
With Global Media Ethics: Problems and Perspectives, Stephen J.A. Ward, well-known ethics expert, brings a new and important contribution to the field, shifting the debate of journalism ethics in the digital era to a project on a global scale. This collection offers a diverse range of perspectives and approaches to the controversial issue of international media ethics, addressing the tension between local freedom of expression and respect for universal ethics in a global world.

Although the subject of global ethics in journalism is far from new, it is presented here as a “felt need” project. Ward demands that news media outlets and practitioners urgently reconsider their practices and norms in a global and digitally convergent world. In his view, global media ethics must stress and critique the responsibilities of a news media that is now global in content, reach, and impact, as well as the responsibility of nonprofessionals who flood the Internet with information. A detailed “Further Reading” section at the end of every chapter provides an excellent opportunity to expand on each topic. However, a couple of important aspects seem to be missing: first, a consideration of the difference between a journalist’s own perception of their role and work and their actual opportunities to express the “truth”; and second, ethics related to “ethnic media.”

Stephen Ward, a journalist for 14 years, was a Canadian political reporter before becoming a war correspondent and then a newsroom manager. Today he is an associate editor of the Journal of Mass Media Ethics. In his introduction, Ward outlines the context for global media ethics: the current, often disorienting, revolution of media to interactive and online, and the globalization of news media. This does not mean that everybody across the world should have the same ethical code; we need different approaches based on similar principles of integrity, balance, honesty, truth, and responsibility. The world is now globally connected, and journalists should transcend parochialism, especially when reporting on global issues like climate change, natural disasters, or even wars.

In “Telling the Climate Change Story,” Sharon Dunwoody and Magda Konieczna elaborate on the importance of managing this tension between the “global” and the “local” focus. For example, journalists should not persuade people to care about global warming, but they have an ethical responsibility to give people the option to care by “keeping the issue on the public agenda” (p. 186). In “Ethics of Global Disaster Reporting,” Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Mervi Pantti suggest that journalists can change their traditional role of distance and impartiality, becoming witnesses trained to “consider all human experiences of loss, suffering, and death as equally worthy of compassion” (p. 208).

Nick Couldry (“Why Media Ethics Still Matters”) tackles the problem of how to re-define world ethics if there are no clear common frameworks or rules. To solve this Couldry offers an Aristotelian approach, proposing three virtues for media-related prac-
tice in a digital era: accuracy, sincerity, and care. As he notes, the diversity of articles in the book is itself evidence of a “growing international debate about the frameworks for media ethics” (p. 15).

A compelling aspect of this debate is the reality of cross-national differences as presented in “Universals and Differences in Global Journalism Ethics.” In this comparative study of journalists’ professional values, Thomas Hanitzsch, Patrick Lee Plaisance, and Elizabeth A. Skewes call for more balance in media ethics research. Surveying 2,000 journalists between 2007 and 2009 with a multinational consortium of researchers in 20 countries, they found that notions of “objectivity,” “accuracy,” and “truth” (p. 44) are at the core of a shared normative understanding of professional ethics. However, their results show that in some places harm to people is considered sometimes justifiable (Turkey), while in others, harm is always considered wrong (Pakistan, Chile, Russia, Bulgaria, and Romania). An interesting addition to this research would be a content analysis of these journalists’ work, to verify if their perception of what ethical journalism means corresponds to their actual professional actions.

Another important new concept expressed in this book is the emergence of an “egocentric public” as new publics appear on social networks. In “From Journalism Ethics to an Ethic of Citizenship – Evidence from Colombia,” Hernando Rojas and Tim Macafee write that “failure to recognize these emerging publics, or the inability to incorporate their resources and needs as part of a broader media ecology, will compromise journalism’s service to democratic goals” (p. 122).

Significantly, what emerges overall is that the role of the media is not the same all over the world, and thus the notion of “public interest” can be highly controversial as a global concept. As Herman Wasserman underlines in “South African Perspectives,” “there is still much negotiation, contestation, and disagreement about what the role of the media in post apartheid society should look like” and how media could contribute to overcoming the continued marginalization of a large part of South African citizenry (p. 138). In “Postwar Liberia,” Jo Ellen Fair considers the ethical “conundrum” posed for the country’s journalists, who are caught between the democratic value of individual responsibility and the group loyalties required to rebuild a divided nation. “To what should they try to be loyal – truth or a set of hopes whose workability in Liberia is an open question” (p. 163)? In their article “Contextual Ethics and Arab Mass Media,” Ralph D. Berenger and Mustafa Taha conclude that media ethics in the Middle East must be viewed in the context of what societal members consider normative behaviour for media organizations to practice, and therefore “Islamic media ethics is a work in progress” (p. 106). It should be added that all ethics in the world could be defined as “a work in progress.”

Ward’s book also offers theoretical foundations of global media ethics, as the Internet and the Web weave more and more people and cultures together around the globe. In “Global Ethics and the Problem of Relativism,” Clifford Christians, speaking about “ethical relativism” (p. 273), cites the attachment diasporic communities have to local news while they live and work elsewhere. He offers the relevant outcome that “instead of concluding that no moral universals are possible,” the primary issue for scholars is “identifying a different kind of universal, one that honors cultural diversity
while articulating cross-cultural norms” (p. 288). While this idea could stand as the heart of the book’s overall message, it overlooks the specific role of “ethnic media,” today commonly spread around the world, often operating in a language different from the mainstream. The resulting lack of supervision or monitoring of the “ethnic media” and its approach and content can be problematic in terms of “universal” ethics, even leading to conflicts with “mainstream” society. This topic deserves a closer look.

Ward himself has the last word, offering both introduction and conclusion. In the final article, “Global Media Ethics – Utopian or Realistic?,” he scrutinizes all skeptical objections to the realization of global media ethics, proceeding with an airtight analysis of philosophical reasons enriched by evidence that global media ethics is indeed possible, an idea that needs to be planted as “a seed in the hope of germination in the future” (p. 311).

This collection of articles represents a very significant contribution to the field of media ethics while leaving unanswered the crucial question: in a global context, where does freedom of expression end and respect for ethics start? The debate is definitely open.

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