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Book review: Ethics for Journalists

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At the height of the “cash for comment” scandal in 1999, former Australian radio talkback host Derryn Hinch was asked on ABC Radio about “king of talkback” John Laws’ defence that he was an entertainer not a journalist (and so not bound by journalistic ethical considerations). “Just because you’re an entertainer, it doesn’t mean you rob a bank,” Hinch replied. A few minutes later, in the same interview, Hinch was asked whether he had been made aware of Australian commercial radio’s codes of practice at any of the stations which had employed him over the years. “Didn’t have them, didn’t know about it, didn’t need it,” he replied. Such comments reflect a contradiction inherent in the thinking of many, possibly most, journalists – the view that, on the one hand, ethics are irrelevant while, on the other, there are ethical standards which one must respect.

This helps explain why books such as Richard Keeble’s Ethics for Journalists are so important. Written primarily for practitioners and students, Ethics for Journalists is the latest in Routledge’s useful Media Skills series. Keeble, director of undergraduate journalism studies at London’s City University and well-known as the author of The Newspapers Handbook, attempts to address in a simple and straightforward way some of the most important underlying ethical issues in journalism. Unlike most who have tackled this area before him, he does not focus exclusively on what could be described as the standard journalistic ethical dilemmas – chequebook journalism, accepting “freebies”, conflicts of interest and so on. While these are all mentioned, Keeble’s underlying focus is somewhat broader — journalism’s ethical relationship with some of our more pressing contemporary issues. Although he begins with the less-than-shattering assertion that ethical dilemmas are especially difficult today, he quickly moves on to discuss the contemporary “moral panic” over the media, before raising some of the most contentious ethical issues journalists face.

Briefly, Keeble’s approach is to ask basic but important questions — Why bother with ethical codes? Is a privacy law necessary to restrain the media? Do you feel the employment of
more women will improve news values? — then follow each with a short but pointed discussion. This approach is not as simplistic as it might at first appear. Thus, on the subject of what he calls “race/anti-racism matters”, for example, Keeble quickly moves from a brief discussion of the major ethical issues surrounding the media’s coverage of ethnic minorities to such key questions as whether racist groups should have a voice in the media and whether, at least in the eyes of the media, “Arabs/fundamentalists/terrorists” have replaced communists as the new enemies of Western civilisation. This leads into such practical matters as the influence of language in covering race issues and suggestions as to how journalists might improve their coverage of ethnic minorities.

The book adopts a similar approach to a range of other issues, from ‘sleaze’ coverage, privacy, surveillance and journalistic subterfuge to the debate over the ‘dumbing down’ of the media and the ethical problems of war reporting. The book concludes with a brief but potentially useful chapter, which addresses the various ways in which individual journalists might respond to the ethical challenges they face, ending with the transcripts of interviews with four journalists (including internationally-acclaimed expatriate-Australian Phillip Knightley) on the ethical aspects of their professional lives.

It must be said that, from an academic perspective, much of Keeble’s discussion is superficial, to say the least. This feeling is heightened by the absence of ethical theory at those points where one might reasonably expect to find it. Presumably this is because the publishers feared that many of those at whom the book is aimed would be put off if they encountered so much as a whiff of theory. While such a position might be economically defensible, it means that the end product is somewhat less than it might have been.

A more general criticism, at least from the point of view of those of us who don’t reside and work in the United Kingdom, is the overwhelming Britishness of the examples with which Keeble chooses to illustrate his various points. This does not matter when it involves a quote from a British journalist with the international standing of Robert Fisk or a reference to Diana, Princess of Wales, but it’s quite another thing when the multitude of British rules and regulatory bodies are allowed to dominate discussion about media regulation, or where a discussion of the plight of investigative journalism is posed in terms referring directly to “comedians such as Mark Thomas”.

As a result, Ethics for Journalists is unlikely ever to become a text outside the UK, and unlikely to become a ‘must read’ for non-British practitioners. This is a pity, because it contains some
excellent material presented in a very accessible way, and many people – not least practitioners such as Derryn Hinch – would benefit from considering the issues it raises.