fair comment, and must clearly distinguish factual information from commentary and speculation.

According to *The Washington Post* model, audiences must clearly understand the type of content they are consuming: news, analysis, or opinion. This distinction protects readers from interpreting subjective opinions as factual information.

Media credibility is based on accuracy and objectivity. One of the major challenges in the contemporary media environment remains the dissemination of unverified and manipulative information, which undermines both public trust and democratic

processes. Journalistic ethics requires multi-source verification of information, clear separation of facts and opinions, and the prompt correction of errors.

Journalists must report only verified information and must not disseminate disinformation and/or falsified facts or documents. Information must be obtained through fair and lawful methods. Covert information gathering is permitted only when information cannot be obtained otherwise and when the matter is of high public interest.

The Associated Press has overcome significant challenges in order to deliver accurate, balanced, and impartial news in a fair and timely manner. As a result of these efforts, the organization has gained public trust, with more than half of the population following AP news content.

Commitment to accuracy and impartiality is also demonstrated by the British public broadcaster, as well as by *The Guardian*, whose editorial values are based on such essential media functions as trust, truth, and accuracy. Journalists must not publish unverified information that may mislead the audience. Every effort must be made to correct inaccuracies, and corrections must be published in a clear and transparent manner. Journalists must respect confidentiality and protect confidential sources. They must also respect the principle of privacy and must not violate human dignity.

Reporters at *The Washington Post* bear primary responsibility for reporting, writing, and fact-checking their stories. Articles are subject to review by one or more editors. The Post maintains an editorial review structure, which may include fact-checking. The organization strives to ensure that stories are reported accurately and comprehensively. In the publication process, errors are addressed with particular responsibility and are corrected promptly. As stated:

“When we issue a correction and/or clarification, our goal is to communicate as clearly and quickly as possible what was wrong and what is correct. Everyone should be able to understand how and why a correction was made.”

If a correction materially affects an article, caption, headline, graphic, video, or other material, the newsroom publishes an immediate correction explaining the change.

The ethical policy of *The New York Times* places particular emphasis on impartiality, accuracy, and integrity in journalism. The document states that:

“Producing content of the highest quality and integrity is the foundation of our reputation and the means by which we earn public trust and meet the expectations of our readers.”

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), representing broadcasting organizations from 56 countries, requires impartial and fair reporting. The organization defines six core values shared by all member media organizations: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation.

The European Broadcasting Union operates with editorial freedom, free from political, religious, or commercial influence, enabling it to cover any story or content justified by public interest.

According to *The Guardian*’s editorial code of practice, journalists must ensure that their output serves the public interest. Public interest is the fundamental basis of *The Guardian*’s editorial activity.

Journalists must take responsibility for the accuracy of their work and verify information prior to publication. Where possible, primary and original sources should be used. It is essential to emphasize that neither speed nor format justifies inaccuracy.

The BBC is based on principles of fairness, openness, honesty, and straightforward communication, and it treats both contributors and audiences with respect. Confidentiality is protected within its operations:

“We do not place information, correspondence, or conversations into the public domain unless there is a public interest that outweighs the need to maintain confidentiality.”

BBC producers have editorial freedom to explore religious belief and issues of faith. According to BBC editorial standards, although religion and religious views may be subject to criticism, appropriate context must be provided, and critical views must remain open to challenge. Religious content must not be used for recruitment purposes, such as direct appeals encouraging audiences to join a particular religion. References to positive outcomes associated with a religion are generally acceptable.

In interactive religious programming, an appropriate level of responsibility must be exercised to allow expression of belief and exploration of issues surrounding faith, while ensuring that religious beliefs are not misused or exploited.

According to BBC editorial standards, balance is achieved when media outlets actively cover issues and adopt an appropriate form of moderation in production. The BBC requires that, in cases of religious conflict, not only dominant institutions but also minority perspectives must be represented. The BBC document states:

“We want to reflect the world as it is. This means we show all its parts, both human and natural. But we also balance the right to broadcast innovative and challenging content with our responsibility to protect vulnerable people and avoid causing offence. These are the standards expected of us, as are the expectations of our audience.”

Journalists working in the news sector must always strive to be fair and objective in their professional conduct and must recognize the potential influence of their personal biases.

Diversity and inclusion are central to all objectives of the BBC, from reflecting the whole of the United Kingdom to enabling new generations to rediscover themselves, and to operating as one of the world’s most creative organizations. The BBC respects individuals of all differing views, opinions, and experiences, regardless of age, ability, gender, diversity of thought, physical ability, religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or social background.

Reporters and editors at *The Washington Post* also emphasize fairness. Although debates about objectivity are ongoing, fairness is a principle that editors and reporters must consistently consider and uphold. Fairness is derived from several basic practices: no story is fair if it loses its essential meaning. Fairness includes completeness, relevance, honesty, and equality toward the reader. No story is fair if it includes substantially irrelevant information at the expense of important facts, or if it knowingly or unknowingly misleads or deceives readers. Fairness also includes the diligent pursuit of comment and its truthful representation.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) Code of Editors' Practice establishes a framework of the highest professional standards, which member organizations commit to uphold. This voluntary self-regulatory system balances individual rights with the public's right to know. In order to achieve this balance, the code must be applied neither so narrowly as to restrict respect for individual rights, nor so broadly as to undermine the fundamental right to freedom of expression—including informing the public, avoiding bias, and enabling public interest journalism.

The provisions set out in the document define editorial integrity. These include a clear distinction between comment, speculation, and fact; avoidance of publishing unverified, misleading, or distorted information; prompt and visible correction of significant inaccuracies; and, where necessary, publication of apologies. Affected parties must be given a fair opportunity to respond to significant inaccuracies when reasonably required.

Media must avoid derogatory references to a person's race, skin color, religion, sex and gender identity, or any other physical or mental condition. Such references should only be included when essential to the story.

Western guidelines place particular emphasis on protecting religious sensitivity. Information disseminated by journalists must not contribute to the formation of hatred, stereotypes, or prejudices. Media content must not encourage discrimination based on social or ethnic origin, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other beliefs.

Western media codes strictly define rules of identification. Social concepts of taste and decency change over time; words considered offensive by one generation may become part of common usage in another. However, obscenity must be avoided unless its use is essential to the story and its omission would undermine meaning. If editors determine that potentially offensive material has legitimate news value, appropriate visual and/or textual warnings must be used. News columns are clearly distinguished from editorial pages to serve audiences who have the right to receive facts in news sections and opinions in editorial sections.

These labels are defined as follows:

- Analysis: interpretation of news based on evidence, including data, explaining possible developments based on past events.
- Perspective: discussion of news topics from viewpoints, including individual narratives and personal experiences.
- Opinion: a column or blog in the opinion section.
- Review: a professional critique of a service, product, performance, or artistic or literary work.

Emphasis on a person's religious affiliation is permissible only when it is essential to the story, directly related to its core meaning, and necessary for full understanding. Otherwise, such emphasis is considered unprofessional and may contribute to stigmatization.

Ethical guidelines prohibit discrimination based on religion and forbid derogatory references, insult, incitement to hatred, or the reproduction of hate speech against specific religious groups, as well as stereotypes linking religion to violence or antisocial

behavior. Religious topics require in-depth understanding and contextual representation to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Any content relating to religion that may be offensive to believers must be editorially justified and aligned with audience expectations and generally accepted standards. Religious belief is of central importance to many people and is therefore a highly sensitive issue. Such issues may lead to emotionally driven criminal acts; therefore, media organizations are obliged to avoid unnecessary provocation. Blasphemy laws vary widely across the world, and content producers may consult legal departments. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, applicable in England and Wales, prohibits the use of threatening words or behavior intended to incite religious hatred.

According to BBC editorial standards, religious sensitivity must be considered during the observance of holy days and major religious festivals in order to avoid unnecessary offense. Drama, comedy, and other genres have the freedom to address religious issues, but awareness of potential offense is always required. Religious references, including names, imagery, deities, rituals, sacred texts, and language, must be handled responsibly within widely accepted editorial standards.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is enshrined in national and international instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. This includes freedom of worship, teaching, practice, and observance. Since religion is an integral part of many people's lives, the BBC assumes appropriate responsibility regarding religious programming and its potential impact.

Producers of religious content are granted editorial freedom to present information about different religions and to explore matters of faith; however, they must ensure that the beliefs of followers of any religion or denomination are not subjected to offensive treatment. When religion is the subject of a program, its identity must be clearly communicated to the audience. Vulnerable audiences must be protected from exploitation, and religious programming must not covertly promote religious beliefs.

In reporting significant events, speculation, stereotypes, and sensationalist language must be avoided. Discrimination and incitement to hatred are prohibited.

Journalists must avoid derogatory or offensive references to a person's race, color, nationality, religion, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. Such characteristics should only be mentioned when strictly necessary for the story. It is prohibited to film individuals in public or private spaces without consent where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Journalists must not engage in intimidation, threats, harassment, or pursuit. They must not continue contacting or filming individuals after a clear refusal. In situations of personal grief or shock, interactions must be conducted with sensitivity and published material must reflect appropriate compassion.

In the 21st century, news is disseminated more frequently than ever through text, photo and video materials, interactive graphics, and audio formats across online, mobile, print, and broadcast media. Regardless of platform, AP opposes any form of hate propaganda and does not use content that may be obscene, offensive, racist, or otherwise discriminatory. AP also protects the confidentiality of victims and, as a rule, does not identify them in text or visual materials. Journalists must remember that their personal opinions may harm AP's reputation as an impartial news source and must

refrain from expressing personal views on controversial public issues in any public forum, including blogs or social media.

Media must not seek to obtain information through covert means or coercion, including through intermediaries. Such practices are justified only in the public interest and only when information cannot be obtained by other means.

It is prohibited to film individuals without consent in public or private spaces where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment, or persistent pursuit. They must not continue questioning, calling, pursuing, or photographing individuals who have clearly refused contact. Transparency is one of the core values of fair journalism.

A journalist's reputation and the credibility of their organization are directly linked to the absence of conflicts of interest. Western media organizations' editorial policies strictly separate professional activity from personal interests, as ethical guidelines emphasize that journalistic reputation and organizational credibility depend on avoiding conflicts of interest.

For example, journalists are prohibited from raising funds for religious or charitable purposes in order to avoid conflicts of interest or expectations of favorable treatment. Specifically, the *New York Times* ethics code prohibits journalists from fundraising for religious or charitable causes. This regulation ensures that journalists do not create obligations toward any institution that could influence their editorial independence.

Media professionals are also required to refrain from public or political activities that could compromise their impartiality. Although personal religious belief is a protected right, it must not serve as a lens through which professional reporting and interpretation of events are conducted.

New York Times employees are not permitted to serve on governmental boards or commissions, whether paid or unpaid, nor to join advisory committees or similar bodies, except those related to journalistic organizations or media education.

Journalists are not allowed to solicit funds for socio-political, religious, educational, charitable, or other purposes, as this may create expectations of favorable treatment. The editorial team respects and protects copyright and does not engage in plagiarism. Quotations must be accurate and impartial. Any behavior that creates conflicts of interest or negatively affects fair and objective reporting is strictly avoided.

The European Broadcasting Union reports events impartially and offers audiences a broad, balanced range of perspectives and opinions, while its staff remain sensitive to potential conflicts of interest. The use of covert microphones or cameras may be acceptable if it is in the public interest, but only when no other means of obtaining information are available.

BBC documentation states that BBC employees must serve the public, not themselves; accordingly, their activities must be conducted in the public interest rather than for personal gain.

Media Ethics and Professional Standards in Georgia

Coverage of religious topics in the Georgian media space is particularly sensitive, given the country's historical, cultural, and social context. In Georgia, religion—especially Orthodox Christianity—plays a significant role in shaping national identity and cultural heritage. At the same time, the country is home to various religious groups and denominations, which requires particular sensitivity and responsibility from the media. Therefore, professional and ethical coverage of religious issues constitutes an essential factor in ensuring media credibility and public trust.

The issue of the relationship between media and religion in Georgia has become particularly relevant over the past two decades, as the development of media has been accompanied by an increase in the intensity of religious coverage. The media often serves as a space where issues such as the role of the Church in public life, religious freedom, the rights of religious minorities, and relations between Church and State are discussed.

Media studies in Georgia often note that coverage of religious issues is closely linked to cultural and political contexts. The media frequently becomes a space where different narratives compete (conservative, liberal, and ethno-religious discourses). In this context, the importance of media ethics increases significantly, as journalists are obliged to ensure plurality, accuracy, and contextual analysis.

Respect for ethical standards in the coverage of religious issues is especially important in multi-religious and culturally diverse societies. In Georgia, where the Orthodox Church plays an important cultural role, media coverage of religious topics often becomes part of public debate.

Ethical reporting on religious issues is a necessary precondition for strengthening journalistic professionalism and democratic culture. Analysis of international standards shows that ethical norms are not a barrier but rather the foundation of quality journalism. The implementation of these standards in the Georgian context will contribute to increasing media credibility and fostering a tolerant environment in society. Ethical journalism is the only way for the media to remain an objective narrator rather than an instrument of manipulative narratives.

It can be argued that Western media guidelines are not merely a set of restrictions, but rather an instrument that protects journalists from errors and the public from misinformation and manipulation. The implementation of these standards in the Georgian media space is critically important for establishing a high level of professional ethics.

In the process of establishing democratic values in the country, the existence of an informed society is of crucial importance. Public awareness cannot be achieved without high-quality and professional broadcasting. Freedom of speech and expression is one of the main guarantees of improving the quality of public information. However, ensuring the public's right to receive quality information cannot be achieved solely through legal regulations and protective laws of freedom of speech and expression. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish a strong relationship between journalists and the audience. For this purpose, it is essential that journalists fully understand that they are accountable not to information sources, but to society. Journalists must feel responsibility for the information they provide to the public.

On the other hand, in order for society to be properly and qualitatively informed, it must understand what is required of journalists and what their obligations are. The Code of Conduct of the Public Broadcaster is “one of the instruments of such interdependence—on the one hand, journalists’ responsibility and, on the other hand, society’s ability to monitor this responsibility.”

The Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster represents the first attempt to establish such a document in the Georgian broadcasting space. This code protects the rights of individuals in general, as well as those of broadcasters and journalists. It is neither a rigid set of rules nor a mandatory ethical manual. It is a set of basic professional standards and principles of journalistic ethics, compliance with which is obligatory only for employees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. As stated in the code, “It would be impossible to include all aspects or details of journalistic activity in the code, as well as to foresee all possible situations in which a journalist may find themselves. The code of conduct does not represent a set of precise mathematical formulas that would apply in any situation and assist journalists in making a single correct decision.”

The Public Broadcaster’s Code of Conduct serves as a guide that, together with a journalist’s internal ethics and intuition, assists in making appropriate decisions in specific circumstances. Naturally, the code is a constantly evolving document, which is periodically revised, developed, and refined in practice. The Public Broadcaster makes every effort to establish the truth and accurately reflect current events. For this purpose, reporting is based on verified facts, precise data, and reliable sources, in order to avoid misleading the audience through unverified or inaccurate information.

If a journalist has not personally witnessed a specific event, they must obtain information from primary sources and eyewitnesses. It is also important to verify the received information with alternative sources, and if necessary, the journalist must seek supporting evidence.

The Public Broadcaster’s Code of Conduct states that impartiality of information is the basis of objective public information. Therefore, one of the organization’s main functions is to remain impartial, examine events in detail, and fairly present differing opinions on controversial issues. The Georgian Public Broadcaster strives to maintain balance in coverage and does not ignore significant and valuable positions.

The Code defines biased programming as content that does not reflect a wide range of opinions, is intentionally or unintentionally tendentious, or covertly expresses private views of individuals or groups.

News programs must cover all events equally, and in controversial matters, opinions must be presented in a balanced manner. A journalist’s duty is to provide the public with comprehensive information and not avoid doing so due to possible offense or dissatisfaction from any group. In media production, preference should not be given to the majority of society; rather, attention should be paid to what society needs and has the right to know.

The Public Broadcaster operates based on public interest and assists audiences in making informed decisions, listens to their feedback and complaints, and promptly corrects mistakes. The broadcaster works for society and together with society. Information in journalism is considered a public good, not a consumer product. This

implies that journalistic activity must be conducted within professional ethics, and journalists are accountable to society, their profession, and themselves.

All program content and nature must result from editorial decisions and must not be influenced by political, commercial, or private pressures. The public must be assured that editorial decisions are made solely on the basis of strong arguments and must trust the integrity of the Public Broadcaster's programs and services. Journalistic activity is public, and broadcasters and journalists must disclose any circumstances that could call their editorial independence into question.

Accurate facts must be presented in clear and well-structured language, using standard everyday speech. Careless use of words and expressions must not exaggerate facts or distort reality. In television reporting, language must be simple and accessible, avoiding unnecessary words. Foreign terms should be avoided where adequate Georgian equivalents exist. Specialized terminology (e.g., medical or technical) should not be used unless necessary, in which case it must be explained in accessible language.

Journalists must not use language inconsistent with established linguistic standards; however, language is constantly evolving, and certain expressions may become socially acceptable or unacceptable over time.

Broadcasters must respect the fundamental right of individuals to practice any religion or confession. When preparing religious programs or reports, journalists must be aware of what may offend audiences. Consideration must be given to the beliefs and characteristics of different religious groups in Georgia. What is acceptable for one religious group may be unacceptable for another.

It is prohibited to manipulate audience emotions through religious programming, to ridicule any religious belief or worldview, or to covertly promote one religion over another. It is also prohibited to identify nations or states based on religion unless relevant to the program topic.

If a guest or respondent attributes an event to ethnic origin or religious belief without justification, journalists must present the real causes of the event and emphasize that ethnicity and religion are not related to the issue. Racist or xenophobic statements must not go unchallenged and must be explicitly criticized.

In covering ethnic and religious minorities:

Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, political opinion, ethnicity, cultural or social belonging, economic status, place of residence, health condition, age, or any other factor is strictly prohibited.

The Public Broadcaster's internal guidelines define discrimination as any intentional or unintentional exclusion, distinction, or preferential treatment based on the above characteristics that undermines equal opportunities in professional activity.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic society. Modern journalism is built upon this right, and journalistic responsibilities stem from the public interest in being informed. The Journalistic Charter emphasizes that journalism is not merely a profession but a public responsibility.

The Charter is based on two key international documents:

- Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of expression);
- The Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists.

These establish minimum standards aimed at protecting journalistic autonomy, credibility, and professional dignity.

The first principle - respect for truth and the public's right to know - emphasizes that journalism is based on the pursuit of truth. Information must be fact-based, not speculative; distortion of truth is a serious ethical violation; and journalists are responsible not only for presenting information but also for ensuring its accuracy.

The principle of conscience guarantees that journalists must not be forced to express imposed opinions or positions. Journalists must not be subjected to pressure from editors, owners, political actors, or sponsors. They operate within their own professional conscience, in line with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Journalists must rely only on verified facts. Unverified information must not be broadcast. Information should be confirmed by at least two independent sources to prevent disinformation.

Protection of confidential sources is a fundamental journalistic principle, and journalists must not disclose them.

Journalists must not promote hatred or discrimination. This includes rejecting hate speech, avoiding incitement to violence, eliminating stigmatizing terminology, and ensuring dignified and impartial coverage.

The most serious violations of journalistic ethics include:

- Intentional distortion of facts;
- Acceptance of bribery or benefits;
- Plagiarism.

These actions undermine media integrity and can cause serious public harm.

The Journalistic Charter establishes a comprehensive framework of professional standards that protects public interest, strengthens institutional independence of media, and ensures professional trust. Its principles are not merely normative rules but the foundation of an ethical culture upon which independent journalism in Georgia is built. Compliance with these principles determines not only media quality but also the level of democratic development.

Findings

The analysis of ethical codes, editorial guidelines, and professional standards revealed a substantial degree of convergence between Western and Georgian media organizations regarding the fundamental principles governing the coverage of religious issues.

First, the findings demonstrate that accuracy and verification constitute the cornerstone of ethical journalism in both Western and Georgian frameworks. All examined organizations emphasize the necessity of fact-checking, source verification, and the correction of inaccuracies. Ethical responsibility is consistently associated with the dissemination of reliable and verified information.

Second, impartiality and balance emerged as one of the most frequently emphasized principles. Western media organizations, particularly the BBC, The Guardian, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union, require journalists to present diverse viewpoints and avoid one-sided narratives. Similar standards are reflected in the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, which stress the importance of pluralism and balanced reporting.

Third, editorial independence was identified as a core value across all analyzed documents. Ethical frameworks consistently emphasize that journalistic decisions should remain free from political, ideological, religious, and commercial influence. The findings indicate that editorial autonomy is regarded as a necessary condition for maintaining public trust and professional credibility.

Fourth, both Western and Georgian ethical frameworks place considerable emphasis on the protection of human dignity and human rights. Religious reporting is expected to avoid discriminatory language, stereotyping, stigmatization, and any form of incitement to hatred. Respect for diversity and equality is presented as a fundamental journalistic responsibility.

The analysis also revealed a strong commitment to preventing hate speech and discriminatory narratives. Ethical guidelines prohibit derogatory references based on religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or other protected characteristics. Journalists are encouraged to provide contextualized reporting and avoid reproducing harmful stereotypes.

Religious sensitivity represents another significant area of convergence. Western media organizations provide detailed guidance regarding the representation of sacred symbols, religious beliefs, rituals, and faith communities. Georgian ethical documents similarly emphasize respect for religious diversity and the importance of avoiding content that may unnecessarily offend religious groups.

Despite these similarities, several contextual differences were identified. Western ethical frameworks tend to provide more detailed and institutionally developed guidelines concerning religious diversity, minority representation, editorial accountability, and conflict-sensitive reporting. Georgian ethical documents generally reflect the same normative principles but often provide less extensive practical guidance regarding their implementation.

The findings further indicate that the primary challenge in the Georgian media environment is not the absence of ethical regulations but the consistency of their implementation in everyday journalistic practice. The existence of professional standards alone cannot ensure ethical reporting without adequate professional training, editorial commitment, and institutional support.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Georgian media ethics largely corresponds to internationally recognized professional standards. At the same time, the findings suggest the need for stronger professional education, enhanced ethical self-regulation, and more systematic application of existing standards in the coverage of religious issues.

Recommendations for Georgian Media

The coverage of religious topics in the Georgian media represents a particularly sensitive area of professional responsibility, as such issues are closely connected to societal identity, cultural traditions, and value systems. The way media presents religious issues significantly influences public discourse, intergroup relations, and the development of democratic culture. Therefore, it is essential that journalistic practice be based on clear professional and ethical standards that ensure accuracy, impartiality, and the protection of public interest.

One of the key priorities for Georgian media is the strengthening of professional standards in covering religious topics. Ethical guidelines of international media organizations emphasize that reporting on religion should be grounded in the principles of accuracy, context, and pluralism. Journalists must verify information and present multiple perspectives in order to avoid the spread of one-sided or stereotypical narratives. Such an approach contributes to a better-informed society and helps prevent the deepening of social polarization.

In covering religious issues, it is particularly important to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion. One of the core principles of journalism is the objective and balanced presentation of information, which requires the accurate reporting of facts and a clear separation of commentary or interpretation from factual reporting. Professional journalism should rely on the verification of information through multiple sources and the proper contextualization of events. This practice strengthens public trust in the media and reduces the risk of misinformation.

Another important task for the development of Georgian media is the reduction of sensationalism in the coverage of religious topics. In the contemporary media environment, competition for audience attention often leads to sensationalized reporting, which can negatively affect public discourse. Sensational headlines, emotionally charged narratives, and the amplification of conflict are particularly problematic in religious reporting, as they may contribute to increased social tension. Responsible journalism should prioritize balanced and ethically grounded reporting that serves the public interest rather than merely attracting audience attention.

An important direction of media development is the strengthening of journalists' professional education and training. Modern journalism requires not only technical skills but also a deep understanding of ethical standards and the ability to apply them in practice. Specialized training programs for journalists on media ethics, religious reporting, and cultural diversity significantly enhance professional competence. International experience shows that such educational programs contribute to improving the quality of journalism and increasing media credibility.

In this context, cooperation between universities and journalistic organizations is particularly important, as it enables the integration of academic knowledge with professional practice. Including media ethics and religious reporting in journalism curricula will contribute to the development of future journalists' professional culture and a better understanding of ethical standards.

Another key direction for Georgian media is the institutional strengthening of ethical self-regulation. In modern democratic societies, one of the most effective mechanisms of media governance is self-regulation, based on professional codes of

ethics and independent institutional frameworks. Self-regulation allows media organizations to maintain editorial independence while ensuring a high level of professional accountability.

In Georgia, the development of media self-regulation is already underway; however, its effectiveness largely depends on the active involvement of the journalistic community and the practical implementation of ethical standards. Professional charters, ethical codes, and journalistic organizations play an important role in increasing media accountability and ensuring adherence to journalistic standards. Strengthening these institutional mechanisms will contribute to increasing media credibility and public trust.

In conclusion, the development of Georgian media requires strengthening professional standards in the coverage of religious issues, reducing sensationalism, supporting journalists' education and training, and reinforcing institutional mechanisms of ethical self-regulation. These directions will contribute to the development of professional media culture and create conditions for responsible and ethical journalism, which is one of the key foundations of a democratic society.

Discussion

Media continuously changes its form and reflects the social and political structures within which it operates. The degree of media freedom in any system is determined by how power is distributed in society, particularly in relation to political and economic structures. In Western countries, commercial media tend to be more pluralistic, as capitalist societies are characterized by a decentralization of power. However, in many third-world contexts, the "market" model of mass media coexists with authoritarian structures. In Eastern Europe and Asia, media traditions often reflect the significant role of the ruling political power in subsidizing mass communication. One reason for this is that certain television stations cannot achieve financial sustainability independently. An integrated political-economic elite often sets political agendas for media outlets while guaranteeing their economic survival. As a result, media owners and senior managers are often less focused on financial independence and instead serve the interests of their funders. News content is frequently shaped within ideological frameworks that serve both ruling political elites and opposition interests. The content of private television channels is directly influenced by owners' interests, as media output reflects the priorities of its financiers.

Regarding the coverage of religious issues, Georgian media currently faces numerous challenges. As the research has shown, one of the main problems is the low level of professional competence and education among journalists. Instead of providing in-depth analysis of religious phenomena, the primary focus of media coverage is often sensationalism and ratings. Consequently, religious topics are rarely studied in depth. In general, Georgian media does not prioritize the production of religious or cultural educational programming, and religious topics have unfortunately become a source of manipulation and scandal, which is unethical.

Today, media coverage is mostly limited to conflicts arising on religious grounds, while other aspects are either ignored or reported insufficiently, often in a biased or aggressive manner.

Debates concerning the representation of religion and religious institutions remain an important topic within Georgian media studies. Some scholars and public actors have raised concerns regarding the balance and representation of church-related issues in segments of the Georgian media. The analysis demonstrates that ethical standards in modern journalism are one of the key tools ensuring accuracy, inclusiveness, and the development of democratic discourse. Media ethics is widely recognized in academic literature as being based on principles such as accuracy, impartiality, fairness, and accountability. Research findings indicate that Western media organizations provide a clear normative framework defining professional journalistic standards.

Religious reporting is one of the most sensitive areas of journalism. Religion is not only a belief system but also a social and cultural phenomenon that significantly influences public life. Therefore, religious reporting must be based on professional responsibility and ethical standards. The role of media in shaping religious discourse is especially important, as journalistic narratives often determine public perceptions of religious groups and events.

Research also shows that journalists frequently face ethical dilemmas when covering religious topics, particularly in balancing freedom of expression with respect for different social groups. Professional journalism requires media organizations to avoid hate speech, stereotypical narratives, and discriminatory representations. International media ethics principles emphasize that journalists must be especially cautious when covering topics related to religious, ethnic, or cultural identity.

Responsible religious reporting is particularly important in diverse societies where different religious and cultural groups coexist. Balanced and ethical media coverage of religious topics contributes to social harmony and helps prevent the spread of stereotypes and discrimination. The main goal of journalism in such cases should be informing the public rather than amplifying conflict. Professional journalism is based on the principle that protecting the public interest should be the primary objective of information dissemination.

Another important finding of the research is that the development of media ethics is closely linked to the strengthening of journalism education and professional training. Integrating media ethics and religious reporting into journalism curricula will contribute to the development of professional culture and a better understanding of ethical standards. International practice shows that journalist training and media ethics education play a crucial role in improving the quality of journalism.

In many cases, Georgian media struggles to distinguish between individual persons and entire groups, which increases the risk of ethnic stereotyping. For example, in crime reporting, if the perpetrator is non-Georgian or belongs to a specific religious group, journalists often highlight this detail, using expressions such as “a Syrian woman stabbed two Georgians” or “Muslim terrorists put Christian populations at risk.” In this way, media often emphasizes ethnicity or religion in a manner that implies the crime is more significant because of the perpetrator’s identity. This creates a risk of strengthening stereotypes and negative attitudes toward non-Georgians and various religious groups. Nevertheless, media remains one of the most powerful instruments in shaping public opinion. In such situations, the audience’s main responsibility is to critically assess what purpose a media message serves and what narrative it attempts to construct.

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of highly qualified and professional journalists in today's Georgian media landscape. At the same time, the number of unqualified personnel is increasing, which poses a serious threat to journalism as a profession and to the institutional functioning of media in general. When the public receives inaccurate or incomplete information, it contributes to distortion of facts and undermines the formation of objective public opinion. Credibility, objectivity, and accuracy are the foundation of media's core function, and these principles must be upheld. Unfortunately, these standards are frequently violated, resulting in biased, unverified, and often manipulative information, which is unacceptable in ethical journalism.

Media outlets should not contribute to associating specific problems with particular religious groups, nor should they reinforce existing stereotypes. Acts of violence or crime should not be reported in ways that encourage negative generalizations. Furthermore, media should avoid disseminating statements that incite hatred or mock individuals of different religious beliefs.

It is important not to generalize the behavior or actions of one individual to an entire religious group. Journalists should avoid drawing unjustified connections between a person's religious affiliation and negative events. References to religious identity should only be included when they are essential to the story. In cases of criticism of religious groups, the subjects of criticism should be given the opportunity to express their views and respond.

In short, media has a powerful influence on society. It can psychologically affect individuals and shape perceptions, sometimes even without people realizing it. Media can construct public opinion about individuals and events, and it can spread misinformation in a way that audiences may not immediately recognize. It can either promote or hinder the development of societal awareness and worldview. Media is a crucial institution that significantly influences public consciousness and the formation of the civil sector. It remains one of the most powerful institutions in articulating modern values. Therefore, journalists must remain aware of their responsibility, as their influence on society is extremely significant, especially in countries like Georgia.

Even in the most challenging environments for journalism, there are reputable media organizations across Europe that maintain public trust through integrity, professionalism, and fairness. At the same time, considering current challenges, it is necessary to further explore how media can provide even more reliable and objective information while fully preserving editorial independence.

Conclusion

This study examined the ethical principles governing the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations and explored their relevance within the contemporary Georgian media environment. Through a comparative analysis of the editorial guidelines, ethical codes, and professional standards of leading Western media organizations, alongside the ethical frameworks operating in Georgia, the research sought to identify the fundamental principles of responsible religious reporting and assess their applicability within Georgian journalistic practice.

The findings demonstrate that, despite differences in media systems, institutional traditions, and socio-political contexts, Western media organizations share a common normative understanding of ethical journalism. Their editorial policies are based on such principles as accuracy, verification, impartiality, balance, editorial independence, accountability, transparency, and respect for human dignity. These principles form the foundation of responsible journalism and provide practical guidance for addressing ethical dilemmas in everyday reporting.

Particular attention is devoted to the coverage of religion and religious communities. The analysis revealed that leading Western media organizations emphasize contextualization, the avoidance of stereotypes, the prevention of hate speech, and the careful treatment of sacred symbols and religious beliefs. Ethical guidelines consistently stress that religious identity should be mentioned only when directly relevant to a story and should never be used in a manner that contributes to stigmatization, prejudice, or discrimination. Such standards are especially important in diverse democratic societies, where media narratives significantly influence public attitudes and social relations.

The research also demonstrated that Georgian media ethical frameworks largely correspond to internationally recognized professional standards. The Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the Charter of Journalistic Ethics, and other professional documents reflect many of the same principles found in Western ethical frameworks, including commitments to truthfulness, fairness, professional responsibility, freedom of expression, pluralism, and respect for human dignity. This suggests that the Georgian media environment possesses a solid normative basis for ethical journalism. At the same time, the study indicates that the existence of ethical codes alone cannot guarantee ethical reporting. The effectiveness of ethical standards depends on their practical implementation, institutional support, editorial culture, and the professional competence of journalists. Many contemporary media challenges arise not from the absence of ethical regulations but from inconsistencies in their application. This observation is particularly relevant in transitional democracies, where media organizations often operate within politically polarized environments and under various economic and social pressures.

One of the central conclusions of the study is that religious reporting remains one of the most sensitive areas of journalism. Religion intersects with issues of identity, history, culture, politics, and human rights, making ethical responsibility especially important. Inaccurate or unbalanced reporting can contribute to misunderstanding, stereotyping, and social tension, while responsible journalism can facilitate informed public debate, promote tolerance, and strengthen democratic culture. Consequently, journalists covering religious issues must demonstrate a high degree of professional competence, ethical awareness, and editorial responsibility.

The findings further highlight the importance of editorial independence. Ethical journalism requires reporting to be guided by professional judgment rather than political, ideological, commercial, or religious interests. Editorial independence is not only a professional principle but also a prerequisite for public trust. The credibility of media organizations depends on the perception that information is produced fairly, accurately, and free from external influence.

The study also confirms the close relationship between media ethics and democratic communication. Ethical standards should not be viewed merely as professional

restrictions but as mechanisms that enable journalism to fulfill its democratic function. By ensuring accuracy, fairness, transparency, and accountability, media ethics contributes to the development of an informed public sphere and supports democratic participation, pluralism, and the protection of human rights.

Another important finding concerns the role of journalism education and professional training. Contemporary media environments are increasingly complex due to digital transformation, technological innovation, information overload, and social polarization. Under such conditions, professional competence must extend beyond technical reporting skills and include a strong understanding of ethical principles and decision-making processes. Strengthening media ethics education and expanding professional training opportunities would contribute significantly to improving the quality of religious reporting in Georgia.

The practical significance of this study lies in its recommendations for improving the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgian media. Greater emphasis should be placed on contextual reporting, fact verification, the clear separation of facts from opinions, the reduction of sensationalist practices, and the promotion of pluralism and diversity. Media organizations should actively encourage ethical awareness and professional accountability among journalists.

Future research should focus on empirical analyses of media content and newsroom practices in order to better understand how ethical standards are implemented in everyday journalistic work. Comparative content analyses, interviews with journalists and editors, and audience studies could provide valuable insights into the relationship between ethical principles and media performance.

In conclusion, media ethics remains one of the fundamental pillars of responsible journalism. In the context of religious reporting, ethical standards serve not only as professional guidelines but also as important instruments for protecting human dignity, promoting social cohesion, and strengthening democratic communication. The consistent implementation of these principles within the Georgian media environment can contribute significantly to the development of a more professional, credible, and socially responsible media system.

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