

12-2005

Profile interview: Book author - Journalism ethics at work

S. Tanner

University of Wollongong, stanner@uow.edu.au

G. Phillips

C. Smyth

S. Tapsall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Tanner, S.; Phillips, G.; Smyth, C.; and Tapsall, S., Profile interview: Book author - Journalism ethics at work, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 16, 2005, 123-127.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss16/14>

Profile Interview: Book Author

Journalism Ethics at Work

Stephen Tanner; Gail Phillips, Chris Smyth & Suellen Tapsall.

Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest, NSW (2005)

APME: How is your book different from other books on media ethics currently in the market?

TANNER et.al.: The book aims to provide students with a useful handbook that can help them in practical terms with the difficult choices they often have to make as journalists. There are many excellent texts, which deal in depth with the moral and philosophical context of journalism ethics and we had no intention of duplicating them. Instead our book translates those concepts into the realities of daily practice in the Australian environment.

This focus is also reflected in the topics we have selected for the stand alone chapters. While we have included some of the ‘traditional’ topics covered by journalism ethics books, we have also moved beyond the predictable to include coverage of issues that journalists have tended to feel uncomfortable or even ill-equipped to deal with, including disability, race, ethnicity and suicide.

As journalism academics, and thus presumably your isolation from the “realities of daily (news) practice”, how is your book relevant to practising journalists?

While we are no longer full time journalists we continue our journalism practice and all of us maintain a strong and wide network of industry links. Thus this book, as with other books we have authored, is the product of direct collaboration with current industry professionals and reflects up-to-date industry perspectives and practice. The relevance of our current book lies most strongly in getting up-to-date examples from journalists and editors – along with some people whose lives were affected by media reporting - who shared their views.

While it is often easy and convenient for critics to label academics as isolated and out of touch, our individual and collective research has tended to be practically focused. We also maintain industry links through our students (past and present). Our ability to stay in touch with the profession is evidenced by the plaudits our previous books have received, including Tanner’s 2002 book *Journalism: Investigation and Research* (Pearson Longman), and Gail Phillips’ co-authored text (with Mia Lindgren), *The Australian Broadcast Journalism Manual*, (Oxford, 2002 and recently released in a second edition). Both have been used by practising journalists, not just students hoping to make a career in journalism.

The introduction of the book notes that “ ... essentially, ethical behaviour comes down to the individual applying what they know to be right and eschewing conduct they consider to be wrong.” Does ethical journalism ultimately come down to reporters exercising their common sense?

We do contend that ethical behaviour starts with the individual’s sense of right and wrong, hence the importance of fixing one’s own moral compass as a starting point in order to cope with the many and varied ethical challenges we encounter in life. Much of what the public considers as unethical or unprofessional about journalism relates to how journalists behave on the job and the words they choose to put in their stories, headlines and promos – all individual, accountable decisions.

It’s often perceived that what’s ‘right’ for X may be ‘wrong’ for Y, and ‘moral values’ are invariably shaped by culture, religion and politics. What type of values, if any, should journalism educators at least try to nurture in their students?

This view is a little too one-dimensional and, perhaps, it helps to explain why media organizations are subjected to widespread community criticism of their handling of complex issues. In fact it suggests a black and white view of the world that media organizations should be discouraging. We live in an increasingly complex society in which attitudes towards issues can be measured in degrees of grey. Journalism educators should train their students to recognize the sensitivities that underpin societal attitudes. Journalists who recognize that issues are invariably multi-dimensional will gain far more satisfaction from their work and credibility than those who opt to record the views of polar opposites without acknowledging that such an approach may well be excluding the majority, or a large chunk of people.

The book alludes in p.8 to the notion of reporters needing a serious calibration of their moral compass. Indeed, public opinion polls consistently record the poor showing of journalists. Where have we gone wrong?

While the same ethical principles that apply to individual behaviour also inform more formal codes that journalists will encounter in industry, the pressures of the ‘business’ of journalism have meant that workplaces are more likely to discourage rather than encourage ethical behaviour if it is likely to impact on their performance in the marketplace. Ethical standards in industry in the end are defined by the culture at the workplace and if there is a lack of moral leadership at the senior levels it will make it very hard at junior levels for journalists to stand up for ethical practice.

What can journalism educators do to reclaim journalism’s public integrity?

Regretfully journalism educators can do little to impact on the realities of the workplace. What drives our teaching is the hope that if we encourage students to practise ethically there will be enough critical mass to impact on newsroom culture.

Given that students are taught ethical journalism practice in the isolation of academia, and with the many journalism books circulating in the market, do you see any indication of this “impact on newsroom culture” happening today?

We don't believe that effective journalism programs do operate in isolation. The programs we have been involved with maintain industry links and encourage practitioners to have an input into program design and teaching. At the end of the day, lecturers and the texts they write or adopt can play an important role in encouraging students to think and act ethically. Obviously the views they develop will be challenged in some newsrooms and embraced in others. The willingness of journalists to reflect on their practices and even to embrace ethical change is evidenced by the personal accounts of tragedy we have read and heard recently from journalists who covered the World Trade Center and Bali bombings, the Asian tsunami and smaller, but equally traumatic events closer to home like the Port Arthur shootings, the murder suicides and Thredbo landslide. It is inevitable that events like these will provide momentum for a change in newsroom culture.

What do you see are the issues eroding the moral leadership in newsrooms today?

The confusion in roles between editor and business manager means there is no longer the separation between the role of the media outlet as information provider and its role as money-generator. Editors now have an unresolvable conflict of interest if they have to put the interests of shareholders and advertisers above those of their readers, viewers or listeners. The last thing editors are interested in are issues concerning moral niceties that may hold up the big potentially money-making story.

Only 15pp (218-233) or less than 10% of the book are allocated to discussions on technology – blogs, independent news sites. Why is that so?

While it's true that we do some things in and around the newsroom technically/technologically different to 20 or 30 years ago (look at mobile phones and integrated networking of the process from writing a story to publishing/broadcasting it for example), we are of the view that technology is not in and of itself a determining factor likely to single-handedly change the ethical challenges already inherent in newsgathering and reporting. As we argue in the chapter “in at least these areas – misrepresentation, manipulation, access, privacy and accuracy – the ethical issues are timeless, perhaps dressed up in modern garb but perennial nevertheless” (p. 220). We also go on in the chapter to identify some of the further challenges posed by new media/technology, blogging and the like. As Tapsall has discussed elsewhere (eg. in Cunningham et al 1998¹ or Tapsall and Varley 2001²), we see technology as somewhat of a Trojan horse, in that it brings into renewed focus, and at times under much greater pressure, issues that have always proved ethically perplexing for journalistic practice. In this sense, ethical questions and themes related to technology are interwoven through the entire text not just the specific one dealing with ‘technology’ as a topic.

The book's conclusion noted that "the globalization of media corporations and convergence of media forms means there are many conflicting challenges to the practice of ethical journalism. Without a major revolution which turns the business model of the media on its head, individual journalists will continue to bear the burden of ensuring, through their methods of working, that journalism attains its highest ideals. ...journalists who get their moral settings right will be better able to confront the challenges, to deal with the agonies and the ecstasies that are part of journalism in the 21st century." (p.236). What is this 'major revolution' that you see as necessary?

Ethical journalism emerges from a model which puts first the public's right to be informed. The comparison between the traditional and modern models of journalism are encapsulated in these two quotes cited by Eric Beecher³ recently: where Arthur Sulzberger says of the *New York Times* 'We make money to continue our search for truth' WA Newspaper's Ian Law claims 'WA News is a manufacturing business making widgets called newspapers'. The public's frustration with the current model is being evidenced in the increasing use of the internet as a zone for independent voices to be heard. Declining audiences in traditional media are a clear sign of the public's disenchantment and this hip pocket factor may in the end result in a resurrection of a more ethically-driven model. ♠

Endnotes

1. Cunningham, S., Tapsall, S. et al. 1998, *New media and borderless education*. DEETYA EIP
2. Tapsall, S. & Varley, C. (eds) 2001 *Journalism: Theory in Practice*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne
3. Eric Beecher, 'The Decline of the Quality Press', in *Do Not Disturb: Is the Media Failing Australia*, ed. Robert Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 2005, pp. 22-3.

References

- Barrows, H.S. 1996. 'Problem-based learning in medicine and beyond,' In L. Wilkerson and W.H. Gijsselaers (eds) *New Directions for Teaching and Learning; vol 68. Bringing problem-based learning to Higher education: Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Boss, pp 3-13.
- Bigelow, J.D. 2004. 'Using Problem-Based Learning to Develop Skills in Solving Unstructured Problems,' *Journal of Management Education*, 28 (5), pp 591-218.
- Burns, Lynette, 1997. 'Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and journalism education. Is it new jargon for something familiar?' *Australian Journalism Review*, December, pp 59-72.
- Burns, Lynette and Trevor Hazell, 1999. Problem Based Learning, Youth Suicide and the Media's Response ... Ability. *APME* 6, pp 56-71.
- Cameron, David. 2001. Flood (online) www.rocketonline.com.au/floods
- Cameron, David. 2001. Playing serious games in journalism classes, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, No.11, pp 141-49.
- Duch, B., D. Allen, and H. White 1998. 'PBL: Preparing students to succeed in the 21st Century,' *PBL Insight* 1(2), pp 3-4.

- Felder, R. and Soloman, B.A. 'Learning Styles and Strategies,' (online). Accessed at <http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSdir/styles.htm> on Nov. 12, 2005.
- Gijbels, D., Filip Dochy, Piet van den Bossche, Mien Segers, 2005. 'Effects of Problem-Based Learning: A Meta-Analysis from the Angle of Assessment,' *Review of Educational Research*, 75 (1), pp 27-62.
- Green, K. 'Computer-aided newswriting promotes 'master' approach to teaching'. *Australian Journalism Review*, 13(1), pp 89-99.
- Gunaratne, S. A. and B. S. Lee. 1996. 'Integration of Internet Resources into Curriculum and Instruction,' *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 51 (2), pp 25-36.
- Ketterer, S. 1998. 'Teaching students how to evaluate and use online resources,' *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 52 (4), pp 4-15.
- Kolb D. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Meadows, Michael, 1997. 'Taking a Problem-Based Learning Approach to journalism education, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, No. 3, pp 89-107.
- News Views (online). Accessed at www.newsviews.info/techbytes04.html on November 30, 2005.
- Pedersen, S. and Min Liu. 2003. 'The transfer of problem-solving skills from a problem-based learning environment: the effect of modelling on expert's cognitive processes,' *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 35(2), pp 303-21.
- Wigen, K, A. Holen and O. Ellingsen. 2003. 'Predicting academic success by group behaviour in PBL. *Medical Teacher*, 25(1), pp 32-37.
- Willis, S.C. A. Jones, C. Bundy, K. Burdett, C.R. Whitehouse and P.A. O'Neill. 2002. 'Small group work and assessment in a PBL curriculum: a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of student perceptions of the process of working in small groups and its assessment,' *Medical Teacher*, 24(5), pp 495-501.
- Wood, D.F. 2003. 'Problem based learning,' *British Medical Journal*, 326 (7384), pp 328-41.