12-1-2005

Profile interview: Book author - Quagmires and quandaries: Exploring journalism ethics

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Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss16/13
Profile Interview: Book Author

Quagmires and Quandaries: Exploring Journalism Ethics
University of NSW Press (2005)

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Ian Richards is Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. He is chair of the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee and Director of UniSA’s Postgraduate Journalism Program. A former newspaper journalist, he has worked and studied in Australia and the United Kingdom. He achieved the first PhD in journalism in South Australia, and is the current editor of Australian Journalism Review.

Since 2004 Richards has represented Australian journalism education on an international committee organising the world’s first journalism education congress, to be held in Singapore in June, 2007. He is also heavily involved with the Ethics Centre of South Australia, a collaborative venture between UniSA, Flinders University and the University of Adelaide. His research interest is journalism ethics.

Monash University journalism lecturer Elizabeth Hart asked him about some of the dilemmas he faced in this exploration of one of the most problematic aspects of journalists’ work and journalists’ relationships with their readers: ethics.
HART: Ian, you begin Quagmires and Quandaries with a memory of the time your own article inadvertently hurt the family of a young police cadet. You were just doing your job. Such early-career episodes remain in the minds of many journalists trying to carry out their everyday reporting tasks professionally. Do you think that ethics dilemmas frequently become evident long after the publication, with the wisdom of hindsight, hence the gap between what the community expects of journalists and what journalists produce?

RICHARDS: Some do, some don’t. The problem for many journalists is that it’s only when they get into a tricky situation that it begins to dawn on them that they have difficult ethical decisions to make. If they haven’t considered a range of potential situations and possible responses beforehand, then they will be seriously ill-equipped to tackle the reality. This is particularly so for inexperienced journalists, although it’s easier if they have at least thought about some of the issues during, for example, a journalism ethics class at university.

Regarding any gap between what the community expects of journalists and what journalists produce, it’s difficult to comment because there is no simple way of understanding “the community” or of determining what it might expect. All societies consist of many “communities”, and these are themselves further divided in many ways. The short answer to the question is that people watch and read and listen to the news media because some want the heavens, others seek the gutter, and still others prefer something in between. What journalists produce satisfies the expectations of all of these groups at times, and disappoints them at others.

In the book you employ the power of anecdote very effectively as a springboard for discussion. This contributes to the readability and relevance for practitioners as well as journalism students. For example, the death of Australian cricketer David Hookes outside a Melbourne nightclub in 2004 prompts a discussion in which you set in opposition truthful reporting and invasion of privacy. It leads the reader to consider the uncomfortable question: given that both truth and invasion of privacy could apply in this particular case, does this weaken the AJA Code of Ethics. In other words, if truth, though disrespectful to some, is justifiable under the code, does this render the code unhelpful?

Yes, in certain situations. The most interesting issues in journalism ethics involve situations where a coherent case can argued be for and against a particular course of action. Trying to balance individual privacy and the public’s right to know is one of these issues. Knowing where to draw the line is difficult because the line keeps moving, which makes it easy for journalists to claim a “right to know” when it really means representing the public’s desire for titillation or the public’s morbid curiosity.

You address this tension and others by extending the meaning of truth. You suggest the term “journalistic truth”, which goes beyond mere truth and accuracy and therefore would serve the agenda of journalism more usefully. You suggest the terms “reasonableness” and “substantial completeness” in assessing the pertinence of news reports. While no one has ever been able to define “truth” to anyone else’s satisfaction, you do seem to be advocating the idea that these terms would
provide a foundation for a kind of special language of journalism ethics, much like the language of medicine, law, and religion perhaps. Would the assessing of journalism standards within specially designed journalism terms such as these further alienate journalists from the public’s propensity to understand journalists’ work, mystifying the profession, or, conversely, help to bridge the gap by providing an explanation for some of the ethics dilemmas that afflict the profession?

I would like to think the latter. Although there is an on-going debate about whether journalism is a profession or a trade (some even claim it’s a calling, but I don’t agree), and despite the many criticisms which can be leveled against the notion of professionalism, I think the best hope for lifting ethical standards is to regard journalism as a profession. This is primarily because it would make an effective mechanism for accountability easier to justify and more likely to be accepted.

The point about mystifying the profession is an important one. Most people seem to consider that they know a great deal about journalism because they have read newspapers and seen journalists reporting on television. Of course, they usually don’t. It’s a bit like school – many people think they understand education because they went to school, whereas education is actually a far more complex and sophisticated business than that.

This general ignorance about journalism is not useful, partly for the same reasons that misunderstanding and lack of transparency are undesirable in any area of life, but also because it reflects a widespread failure to appreciate the value of such fundamental notions as freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Many people would be mildly shocked to discover that most journalists are actually reasonable human beings trying to do a difficult job in ways that don’t cause unnecessary harm to those involved. Indeed, most people don’t seem to appreciate that several hundred journalists die every year in the cause of reporting dangerous events for the news bulletins they watch most evenings.

Journalist Margot Kingston’s coverage of the One Nation political campaign in 1998 provides a platform from which you consider the meaning of the word “objectivity”. In this analysis, the reader gains a snapshot of meanings of that word over the past 200 years and the role it has played in commercial influences on the profession and in social responsibility theory. The history as you tell it reinforces your critique of journalistic practice by showing that objectivity is not achievable. How much can journalists justify the fragility of their ethics and standards by linking them back to philosophical discourse? If they can, then is there a reason to put their professional position more forcefully to the public to again reduce the gap between public expectations and journalistic reality?

I don’t think there’s much of a case for trying to justify the fragility of journalism ethics on any basis. Other areas of professional life seem to do less to justify themselves than journalism, yet they don’t seem to have the same problems as journalism.

As for the gap between public expectations and journalistic reality, part of the problem is that in journalism, unlike most other areas of professional life, there is no clear-cut client. As a result, the sorts of considerations which attach to the
relationships between doctors and patients or lawyers and clients, for example, are weak or non-existent in journalism.

One consequence is that the public is not really part of the working culture of most journalists. Another is that media managements generally consider that ratings and circulation figures are the final arbiter of what is acceptable and what is not. This means that market forces are given great rein in determining the acceptability or unacceptability of a wide range of actions and behaviours, and market forces are not renowned for encouraging ethically sound decisions.

As far as reducing the gap between public expectations and journalistic reality is concerned, there has been a widespread failure on the part of the news media to explain themselves to the wider public. Senior media representatives too often respond defensively and over-sensitively to criticism, even though they invariably consider that they have the right to call the rest of society to account.

For their part, most members of the public don’t seem to understand that, just as individual journalists bring their own backgrounds, understandings and experience to bear on their work, so, too, members of the audience bring their individual histories and backgrounds to bear on their perceptions of every piece of journalistic work they watch, listen to or read.

Many aspects of journalism are morally indefensible. Codes of ethics at best grapple with the exigencies of the newsroom and at worst, by omission or contradiction, condone dubious practice. You call these deficiencies “silences of the codes”. It’s a terrific term. It would make a good title for a novel about shonky journalism. Any plans?

Thank you – although I hope it won’t be confused with “The Silence of the Lambs”!

I have a number of ideas for future work, but not for any novels.

Journalism might look to other models, such as those of the military and the business sectors, to redefine its approach to ethics, you suggest. The military can justify killing in particular circumstances and corporations can justify environmental abuse and disproportionate executive salaries in particular circumstances, because they can define their reasons, those reasons being related to their function in society. With a reference point in utilitarianism and also in the so-called American pragmatism, could journalists then justify some unsavoury aspects of their professional practice by identifying a single reason for their actions, freedom of expression for example, as the most important measure on a list of values?

It’s always possible to find justifications for unethical behaviour. Even the Nazis thought they had a sound case for their despicable treatment of the Jews. The point of military ethics is not to justify killing, and the point of business ethics is not to justify environmental abuse and disproportionate executive salaries.
It seems obvious that the sorts of ethical dilemmas faced by journalists are not entirely unknown elsewhere. While there’s no shortage of practitioners in all areas of life who seem to regard ethics as a luxury they can’t afford, there are also many others who make a serious attempt to lead their professional lives in ways which can be regarded as ethical. Journalists can learn a lot from looking at how others have tackled a wide range of issues, beginning with that most fundamental, yet complex, philosophical question: why be good?

Journalists are assuming less and less power over their own ethical decision-making, because of changing levels of influence. But Voakes’ study suggests that education could be part of the solution. Are there any specific ways you might change existing ethics courses in universities to prepare students for the industry?

I think that sound journalism education must be part of the solution, but just how large a part is open to debate. No matter what happens within the university context, it will always take place within the university context. Learning how to write a good news story requires a combination of sound education, practical training, and real-world experience, and learning how to tackle ethical issues requires a similar combination. It’s hard to generalise about existing ethics courses, because the subject is tackled in a wide variety of ways, but the approach adopted towards the reporting of suicide and mental health as a result of a series of projects in Australian journalism education is an excellent way to go.

The gap between academia and industry remains a sticking point in journalism training. But the book concludes with the assertion that this is not inevitable. What would both sides have to give, how would both sides have to bend, to lessen the gap?

In the long run, industry and academia have to join forces or we’ll all be the losers. Journalism is facing many challenges today, and those who love and care for journalism need to rise above petty jealousies and prejudices and look to our common interests.

Despite the rise of internet journalism in general, and blogging in particular, the mainstream industry will continue to be central to the survival of journalism (by providing the main vehicle for journalistic practice and representing journalism to the wider society, as well as employment, training, investment and so on). However, industry needs to accept that education also has much to offer, from bright and talented new entrants to journalism to research which can help industry build on its strengths and minimise its weaknesses. ♠