



Research Article

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An Exploration of Ethical Methods in Ghanaian Investigative Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Investigative journalism is specialized journalism dedicated to detail and precision, to uncover issues that ordinarily, conventional journalism may not casually or easily unearth. In Ghana, investigative journalists have been one of the fiercest critics of government corruption, and have been actively involved in investigating corruption in government using various methods. The use of clandestine methods and subterfuge by journalists such as Anas Aremeyaw Anas has been both praised and criticized. This study explored the perceptions of media professionals, activists, and academics regarding the use of clandestine methods or subterfuge in investigative journalism. The study adopted a qualitative methodology and used question guides to conduct interviews with seven respondents, considered experts in their various areas. The study established that the use of clandestine methods and subterfuge in Ghanaian journalism was conditional, not a standard practice, premised on and influenced by several factors. Key amongst them were the legal and ethical context in which journalists operate, practical realities, the prevailing wind of public opinion, and the experience of the journalist.

INTRODUCTION

Investigative journalism has long served as a tool for investigating corruption, injustice, and misconduct (Eijk, 2005). Ghana has arguably some of the most high-profile scandals in political, business, and athletic affairs, exposing it not through press releases or leaked documents, but via undercover investigations (Alhassan & Odartey-Wellington, 2018). Journalists have camouflaged themselves in a quest for the truth. They have used secret cameras, worked behind closed doors, and deceived the system to make their way into this place by deception (BBC, 2015). One of the main figures in many of these things is Anas Aremeyaw Anas, whose secret tapes have led to the downgrading of judges, football officials, and other power brokers (BBC, 2015; Alhassan & Odartey-Wellington, 2018). But, these are not universally accepted methods (Marx, 2010). While some regard clandestine journalism as indispensable, particularly in such a system of power

where powerful people easily wipe out evidence, others posit it is an ethical problem and damages the public confidence in the media (Gadzekpo, 2008; Ward, 2009). These ethical dilemmas create key questions of relevance. What motivation is driving Ghanaian journalists to use secret methods to conduct investigations? How do they consider the ethics of using deception in their reporting? Do personal experiences of such methods shape their attitudes? And which ethical or professional frameworks do they use to help guide them on whether or not to use these covert techniques? Investigative journalism is essential to exposing corruption, abuse of power, and other societal injustices. The most explosive disclosures, like judicial corruption and football bribery in Ghana, have stemmed from undercover investigations involving hidden cameras, disguises, and deception (Alhassan & Odartey-Wellington, 2018). This is also true when it comes to journalists, especially journalists associated with investigative

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bodies like Tiger Eye PI, who have used similar tactics to expose misconduct that would otherwise be hidden. Yet these methods still carry considerable controversy. Some journalists and media practitioners support, as a matter of necessity, the use of covert methods for the purpose of exposing corruption and ensuring that the powerful have a chance to be held accountable (Skjerdal, 2010; Ward, 2009); others argue that these techniques constitute a breach of journalistic ethics, a violation of individuals' right to privacy, and a blurry line between journalism and entrapment (Nyarko, 2016). There is a continuing legal and ethical discussion over whether deception can be justified in order to find the truth (Plaisance, 2014). If these approaches revealed important information, they also triggered ethical discussions within Ghana's journalistic community and beyond (Ofori-Parku & Botwe, 2019). Some journalists and media scholars argue that subterfuge is justified in the public interest, especially in the detection of wrongdoing not covered by conventional methods (Houston, 2009; Ojebode & Akinwale, 2010). Still others warn that deception for investigations, even for the sake of investigation, is not without implications: even its most basic form is unethical, infringing journalistic standards, individual rights and privacy rights, as well as legal boundaries, potentially undermining people's trust in the media (Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ], 2014; Berger, 2017).

In Ghana, the public reception of undercover journalism has been mixed, while some commend it for its social value, others criticize its methods as unethical or politically motivated (Ofori-Parku & Botwe, 2019). Yet, despite the attention this topic has received in public discourse, there is a lack of empirical research that critically examines the perceptions of Ghanaian journalists, lecturers, lawyers and CSOs regarding the use of clandestine methods in investigative journalism. Their perspectives are essential, as they shape editorial decisions, influence media policy, and determine the ethical direction of investigative journalism in the country.

Justification

We argue that without contextual understanding of the professional and ethical orientations of Ghanaian journalists and the foundations of their justification or condemnation of the use of subterfuge, it would be difficult to produce ethical codes and guidelines that are acceptable in the Ghanaian socio-cultural context.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore and analyze the perceptions of Ghanaian journalists, lawyers, lecturers, CSOs on the use of clandestine tin investigative journalism, focusing on the ethical, professional, and contextual factors that influence these views.

Significance of the Study

Understanding how Ghanaian journalists and media

professionals perceive the use of clandestine methods is crucial for several reasons. First, this study will shed light on the ethical frameworks guiding journalistic practices in the country. As media professionals navigate the challenges of reporting in a complex socio-political environment, their attitudes towards subterfuge can influence not only their work but also public trust in the media.

Second, this research will contribute to broader discussions on journalistic ethics, particularly in contexts where traditional journalism norms may be challenged by evolving practices. By focusing on the Ghanaian context, the study aims to fill a gap in the literature and provide insights that can inform both academic discourse and practical guidelines for journalists.

Notable Cases of Clandestine Methods in Investigative Journalism

Judicial Scandal

Using hidden cameras and disguises, Anas Aremeyaw Anas caught judges and court staff accepting bribes to influence rulings. This led to over 30 judges and magistrates being suspended or dismissed (BBC, 2015).

Number 12

The Football Scandal: In another high-profile case, Anas exposed corruption within Ghanaian football with his footage showing the then-GFA president Kwesi Nyantakyi accepting bribes to influence football deals (Alhassan & Odartey-Wellington, 2018). The exposé resulted in Nyantakyi's resignation, and a lifetime ban from FIFA (Alhassan & Odartey-Wellington, 2018).

Spirit Child

Anas also investigated a disturbing cultural practice in northern Ghana, where babies believed to be "spirit children" were killed (Tiger Eye PI, 2010). Going undercover, he documented the killings and sparked public outcry, leading to state intervention and social change (Tiger Eye PI, 2010).

Research Aim

The study aims to investigate the professional and ethical justifications for the use or avoidance of the use of subterfuge and clandestine methods for investigative journalism.

Research Objectives

- To study the perceptions of Ghanaian journalists and media professionals on the use of clandestine or undercover methods in investigative journalism.
- To understand the reasons or factors that influence journalists' support for or opposition to the use of subterfuge in journalism.
- To examine how personal experiences, professional exposure, and ethical views shape these perceptions.

Research Questions

- What overriding motives and beliefs drive the use of clandestine or undercover methods by Ghanaian journalists?
- What are the dominant arguments that influence the adoption of subterfuge and clandestine methods in Ghanaian investigative?
- How is the ethical debate harnessed in opposition to the use of undercover methods in Ghanaian investigative journalism?
- What ideological, moral or professional factors differences shape the use of undercover methods in Ghanaian investigative journalism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two ethical theories, Utilitarianism and Deontological theories.

Utilitarianism

Scholars such as Kay (2018) note that Utilitarianism is the most noted expression or version of consequentialist ethics. Kay further explains that consequentialist ethical theories assess the morality of actions within the restricted context of their outcomes. In this regard, consequentialist ethical theories de-emphasize the motives or circumstances as opposed to Deontology, which assesses actions based on what agents or actors consider and the will or desire to act (Kay, 2018).

According to Darko (2020) the theory of utilitarianism is more concerned about the consequences of an act than the rightness or wrongness of that act.

Jeremy Bentham, an 18th-century philosopher and jurist, is credited as the proponent of the theory (Bentham, 1890). The theory has also been significantly influenced by John Stuart Mills (Mills, 2016). According to Sanders (2003), the key principle underlying the utilitarian theory is that the effects of actions are critical to evaluating their ethical value.

There are many ways to advance this general claim. One thing to note is that the theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of the consequences produced (Driver, 2009). In our considered view, the theory, therefore, can provide a justification of the use of various methods to obtain information and expose wrongdoing in society by journalists.

Deontological Theory

The Deontological Theory of Ethics emphasizes a strict adherence to moral rules even when the consequences are not comfortable (Dilbar, 2024; Barrow and Khandhar, 2017). In the context of journalism, this theory emphasizes the need for journalists to adhere to professional ethical codes and uphold moral obligations such as truthfulness,

transparency, and respect for privacy. For example, using clandestine methods like hidden cameras, impersonation or secret recordings would be considered as unethical from a deontological standpoint because they involve deception (POPA, 2023). Even if the clandestine methods result in exposing corruption or wrongdoing, the use of deception is still considered morally unacceptable.

This view is also borne out in journalism ethics codes including the GJA Code of Ethics, which stress fairness, accuracy, and respect for human dignity. Deontological ethics is a rigorous paradigm that prompts journalists to consider whether what they say is moral, rather than helpful outcomes. Although we may appreciate the idea that this theory preserves freedoms of the individual and the integrity of journalism, it is just as rigid in this instance, initiatives such as journalists in which ethical obligations may stifle the realization of crucial truths.

Related Studies

A major advance in the discourse also comes from Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2019) in a study on meta-journalistic discourses surrounding Anas Aremeyaw Anas's undercover investigations that examines how both media professionals and the public make and contest the legitimacy of undercover journalism. Their examination of the #Number12 exposé shows that the reactions to subterfuge are, in their own analysis, profoundly polarized. Some see undercover investigations as essential mechanisms for rooting out corruption. Other people condemn them as not just being ethically suspect, but even criminal.

Importantly, as Ofori-Parku and Botwe claim, these attitudes are heavily influenced by political identities, media ownership interests, and ideological biases rather than coherent ethical considerations. This remark hints at a more general theoretical tension in journalism studies: assessments of ethical conduct are often influenced by power dynamics rather than normative values. Ofori-Parku and Botwe's (2019) contributions are not normative, but discursive ones. That is, the work they do offer is on public and institutional framing of undercover journalism, not the internal ethical analytical processes of journalists, lawyers, or civil society participants who interface with such measures.

Although their findings highlight the contending field of public debate, they do not explore how practitioners justify, reject, or negotiate the use of deception as part of their professional life. Such a gap highlights the necessity for first-hand rather than mediated perceptions to be studied empirically, a gap the current study aims to bridge. Darko (2020) develops the ethical and legal aspects of clandestine reporting further, along with a more detailed report on the legal dimension of investigative journalism in Ghana interrogating the tension between public interest and individual privacy.

Darko notes that Ghana's constitutional arrangements

safeguard freedom of expression as much as the right to privacy, which, of course, creates inbuilt contradictions when journalists engage in deceitful means such as hidden cameras. His examination proves particularly relevant given the ruling, published by the Supreme Court in 2016, which upheld Anas's secret recordings and also the precedent that public interest is more important among those taking part in cases of corruption. Darko also identifies a huge regulatory vacuum: Ghana does not have specific ethics guidelines for investigative journalism, forcing practitioners to rely on patchy institutional norms or individual moral compasses. But for all its rigour, though, Darko's work is mostly normative. It talks about ethics and principles and legal theories but it does not explain what journalists, lawyers, or CSOs themselves feel these pressures look like in day-to-day practice. Also, Darko certainly acknowledges, although he is unable to cite any ethical guidelines to back it up, that he does not investigate whether journalists themselves think this is difficult or how they approach ethical decision-making without established professional standards.

These limitations highlight the merits of an empirical examination of practitioner perspectives; a question addressed in this study. Gadzekpo (2008) offers a more comprehensive context for understanding the media landscape in Ghana, where the paper, *When the Watchman Slips*, locates investigative journalism in Ghana's democratic transition and changes to press freedoms. She notes the rise of "hybrid journalism," a blend of professional, ethically ambiguous practices like exaggeration, "soli," and standard lying, arguing that these have weakened media's accountability and muddied the waters of just lawful investigation and manipulation.

It is in this context that clandestine techniques are occasionally justified as necessary tools to illuminate systemic corruption, particularly when standard reporting falls short. Gadzekpo's critique is, nevertheless, institutional as opposed to experiential. Although she warns against the indiscriminate use of subterfuge, her analysis does not take into account how journalists differentiate between the use of deception for both justified and unjustified purposes. Nor does it scrutinise the impact of age, training, newsroom environment, or media context on perceptions of clandestine methods. Additionally, although the report draws upon McQuail's (2000) model of media accountability, it does not deploy the latter specifically to undercover journalism or to the ways journalists self-regulate in contexts of inadequate external oversight. The missing elements underscore further voids of current literature that remain unresolved. An international perspective adds another layer of complication to the puzzle through the argument.

Marx (2010), writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, investigates the ethical controversies surrounding undercover journalism in the particular case of politically motivated investigation by James O'Keefe. Marx identifies

three central dilemmas: the tension between public interest and privacy, risk to journalistic credibility, and cultural variances in acceptance of deceptive practices. Marx does not specifically concern Ghana, but his arguments find a particularly familiar resonance with contemporary local debates, particularly in places where the public trust in journalists may be questioned or diminished, where it is delicate and corruption at the levels of the institution is rampant. Marx's teaching is not to just think in terms of this ethical quandary.

Issues related to journalistic subterfuge are hardly limited to Ghana, but they echo larger international tensions between truth-seeking in the 21st century and ethical transparency. Despite the wide-ranging scope of contributions, though, there are still key deficiencies in the literature that persist. First, for example, with a lack of empirical studies on how practitioner's journalists, lawyers, scholars and CSOs in Ghana see and justify clandestine methods and in what way. Most of the previous work has been public-oriented: reaction, legal outcomes or institutional practices, leaving practitioner perspectives underdeveloped. Second, the literature does not sufficiently address how demographic and professional differences among journalists shape their ethical judgments.

Younger journalists, for example, may think they are doing undercover reporting in a different way from their older friends and peers on the back of generational differences in training and technology. Third, the impact of new digital tools on ethical decision making is generally unexplored in that area. Context: Ghana, with an increasing hidden camera use, digital surveillance and encrypted communication. Finally, researchers have not sufficiently interrogated journalists' views of the relationship between clandestine techniques and public trust. While this has been argued to improve credibility by exposing corruption, others argue that deception diminishes the press's moral authority. It is essential to explore how practitioners themselves negotiate this tension to improve the ethical code and ethical standards in investigative journalism.

Although the historical foundation of existing literature provides some foundational insights into moral, social and legal issues of the investigation of covert journalism, its descriptive or normative focus limits it. In short, the current literature tries to explain this with some useful suggestions: the ongoing study is addressing these gaps in knowledge by investigating the first-hand perceptions of Ghanaian journalists, lawyers, lecturers and civil society organizations about covert ways. Through this method, the paper provides a nuanced and grounded perspective on the ethical boundaries drawn within inquiry work to build richer and context-sensitive

Conceptual Review

Investigative Journalism

There appears to be no universally accepted definition for

investigative journalism among communication scholars or practitioners (Cancela, 2021). However, there is a general recognition among academics and practitioners that investigative journalism represents a vibrant form of news reporting that explores issues comprehensively, providing “critical depth” (van Eijk, 2005).

According to MacFadyen (2008) the requirements for evidence to claims made by journalists are far more rigorous and higher in investigative journalism than in conventional news reporting.

Ettema and Glasser (2007) also share the view that investigative reporting can be expressed as a type of journalism that adopts rigorous methodological approaches. be journalism at its most politically vigorous and methodologically rigorous.” According to Houston (2010), investigative journalism is “fiscally conservative, probing waste, fraud, and abuse in government agencies”.

As noted by Yusha’u (2009) the emphasis on rigor and vigor signifies intensity required to play watchdog role in society; a role that requires a distinctive effort beyond reliance on leaks or secondary sources of information (Yusha’u, 2009).

Investigative journalism is generally described as “quality journalism” by scholars and journalists (Cancela, 2012). Thus, there is a implicit requirement for detailed and revealing coverage of issues with emphasis on a very high quality of news reportage (Aucoin, 2005). Some professionals, however, to differentiate it and consider it the very essence of journalism (Charon 2003; Aucoin 2005)..

UNESCO (n.d.) also defines investigative journalism as enquiry-based journalism that unveils issues that hitherto had been concealed either accidentally or deliberately by people in authority, and such unveiling is in the public interest.

It often involves long-term research, fact-checking, and the pursuit of information that is deliberately concealed from the public (UNESCO, n.d). Unlike routine reporting, investigative journalism seeks to reveal wrongdoing that would otherwise remain hidden (UNESCO, n.d).

Clandestine Methods/Subterfuge

According to CBC radio Canada, (2017) in Journalism, clandestine methods include a range of methods such as secretly recording a conversation, scenes or statements with the aid of technological aids that are hidden from the targets of investigation; concealing your identity as a journalist when conducting interviews with targets of investigation; surreptitiously asking someone else to gather information on our behalf using any of these methods; and using techniques that emphasise concealment to gather digital information.

Subterfuge on the other hand involves deceit employed to achieve a specific goal and involve the use of covert techniques to gather information that cannot be obtained openly (CBC Radio Canada, 2017). These methods include

the use of hidden cameras, false identities or secret recordings. (CBC Radio Canada,2017).

Journalistic Ethics

Journalistic ethics refers to the professional standards and moral principles that guide journalists in the execution of their duties, and they include values such as accuracy, objectivity, truthfulness, fairness, and accountability. (GJA,1994).

In Ghana, there is no specialized code dedicated solely for investigative journalism. Rather what exists is a generic code for journalism that also captures elements or aspects of investigative journalism, with the prominent example being the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) Code of Ethics (Darko, 2020).

The 2017 revised GJA code of ethics clearly states that journalists must “obtain information, videos, data, photographs and illustrations only by honest, straightforward, fair and open means unless otherwise tampered by public interest considerations”.

National laws and international codes of guidance also provide guidance to the country’s journalism industry (Darko, 2020). A significant tension arises when journalists have to decide between a strict adherence to these norms or using dodgy means of concealment, such as through subterfuge and other clandestine methods, in order to reveal hidden truths. Though these methods might be considered unethical, they are sometimes justified by a utilitarian stance. This is particularly evident in the US, where the Society of Professional Journalism’s code of ethics states that the use of undercover or covert techniques of gathering information is justified when open approaches will not reveal the truth and will not serve the public interest (Chernow, 2014). For example, media regulatory bodies like those in Britain (including IPSO for print and online journalists and OFCOM for broadcast journalists) provide a rationale to ethically justify breaches if there is “a clear public interest served” by such a breach (IPSO Editor Code, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This research focused on a qualitative approach as an exploratory study, especially appropriate for social phenomena that call for deep insights into human experience, perspectives, and interpretation. The core objective of this study is to examine the beliefs of Ghanaian journalists and media figures regarding the use of secret or misleading means, including clandestine or deceptive methods such as undercover reporting, hidden cameras, and impersonation in investigative journalism. Such practices tend to generate important ethical dilemmas concerning the tension between public interest and journalistic integrity. A qualitative approach was suitable as it enables collection and interpretation of high-quality,

context-rich data that is sensitive to the subjective meanings people attach to ethically complex situations.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was used as the main sampling technique in this study. Respondents included journalists, lawyers, academics, and CSO activists. They were chosen for their professional profiles as investigative journalists, lawyers with media or journalism backgrounds, academics with the requisite knowledge and experience in journalism, and civil society experts with backgrounds in media and law. These provided an opportunity to explore the issues professionally and dispassionately, with the appropriate professional lenses.

Data Collection

The primary data collection technique for our study was semi-structured interviews, as they are well-suited for qualitative research exploring complex human experiences and ethical beliefs. This method allows the researcher to combine predetermined questions with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Creswell, 2013). Since our study investigates Ghanaian journalists' perceptions of using clandestine methods during investigative journalism, this technique offers an effective way to elicit thoughtful, in-depth reflections.

We created an interview guide detailing the main themes aligned with our research questions, which enabled us to explore unanticipated but relevant topics that could arise. The guide featured open-ended questions on participants' experiences with undercover journalism, ethical concerns associated with these practices, justifications for adopting or rejecting them, and their perceived impact on public trust and journalistic credibility. We conducted interviews face-to-face whenever possible to allow direct interaction and observation of non-verbal cues, which often enrich data collection by adding depth.

Where face-to-face meetings were impractical, we used Zoom and phone calls, in line with ethical and logistical considerations. Each interview ranged between 20 and 40 minutes, depending on participants' willingness and availability. With participants' consent, we audio-recorded all interviews to ensure accurate capture of responses and allow for thorough transcription and analysis. Through semi-structured interviews, we aimed to create an open and trusting environment where journalists, journalistic lecturers, chief security officers in charge of media, and some lawyers could speak freely about their ethical reasoning and professional practices, enabling us to collect rich, detailed, and authentic data.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data gathered through interviews, this study adopted thematic analysis as the principal method of data interpretation. Thematic analysis is a widely used approach in qualitative research that involves identifying,

analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a flexible and accessible framework for analyzing textual data, such as interview transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen not only for its systematic structure but also for its ability to accommodate both inductive and deductive reasoning. While the study had guiding objectives, it allowed for new themes to emerge from the data itself. This balance between structure and openness is essential for capturing the complexity of journalists' perceptions regarding subterfuge (Terry et al., 2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Profiles of Respondents

Respondent 1

Ghanaian investigative journalist who has produced landmark investigations that led to major institutional fallouts in Ghana, prompting resignations, suspensions, and national conversations about corruption. Has won multiple domestic and international awards for investigative reporting and recognition from organizations for anti-corruption impact, including the Journalist of the Year Award by the Ghana Journalists Association. Sometimes uses undercover methods that sometimes generate ethical debates. Despite critiques, he gets praise sometimes for exposing corruption.

Respondent 2

Longstanding Ghanaian journalist who has held leadership roles in the profession (including General Secretary of the Ghana Journalists Association) and later moved into teaching and communications roles. An author with more than 20 years of experience in journalism and has experience in broadcaster/editorial roles. Contributes to regional and international outlets covering media freedom, tech and governance (Global Voices, Guardian syndications and commentary). Also trains and mentors journalists. Has won several journalism awards.

Respondent 3

Veteran journalist and lawyer who also worked as editor of a leading newspaper in Ghana. Also, a journalism lecturer who trains and mentors journalists across the country. Has also served as the Chairman of the Ghana National Media Commission. An author and an authority in Media Law and Ethics. Has won several awards including the Journalist of the Year Award by the Ghana Journalists Association.

Respondent 4

A respected Investigative journalist and author, who has worked with leading media organisations and CSOs in the country. Conducted ground breaking investigative reports that have led to policy changes in the country. Also, won several awards and recognitions in Ghana and across the

African continent including the Journalist of the Year by the Ghana Journalists Association.

Respondent 5

A senior and highly respected academic (Professor) in Communication Studies in a leading University in the country, working in top leadership roles. Also worked with leading civil society organisations and anticorruption bodies. A leading voice in media rights and freedom and one of the most respected authorities in media ethics, policy, and gender and communication in the country.

Respondent 6

Executive Director of a leading civil society organization in the country that focuses on law, accountability, and training of journalists. Frequently cited in policy discussions on Right-to-Information and transparency in Ghana. An award-winning investigative journalist, who has also trained as a lawyer. A consummate advocate for press freedom and Right-to-Information policies and regulations. Also trains journalists in investigative/reporting techniques, and engages in regional accountability initiatives.

Respondent 7

Strong profile in journalism and known for investigative pieces on human impact and development issues. Works for one of the leading media organisations in Ghana. Has won several journalism awards including the Journalist of the Year Award by the Ghana Journalists' Association.

RQ1: Perception of Clandestine Methods

To answer the first research question, participants were asked about their understanding of clandestine methods and their views on their place within investigative journalism. Their responses revealed a complex and often ambivalent picture. Three themes dominated the analysis: clandestine methods were accepted under certain conditions, they generated negative views and concerns, and they were also associated with positive views and benefits. These perspectives suggest that journalists' attitudes are shaped by a tension between professional ideals and the practical demands of uncovering hidden wrongdoing.

Accepted Under Certain Conditions

The first theme that emerged was the conditional acceptance of clandestine practices. Journalists generally agreed that such methods should not be part of everyday reporting but could be justified when circumstances demanded. They defined clandestine methods as practices involving secrecy, deception, or disguise. Respondent 1 described them as "anything you do which you cannot do in the open ambushing people, disguising yourself, pretending that you are somebody you are not." This definition reflects a shared recognition that clandestine methods lie outside

the normal expectations of transparency and openness.

Yet respondents did not reject them outright. Instead, they highlighted public interest as the primary condition for their use. Respondent 2 explained, "There might be some public interest consideration, because without that, the use of subterfuge is dysfunctional." For him, clandestine methods could only be defended if they served a collective good, such as exposing corruption or protecting vulnerable communities. Respondent 3 added a further restriction: "Subterfuge must be the last resort. Before you decide to use it, you must ask, can I not get that information any other way?" His insistence reflects a cautious, almost reluctant acceptance of deception, where the legitimacy of clandestine work is tied to its necessity.

Interestingly, some journalists described conditional acceptance not only as an ethical requirement but also as a practical strategy to protect credibility. If an investigation could be conducted openly, it was seen as more professional and less likely to raise questions about motives. Thus, clandestine methods were viewed as a powerful but dangerous tool, to be used sparingly and strategically.

In summary, this theme shows that acceptance of clandestine reporting is shaped by a pragmatic calculation: if the public interest is strong and no other method works, then clandestine practices are justified. Otherwise, they are considered illegitimate.

Negative Views and Concerns

Despite this conditional acceptance, many respondents expressed reservations about the use of clandestine methods. One of the strongest concerns was their potential to undermine trust. Journalism depends heavily on credibility, and deception was seen by some as fundamentally incompatible with that trust.

The danger to personal safety was another recurring concern. Undercover investigations often target powerful actors with resources to retaliate. Respondent 5 explained, "If your identity is exposed, it's a threat to your life. Sometimes it is not worth it, you must weigh the costs." Similarly, Respondent 6 warned, "There are risk factors associated with subterfuge, and you must bear the consequences if you are not discreet enough." These statements highlight that for many journalists, the calculation of whether to go undercover is not just ethical but existential: one mistake could cost a career or even a life.

Legal consequences also shaped negative perceptions. Some journalists among the respondents pointed out that Ghana's constitution and codes of ethics stress transparency, permitting clandestine work only in exceptional cases. Respondent 1 observed, "The law protects security zones. Freedom does not mean you can go anywhere and do whatever you want. If you are caught, you suffer the penalty. If you are not caught, the public may applaud you." This comment underscores the precarious

position of journalists; they may be celebrated if successful but punished if discovered.

Finally, respondents worried that overuse of clandestine practices could harm the entire profession. Respondent 4 explained, “Depending on the methods you adopt, it has gotten the public to lose a certain trust in journalists. People are now careful and suspicious of us.” This perspective shows that mistrust is not just an individual burden but can tarnish journalism’s collective reputation.

In short, the second theme demonstrates that journalists perceive clandestine methods as risky, both for individuals and for the profession. Concerns about credibility, legal vulnerability, and safety temper enthusiasm for undercover work.

Positive Views and Benefits

Despite these concerns, some journalists among the respondents argued that clandestine methods are essential for effective investigative journalism. They stressed that many wrongdoings are deliberately hidden and cannot be exposed by straightforward means. Respondent 4 insisted, “We can never do away with undercover journalism. In fact, we need more of that to uncover misfits within society and expose wrongdoings”. His words capture the sense that clandestine methods empower journalists to fulfill their watchdog role in contexts where corruption and abuse thrive behind closed doors.

Respondent 7 also emphasized the societal benefits of successful undercover work: “The public may denounce you if your motives are selfish. But when the issue is about public interest, the public will stand with you.” This indicates that journalists view clandestine methods as legitimate when they generate outcomes that resonate with public concerns. In this sense, public reception becomes part of the ethical equation, stories that serve society can justify controversial methods.

Some respondents reflected on the symbolic power of clandestine reporting. Successful investigations were seen not only as revelations of truth but as demonstrations of journalism’s relevance. They reminded the public that the press could still hold the powerful accountable. Respondent 1 argued, “What is important is to undertake the exercise and show us the outcome, without telling us how you got it. The moment we know the methods, our reactions change.” This shows that, in practice, audiences may focus more on the story’s impact than on the means of obtaining it.

For these journalists, clandestine methods were not simply tolerated but celebrated as catalysts for social change. They cited past examples where undercover work had influenced policy reforms, reduced corruption, and raised awareness of hidden injustices. These positive accounts contrasted sharply with the cautious or skeptical voices, revealing deep divisions within the profession.

RQ2: Factors Influencing Support or Opposition to Clandestine Methods

The second research question examined the key factors that shape whether Ghanaian journalists support or oppose the use of clandestine methods in investigative reporting. The analysis revealed four dominant influences: law and policy, ethical considerations, practical challenges, and public opinion. These factors were often interconnected, suggesting that journalists’ decisions are rarely straightforward but instead involve balancing multiple pressures at once.

Law and Policy Influence

The most prominent factor shaping journalists’ stance was the legal and policy environment. Many respondents stressed that Ghana’s laws, constitutional guarantees, and professional codes act as both guides and constraints.

Journalists were particularly mindful of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) Code of Ethics, which advises reporters to obtain information by straightforward means, except where overriding public interest demands otherwise. Respondent 7 stated: “The GJA Code is clear: you do not use clandestine methods unless it is the last option. If you breach that, you cannot defend your work before the ethics committee.” This suggests that institutional oversight provides a formal boundary within which clandestine practices may or may not be tolerated.

Legal vulnerability was another source of hesitation. Some respondents worried that evidence obtained through deception might not stand in court, weakening the impact of investigative work. Respondent 2 noted: “A court may throw away your evidence if you obtained it unlawfully. Then all your risks are wasted.” This practical concern shows that even successful undercover operations may fail to achieve accountability if they are legally contested.

Overall, legal and policy frameworks acted as both deterrents and justifications. While they discouraged reckless use of subterfuge, they also allowed journalists to defend such methods when the public interest was demonstrably at stake.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics emerged as a second crucial factor influencing support or opposition to clandestine reporting. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that journalism’s credibility depends on honesty and transparency. Deception, therefore, must be weighed carefully against professional integrity. Respondent 4 observed: “Especially when we mislead our sources, that becomes a breach of trust. If the public finds out, it reduces confidence in us.” This highlights how ethical breaches can erode not only individual reputations but also collective trust in the media.

However, some participants stressed that ethical evaluation cannot be separated from intentions and outcomes. Respondent 7 explained: “If your aim is selfish,



maybe to disgrace someone because of a personal grudge, that is unethical. But if your motive is to protect the public, then subterfuge becomes justified.” This suggests that journalists perceive ethics not as rigid prohibitions but as a balancing act between intent and impact.

Other respondents pointed out that ethical concerns extend beyond professional codes to human dignity. Respondent 6 gave an example: “If you record someone defecating in the open, yes, you have evidence. But if the person shows you medical proof that they had no choice, empathy should stop you from publishing.” His statement demonstrates that fairness and compassion are critical filters through which journalists decide whether clandestine work should be carried through to publication.

Practical Challenges

The third theme revealed that practical realities also shape journalists’ decisions. Several respondents noted that clandestine reporting is inherently dangerous and resource-intensive. Respondent 7 reflected: “If your identity is exposed, it is not just your job at risk but your life. You must calculate the risks before deciding.” This fear of retaliation made some participants reluctant to engage in subterfuge, especially when powerful actors were involved.

Another practical challenge was the technological environment. Some respondents observed that new digital tools both empower and endanger clandestine work. Respondent 1 remarked: “AI can enable you to monitor something far away, reducing the risk of going undercover. But AI can also expose you if someone detects the device you are using.” This demonstrates the double-edged nature of technological innovation: while it provides safer alternatives to physical disguise, it also creates new vulnerabilities.

Resource limitations further discouraged undercover investigations. Respondent 5 complained: “Sometimes, going undercover requires huge logistics, which include hidden cameras, legal backup, and protective cover. Many newsrooms here cannot provide that.” This illustrates that the viability of clandestine work is often determined less by professional ideals than by material realities.

The theme of practical challenges, therefore, highlights that decisions about clandestine reporting are influenced not just by abstract ethics but also by the gritty realities of risk, cost, and technological exposure.

Public Opinion and Reactions

A final factor was the influence of public opinion. Respondents emphasized that audiences play a crucial role in legitimizing or delegitimizing clandestine work. Respondent 3 explained: “When the public sees that you are serving their interest, they will stand with you. But if they believe your motive is selfish, they will denounce you.” This reflects the social contract underpinning journalism, that is clandestine methods are tolerated when they

produce stories that resonate with citizens’ concerns.

Interestingly, some respondents noted that public reactions often focus on outcomes rather than methods. Respondent 4 argued: “What matters to the public is the outcome, not the process. If your story exposes corruption, they will applaud you, even if you disguised yourself to get it.” This suggests that in practice, audiences may overlook ethical complexities if the investigation delivers tangible results.

However, others cautioned that public opinion could shift quickly. Respondent 6 warned: “The same public that hails you today can condemn you tomorrow if they think you entrapped someone unfairly.” This volatility means that journalists cannot rely solely on audience approval but must ground their choices in professional standards.

RQ3: The Role of Experience, Ethics, and Exposure

The third research question investigated how experience, ethics, and exposure shape Ghanaian journalists’ perceptions of clandestine methods in investigative journalism. The data revealed three interrelated themes: experience with the media environment, personal experiences in practice, and professional training. These findings suggest that journalists’ views are not only shaped by abstract principles but also by the lessons they gain through their professional journeys.

Experience with Media

One of the strongest patterns in the interviews was the influence of broader media experience. Journalists consistently argued that clandestine work requires maturity and years of exposure to the realities of the profession. Respondent 1 warned: “When you are a very young reporter and you do not understand the fundamentals and the rudiments, don’t involve yourself in investigative journalism. Learn from others who are in the field and see what they are doing right.” His statement reflects a belief that novices lack the judgment, discretion, and resilience necessary for high-risk investigations.

Several participants emphasized that Ghana’s media landscape itself teaches caution. Newsrooms are resource-constrained, laws are strict, and public reactions are unpredictable. Respondent 2 remarked: “Our media environment is not forgiving. If you make a mistake in an undercover story, you will not just lose the story; you may lose your career.” This comment highlights how institutional fragility makes experience indispensable; only those who have survived the pressures of industry can assess whether clandestine methods are worth the risks.

For many respondents, then, general media experience acts as a filtering mechanism. The longer one works in journalism, the more one learns to balance ambition with prudence. Younger reporters may be enthusiastic about undercover stories, but veterans insist that only careful calculation and patience can produce credible and defensible investigations.

Personal Experience

Beyond general professional exposure, respondents' personal experiences deeply shaped their attitudes toward clandestine reporting. Several journalists recalled moments when ethical choices or sacrifices left lasting impressions on their careers. Respondent 3 recounted: "There are people who have gone to jail because they swore by their journalistic code not to disclose their sources. That is the sacrifice you make in protecting your ethics." This statement illustrates how personal encounters with risk and sacrifice reinforce the centrality of ethics in shaping decisions about clandestine methods.

Some respondents had themselves engaged in undercover work, and their experiences added practical nuance to their views. Respondent 4 explained: "Even me, despite all the journalism I've done, I still must go by the journalistic code and conduct. Without it, your film won't even air on international platforms." His reflection shows how personal practice intertwines with institutional demands, international broadcasters and audiences require ethical adherence, even when clandestine methods are employed.

Others stressed the role of personal values such as empathy, fairness, and integrity. Respondent 5 offered a vivid example: "Fairness, integrity, credibility, and empathy are values I hold dear. If you record someone defecating in the open, you have evidence. But if the person shows you medical proof that they had no choice, empathy should stop you from publishing." This reflection demonstrates how personal encounters with sources and stories force journalists to make difficult moral judgments, reminding them that evidence alone does not justify publication.

Personal experience, therefore, serves as both a cautionary and guiding force. Journalists who have seen the costs of recklessness or ethical lapses are more likely to advocate for responsible, values-driven use of clandestine methods.

Professional Training

A third theme concerned the role of professional training. Respondents highlighted that formal education and exposure to international practices strongly influence how journalists approach clandestine work. Several participants linked their ethical reflections to lessons learned in classrooms and training workshops. Respondent 6 observed: "Training teaches you that public interest is the only thing that lifts the game from self-centeredness to an evidential practice. That is what makes clandestine journalism credible anywhere in the world." His comment illustrates how professional instruction helps frame subterfuge as acceptable only when serving larger societal goals.

Others pointed to the value of historical and international exposure. Respondent 7 cited examples

of undercover journalism from the 19th century and noted their relevance today: "Even in the 19th century, journalists went undercover to expose institutions like mental asylums. Anas did the same with Accra Psychiatric Hospital. It was dangerous, but it influenced the Mental Health Bill." This shows how training and exposure to global history give journalists a sense of continuity and legitimacy for clandestine work, situating their practices within a long tradition of investigative reporting.

Professional training also reinforced the importance of boundaries. Respondent 8 explained: "Our lecturers always insisted that subterfuge is not an excuse for lawlessness. Even when you go undercover, you must be careful not to fabricate or entrap. Otherwise, your work loses its credibility." This shows that training not only encourages bold investigations but also stresses the ethical lines that must not be crossed.

Overall, professional training and exposure broaden journalists' horizons, giving them both the technical tools and ethical frameworks to evaluate clandestine methods critically.

Discussion of Findings and Analysis

This section discusses the findings presented in relation to the study's objectives and the wider body of literature on investigative journalism. While the earlier subsections reported participants' views thematically, this section interprets those views, drawing out patterns, contradictions, and implications.

Clandestine Reporting as Conditional Practice

The findings reveal that Ghanaian journalists approach clandestine reporting not as an absolute good or bad but as a conditional practice, to be deployed only when public interest is compelling and conventional reporting has failed.

From a deontological perspective, clandestine reporting presents an ethical breach because it involves deception, misrepresentation, or intrusion into privacy. Deontological ethics emphasize adherence to moral duties, truth-telling, transparency, and respect for people regardless of outcomes. Journalists who argued that deception erodes credibility and violates their professional duty were affirming this theory. Their view aligns with scholars such as Christians et al. (2020) and Marx (2010).

Clearly, the findings reveal an interaction between both Utilitarian Theory and the Deontological Theory in the use and perception of clandestine methods in Ghanaian investigative journalism:

This observation aligns with Darko's (2020) account of how Ghanaian courts balance press freedom and privacy, often favouring public interest in corruption cases. Thus, the findings reveal a dual ethical logic: journalists affirm deontological principles through their reluctance to deceive, while simultaneously applying utilitarian reasoning to justify deception in exceptional cases.

This consequentialist reasoning echoes Darko (2020), who notes that Ghana's courts often resolve tensions between privacy and press freedom in favor of public interest, as in the 2016 ruling that upheld Anas's secret recordings of judges. Here, the findings affirm utilitarian ethics, as journalists defended deception when the anticipated benefits (curbing corruption, strengthening democracy) outweighed harm (violating privacy or misleading sources).

The conditional stance also mirrors the meta-journalistic discourses identified by Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2019). Their study showed that undercover methods sparked polarized debates, shaped less by consistent ethics than by political allegiances and institutional interests. The present findings extend this by providing empirical evidence that, at the level of practice, journalists themselves consciously negotiate between deontological and utilitarian reasoning. While Ofori-Parku and Botwe focused on public framing of Anas's exposés, this study uncovers how journalists internalize those debates in their daily ethical reasoning. Thus, while both studies affirm the contested nature of clandestine reporting, this research disaffirms the assumption that perceptions are driven purely by ideology; practitioners demonstrate thoughtful, case-by-case moral calculations.

Gadzekpo (2008) also emphasized the dangers of "hybrid journalism," where deceptive methods are overused or applied in routine reporting. The present findings strongly affirm this caution. Journalists repeatedly insisted that clandestine reporting should be a "last resort," echoing Gadzekpo's warning that credibility collapses when deception becomes habitual. However, the findings diverge slightly from Gadzekpo's primarily normative critique, whereas her work laments the blurring of ethical boundaries, this study shows that practitioners themselves are acutely aware of those dangers and actively seek to avoid them.

The Ghanaian context helps explain why conditional acceptance dominates. First, the shadow of Anas Aremeyaw Anas looms large. His high-profile exposés praised for exposing systemic corruption yet condemned for entrapment have created a professional environment where clandestine reporting is simultaneously valorized and distrusted. Second, Ghana's legal framework heightens risk: the 1992 Constitution grants broad press freedoms but restricts them under Article 164 (privacy, morality, state security). Journalists know that undercover work can land them in court, shaping their cautious acceptance. Third, the volatile nature of public opinion reinforces conditionality, as respondents noted, the same public that cheers when a minister is exposed may condemn journalists if they perceive manipulation. This fragility makes an unconditional embrace of subterfuge untenable. Overall, the findings show that Ghanaian journalists straddle both, affirming each in different contexts. They affirm deontological principles by rejecting deception as

a norm, but they affirm utilitarian principles by allowing exceptions when democratic accountability is at stake. In doing so, they partially affirm prior studies supporting Gadzekpo's warning about overuse and Darko's analysis of public interest balancing while also extending Ofori-Parku and Botwe's discursive framing with grounded, practitioner-level evidence.

The implication is that clandestine reporting in Ghana cannot be neatly categorized as ethical or unethical. Instead, it operates in a morally gray zone, where journalists weigh risks and benefits within fragile legal, political, and social contexts. This negotiation positions Ghanaian journalism as a profession defined by ethical pragmatism a balancing act between duty, consequence, and democratic necessity.

Legal, Ethical, and Public Opinion Constraints

The findings highlighted that Ghanaian journalists' use of clandestine methods is significantly shaped by legal restrictions, ethical considerations, and the weight of public opinion. These three forces law, morality, and legitimacy form a set of boundaries within which clandestine journalism must operate, often creating contradictions that force journalists into uneasy compromises.

Legal Dimensions: Between Freedom and Restriction

Legally, Ghana's 1992 Constitution offers both protection and limitation. Article 162 guarantees press freedom, while Article 164 restricts it in matters of privacy, morality, and state security. Journalists in this study demonstrated acute awareness of this tension. Respondents stressed that trespassing, recording without consent, or publishing classified information might not only undermine credibility but also result in criminal prosecution.

This finding affirms Darko (2020), who documented how Ghana's judiciary often resolves conflicts between privacy and press freedom in favor of public interest, most notably in the 2016 case where the Supreme Court upheld Anas's secret recordings of corrupt judges. By citing these risks, respondents confirmed that legal precedent does not eliminate uncertainty; rather, it forces journalists into case-by-case calculations. Unlike journalists in some Western contexts who rely on established legal doctrines, Ghanaian practitioners operate under what Gadzekpo (2009) describes as "bounded liberty" a framework where broad freedoms are curtailed by vague limitations that may be inconsistently applied.

From a deontological perspective, legal breaches are inherently wrong because they undermine the principle of respect for law and individual rights. Journalists who insisted that clandestine reporting must never involve unlawful acts affirmed this stance, upholding duty above potential benefits. In contrast, a utilitarian perspective supports calculated legal risk if the anticipated public good such as exposing systemic corruption outweighs potential harm. Those who cited Anas's judicial exposé as

a legitimate justification reflected this consequentialist reasoning, affirming utilitarian ethics. Thus, the findings reveal that both ethical theories coexist in practice, but deontology appears more dominant when legal consequences pose personal risk.

Ethical Pluralism and Professional Dilemmas

Participants also displayed diverse ethical reasoning frameworks. Some adopted deontological reasoning, stressing that honesty and transparency are non-negotiable duties in journalism. These respondents echoed Christians et al. (2020) and Marx (2010), both of whom argue that deception corrodes journalism's credibility and undermines its claim to moral authority. Their view affirms these critiques by demonstrating that within Ghanaian newsrooms, many practitioners regard clandestine reporting as ethically corrosive even when it produces impactful stories.

Others leaned toward utilitarian reasoning, justifying deception if it prevented greater harm or exposed systemic corruption. This perspective directly affirms Darko (2020), who documented how public interest arguments often legitimize invasive reporting practices in Ghana. Similarly, it affirms Gadzekpo (2008), who recognized that clandestine reporting may be justified in exceptional cases of public interest, though her caution against overuse aligns with the reluctance of participants to normalize deception.

A third ethical strand consistent with the ethics of care though not explicitly stated by participants emerged in responses that highlighted empathy and human dignity. Journalists warned that exposing vulnerable individuals may be legally defensible but morally troubling, echoing Ward (2016), who argued that ethical codes are not abstract but lived experiences shaped by empathy. This finding disaffirms purely utilitarian logic by reminding us that even consequentialist justifications have moral limits in practice.

The Power and Volatility of Public Opinion

Public opinion was repeatedly identified as a decisive constraint. Respondents explained that while undercover exposés often win applause when they expose corruption, public opinion can quickly turn hostile if journalists are seen as manipulative or politically motivated. This volatility confirms Thompson (2018), who observed that legitimacy in African investigative journalism is audience-dependent. It also echoes Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2019), who showed that reactions to Anas's exposés were shaped less by ethical principles than by political allegiances and media ownership structures.

The findings both affirm and extend this literature. They affirm the observation that public approval is not grounded in consistent ethics but in shifting socio-political loyalties. Yet they extend it by providing empirical evidence that journalists themselves are acutely aware of

this volatility and actively calibrate their use of clandestine methods to maintain public trust. In other words, while Ofori-Parku and Botwe framed public debates as external to journalism practice, this study demonstrates how journalists internalize those debates in their professional decision-making.

The Ghanaian context magnifies these challenges. The absence of clear, enforceable ethical guidelines for investigative journalism means that journalists must rely on their own judgment in the face of legal ambiguity and public pressure. Moreover, the strong cultural emphasis on communal reputation where an individual journalist's misstep can tarnish their media house or even the profession heightens sensitivity to public perception. In this sense, conditional acceptance of clandestine reporting is not only an ethical stance but also a strategy of professional survival.

Implications

The findings suggest that clandestine reporting in Ghana is bounded by a triangular negotiation: between law, ethics, and audience legitimacy. This negotiation affirms both deontological and utilitarian theories in different contexts, deontology in the emphasis on legality and duty, utilitarianism in the prioritization of public interest. It also affirms prior studies such as Darko (2020) and Gadzekpo (2008), while extending Ofori-Parku and Botwe's focus on discursive framing into the realm of lived professional practice.

The implication is that Ghanaian journalism operates in a space of ethical pluralism, where practitioners must juggle multiple, sometimes contradictory, logics. This complexity demands clearer ethical guidelines, stronger legal protections, and more consistent public discourse.

Without these, clandestine reporting will remain a precarious balancing act, necessary for democracy but fraught with risks that extend beyond individual journalists to the profession.

The Role of Experience and Professional Exposure

The findings revealed that journalists' years of practice and professional exposure played a significant role in shaping how they perceived and justified the use of clandestine methods. While younger or less experienced journalists tended to adopt categorical stances, either outright rejection or enthusiastic endorsement, seasoned practitioners often expressed more nuanced and conditional acceptance. This pattern highlights the central role of experience in shaping ethical reasoning, professional confidence, and willingness to navigate the legal and moral ambiguities of undercover journalism.

Professional Maturity and Ethical Reasoning

Experienced journalists in the study emphasized that clandestine methods should never be used as a "first option," but only as a last resort when all conventional methods fail. They argued that reporting must prioritize

fairness, accuracy, and accountability before considering deception. This aligns with Marx (2010), who observed that seasoned investigative journalists globally tend to adopt undercover methods sparingly, often as a carefully calibrated tool rather than a default strategy.

This finding affirms Christians et al. (2020), who stress that professional maturity is often marked by a deeper appreciation of ethical codes and the long-term consequences of breaking them. Younger journalists in the study who expressed uncritical support for deception appeared to reflect what Ward (2016) calls naive consequentialism, “a tendency to prioritize immediate impact over enduring credibility”. By contrast, the nuanced caution of senior journalists demonstrates a move toward deontological reasoning, where duty to fairness and respect for subjects outweighs sensational results.

Training, Mentorship, and Exposure to Best Practices

Another strong theme was the role of training and exposure. Journalists who had undergone formal training in ethics or who had worked under experienced mentors reported greater hesitation about clandestine methods. They often referenced professional codes, such as the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) Code of Ethics, which discourages deception except in extraordinary cases. This reflects Gadzekpo (2009), who argued that Ghanaian journalism still relies heavily on informal mentorship traditions, with ethical habits passed down from senior practitioners to juniors.

Interestingly, some participants who had studied abroad or engaged with international training programs highlighted stricter editorial checks and balances outside Ghana. They contrasted this with Ghana’s relatively loose newsroom structures, where decisions to use clandestine methods are often left to individual discretion. This finding disaffirms the assumption in Darko (2020) that Ghanaian investigative journalism has already institutionalized public-interest tests for clandestine reporting. Instead, it suggests that such frameworks remain underdeveloped, leaving journalists reliant on personal judgment shaped by training and exposure.

Experience as a Source of Pragmatism

Respondents with more professional exposure often displayed a pragmatic balancing act between deontology and utilitarianism. They argued that although deception is ethically problematic, it is sometimes the only viable tool against entrenched corruption and abuse of power. Their reasoning reflected utilitarian pragmatism: harm caused by deception could be outweighed by the greater public benefit of reform. However, their pragmatism was also marked by caution, emphasizing reputational risk and potential legal consequences.

For example, one participant explained that “Anas can get away with it because of his brand, but for an ordinary journalist, the fallout could be career-ending.”

This underscores a central finding: experience makes journalists more aware of professional risks, not just ethical concerns. In this sense, professional exposure nurtures an ethic of strategic restraint, where clandestine methods are treated as tools to be deployed selectively, not universally. This affirms Thompson (2018), who argued that credibility in African journalism is inseparable from audience trust and professional standing.

Dangers of Inexperience and Overzealousness

In contrast, less experienced journalists often expressed admiration for undercover methods without considering potential risks. They cited high-profile successes, such as Anas’s exposés, as evidence of the method’s legitimacy, but rarely acknowledged the legal, ethical, or professional consequences. This reflects Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2019), who observed that public fascination with Anas has created a culture where undercover journalism is romanticized, especially among younger practitioners.

This finding disaffirms the assumption that all journalists in Ghana critically interrogate the ethics of clandestine reporting. Instead, it demonstrates that inexperience can breed overconfidence, where the allure of impact overshadows the complexity of professional responsibility. It also highlights the danger of a “copycat mentality” in journalism, where admiration for successful figures substitutes for ethical deliberation.

Implications

The findings suggest that professional maturity and exposure to training cultivate an ethic of caution, where clandestine methods are considered legitimate only under specific, tightly defined conditions. This affirms existing scholarship (Marx, 2010; Christians et al., 2020; Gadzekpo, 2009) but also extends it by illustrating how Ghana’s newsroom culture amplifies these differences between novice and experienced practitioners.

From a theoretical perspective, this theme shows how deontological and utilitarian reasoning interact dynamically across a journalist’s career trajectory. Novices often embrace utilitarianism in a simplified form, equating impact with legitimacy. With experience, however, journalists develop a more pluralistic ethical framework, weighing duties, rights, consequences, and reputational risks simultaneously. This progression suggests that professional exposure is not just about acquiring technical skills but also about cultivating the intellectual and ethical flexibility required for investigative journalism in contexts of weak regulation and high public scrutiny.

Synthesis of Findings Across Research Questions

The findings of this study, when examined across the three research questions, reveal a nuanced and context-dependent perception of clandestine methods in Ghanaian investigative journalism. Each research question highlights a different dimension of how journalists, lawyers, and civil society actors evaluate the ethics, legitimacy, and practical use of subterfuge in their work.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of Ghanaian journalists regarding clandestine methods in investigative journalism?

Across participants, there was consensus that clandestine methods are ethically and professionally complex. Journalists acknowledged that such methods could be necessary to expose corruption and hold power to account, reflecting a utilitarian perspective that justifies deception when outcomes benefit the public. At the same time, deontological concerns were evident, with several participants emphasizing that deception, lying, or privacy violations are morally problematic, regardless of outcomes. The synthesis of RQ1 indicates that journalists perceive clandestine methods as a conditional tool: acceptable under circumstances of high public interest and in the absence of conventional reporting avenues. This aligns with existing studies (Ofori-Parku & Botwe, 2019; Darko, 2020) that show Ghanaian journalists operate in a contested ethical space shaped by both professional duty and consequentialist reasoning.

RQ2: What legal, ethical, and public opinion factors influence the use of clandestine methods?

Participants consistently noted that Ghana's legal framework, particularly constitutional protections for privacy and press freedom, creates both opportunities and limitations for clandestine reporting. Journalists are aware that violating privacy, trespassing, or recording without consent can have legal repercussions, reinforcing a cautious approach. Ethical considerations, drawn from both deontological and utilitarian reasoning, further influence decisions; journalists balance duty-based concerns (truthfulness, fairness, respect for human dignity) with the potential societal benefits of exposing wrongdoing. Public opinion emerged as another critical factor; audiences may applaud investigations that reveal corruption but condemn methods perceived as manipulative or intrusive.

Across RQ2, the synthesis demonstrates that external pressures, including law, ethics, and audience expectations, act as powerful moderators, shaping whether and how clandestine methods are employed. This confirms the observations of Gadzekpo (2008) and Marx (2010) that Ghanaian journalists operate in a high stake, socially negotiated environment.

RQ3: How do professional experience and exposure shape journalists' use of clandestine methods?

Professional experience, mentorship, and training strongly influenced journalists' willingness to engage in subterfuge. Younger journalists often expressed enthusiasm for undercover investigations, inspired by high-profile cases such as Anas Aremeyaw Anas's #Number12 exposé, while senior journalists emphasized caution, highlighting risks

to credibility, personal safety, and career sustainability. The synthesis of RQ3 underscores the role of socialization and lived experience in shaping ethical decision-making. Journalists learn over time how to weigh potential benefits against risks and moral considerations, reflecting a dynamic negotiation between utilitarian justifications for exposing corruption and deontological commitments to ethical principles. This complements findings in Darko (2020) and Gadzekpo (2008), who highlight that professional norms and exposure to consequences influence journalists' ethical judgments.

Overall Synthesis

Bringing together all three research questions, clandestine methods in Ghanaian investigative journalism are shown to occupy a gray area of conditional legitimacy. Journalists and stakeholders negotiate their use based on ethical reasoning, professional experience, legal constraints, and public opinion. Utilitarian reasoning justifies when the societal benefit is significant, whereas deontological principles act as a cautionary guide against unnecessary deception. Personal and institutional factors mediate these decisions, illustrating a hybrid ethical framework that balances duty and consequence.

The study affirms and extends the literature: Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2019) described the public and institutional debates surrounding subterfuge, while this research provides empirical evidence of how practitioners themselves navigate these debates in practice. Similarly, Darko (2020) identified legal tensions between privacy and public interest; this study shows how these tensions are actively negotiated by journalists in their day-to-day decision-making.

In conclusion, the synthesis indicates that clandestine methods are neither inherently unethical nor automatically acceptable. Their use is contingent on the context, societal benefit, and the journalist's ethical reasoning, underscoring the need for clearer ethical guidelines, professional training, and institutional support to navigate the complex terrain of investigative journalism in Ghana.

Implications for Ghanaian Journalism

The final implication is that clandestine journalism, though contested, remains indispensable within Ghana's democratic project. Journalists see it as a powerful weapon against corruption and abuse of power but are acutely aware of its risks to credibility, safety, and legitimacy. The findings suggest that Ghanaian journalism is evolving into a profession defined not by rigid codes but by constant negotiation between ideals and realities.

This balancing act has critical implications. It underscores the need for stronger institutional protections for investigative journalists, clearer legal guidelines on acceptable practices, and continuous ethical training. It also highlights the importance of cultivating public trust, since audience perception ultimately legitimizes or

delegitimizes journalistic work. In this sense, clandestine reporting in Ghana is not just a professional choice but a societal conversation about how truth, transparency, and accountability are defined in a fragile democracy.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Ghanaian journalists are not reckless risk-takers nor timid rule-followers. Instead, they are professionals carefully navigating a contested space where law, ethics, public trust, and personal experience collide. Clandestine journalism remains both a dangerous gamble and a democratic necessity, a reminder that in Ghana's media landscape, credibility and courage must walk hand in hand.

CONCLUSION

The study affirms that clandestine reporting in Ghana exists within a space of negotiated legitimacy. While it is not an anathema within the journalistic, media and public space, it derives its strength from its enforced justification by way of the public interest remit and the democratic imperatives within the context of appropriate moral, legal, and practical constraints.

This conclusion is expanded as follows

Clandestine Reporting is a Conditional Tool, Not a Standard Practice

The study concludes that Ghanaian journalists neither wholly accept nor entirely reject clandestine methods. Instead, they adopt a pragmatic stance, permitting such practices only when issues of significant public interest are at stake and when no alternative methods can achieve the same results. This conclusion reflects the Ghana Journalists Association's Code of Ethics, which allows deception in exceptional cases.

Legal and ethical frameworks shape decision-making. Journalists' decisions are strongly influenced by the legal and ethical context within which they operate. Ghana's constitutional provisions simultaneously guarantee media freedom and impose restrictions in the interests of morality, order, and security. Ethical frameworks are diverse: some journalists adopt a duty-based approach (deontology), others a results-based approach (teleology), and others an empathy-driven perspective (ethics of care). These varying ethical orientations produce different attitudes toward clandestine reporting.

Practical realities constrain clandestine journalism. Limited resources, inadequate institutional protection, and risks to personal safety significantly constrain the practice of clandestine journalism. Investigations that require elaborate disguises, hidden cameras, or legal support are often beyond the capacity of Ghanaian media houses, making such work risky and rare.

Public opinion legitimizes or delegitimizes undercover work.

Audience reactions play a crucial role in determining whether clandestine reporting is viewed as legitimate.

Investigations perceived to serve the public interest gain widespread support, while those seen as sensationalist or exploitative face backlash. Thus, clandestine journalism is ultimately judged not only by professional peers but also by the public.

Experience and exposure foster caution and professional judgement.

Experience, professional training, and global exposure encourage journalists to evaluate undercover practices more carefully. Senior journalists tend to be cautious due to personal or observed consequences, while training provides a structured ethical and legal framework. Younger journalists are more enthusiastic, suggesting a generational divide in risk-taking.

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