



Media ethics

Edited by *Matthew Kieran*,
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If you're looking for a step-by-step guide to how to be an ethical journalist, *Media Ethics* is not for you. But if you are interested in the philosophical background to the media, this collection of essays is a thought-provoking work.

Editor and contributor Matthew Kieran argues that the philosophical nature of most of the essays is justified on the grounds that we cannot understand ethical issues by reference to social consensus, if one exists, because consensus itself does not reveal "what...people's preferences ought to be and why, rationally speaking, this is so".

Among the contributors is Andrew Belsey, a lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Wales, who sees journalism as a struggle between industrial journalism and ethical journalism. He accepts the reality of both, claiming that "the necessity of making a living makes a mockery of most people's highest ethical aspirations.

Compromise is part of living in the world as it now is". After lamenting the vulnerability of ethical journalism to the commercial reality of industrial journalism, Belsey concludes that there is no solution to the paradox, placing emphasis on virtue in journalism - good intentions matched by good actions. He cites the example of Martin Bell, another contributor to the book and a journalist regarded for his "virtuous" journalism in reporting wars from Vietnam to Bosnia. Bell was elected to the UK parliament in 1997 after standing against a cabinet minister who had allegedly conducted unethical financial dealings.

Bell acknowledges the obvious conflict between commercial pressure and the "culture of truthfulness" and takes some joy in the fact that he thinks this culture still prevails at the BBC. Bell believes in the "journalism of attachment... a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor". This is not to say that he supports bias, rather that he recognises that journalists are more and more a part of what they report. If objectivity is indifference to the atrocity one is reporting, Bell wants none of it. Not everything should be shown but people must have a sense of what happened. Perhaps conceding that his perspective comes from reporting wars in 11 countries, Bell says the argument is more one of degree than principle.

The perspective of the journalist is a theme picked up by Kieran. Stating that the end of journalism is the "relaying of news about events that affect and concern the public", he suggests that it is "unsurprising" that different interpretations emerge from the same events when one takes into account the different perspectives. This, he argues, does not necessarily have to be condemned. Different interpretations of a situation can be legitimate incomplete parts of the whole story. Kieran cites the OJ Simpson case as an example: mainstream media concentrated on the circumstances of his arrest and treatment in light of his star status; the black media concentrated on possible racial angles; and the women's press looked at the allegations of wife beating. None painted the whole picture but all were legitimate parts of it.

Privacy and public exposure are topics taken up by David Archard and moral philosopher Mary Midgley. The lack of a right of privacy in the UK, as in Australia, prompts these contributors to ask

what privacy rights would protect.

Archard, reader in Philosophy at the University of St Andrews, does not get into the debate over whether and how a privacy law should operate. He instead discusses what the content of a right of privacy might be. He argues for a definition based on misuse of information and then examines the usual justifications for intrusions into people's privacy. Archard challenges the widely held notion that public figures must automatically sacrifice any right to privacy but also suggests that gossip is not as evil as it is made out to be. Midgley looks at invasions of privacy in the broader context of the tension between ideals and practice. She says the argument that one cannot offer criticism unless one is immune from it is to deny the inherent fallibility of humans. Her discussion of whether consistency is possible is very interesting.

But what of those who dominate the media? Brian McNair, senior lecturer in Film and Media Science at the University of Stirling, looks at the roles of journalists, politicians and public relations advisers. After examining the ethics of political journalism, McNair concludes that politicians and journalists compete to set the news agenda. This places everyone, the media and those who consume it, under a burden to ensure that ethical standards are maintained, appropriate media ownership laws are in place, and that public service broadcasting is preserved.

As law struggles to regulate new forms of media, ethics emerge as a crucial part of maintaining media with integrity. *Media Ethics* does not purport to come to conclusions about what ethical standards should be adhered to but provides insight into what might be called the "thought infrastructure" of contributors who have considered the issues. On that basis, it is an interesting and useful work.

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