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978-0-521-53427-7 - Remote Control: New Media, New Ethics

Edited by Catharine Lumby and Elspeth Probyn

Excerpt

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Introduction:
An Ethics of
EngagementELSPETH PROBYN &
CATHARINE LUMBY

A PRINCESS DRIVEN TO HER DEATH BY MANIACAL PAPARAZZI; REALITY shows where contestants cry, vomit and have sex on screen; radio hosts showered with vats of cash for editorial comment; an online world teeming with pornographers and Nazis; media moguls putting the boot into rugby league fans – in the past decade, media ethics have rarely been out of the media.

In their diversity and difference, the concerns raised by popular new media genres challenge the conventional framing of media ethics. Certainly the intensity, reach and variety of media formats today are unprecedented. From global news channels clogged with talking heads dissecting instantaneous satellite feeds to online web sites featuring people who live their entire life in front of a camera, our screens, magazines and airwaves are filled with images of what living is like. Driven by technological advances, increased competition, and the globalisation of capital and information flows, our contemporary mass media present the viewer, the reader and the Internet user at home with a host of ethical challenges.

Meanwhile, public debate brims with popular and scholarly commentators announcing the decline, degradation and even extinction of media ethics. In conventional terms, the story of the media is one of moral and professional decline, a tale of the steady erosion of codes and ideals which once guided mainstream journalistic practice and media production. And yet, as anyone who's worked in the media can attest, codes of ethics and journalistic ideals have always had a tenuous relationship with the messy realities of professional practice. The public might have been outraged by intrusions into Diana's privacy, but editors know photos of topless celebrities

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still sell magazines. And while current affairs shows have been savaged for unethical practices in the past decade, the mantra of TV journalism is still: get the story and get it first.

Faced with the realities of deadlines, frenzied competition for jobs, and continuous pressure from above to keep the ratings up and the costs down, it's no wonder that few media producers spend their time worrying about abstract ethical codes or ideals. Across the Western world, scholarly and popular debates about media ethics remain dominated by a belief in the efficacy of abstract, regulatory codes that attempt to define ethical behaviour in advance of practical dilemmas. Yet the very reason such codes are often derided or ignored by journalists is that they fail to take account of the realities and complexities of popular media practice. What's more, such codes are only held to apply to hard news and current affairs journalism, while increasingly many of the ethical dilemmas thrown up by the contemporary media relate to entertainment-oriented formats.

Remote Control offers a broader, more engaged and, we hope, more engaging framework for thinking about the ethical dilemmas thrown up by the contemporary media. Our contributors address the following questions: What are the limitations of current debates about ethics and the popular media? Do media consumers have the same kinds of ethical concerns as academic and media commentators who speak on their behalf? Should we have different ethical standards for information and entertainment media? Should we censor online media more or, conversely, less stringently than conventional formats? How much agency should we attribute to viewers and readers? When is it relevant to bring race or religion or gender into debates about crime and terrorism?

Conventional studies of media ethics tend to proceed on the basis that there are universally desirable political and social goals and ideals, and that a code of media ethics can be arrived at by measuring the extent to which a media practice supports such goals and ideals. These goals and ideals include the right to privacy; the importance of rationality, and the clear delineation of fact and opinion in public debate; the disclosure of all vested interests; and the separation of matters of public interest from matters which merely interest the public.

In contrast, we argue that any inquiry into the ethics of the contemporary popular media needs to begin by considering how emerging genres and

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technologies are re-shaping our public sphere, and how this might in turn cause us to rethink the assumptions grounding our ethical norms. The relationship between the media and ethics has to be understood as dynamic, not fixed. Similarly, the relationship between audiences and media products and technologies has to be seen as interactive. And as *Remote Control* demonstrates, there is ample evidence of experimentation on both sides of the screen and the page.

As Duncan Ivison writes in his chapter on the philosophical roots of debates about ethics and the public sphere:

Our philosophical orientation should be less towards consensus and more towards how we can live with the disagreements we have with each other. Since there is no standpoint outside of the conversations and arguments of the actual interlocutors that is rationally or morally authoritative on its own, we have to begin with the premises and beliefs that are brought to these arguments and work from there.

In other words, not only is it OK to have heated debates about what counts as our values and ethics – it's essential.

In the course of her essay on the growth of the advertorial or infomercial, Anne Dunn makes a related point when she argues that: 'codes alone will never provide answers to the hard questions because ethical thinking and behaviour do not reside in codes. There is more to being ethical than following rules.' Ethics, Dunn suggests, have to be understood *de facto*, not *de jure*. Any organisation or profession can draw up a code of practice, but ethics inevitably come down to decisions made by individuals who have to balance self-interest and other pragmatic considerations with wider ideals.

ENGAGING WITH MEDIA

Any discussion of media ethics has to proceed from a detailed examination of how a given media text is organised, produced and consumed. We believe it's meaningless, not to mention pompous, to talk about media products and audiences in the abstract.

There is a long tradition within critical media studies of what Stuart Hall has called 'the encoding and decoding' processes. His framework directed attention to the different spheres that organise the production and the

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encoding of the media.¹ These have a direct impact on how different media are understood, engaged with, or decoded. The point of his model was to clarify the different types of restraints that affect the production of different media messages – from the infrastructure of each medium (e.g. commercial or state-funded), the choice of different genres and the public climate in which they are broadcast, to the position of consumers in terms of factors like social class. Hall argued that media reception always involves more than just the transmission of information. We extend this model while implicitly following its dictates. For instance, our interest in the new types of blurred genres on television (reality show meets game show) reveals that the types of issues presented by different media genres will be understood in particular ways by viewers.

None of us comes to the media as a blank slate. We all have histories and tastes, predilections and pet peeves. We bring expert knowledge, interests and preconceptions to what we read or watch or listen to. As Ghassan Hage points out in his essay, the ways in which we relate – or fail to relate – to others is also deeply ingrained. For Hage, at one level the ethics of journalism is simple: if you are *talking about* rather than *talking to* people, you are acting unethically. Hage uses the infamous example of the ‘Muslim Lebanese rapes’ as a prime instance of where the media *en masse* talked about ‘the Lebanese problem’, but rarely bothered to talk to Lebanese Australians. As he puts it, the question is not about whether to be nice – it’s about recognising the other as fully human.

It is undeniable that media practitioners are fully a part of the society they report on. But they also have histories, and a knowledge of the history of the medium in which they work. One of the compelling aspects of *Remote Control* is the number of insights that practitioners offer in their interviews. They are up-front about the challenges they face in their professional lives. And while they are reflective, and sensitive to ethical dilemmas, they are also honest about the problems they face in living up to the codes of ethics that regulate their practice.

Contributors to this book all examine key ethical issues through a careful study of cases which have been the focus of both public and scholarly debate about media ethics in Australia over the past decade. We are less concerned with questions about what different media genres ought to do, and more with how they are actually organised, what practitioners endeavour to do in

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practice within the scope of their formats, and how viewers and readers navigate this new mediascape.

One of the guiding thoughts behind this book is that ethics emerge from encounters between the media text, the practitioner, the producer and the consumer. We propose that the focus on universal standards – which so often characterises discussions of ethics in general, and media ethics in particular – can cause a blindness to specifics. Too often, pronouncements are made about the ethics of a particular media product or event without any consideration of how a genre is organised, who consumes it and in what context. For instance, it makes absolutely no sense to take an ethical framework developed in the world of news journalism and apply it directly to the world of *Big Brother*.

Indeed, as Duncan Ivison argues in his overview of how ethics is understood within philosophical traditions, ethics must be understood as both situated and, of necessity, universalising. He draws our attention to why concepts like the public sphere and the right to engage in it are central to our democracies. Equally, the dizzying changes in the mediasphere, and the concomitant globalising and speeding up of information flows, bring new urgency and new inflections to old thoughts. How do we best ensure that the public sphere is a place where citizens can exchange and sometimes change their opinions and values? Ivison's down-to-earth discussion of values is a check to those who would decry any acknowledgement of *different* values as relativism or pluralism gone wrong. He also demonstrates how 'a vibrant, diverse, inclusive and critically engaged public' is the very cornerstone of our society. Intense discussions about values, about diversity and tolerance are, in other words, signs of life, not something to be deplored.

In simple terms, a renewed debate about ethics means taking new media genres and formats seriously. And to this end, the essays in *Remote Control* detail new media genres and practices. Kath Albury looks closely at the way ordinary people are participating in making and distributing porn on the Internet. What, she asks, happens to conventional ethical frameworks which denounce pornography for commercialising sex and exploiting female workers, when average people begin making porn for pleasure rather than profit? How applicable is the claim that porn commodifies bodies when many of the 'amateurs' represented have bodies which are too ordinary or tastes which are too kinky to be featured in mainstream pornography? As Albury states, while

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some may still argue that this kind of porn is immoral, it doesn't follow that the amateur community lives in an ethical vacuum. Indeed, participants in these online communities often operate with explicit codes of practice, internal value systems and ideas about best practice.

In another essay, Kate Crawford examines what constitutes acceptable speech on the Internet and how censorship is being practised. She locates two systems of control or censorship: one which operates in a targeted manner, such as defamation law, and one which is based in general moral principles, such as the anti-Internet porn legislation that has been introduced in Australia. Through a detailed examination of US and Australian case law and legislation, Crawford argues persuasively that these generalised principles are proving ineffective in censoring a medium as diverse and participatory as the Internet.

In her account of publishing an online webdiary, Margo Kingston also argues that the Internet poses specific ethical challenges and opportunities. Kingston writes as a print journalist who moves online and finds herself in a uniquely interactive world. Kingston's Webdiary has been an experiment for her, for Fairfax, and for her webdiarists. Online, her 'readers' become *contributors* – collaborators in the process of journalism, with some key resultant shifts in how Kingston understands her role and her ethical duties as a journalist. Her experience in the online media world leads Kingston to critique the conventional insistence on objectivity in journalism. She argues instead that objectivity is a ruse that 'hides the truth' and sets up the journalist as an 'observer/judge'. Fittingly, some of the most astute observations about media ethics are those she solicited from her contributors/readers. As one puts it, 'Knowing how to use power responsibly is the essence of ethics'.

From Kingston's comments it is evident that some genres facilitate and even demand a closeness between journalist and reader. This is at the heart of one of the basic principles of ethics that guide this book – the importance of honesty and accountability to an audience. In Elspeth Probyn's chapter, the world of food journalism and media is explored in terms of closeness and proximity. In one regard food journalism is one of the last bastions where certain unacceptable forms of subjective closeness are still practised. These include the ubiquity of freebies and complimentaries (known as comps), as well as, in certain cases, free meals for restaurant reviewers. These practices clearly contravene general ethical codes for journalism, as well as specific

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ones for food writers. But there are other forms of closeness which may provide inspiration for a wider ethics of engagement in terms of popular media and life-style genres. As John Newton, an established freelance food writer, comments, food journalism is a subjective, intimate and convivial form of journalism. Food journalists write about issues that are central to our lives, families, homes and health. Interviews with prominent food journalists provide a picture of their frustration at being dismissed as life-style writers, or worse – as gossip columnists. At the same time, they also speak to the incongruity of applying the subjective/objective distinction of conventional media ethics to popular, convivial and life-style journalism.

In John Hartley's chapter, another challenge is issued to the ethical norms of professional distance, detachment and objectivity. Hartley begins by asking what ethical journalism would look like from an Indigenous perspective. His interviews with several experienced Indigenous media practitioners uncover a set of very different ethical considerations. One of the key problems he and his interviewees identify is that Indigenous people have come to be identified with such a specific place in the mediasphere, that journalistic focus – positive or negative – inevitably frames them in narrow terms. Where, his chapter asks, are the business stories or the reports about Indigenous government issues? Where are the stories that portray Aboriginal life as anything other than one big problem – and implicitly or explicitly as a problem for whites? From the media practitioners he interviews, some clear-cut guiding principles emerge: the necessity for respect and of following protocols, and another sense of time other than that of the journalist. The stories also raise the need to identify a wider spectrum of leaders and spokespeople – like mainstream non-Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Australia has many voices and differing points of view.

In Michael Moller's essay, the question of respect for difference is considered from another point of view – that of the grassroots fans who overturned a media mogul's decision to shut out a beloved local rugby league team. Moller follows the ways in which the supporters of the Rabbitohs (also known as Souths) used the media in their campaign to revoke the expulsion of South Sydney League Club from the National Rugby League – a decision made purely in terms of the interests of the commercial media. Moller's analysis does not come out against the broadcasting of rugby league games. On the contrary, he shows us the diversity of community that is fostered by sports

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media. It's a David and Goliath story of the battle by the fans, and their use of the Internet and traditional media to gain support for their cause.

In her account of the rise of media pranksterism in Australia, Milissa Deitz shows us how the media's heels are being nipped by the knowledgeable and audacious media practitioners of the future. Using handycams and web sites, young media consumers are increasingly turning the cameras on the received ideas and complacent media practices of mainstream journalism. Through her history of alternative media stunts, Deitz suggests that it's precisely the young people – normally portrayed as being in need of protection and correction by the popular media – who are familiar with its vocabulary, technology and formulas, and she shows how they use this knowledge to both develop and deploy an ethical critique of the industry.

In a quite different corner of the media, Graeme Turner takes us through some of the intricacies and the implications of the notorious Cash for Comment affair. Is John Laws an entertainer? Is Alan Jones a journalist? In examining the debate about where to draw the line between entertainment and information, radio host and commercial voice for hire, Turner raises crucial questions about the state of the media in general, and the case of talkback radio in particular. Turner argues that the fallout from the Cash for Comment episode provided a moment when there was active engagement by a number of parties – media practitioners, the Australian Broadcasting Authority, academics, and a plethora of voices talking back in the radio, in television, and in print. Though some ethics took a battering, the ensuing outcry and public inquiry provided a sense of what a working media ethics should do: provoke comment and reflection from all sides of the Australian public.

In Catharine Lumby's account of the appeal of reality TV we again hear from voices rarely heard in debates about media ethics. Drawing on research she conducted jointly with Elspeth Probyn, Lumby uses evidence from extensive interviews with teenage girls to show that fans of reality television are not the ethically vacuous dupes that some commentators have suggested. Rather, teenage girls use the scenarios in shows like *Big Brother* as a way of reflecting on the ethical dilemmas they face in their own lives. Teenagers today, she argues, are under constant surveillance and they are well aware of this, which may in part be why they understand and appreciate the ironies and the lessons of reality TV. In Lumby's description, a major part of the

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appeal of reality TV is that it 'presents us with individuals caught up in the process of negotiating the messy ethics of ordinary existence'. The lessons have to do with relationships, hopes and aspirations, as well as fears. In its showcasing of ordinary people, reality TV continually conveys the ordinariness of these questions.

As Anne Dunn concludes from her study of advertising techniques, 'ethics in advertising, as in any aspect of our lives, is about the quality of human relationships, the way we treat each other'. In a different articulation of the anxiety about the difference between the real and the manufactured, Dunn argues convincingly that some of the tricks of the ad trade may yet go awry. If the trend of camouflaging ads as content continues, she suggests, the advertising industry may be hoist with its own petard if the public becomes overly cynical. Indeed, she argues, it's a cynicism the advertising industry may already be detecting, resulting in a move away from the most devious forms of product placement. As people vote with their feet or with their credit cards, she says, the industry is being forced to engage with its public – to participate in a form of ethics in action.

The issues raised by an ethics in action are voiced in different ways in our interviews with some of the most prominent media practitioners in Australia. Their experience and candour are invaluable in providing insight and raising questions about the practice of ethics in this country. From their different points of view, Maxine McKew, Mike Carlton, John Safran, and Cherry Ripe speak honestly and directly about the ethics of the media and their own experiences as practitioners. They do not all agree with each other, but they all provide cogent reasons why honesty and accountability to their readers, listeners and viewers are so central to the practice of media ethics. Their voices are joined by those one doesn't normally hear from in books about media ethics – an advertising executive (Jim Moser), a spokeswoman from the sex and porn industry (Fiona Patten), and a best-selling novelist and a trained Sinologist (Linda Jaivin).

ENGAGING INTEREST

Our primary motivation in producing this collection was to stir up and encourage public debate about these issues. Too often, ethics is seen as a scary or arcane topic to be deliberated over by learned professors or opinionated media commentators. Media ethics is presented in dry textbooks

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for media students to dutifully learn by rote, only to be forgotten or discarded once they are in the thick of the action. We want to make media ethics interesting – to demonstrate that these are vital issues of interest to us all. Reading these essays we hope you will be interested, engaged and entertained. We do not pretend to have all the answers, nor to have covered all the issues. But we do contend that new and popular forms of the media should be taken seriously for what they tell us about ethical engagement and connection, about what's real and what's not, about the types of ethics being practised at the grassroots level, online and in studios and newsrooms; about why honesty and accountability matter to all concerned: journalists, producers, media owners and consumers. In the end, ethics comes down to use it or lose it. We need to practise ethical reflection, to ask and demand more of the public sphere, and to participate as consumers and producers – or else.

NOTES

- 1 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchison, 1980), 128–40.