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Designing a Media Ethics Model for Iranian News Websites

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to design and empirically validate a comprehensive media ethics model for Iranian news websites by integrating qualitative grounded-theory findings with quantitative structural equation modeling. This exploratory mixed-methods study was conducted within an interpretive paradigm using a sequential qualitative–quantitative design. In the qualitative phase, 18 media experts, university academics, and experienced news professionals were selected purposively and interviewed through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and the Strauss and Corbin grounded-theory approach through open, axial, and selective coding. In the quantitative phase, a researcher-developed questionnaire derived from the qualitative model was distributed among 115 journalists, editors, managers, and other professionals active in Iranian online news media. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and partial least squares structural equation modeling in SmartPLS. Reliability and validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The structural model showed that lack of pluralism significantly predicted technological updating of media ethics ($\beta = 0.206$, $p = 0.001$), while failure to observe media-ethics principles significantly predicted ethical orientation toward shared public, media, and governance interests ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$). Ethical orientation significantly predicted development of an ethical charter ($\beta = 0.516$), regulatory updating ($\beta = 0.454$), licensing independent specialized news websites ($\beta = 0.449$), and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.421$), all $p < 0.001$. The ethical charter significantly predicted updated ethical regulations ($\beta = 0.612$), digital democracy serving citizens and government ($\beta = 0.537$), and growth in ethically oriented journalists ($\beta = 0.576$), all $p < 0.001$. Adjusted R^2 values ranged from 0.666 to 0.877. Model fit was satisfactory (SRMR = 0.068, GOF = 0.7834, NFI = 0.931). The validated model indicates that media ethics in Iranian news websites depends on the interaction of professional ethics, technological adaptation, regulatory modernization, institutional pluralism, journalist competence, and public accountability, with the ethical charter functioning as a central operational mechanism for translating ethical values into institutional and professional outcomes.

Keywords: Media Ethics; Iranian News Websites; Grounded Theory; PLS-SEM; Digital Democracy; Ethical Charter; Online Journalism

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the production, circulation, interpretation, and consumption of news. News websites now operate in an environment characterized by immediacy, interactivity, algorithmic distribution, citizen participation, platform convergence, and intense competition for audience attention. Although these developments have expanded access to information and diversified the channels through which citizens encounter public affairs, they have also created a more complex ethical landscape for journalism and media organizations. Traditional principles such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, accountability, privacy, and avoidance of harm remain central to professional journalism, but their application has become increasingly difficult in digital environments where speed, virality, technological mediation, and commercial pressures often shape editorial practices.

Consequently, media ethics can no longer be treated merely as a set of individual moral duties for journalists; rather, it must be understood as an institutional, technological, legal, professional, and social framework governing the entire process through which news is produced and disseminated [1, 2].

The ethical significance of digital media is particularly evident in the relationship between news production and public perception. News organizations do not merely transmit information; they actively contribute to the construction of public understanding by selecting issues, framing events, determining source visibility, and assigning interpretive significance to political, social, cultural, and economic developments. Biased or ethically weak reporting can therefore influence not only attitudes toward individual events but also broader perceptions of social reality, institutions, and groups. Research on media ethics and public opinion has emphasized that partial reporting, selective representation, emotionally loaded language, and imbalance in source selection may distort public judgment and weaken confidence in media institutions [3]. The ethical performance of news websites is thus directly connected to the quality of public discourse, because public trust depends on the perception that news organizations are accurate, transparent, fair, and committed to the public interest rather than to hidden institutional, economic, or political agendas.

The transition from traditional journalism to digital journalism has also intensified concerns about disinformation and misinformation. In contemporary online environments, false, misleading, decontextualized, manipulated, or partially accurate content can circulate rapidly across multiple platforms before professional news organizations are able to verify or correct it. The emergence of social media as a major source of information has blurred the traditional distinction between professional journalism, citizen-generated content, commentary, advocacy, and propaganda. As a result, fact-checking has become an important ethical and governance mechanism within digital news ecosystems. The ethical responsibilities of media organizations increasingly include not only avoiding the publication of false information but also establishing systematic practices for verification, correction, source evaluation, transparency, and content governance [2]. The relationship between digital democracy and disinformation further indicates that ethical regulation of online communication is closely connected to democratic participation, institutional legitimacy, and citizens' ability to make informed decisions [4].

Digital media ethics is therefore increasingly intertwined with technological literacy. News production is now influenced by artificial intelligence, automated content generation, algorithmic recommendation systems, data analytics, synthetic images, manipulated audiovisual materials, and emerging forms of virtual representation. These technologies create opportunities for efficiency, personalization, and innovation, but they simultaneously introduce new ethical questions concerning authenticity, disclosure, deception, accountability, and the distinction between human and machine-generated communication. Research on human-like virtual influencers has demonstrated that digitally simulated actors can complicate ethical expectations because audiences may not always clearly understand the nature, origin, or persuasive intent of mediated representations [5]. These developments are directly relevant to news organizations because similar technologies can be used to generate or modify images, videos, audio, headlines, summaries, and even complete news reports. Accordingly, a contemporary model of media ethics must address not only classical journalistic obligations but also the ethical governance of emerging technologies.

The rapidity of technological change also creates regulatory challenges. Ethical principles and legal provisions may become outdated when they fail to reflect the technological capabilities and risks associated with contemporary digital media. New media environments require ethical frameworks that can respond to manipulated content, data privacy, digital surveillance,

algorithmic discrimination, online harassment, deepfakes, automated journalism, and the borderless distribution of information. The ethical issues created by new media and social networks have therefore encouraged scholars to propose more comprehensive frameworks that combine traditional ethical principles with practical solutions adapted to the characteristics of digital communication [6]. Similarly, research grounded in institutional media transformation has emphasized that ethical systems must adapt to organizational and technological changes rather than remain limited to abstract professional ideals [7].

The need for updated ethical standards is reinforced by the increasing diversity of actors involved in digital communication. Professional journalists now share the information environment with citizen journalists, influencers, activists, organizations, automated systems, ordinary users, and anonymous content producers. This plurality can enrich public discourse, but it also weakens traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and complicates responsibility for harmful or inaccurate information. Ethical questions concerning consent, privacy, data collection, representation, and the treatment of online users have been identified even in social media research, demonstrating that digital communication environments generate moral concerns that extend beyond conventional newsroom practice [8]. For news websites, these concerns are particularly important because information obtained from social networks may involve private individuals, user-generated photographs, unverified testimony, or content originally produced for contexts unrelated to formal journalism.

The growing social importance of digital platforms also means that ethical communication must be evaluated in relation to its broader psychological and social consequences. Excessive social media exposure has been associated with anxiety, stress, and depression, especially among younger populations, highlighting the need to consider not only informational accuracy but also the emotional and psychosocial effects of digital communication environments [9]. Although news websites differ from social networking platforms, their content is increasingly distributed through social media and optimized for rapid engagement, which can encourage sensationalism, alarmist framing, polarizing headlines, and emotionally provocative content. Ethical journalism must therefore consider the consequences of engagement-oriented practices and recognize that maximizing clicks or visibility may conflict with the public-interest responsibilities of professional news organizations.

Professional ethics also depends heavily on the competence and moral development of journalists and media personnel. Ethical decision-making is not purely rule-based; it requires the capacity to identify moral problems, evaluate competing interests, understand potential harms, and justify decisions in relation to professional standards. Evidence from media ethics education suggests that structured ethical training can contribute to the development of moral reasoning and professional maturity among journalism students [10]. This finding is highly relevant to practicing journalists in digital newsrooms, where ethical judgments must often be made under substantial time pressure and technological uncertainty. Continuous professional education, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence, verification tools, privacy, and digital security, should therefore be regarded as a core component of media ethics rather than a secondary professional-development activity.

The organizational context of journalism is equally important. Ethical performance is affected by management practices, workplace culture, organizational health, employment conditions, professional autonomy, and institutional incentives. Research in media organizations has shown that ethical management and human-resource agility are associated with the capacity to respond effectively to organizational crises [11]. In other organizational contexts, professional ethics has also been linked to organizational health, with social media potentially mediating the relationship between ethical norms and institutional functioning [12]. These findings suggest that unethical journalism should not always be attributed exclusively to

individual journalists. Inadequate salaries, job insecurity, political pressure, commercial competition, weak editorial governance, poor training, and unclear professional standards may create organizational conditions that increase the likelihood of ethically problematic behavior.

Media ethics is also deeply connected with institutional credibility and social responsibility. Organizations whose activities are perceived as socially responsible often receive more favorable media attention, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between ethical conduct, public legitimacy, and media representation [13]. From the perspective of news organizations themselves, ethical credibility can function as a form of institutional capital. Ethical capital can strengthen the economic and reputational foundations of media institutions by supporting trust, legitimacy, and sustainable relationships with audiences and stakeholders [14]. This is especially important in competitive digital environments where users can rapidly shift between multiple information sources and where trust can be damaged by a single widely circulated ethical violation.

The concept of professional ethics has also expanded within adjacent areas of digital communication. Research on social media influencers, for example, has demonstrated the need for comprehensive ethical models addressing transparency, responsibility, authenticity, and professional conduct in technologically mediated communication [15]. Although influencers and news organizations perform different social functions, the underlying ethical challenge is similar: actors who possess the capacity to shape perceptions must be accountable for how information, persuasion, and representation are managed. This comparison reinforces the argument that ethical principles should be translated into concrete and operational models capable of guiding behavior in specific communication environments rather than remaining at the level of general moral statements.

The development of digital ethics also has a civic and educational dimension. Ethical behavior in digital environments is shaped not only by institutional rules but also by citizens' ability to understand rights, responsibilities, respectful communication, and the consequences of online participation. Research concerning ethics education in the digital era has emphasized the importance of values-based education for developing responsible digital citizenship [16]. For news websites, this perspective implies a dual responsibility: media organizations must act ethically themselves, but they may also contribute to raising public awareness regarding misinformation, privacy, lawful content production, responsible sharing, and the social consequences of digital communication.

Freedom of the press represents another essential dimension of media ethics. Ethical journalism requires professional responsibility, but responsibility cannot be meaningfully exercised in an environment where journalists lack reasonable autonomy or where institutional controls prevent diverse perspectives from entering public discourse. Studies of journalists' perspectives on constitutional reform and media freedom demonstrate that legal structures significantly shape journalistic independence and perceptions of professional freedom [17]. Ethical regulation must therefore avoid becoming a mechanism for suppressing legitimate criticism or restricting pluralism. A credible ethical framework should instead seek an appropriate balance among professional freedom, accountability, social responsibility, public interest, privacy, and legal obligations.

This balance becomes particularly important in politically and culturally sensitive media environments. Ethical discourse in media may intersect with questions of identity, gender, religion, nationalism, and transnational representation. Research on Iranian feminism and transnational media ethics illustrates how mediated discourse can involve competing moral frameworks, political interpretations, and cultural expectations [18]. Such complexities suggest that a media-ethics model designed for Iranian news websites should be context-sensitive. International journalistic norms are relevant, but they must

be interpreted in relation to the legal, cultural, religious, political, and institutional characteristics of Iranian media while maintaining core ethical commitments such as truthfulness, dignity, fairness, pluralism, and accountability.

The development of context-specific ethical models has already received attention in Iranian media research. Studies of television sports programs have identified multiple factors affecting media ethics and have proposed models that emphasize the interaction of professional, organizational, and contextual determinants [19]. Similarly, attempts to conceptualize ethics within the framework of media transformation indicate that institutional policy documents can play an important role in defining ethical priorities and responsibilities [7]. These studies demonstrate the value of model-building approaches, yet the distinctive characteristics of Iranian online news websites require separate investigation because news websites operate in a more immediate, interactive, technologically exposed, and competitively fragmented environment than traditional broadcast media.

The contemporary digital environment also raises questions concerning the nature of moral engagement itself. Social media can reward visible moral outrage and symbolic demonstrations of ethical positioning, while meaningful ethical engagement requires deeper reflection, dialogue, and responsibility [20]. In journalism, this distinction is particularly important. Public claims of ethical commitment have limited value if organizational practices continue to prioritize sensationalism, political pressure, unverified content, or technological expediency. Ethical journalism therefore requires institutional mechanisms capable of translating moral values into enforceable professional practices, including editorial standards, transparent correction procedures, verification systems, training programs, privacy protections, conflict-of-interest rules, and accountability mechanisms.

Professional ethics is also inseparable from questions of public trust and legitimacy. The ability of news organizations to function as credible information authorities depends on the perception that they serve more than narrow institutional or commercial interests. Ethical standards should protect the public's right to accurate information while enabling journalists to report critically on institutions and powerful actors. At the same time, journalistic freedom must be accompanied by responsibility in matters such as source verification, protection of human dignity, avoidance of discriminatory representation, and correction of misinformation. This orientation corresponds to the broader conception of radical media ethics, which views journalistic responsibility as extending beyond local professional routines toward the ethical demands of a globalized and digitally interconnected information environment [1].

The ethical challenges facing Iranian news websites are intensified by the competitive structure of the digital information ecosystem. Official news websites compete not only with one another but also with social media accounts, citizen journalists, unlicensed news distributors, foreign Persian-language media, and rapidly evolving technological systems. The speed advantage enjoyed by informal information channels can pressure professional news organizations to publish before adequate verification, while the growth of artificial intelligence and synthetic media increases the difficulty of distinguishing authentic from manipulated content. These pressures create an urgent need for a structured ethical framework capable of integrating professional standards, technological competence, legal modernization, public accountability, pluralism, journalist autonomy, organizational responsibility, and societal values.

At the same time, any such framework must avoid reducing media ethics to censorship or administrative control. The credibility of an ethical model depends on its capacity to protect freedom of expression, diversity of thought, access to information, privacy, fairness, and the public interest while also addressing disinformation, hate speech, technological

manipulation, and professional misconduct. An effective model should therefore combine regulatory clarity with institutional independence and should recognize the reciprocal responsibilities of journalists, news organizations, citizens, regulators, and technology systems. The objective is not merely to prevent unethical behavior but to create conditions under which ethical journalism becomes professionally feasible, organizationally supported, technologically informed, legally protected, and socially valued.

Despite the growing literature on media ethics, digital communication, disinformation, professional conduct, technological change, media freedom, and social responsibility, there remains a need for an integrated model specifically tailored to Iranian news websites. Existing studies have examined individual dimensions such as professional ethics, media freedom, organizational ethics, social media, fact-checking, ethical education, or technological transformation, but these components are often studied separately rather than within a unified explanatory framework [6, 15, 19]. A comprehensive model is therefore needed to identify the causal, contextual, and intervening conditions affecting media ethics, clarify the core ethical phenomenon, specify feasible strategies, and determine the expected professional, regulatory, and social consequences of ethical reform in Iranian online news environments.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to design and empirically validate a comprehensive media ethics model for Iranian news websites by integrating qualitative grounded-theory findings with quantitative structural equation modeling.

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory mixed-methods design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to develop and validate a comprehensive media ethics model for Iranian news websites. The research was conducted sequentially in qualitative and quantitative phases, with the qualitative findings forming the conceptual basis for the subsequent quantitative assessment. In addition to the empirical phases, a library-based review of relevant literature, theoretical sources, previous empirical studies, professional media ethics frameworks, and documentary materials was undertaken to enhance the researchers' theoretical sensitivity and to provide an informed conceptual background for data collection and interpretation. The qualitative phase combined thematic analysis with the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory approach. Thematic analysis was used to identify, organize, and interpret recurring ethical themes, while grounded theory was employed specifically to generate the conceptual and paradigmatic structure of the proposed media ethics model. This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought not merely to describe ethical concerns in Iranian online news media, but to explain the conditions, mechanisms, strategies, and consequences through which ethical media practice is formed and sustained.

The qualitative study population consisted of media experts with substantive theoretical or professional expertise in media ethics. Participants were selected purposively on the basis of their ability to provide information-rich perspectives on the ethical operation of Iranian news websites. Eligibility criteria included university academics with teaching, research, book publication, or scholarly articles in the field of media ethics, specialists with a documented research background in media ethics, and owners or senior professionals of news websites with more than 10 years of professional activity and demonstrated concern with ethical issues in news production and dissemination. Eighteen experts participated in the qualitative phase. Of these participants, 14 were men and 4 were women, corresponding to 78% and 22% of the qualitative sample, respectively. Two participants were younger than 45 years of age and 16 were older than 45 years. Regarding educational attainment, 3 participants held master's degrees and 15 held doctoral degrees. In terms of professional

experience, 2 participants had less than 10 years of experience, 7 had between 10 and 20 years of experience, and 9 had more than 20 years of professional experience. Participant selection was guided by the principle of theoretical relevance, and interviewing continued until the collected data were judged to provide sufficient conceptual depth and saturation for constructing the emergent model.

The quantitative phase was conducted after development of the preliminary qualitative model. The target population consisted of professionals actively involved in Iranian online news production and management, including news service editors of online news websites, managing directors of online news agencies, journalists working for Iranian online news platforms, citizen journalists, reporters, and editors of news sections. The accessible quantitative population comprised 115 individuals. Participants were selected through purposive sampling so that respondents possessed direct professional familiarity with the operational, organizational, and ethical dimensions of online news production. Sample-size determination was informed by Cochran's formula, while the final selection also took into account accessibility and substantive relevance to the study objectives. The quantitative phase was designed to assess the empirical adequacy of the qualitative model, evaluate relationships among the identified constructs, and contribute to the development of an integrated and validated model of media ethics for Iranian news websites.

Data were collected using different but complementary instruments in the qualitative and quantitative phases. In the qualitative phase, the principal data collection instrument was the in-depth semi-structured interview. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' experiences, judgments, interpretations, and professional evaluations concerning ethical conduct in Iranian news websites. Interview questions addressed the meaning and dimensions of media ethics in online news environments, ethical challenges affecting news production and publication, organizational and professional conditions influencing ethical behavior, contextual and intervening factors, appropriate ethical strategies, and the potential consequences of adherence to or violation of ethical principles. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility to pursue emerging issues, clarify participants' interpretations, and explore new categories that arose during the interviews. Documentary note-taking and systematic extraction of relevant concepts from scholarly and professional sources were also used to support the interview data and increase theoretical sensitivity.

The qualitative material was further organized through thematic analysis by constructing a thematic network consisting of basic, organizing, and overarching themes. Ethical concepts emerging from the interviews, documentary materials, and relevant professional evidence were compared continuously so that recurrent ideas could be distinguished from isolated observations. The interview questions were designed to cover different aspects of the focal phenomenon rather than relying on a single perspective, thereby strengthening construct representation. Particular attention was paid to discrepant or negative cases that did not correspond with dominant patterns, as such cases could reveal conceptual limitations or require revision of the evolving interpretation. Methodological flexibility was also maintained throughout the qualitative phase so that interview prompts could be refined when emerging findings indicated the need for deeper examination of particular ethical dimensions.

In the quantitative phase, data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire constructed directly from the categories, subcategories, concepts, and relationships identified during the qualitative grounded theory analysis. The preliminary qualitative model therefore served as the content foundation for questionnaire development. Questionnaire

items operationalized the principal dimensions of the proposed media ethics model and were formulated as statements rated on a Likert-type response scale, enabling respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements concerning ethical principles, organizational conditions, professional practices, strategies, contextual influences, and expected consequences in Iranian news websites. The instrument was intended to measure respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and professional evaluations concerning the ethical functioning of online news media. Before inferential analysis, the adequacy of the measurement instrument was evaluated in terms of its validity and reliability so that the observed indicators could appropriately represent the latent constructs derived from the qualitative phase.

Attention was also given to methodological trustworthiness across both phases of the study. In the qualitative component, credibility and construct validity were strengthened through the use of multidimensional interview questions, continuous comparison of categories, consideration of discrepant cases, theoretical saturation, and detailed contextual description. Purposive selection of information-rich participants with direct expertise in media ethics supported the internal coherence of the qualitative interpretation. Transferability was addressed by documenting the characteristics of the participants, professional context, and analytic procedures in sufficient detail to allow readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable media environments. In the quantitative phase, the researcher-developed questionnaire was subjected to psychometric assessment through examination of measurement-model properties, including the reliability and validity of the constructs and indicators, before interpretation of the structural relationships.

Qualitative data analysis proceeded through two complementary analytical procedures. First, thematic analysis was applied inductively and comparatively to identify the main and subsidiary themes associated with media ethics in Iranian news websites. Interview transcripts and documentary materials were reviewed repeatedly, meaningful units were extracted, similar concepts were compared, and related concepts were clustered into broader thematic domains. Deductive comparison with concepts derived from the theoretical literature was also used where appropriate, while priority was given to themes grounded in participants' accounts. The resulting thematic network provided an organized representation of the ethical dimensions identified in the data and supported the subsequent theory-building process.

The principal model-building procedure was Strauss and Corbin grounded theory analysis using open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, interview transcripts and supporting documentary material were examined closely to identify meaningful concepts, actions, conditions, beliefs, and ethical concerns. Conceptually similar codes were compared and grouped into preliminary categories and subcategories. During axial coding, relationships among the categories were examined systematically to determine how the emerging concepts were connected and how they functioned within the phenomenon of media ethics in Iranian news websites. At this stage, the categories were organized according to the grounded theory paradigm, including causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action and interaction strategies, and consequences. During selective coding, the categories were integrated around a central or core category that provided the most comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon. Relationships among the core category and the remaining categories were then refined to produce a coherent preliminary paradigmatic model of media ethics for Iranian news websites.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted after the qualitative model had been translated into measurable constructs and questionnaire items. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize the characteristics and response patterns of the quantitative data, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Inferential statistical procedures were

then used where appropriate to examine group differences and associations among variables, including t tests, analysis of variance, and regression-based analyses. The principal analytical technique, however, was partial least squares structural equation modeling using SmartPLS. PLS-SEM was selected because of its suitability for exploratory model development, prediction-oriented analysis, relatively complex structural models, latent-variable analysis, and research contexts involving comparatively limited sample sizes or data that may not satisfy strict multivariate normality assumptions.

In the structural equation model, the major components derived from the qualitative phase, including causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences, were modeled as latent constructs measured through their respective questionnaire indicators. Model analysis proceeded through specification of the theoretical measurement and structural models, estimation of model parameters, assessment of measurement-model quality, evaluation of structural relationships, and interpretation of the final model. Measurement-model evaluation focused on the reliability and validity of indicators and latent constructs, while structural-model assessment examined the magnitude and statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships among the constructs and the explanatory and predictive performance of the model. The quantitative results were subsequently compared with the relationships proposed during the qualitative phase so that unsupported relationships could be reconsidered and empirically supported relationships could be retained in the final model.

Integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings followed a sequential mixed-methods logic. The qualitative phase first identified the principal themes, variables, and hypothesized relationships underlying media ethics in Iranian news websites. These findings were then transformed into measurable constructs and testable relationships for the quantitative phase. After quantitative testing, the statistical findings were interpreted in light of the qualitative themes and expert accounts, allowing the researchers to explain not only whether the proposed relationships were empirically supported but also why and under what conditions they were meaningful. The final media ethics model was therefore developed through systematic integration of the qualitative grounded theory structure and the quantitative PLS-SEM findings. The integrated model was intended to specify the principal ethical variables, clarify the relationships among those variables, and provide an empirically informed framework for the implementation and evaluation of ethical practices within Iranian news websites.

Findings and Results

Selective coding resulted in a comprehensive conceptual framework for media ethics in Iranian news websites. Two principal causal conditions emerged: the lack of pluralism and opportunities for diversity of thought and the widespread failure to observe media-ethics principles. The contextual conditions reflected technological, regulatory, competitive, and human-resource deficiencies, whereas the intervening conditions concerned competition from domestic informal news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media as well as the effects of international sanctions. The central phenomenon was conceptualized around ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, the media, and governance institutions, together with the need to continuously update the ethics of news websites in accordance with contemporary technological developments. Four major strategic responses emerged: developing an ethical charter for Iranian news websites, updating media-ethics provisions and regulations, licensing independent specialized news websites, and developing digital democracy. The expected consequences included standardized legal, public, and ethical oversight; updated ethical legislation; development of digital democracy oriented toward the interests of citizens and government

within a religious value framework; and growth in the number of ethically oriented journalists committed to protecting the public interest. The complete selective-coding structure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Selective Coding Results and Main Categories of the Grounded-Theory Model

Paradigm Dimension	Main Category	Principal Open Codes/Subcategories
Causal conditions	Lack of pluralism and opportunities for diversity of thought in Iranian news websites	News websites should provide public access to diverse viewpoints; weaknesses exist in transparency, clarification, and correction of reality; websites should be capable of reflecting diverse and contradictory news without necessarily interpreting it or fearing its publication; news websites should remain committed to shared societal, media, and governance values.
Causal conditions	Failure to observe media-ethics principles in many Iranian news websites	Absence of a unified authority for legal and ethical supervision; influence of internal and external lobbying and pressure groups resulting in biased news; use of mobile citizen journalists unfamiliar with ethical principles; inadequate attention to the low income and livelihood conditions of journalists and news-site personnel.
Contextual conditions	Absence of a specialized center for monitoring and updating laws in accordance with emerging technologies	Diversification of news-site offenses as technology advances; outdated laws governing offenses arising from artificial intelligence and related technologies; absence of specific legal provisions concerning inability to identify fake images and videos and the subsequent dissemination of such materials.
Contextual conditions	Intense competition from unofficial online news distributors and social-media actors	Open access to content production without adequate knowledge of legal and civil responsibilities; faster dissemination by unlicensed social-media news channels; insufficient public awareness of fake news, rumors, legal consequences, and social repercussions; lack of effective legal supervision of unlicensed news distributors.
Contextual conditions	Inadequate updating of the skills and competencies of news-site human resources and journalists	Lack of a clear definition of investigative and technology journalism and related environmental, professional, and personal values; education and experience not adequately aligned with contemporary newsroom requirements; need for interactive, analytical, multilayered, investigative, digitally literate, accurate, responsible, and norm-based newsrooms; absence of continuous training in artificial intelligence and emerging technologies.
Intervening conditions	Intense competition from domestic news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media	Attempts to disturb public order and public opinion through biased interpretations; partial presentation of facts, fake news, and rumors contributing to Iranophobia and Islamophobia; production of allegedly distorted or destructive portrayals of Iran; use of offensive language and unethical or prohibited audiovisual content to attract young audiences.
Intervening conditions	International sanctions against Iran	Restricted participation in global media-ethics institutions; limited possibilities for international legal action against adversarial news outlets; delayed access to emerging technologies and difficulties in timely localization of technological ethics.
Central phenomenon	Ethical orientation of news websites toward the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance	Preservation of social cohesion and national and regional identity; use of artificial intelligence to monitor fake news and compare it with verified information; enhancement of public awareness to strengthen intellectual development and mutual trust among citizens, media, and governance institutions.
Central phenomenon	Updating news-site ethics according to contemporary technological needs	Mandatory ethical commitments in news production, dissemination, analysis, and criticism; technological monitoring of journalists' competence; development of a codified legal framework for preventing cyber offenses; establishment of fake-news monitoring units within newsrooms; public education concerning ethical responsibilities in online content production and dissemination.
Strategies and actions	Development of an ethical charter for Iranian news websites	A comprehensive charter consistent with ethical norms, beliefs, societal values, media values, and governance values; incorporation of technological dimensions while maintaining journalistic standards; emphasis on interactive, commitment-oriented policies centered on public interests; protection of privacy, freedom of expression, pluralism, nondiscrimination, and freedom of access to information.
Strategies and actions	Updating ethical provisions and regulations governing news websites	Development and revision of legislation in accordance with the speed and openness of the digital environment; preventive legal measures against unlicensed news-distribution entities; regulation of order and responsibility in online news-content production and dissemination.
Strategies and actions	Licensing independent specialized news websites	Reduction of pressure encouraging biased and interest-driven news; expansion of intellectual diversity and respect for competing viewpoints; reduction of discrimination and strengthening of equality and representation; promotion of social development, coexistence, solidarity, and national unity despite differences in viewpoints.
Strategies and actions	Digital democracy	Reduction of misinformation, hate speech, and opacity through ethical standardization; ethical responsibility for conflict resolution and human solidarity; nonpartisanship in news dissemination; fair collection of information from reliable sources.
Consequences	Standardized supervision and control of news-site conduct and performance	Protection of privacy; protection of the privacy of public figures insofar as it does not conflict with the public interest; increased credibility and reference value of official news websites; reduced capacity of informal and adversarial media to undermine domestic news outlets; more truthful and publicly responsible news dissemination.
Consequences	Updated ethical laws and regulations for news websites	Legal supervision and removal of unauthorized and sensationalist news distributors; broader constructive interaction between the judiciary and news organizations; greater legal awareness among citizens and citizen journalists.
Consequences	Development of digital democracy serving citizens and government within a religious value framework	Mutual satisfaction grounded in honesty, trust, belief in God, and respect for reciprocal interests; stronger national cohesion and identity; enhanced national, regional, and international credibility; improved conditions for domestic social development and international sociocultural interaction.
Consequences	Increase in ethically oriented journalists defending public interests	Greater respect for human dignity regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, language, or other distinctions; stronger professional self-worth and occupational credibility among journalists; development of a calmer, more tolerant, ethical society capable of respecting disagreement and criticism.

The qualitative model therefore suggested that media ethics in Iranian online news environments cannot be reduced to individual journalistic conduct. Instead, it is a multidimensional system involving regulation, technological competence, professional culture, pluralism, institutional independence, public participation, digital governance, and responsibility toward the public interest.

The quantitative measurement model was first evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha values were generally above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Composite reliability values were also above 0.70 across the reported constructs. AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity. The results therefore supported the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 2

Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Measurement Model

Construct	Cronbach's α	rho_A	CR	AVE
Lack of pluralism and opportunities for diversity of thought	0.769	0.759	0.862	0.679
Competition from unofficial news distributors and social-media actors	0.943	0.943	0.956	0.814
Absence of a specialized center for monitoring and updating laws	0.783	0.789	0.902	0.822
Ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance	0.889	0.905	0.923	0.752
Inadequately updated human resources and journalists	0.865	0.869	0.918	0.789
Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.952	0.954	0.969	0.912
Updated ethical laws and regulations for news websites	0.799	0.815	0.858	0.708
Updating ethical provisions and regulations in law	0.898	0.902	0.952	0.908
Development of digital democracy serving citizens and government within a religious framework	0.774	0.787	0.898	0.815
Competition from domestic and adversarial Persian-language foreign media	0.927	0.938	0.965	0.932
International sanctions against Iran	0.945	0.946	0.960	0.859
Failure to observe media-ethics principles	0.920	0.929	0.934	0.767
Standardized supervision and control of news-site conduct	0.827	0.753	0.806	0.676
Development of digital democracy	0.993	0.699	0.737	0.785

The measurement results indicated strong psychometric performance. For the lack of pluralism construct, AVE was 0.679 and CR was 0.862. Competition from unofficial news distributors demonstrated particularly high internal consistency, with $\alpha = 0.943$ and CR = 0.956, while the absence of a specialized legal-monitoring center produced AVE = 0.822 and CR = 0.902. Ethical orientation toward shared citizen, media, and governance interests also showed high reliability and convergent validity, with $\alpha = 0.889$, CR = 0.923, and AVE = 0.752.

The human-resource deficiency construct achieved $\alpha = 0.865$, CR = 0.918, and AVE = 0.789. Licensing independent specialized news websites exhibited particularly high values, with $\alpha = 0.952$, CR = 0.969, and AVE = 0.912. Updated ethical laws and regulations produced $\alpha = 0.799$, CR = 0.858, and AVE = 0.708, whereas updating ethical provisions in law produced $\alpha = 0.898$, CR = 0.952, and AVE = 0.908. Digital democracy oriented toward the mutual interests of citizens and government achieved $\alpha = 0.774$, CR = 0.898, and AVE = 0.815.

Competition from domestic news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media yielded $\alpha = 0.927$, CR = 0.965, and AVE = 0.932, while international sanctions achieved $\alpha = 0.945$, CR = 0.960, and AVE = 0.859. Failure to observe media-ethics principles achieved $\alpha = 0.920$, CR = 0.934, and AVE = 0.767. Standardized supervision and control yielded $\alpha = 0.827$, CR = 0.806, and AVE = 0.676. Finally, the digital-democracy construct reported $\alpha = 0.993$, CR = 0.737, and AVE = 0.785. Collectively, these results supported the adequacy of the measurement instrument for the subsequent structural analyses.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The original model matrix contained 16 numbered latent dimensions. The diagonal values represent the square roots of the corresponding AVEs, whereas the off-diagonal values represent interconstruct correlations. The overall pattern indicated that the diagonal values were generally greater than the correlations between the corresponding construct and the remaining constructs, supporting discriminant validity.

Table 3*Fornell–Larcker Criterion Matrix*

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	1.000															
2	0.552	0.811														
3	0.710	0.535	0.823													
4	0.647	0.576	0.716	1.000												
5	0.500	0.567	0.542	0.479	0.902											
6	−0.410	0.592	−0.608	−0.540	−0.482	0.906										
7	0.436	0.592	0.491	0.445	0.451	−0.455	0.867									
8	0.490	0.586	0.561	0.484	0.788	−0.474	0.505	0.888								
9	0.351	0.442	0.459	0.397	0.717	−0.335	0.344	0.659	0.955							
10	0.555	0.624	0.651	0.533	0.617	−0.732	0.441	0.638	0.468	0.713						
11	0.253	0.359	0.436	0.409	0.388	−0.466	0.255	0.334	0.324	0.495	1.000					
12	−0.756	0.656	−0.627	−0.639	−0.630	0.635	−0.497	−0.632	−0.547	0.699	−0.425	0.953				
13	−0.438	0.572	−0.540	0.485	−0.620	0.586	−0.432	−0.687	−0.467	0.719	−0.384	0.740	0.903			
14	−0.420	0.525	−0.547	−0.345	−0.527	0.449	−0.389	−0.568	−0.430	0.603	−0.498	0.576	0.523	0.965		
15	0.547	0.595	0.603	0.576	−0.648	0.626	−0.509	−0.629	−0.498	0.716	−0.714	0.796	0.666	0.681	0.927	
16	0.506	0.508	0.668	0.427	0.527	−0.505	0.748	0.495	0.438	0.805	0.429	−0.551	−0.501	−0.495	−0.563	0.753

Thus, the Fornell–Larcker assessment generally supported the empirical distinctiveness of the latent dimensions and indicated that the constructs represented sufficiently differentiated components of the proposed media-ethics model.

The structural model was evaluated using path coefficients, t statistics, and p values. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 95% confidence level, with $p < 0.05$ considered significant. The complete structural-path results are reported in Table 4. Most of the hypothesized relationships were statistically supported, although several paths failed to reach significance.

Table 4*Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis-Testing Results*

Structural Relationship	β	t	p	Result
Lack of pluralism → Ethical orientation toward shared interests	0.020	0.386	0.699	Not supported
Lack of pluralism → Updating media ethics for technological needs	0.206	3.434	0.001	Supported
Failure to observe media ethics → Ethical orientation toward shared interests	0.296	4.505	<0.001	Supported
Failure to observe media ethics → Updating media ethics for technological needs	0.020	0.386	0.699	Not supported
Ethical orientation → Development of an ethical charter	0.516	9.736	<0.001	Supported
Ethical orientation → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.454	7.215	<0.001	Supported
Ethical orientation → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.449	7.707	<0.001	Supported
Ethical orientation → Development of digital democracy	0.421	7.309	<0.001	Supported

Technological updating of ethics → Ethical charter	0.171	2.799	0.005	Supported
Technological updating of ethics → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.233	3.768	<0.001	Supported
Technological updating of ethics → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported
Technological updating of ethics → Digital democracy	0.200	2.688	0.007	Supported
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Ethical charter	0.020	0.386	0.699	Not supported
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.200	2.688	0.007	Supported
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.394	5.769	<0.001	Supported
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Digital democracy	0.394	5.769	<0.001	Supported
International sanctions → Ethical charter	0.406	5.271	<0.001	Supported
International sanctions → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported
International sanctions → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.020	0.386	0.699	Not supported
International sanctions → Digital democracy	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported
Absence of legal-monitoring center → Ethical charter	0.178	2.840	0.005	Supported
Absence of legal-monitoring center → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported
Absence of legal-monitoring center → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.086	1.132	0.263	Not supported
Absence of legal-monitoring center → Digital democracy	0.178	2.840	0.005	Supported
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Ethical charter	0.231	4.023	<0.001	Supported
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.207	2.544	0.011	Supported
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.030	0.394	0.699	Not supported
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Digital democracy	0.020	0.381	0.699	Not supported
Human-resource deficiencies → Ethical charter	0.274	4.055	<0.001	Supported
Human-resource deficiencies → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.394	5.769	<0.001	Supported
Human-resource deficiencies → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.023	0.376	0.689	Not supported
Human-resource deficiencies → Digital democracy	0.349	5.413	<0.001	Supported
Ethical charter → Standardized supervision and control	0.281	3.883	<0.001	Supported
Ethical charter → Updated ethical laws and regulations	0.612	9.333	<0.001	Supported
Ethical charter → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.537	8.255	<0.001	Supported
Ethical charter → Increase in ethically oriented journalists	0.576	8.026	<0.001	Supported
Updating ethical provisions in law → Standardized supervision and control	0.249	3.202	0.001	Supported
Updating ethical provisions in law → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.297	5.011	<0.001	Supported
Updating ethical provisions in law → Increase in ethically oriented journalists	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported
Updating ethical provisions in law → Digital democracy	0.195	3.523	<0.001	Supported
Licensing independent specialized news websites → Standardized supervision and control	0.297	5.011	<0.001	Supported
Licensing independent specialized news websites → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.195	3.523	<0.001	Supported
Licensing independent specialized news websites → Increase in ethically oriented journalists	0.148	2.657	0.008	Supported
Licensing independent specialized news websites → Digital democracy	0.238	5.332	<0.001	Supported
Digital democracy → Standardized supervision and control	0.086	1.132	0.258	Not supported

Among the causal conditions, lack of pluralism significantly predicted the need to update media ethics in accordance with technological requirements ($\beta = 0.206$, $t = 3.434$, $p = 0.001$), but its path to ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, the media, and governance institutions was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.020$, $p = 0.699$). Failure to observe media-ethics principles significantly predicted ethical orientation toward shared interests ($\beta = 0.296$, $t = 4.505$, $p < 0.001$), whereas its relationship with technological updating of media ethics was not supported.

The central phenomenon exerted substantial effects on the strategic dimensions. Ethical orientation toward shared interests significantly predicted development of an ethical charter ($\beta = 0.516$), updating ethical provisions and regulations ($\beta = 0.454$), licensing independent specialized news websites ($\beta = 0.449$), and development of digital democracy ($\beta = 0.421$), all with $p < 0.001$. Similarly, technological updating of media ethics significantly predicted ethical-charter development ($\beta = 0.171$, $p = 0.005$), regulatory updating ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < 0.001$), and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.200$, $p = 0.007$), although it did not significantly predict licensing of independent specialized news websites.

Among the intervening conditions, competition from domestic news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media significantly predicted regulatory updating ($\beta = 0.200$, $p = 0.007$), licensing of independent specialized news websites ($\beta = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$), and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$), but did not significantly predict development of the ethical

charter. International sanctions significantly predicted development of the ethical charter ($\beta = 0.406$, $t = 5.271$, $p < 0.001$), whereas their relationships with regulatory updating, licensing of specialized news websites, and digital democracy were not statistically significant.

Regarding contextual conditions, the absence of a specialized monitoring and legal-updating center significantly predicted both development of an ethical charter and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.178$, $p = 0.005$ for both paths). Competition from unofficial news distributors significantly predicted development of the ethical charter ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$) and updating of ethical regulations ($\beta = 0.207$, $p = 0.011$), whereas the paths to licensing specialized news websites and digital democracy were not supported. Human-resource deficiencies significantly predicted development of the ethical charter ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$), regulatory updating ($\beta = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$), and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$), whereas the path to licensing specialized independent news websites was nonsignificant.

The strategies also demonstrated substantial effects on the consequences. Development of an ethical charter significantly predicted standardized supervision and control ($\beta = 0.281$), updated ethical laws and regulations ($\beta = 0.612$), digital democracy serving citizens and government within the religious value framework ($\beta = 0.537$), and an increased number of ethically oriented journalists committed to public interests ($\beta = 0.576$), with all relationships significant at $p < 0.001$. Updating ethical provisions in law significantly predicted standardized supervision ($\beta = 0.249$, $p = 0.001$), digital democracy serving citizens and government ($\beta = 0.297$, $p < 0.001$), and the broader development of digital democracy ($\beta = 0.195$, $p < 0.001$), but did not significantly increase the number of ethically oriented journalists. Licensing independent specialized news websites significantly predicted standardized supervision ($\beta = 0.297$), digital democracy serving citizens and government ($\beta = 0.195$), growth in ethically oriented journalists ($\beta = 0.148$), and broader digital democracy ($\beta = 0.238$). In contrast, the direct path from digital democracy to standardized supervision and control was not statistically significant.

Effect sizes were assessed through f^2 to determine the relative contribution of predictor constructs to endogenous variables. The supplied analysis classified the relationships according to weak, moderate, or strong effects. The strongest reported contribution was associated with human-resource and journalist deficiencies in predicting digital democracy ($f^2 = 0.478$), followed by updating ethical provisions in law in predicting digital democracy serving citizens and government ($f^2 = 0.452$), development of the ethical charter in predicting updated ethical legislation ($f^2 = 0.367$), development of the ethical charter in predicting standardized supervision ($f^2 = 0.365$), and updating ethical provisions in predicting digital democracy ($f^2 = 0.362$).

Table 5

Effect Sizes for Significant Structural Relationships

Relationship	f^2	Reported Magnitude
Lack of pluralism → Technological updating of media ethics	0.092	Moderate
Failure to observe media ethics → Ethical orientation	0.067	Moderate
Ethical orientation → Ethical charter	0.090	Moderate
Ethical orientation → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.360	Strong
Ethical orientation → Licensing independent specialized news websites	0.176	Strong
Ethical orientation → Digital democracy	0.219	Strong
Technological updating of ethics → Ethical charter	0.192	Strong
Technological updating of ethics → Updating ethical provisions in law	0.036	Moderate
Technological updating of ethics → Digital democracy	0.080	Moderate
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Updating ethical provisions	0.007	Weak
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Licensing specialized websites	0.041	Moderate
Competition from domestic/adversarial foreign media → Digital democracy	0.192	Strong
International sanctions → Ethical charter	0.132	Moderate

Absence of legal-monitoring center → Ethical charter	0.031	Moderate
Absence of legal-monitoring center → Digital democracy	0.062	Moderate
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Ethical charter	0.032	Moderate
Competition from unofficial news distributors → Updating ethical provisions	0.098	Moderate
Human-resource deficiencies → Ethical charter	0.154	Strong
Human-resource deficiencies → Updating ethical provisions	0.087	Moderate
Human-resource deficiencies → Digital democracy	0.478	Strong
Ethical charter → Standardized supervision and control	0.365	Strong
Ethical charter → Updated ethical laws and regulations	0.367	Strong
Ethical charter → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.055	Moderate
Ethical charter → Increase in ethically oriented journalists	0.024	Moderate
Updating ethical provisions → Standardized supervision and control	0.031	Moderate
Updating ethical provisions → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.452	Strong
Updating ethical provisions → Digital democracy	0.362	Strong
Licensing specialized news websites → Standardized supervision and control	0.050	Moderate
Licensing specialized news websites → Digital democracy serving citizens and government	0.106	Moderate
Licensing specialized news websites → Increase in ethically oriented journalists	0.047	Moderate
Licensing specialized news websites → Digital democracy	0.103	Moderate

The explanatory power of the endogenous constructs was assessed using R^2 and adjusted R^2 . All reported endogenous constructs demonstrated substantial explanatory power. Ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance institutions produced $R^2 = 0.717$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.715$. Updating news-site ethics in accordance with technological requirements produced $R^2 = 0.856$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.852$. Development of an ethical charter produced $R^2 = 0.819$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.817$, while licensing independent specialized news websites produced $R^2 = 0.713$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.710$.

Digital democracy produced $R^2 = 0.775$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.773$. Updated ethical laws and regulations produced $R^2 = 0.709$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.708$, while the increase in ethically oriented journalists committed to protecting public interests produced $R^2 = 0.775$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.772$. The human-resource deficiency construct produced $R^2 = 0.668$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.666$. Competition from unofficial news distributors and social-media actors demonstrated the highest explanatory coefficient, with $R^2 = 0.881$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.877$. Standardized supervision and control of news-site conduct and performance produced $R^2 = 0.816$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.810$.

Accordingly, adjusted R^2 values ranged from 0.666 to 0.877, indicating that approximately 66.6% to 87.7% of the variance in the corresponding endogenous constructs was explained by their predictors. The highest explanatory power belonged to competition from unofficial news distributors and social-media actors, followed by technological updating of media ethics, development of the ethical charter, and standardized supervision and control. Although the human-resource and journalist competence construct showed the lowest R^2 among the reported dimensions, its adjusted R^2 of 0.666 still indicated substantial explanatory power.

More specifically, the R^2 of 0.717 for ethical orientation indicated that the causal and related antecedent variables explained a substantial proportion of variation in commitment to the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance. The R^2 of 0.856 for technological updating of media ethics highlighted the importance of adapting ethical standards to emerging technologies. The R^2 of 0.819 for the ethical-charter construct suggested that the identified antecedents strongly accounted for the need to establish a comprehensive ethical framework for Iranian news websites. Similarly, the R^2 of 0.713 for licensing independent specialized news websites demonstrated the relevance of institutional and contextual factors to the development of a more pluralistic and competitive news environment.

The R^2 of 0.775 for digital democracy indicated that the strategic configuration of the model substantially explained the development of participatory and ethically regulated digital news environments. The R^2 of 0.709 for updated ethical laws and regulations showed that legal modernization should be understood as a major consequence of the proposed ethical framework but not as a sufficient condition on its own. The R^2 of 0.775 for increasing the number of ethically oriented journalists emphasized the importance of professional conduct, public-interest orientation, and institutional strategies in strengthening the legitimacy of official Iranian news platforms.

The R^2 of 0.668 for human-resource and journalist competencies suggested that professional training, technological expertise, and particularly mastery of artificial-intelligence tools represented important but comparatively less dominant dimensions of the model. Nevertheless, improved technological literacy may reduce the likelihood of disseminating false content and increase journalists' ability to identify manipulated or artificial audiovisual materials. The R^2 of 0.881 for competition from unofficial news distributors was the highest in the model, indicating the centrality of competition with social-media actors and informal news channels to the contemporary media environment. Finally, the R^2 of 0.816 for standardized supervision and control highlighted the importance of legal, public, and ethical oversight in reducing misuse of news platforms and strengthening institutional credibility.

The overall goodness of fit was assessed through the standardized root mean square residual, goodness-of-fit index, and normed fit index. The SRMR value was 0.068, below the acceptance threshold of 0.08. The GOF value was 0.7834, substantially higher than the reported benchmark of approximately 0.36–0.37. The NFI was 0.931, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.90. Taken together, these results indicated satisfactory overall model fit and supported the empirical adequacy of the structural model.

The quantitative findings substantially confirmed the grounded-theory model generated in the qualitative phase. The general structure consisting of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, central phenomena, strategies, and consequences was empirically supported, although the relative influence of the individual components varied. The model therefore remained fundamentally consistent with the qualitative framework while demonstrating that certain dimensions were more influential than others.

Among the causal conditions, lack of pluralism and opportunities for diversity of thought exerted its most important significant influence on technological updating of news-site ethics, with $\beta = 0.206$. Failure to observe media-ethics principles, in turn, significantly influenced ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, the media, and governance institutions, with $\beta = 0.296$. Thus, both pluralism and compliance with fundamental ethical principles contributed to the emergence of the central ethical phenomenon, although through different pathways.

Among the central dimensions, ethical orientation toward shared interests produced the strongest effects on the strategy variables. Its strongest relationship was with development of an Iranian news-site ethical charter ($\beta = 0.516$), followed by updating ethical provisions and regulations ($\beta = 0.454$), licensing independent specialized news websites ($\beta = 0.449$), and development of digital democracy ($\beta = 0.421$). These findings positioned ethical orientation toward collective interests as one of the principal driving components of the final model.

Regarding intervening conditions, competition from domestic news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media significantly influenced licensing independent specialized news websites and digital democracy, both with $\beta = 0.394$. International sanctions demonstrated their strongest relationship with development of an ethical charter ($\beta = 0.406$). These

findings suggested that external competitive and geopolitical pressures were particularly relevant to institutional and strategic responses within the proposed ethical framework.

Among the contextual conditions, inadequately updated human resources and journalists emerged as particularly important. This factor significantly influenced development of the ethical charter ($\beta = 0.274$), updating ethical provisions and regulations ($\beta = 0.394$), and digital democracy ($\beta = 0.349$). The results therefore underscored the importance of professional skill, specialization, digital literacy, mastery of emerging technologies, and particularly competence in artificial intelligence for the future ethical performance of Iranian news websites.

The strategy-to-consequence relationships were among the strongest in the structural model. Development of an ethical charter exerted its strongest effect on updated ethical laws and regulations ($\beta = 0.612$), followed by an increase in ethically oriented journalists committed to public interests ($\beta = 0.576$) and development of digital democracy serving citizens and government within the religious value framework ($\beta = 0.537$). This pattern demonstrated that the ethical charter represented the central operational mechanism through which the qualitative values identified by the experts could be converted into institutional, regulatory, professional, and sociopolitical outcomes.

Overall, the findings supported the final media-ethics model developed through the qualitative phase. The quantitative PLS-SEM analysis showed that the grounded-theory structure possessed satisfactory reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, explanatory power, and overall model fit. Updating media ethics in accordance with technological developments, developing an ethical charter for Iranian news websites, addressing competition from unofficial online news distributors, and establishing standardized legal, public, and ethical supervision emerged as particularly important components of the model.

Although updating the skills, specialization, and technological competence of journalists remained influential, its explanatory contribution was relatively lower than that of several other components. Nevertheless, technological competence, particularly the ability to use artificial intelligence responsibly and recognize manipulated news content, remained an essential dimension of the proposed model. Collectively, the findings suggest that the development of media ethics for Iranian news websites requires simultaneous attention to professional ethics, legal modernization, technological adaptation, institutional pluralism, journalist competence, public accountability, and democratic participation in the digital information environment.

The convergence of the qualitative and quantitative findings ultimately supported retention of the principal grounded-theory structure as the final model. Differences across path strengths did not require fundamental reconstruction of the qualitative model; rather, they clarified which components possessed greater or lesser empirical influence. Accordingly, the final model provides an integrated framework through which policymakers, media-law legislators, professional ethics institutions, managers of Iranian news websites, journalists, and other stakeholders may address the principal ethical challenges facing online news production and dissemination.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop and empirically validate a comprehensive media ethics model for Iranian news websites by integrating qualitative grounded-theory findings with quantitative PLS-SEM analysis. The findings showed that media ethics in the context of Iranian online news cannot be understood solely as an individual professional obligation of

journalists. Instead, it emerged as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by causal, contextual, technological, regulatory, organizational, and geopolitical conditions. The qualitative phase identified lack of pluralism and diversity of thought, failure to observe media-ethics principles, inadequate legal updating, competition from unofficial and foreign news actors, deficiencies in journalists' technological competence, and international sanctions as major antecedent or contextual factors. The central phenomenon was defined through ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance institutions, together with the need to update media ethics in response to technological change. The strategic responses included developing an ethical charter, updating ethical regulations, licensing independent specialized news websites, and advancing digital democracy, while the expected consequences included stronger oversight, updated legal frameworks, higher professional credibility, and an increase in ethically oriented journalists.

One of the important findings was the significant relationship between lack of pluralism and the need to update media ethics in line with contemporary technological requirements. This finding suggests that ethical reform in digital journalism is connected not only to technological modernization, but also to the openness of the information environment and the extent to which multiple voices can participate in public discourse. When the digital media environment does not adequately accommodate diversity of opinion, the need for revised ethical standards becomes more pronounced because technological expansion without pluralistic norms may reinforce existing asymmetries in visibility and representation. This interpretation is consistent with the broader argument that digital media ethics must be adapted to the realities of globally interconnected and participatory information environments [1]. It is also compatible with research emphasizing that ethical frameworks for new media must simultaneously address freedom of expression, public participation, and the risks associated with digitally mediated communication [6].

The significant effect of failure to observe media-ethics principles on ethical orientation toward the shared interests of citizens, media, and governance institutions also confirms the importance of institutionalizing professional ethics rather than treating ethics as an abstract or symbolic concept. The result indicates that deficiencies in current ethical practice increase the need for a clearly articulated orientation toward the public interest, institutional responsibility, and trust. Similar conclusions can be drawn from studies showing that biased reporting shapes public opinion and weakens the credibility of media institutions [3]. In this sense, the emphasis placed by the present model on shared interests reflects the need to balance organizational objectives, social responsibilities, and the public's right to reliable information. The result is also consistent with the idea of ethical capital, according to which ethical credibility constitutes an important source of legitimacy and sustainability for media organizations [14].

The findings further showed that ethical orientation toward shared interests was one of the strongest predictors of the principal strategies in the model. It significantly influenced development of an ethical charter, updating of ethical regulations, licensing of independent specialized news websites, and development of digital democracy. Among these relationships, the strongest path was toward development of an ethical charter. This pattern suggests that the operationalization of ethical values requires explicit institutional codification. In other words, shared ethical commitments become more effective when translated into clear standards governing newsroom behavior, technological practices, accountability, privacy, impartiality, access to information, and public responsibility. This interpretation aligns with studies that have emphasized the importance of comprehensive models of professional ethics in communication-based occupations [15]. It is also consistent with research

on media organizations showing that organizational ethics and ethical management are closely associated with institutional functioning and crisis-management capacity [11].

The importance of technological updating was another central finding. Updating news-site ethics in accordance with emerging technological requirements significantly predicted development of an ethical charter, regulatory updating, and digital democracy. This finding is particularly important given the growing role of artificial intelligence, automated content generation, synthetic media, and algorithmic distribution in contemporary journalism. Technological developments have expanded the ethical responsibilities of journalists beyond traditional concerns such as accuracy and fairness to include questions of authenticity, disclosure, algorithmic bias, verification, data protection, and manipulation. Studies of virtual influencers demonstrate how technological mediation can blur boundaries between authentic and artificial representation and create new ethical dilemmas for audiences and communicators [5]. The present findings suggest that similar concerns are increasingly relevant to news websites, where the inability to recognize manipulated images, videos, or artificial content can directly undermine institutional credibility.

The results concerning competition from domestic unofficial news distributors and adversarial Persian-language foreign media also deserve attention. This intervening factor significantly predicted regulatory updating, licensing of independent specialized news websites, and digital democracy. These findings suggest that external information competition can create pressure for institutional reform and greater diversification of the domestic news environment. When audiences have access to a wide range of unofficial or foreign information sources, formal news organizations may need to improve transparency, responsiveness, and editorial independence in order to maintain public trust. The finding is consistent with research showing that media freedom and the legal environment influence how journalists perceive their professional autonomy and ability to serve the public [17]. It also supports broader arguments that ethical media systems cannot rely exclusively on restriction or control; they require credible institutions capable of producing timely, pluralistic, and trustworthy information.

The significant relationship between international sanctions and development of an ethical charter suggests that geopolitical constraints can indirectly reinforce the perceived need for stronger domestic ethical frameworks. Sanctions may limit institutional participation in international professional networks, delay access to technological resources, and reduce opportunities for cross-border cooperation. Under such conditions, developing a context-sensitive domestic ethical framework becomes more important. This finding is compatible with the broader literature emphasizing that media ethics must be adapted to local institutional and cultural contexts rather than simply transferred from one setting to another [18]. At the same time, such contextual adaptation should not result in abandoning universal professional principles such as accuracy, human dignity, accountability, and fairness.

Among the contextual conditions, deficiencies in the skills and technological preparedness of journalists had significant effects on several strategic outcomes. Human-resource deficiencies significantly predicted development of an ethical charter, regulatory updating, and digital democracy. This result highlights the central role of professional competence in ethical journalism. Ethical frameworks are difficult to implement when journalists lack the technological knowledge required to identify manipulated content, evaluate digital sources, or use artificial intelligence responsibly. The finding is consistent with evidence that ethical reasoning can be strengthened through structured education and professional training [10]. It also aligns with research showing that professional ethics is closely connected to organizational health and institutional functioning [12].

These results imply that technological literacy and ethical competence should be treated as complementary rather than separate dimensions of journalist development.

The structural analysis also demonstrated that development of an ethical charter produced some of the strongest effects on the model's consequences. The ethical charter significantly predicted standardized supervision and control, updated ethical laws and regulations, development of digital democracy serving citizens and government, and an increase in ethically oriented journalists committed to the public interest. The strongest of these relationships was the effect on updated ethical laws and regulations. This finding indicates that a professional ethics charter may function as a bridge between normative values and formal institutional governance. It can clarify the standards expected of journalists and media organizations while also informing legal and regulatory reform. Similar arguments have been advanced in studies that conceptualize ethical transformation as an institutional rather than purely individual process [7]. The finding also corresponds with evidence that ethical models in media-related environments benefit from explicit attention to organizational, contextual, and professional factors [19].

The role of the ethical charter in increasing the number of ethically oriented journalists is equally significant. This result suggests that organizational standards can influence professional identity by clarifying expectations and strengthening the normative environment within which journalists work. Professional conduct is not formed solely by personal values; it is also shaped by institutional incentives, newsroom culture, managerial practices, and peer expectations. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that ethical management contributes to healthier and more resilient media organizations [11]. It also supports educational evidence showing that moral reasoning and ethical maturity can be developed through structured exposure to ethical concepts and decision-making frameworks [10].

The effects of updating ethical regulations further reinforce the importance of legal modernization. Updating ethical provisions significantly predicted standardized supervision, development of digital democracy, and broader public-government digital interaction. The implication is that outdated legal frameworks cannot adequately regulate contemporary digital journalism, especially when the media environment includes artificial intelligence, rapid circulation of information, citizen-generated content, and cross-platform dissemination. This result is consistent with research emphasizing the need for new ethical frameworks and practical responses to the challenges of social networks and digital media [6]. It also corresponds to work on fact-checking and content governance, which demonstrates that contemporary media regulation increasingly requires standards capable of addressing disinformation and digital verification [2].

The positive effects of licensing independent specialized news websites on several consequences are also notable. This strategy significantly predicted standardized supervision, digital democracy, growth in ethically oriented journalists, and development of broader digital participation. The finding suggests that a more diversified and professionally regulated media environment may contribute to both accountability and pluralism. Institutional independence can reduce pressure for uniform or interest-driven reporting and may provide greater space for specialized expertise, investigative journalism, and alternative viewpoints. This interpretation is consistent with the argument that media freedom and professional autonomy are necessary conditions for meaningful ethical journalism [17]. Ethical regulation is therefore most effective when combined with responsible freedom rather than excessive restriction.

The significant relationship between ethical and regulatory strategies and digital democracy further confirms that media ethics is closely connected to the quality of public participation. The present model conceptualized digital democracy not only

as technological access but as a communicative environment characterized by honesty, trust, pluralism, fair representation, and respect for public interests. This interpretation closely aligns with work emphasizing the relationship between digital democracy and the governance of disinformation [4]. It also reflects the educational perspective that responsible participation in digital environments requires ethical awareness and civic competencies [16]. Thus, the development of digital democracy cannot be separated from professional media ethics and responsible information governance.

The model's strong explanatory power further strengthens these interpretations. Adjusted R^2 values ranged from 0.666 to 0.877, indicating that the model explained a substantial proportion of variation across the principal endogenous constructs. Competition from unofficial news distributors showed the highest explanatory power, followed by technological updating of media ethics, development of the ethical charter, and standardized supervision and control. These results suggest that the contemporary ethical challenges of Iranian news websites are strongly embedded in the changing digital information ecosystem. This is also consistent with evidence that the structure of digital communication can intensify moral polarization and performative forms of ethical discourse [20]. The present findings therefore reinforce the need to move beyond symbolic commitments and develop institutional mechanisms that operationalize ethical principles in everyday journalistic practice.

The measurement and fit indices also provided strong support for the proposed model. Reliability and convergent validity were generally satisfactory across the constructs, discriminant validity was supported by the Fornell–Larcker assessment, and the overall model-fit indices were acceptable, with SRMR = 0.068, GOF = 0.7834, and NFI = 0.931. These findings indicate that the qualitative dimensions identified through grounded theory were not merely descriptive themes but could also be operationalized as coherent latent constructs in the quantitative phase. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative evidence therefore provides strong support for retaining the grounded-theory structure as the final conceptual model.

Overall, the results show that media ethics in Iranian news websites should be conceptualized as an integrated system involving professional conduct, technological competence, regulatory modernization, institutional pluralism, organizational accountability, and public-interest orientation. This interpretation is consistent with broader scholarship emphasizing the multidimensional character of ethics in contemporary digital communication [1, 8]. It also resonates with research demonstrating that digital media environments affect not only information quality but also psychological and social well-being, particularly among younger users [9]. Accordingly, ethical reform in online journalism should address both the integrity of content and the broader consequences of media practices for public trust, social cohesion, and civic participation.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative phase relied on a relatively small purposive sample of experts, which was appropriate for grounded-theory development but may not capture the full diversity of perspectives existing across all Iranian news organizations. Second, the quantitative sample was limited to professionals associated with online news production, management, and journalism, and the use of purposive sampling may restrict the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of media practitioners. Third, the study was cross-sectional, and therefore the reported structural relationships should not be interpreted as definitive evidence of causality over time. Fourth, the model was developed specifically within the institutional, technological, and sociocultural context of Iranian news websites, which means that direct application to other national media systems should be approached cautiously. Finally, self-reported questionnaire data may have been influenced by social desirability or respondents' professional perceptions of ethical expectations.

Future studies should test the proposed model using larger and more diverse samples drawn from different types of news organizations, including national agencies, regional media, independent digital outlets, and specialized news platforms. Longitudinal research would be valuable for examining whether changes in regulation, technological competence, and professional training produce measurable improvements in ethical practices over time. Comparative studies could also evaluate the applicability of the model across different countries, legal systems, and media cultures. Future research may further incorporate audience perspectives to determine whether improvements in ethical standards are associated with greater public trust, perceived credibility, and willingness to rely on official news websites. Additional studies should also examine the ethical implications of generative artificial intelligence, deepfakes, automated journalism, algorithmic recommendation systems, and AI-assisted fact-checking, as these technologies are likely to become increasingly important in the production and governance of digital news.

In practice, Iranian news organizations should develop and implement a comprehensive and regularly updated ethical charter that addresses both traditional journalistic principles and emerging technological challenges. Continuous professional training should be provided in areas such as artificial intelligence, digital verification, identification of manipulated audiovisual content, privacy protection, source evaluation, and responsible use of social media. Regulatory institutions should modernize media-related laws and establish clear, transparent, and proportionate rules for online news production while preserving freedom of expression and diversity of opinion. Independent specialized news websites should be encouraged within a framework of professional accountability, and stronger mechanisms should be created for legal, public, and professional oversight. News organizations should also invest in better employment conditions, institutional independence, newsroom competence, and public-interest journalism so that ethical conduct becomes an organizational norm rather than an individual burden placed solely on journalists.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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