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whose ethics?

CATHARINE LUMBY AND ELSPETH PROBYN (EDS)
Remote Control: New Media, New Ethics
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'In Australia in 1999', writes Graeme Turner, 'a group of conservative and commercially dominant talkback radio hosts … were involved in a scandal which exposed widespread exploitation of their market power through secret paid endorsements for products, companies and political positions. The consequent official inquiry found it difficult to locate just what was the ethical principle being transgressed, partly because these were not (ethically bound) journalists, but (ethically free) "entertainers"'. (87) What I found particularly interesting about the 'cash for comment' scandals Turner is discussing is the fact that even when it was made public that John Laws and Alan Jones had taken money in exchange for their endorsements, their listeners were not overly concerned. While academics and readers of upmarket newspapers were outraged, listening figures did not decline for either of these talkback hosts. Did their listeners not see this behaviour as unethical? Or did it not matter to the listeners that it was unethical?

This fascinating collection provides a useful perspective on thinking about just such real-world ethical issues. The concept of 'ethics' is one of the few ways in which discussion of philosophical issues has been allowed—indeed, demanded—in vocational teaching. Catharine Lumby and Elspeth Probyn have taken advantage of this fact to produce a fascinating book of cultural theory that is obviously and directly related to the increasingly vocational concerns of the changing academy. They bring together academics and media practitioners (and media practitioners who are academics and academics who are media practitioners) in an inspiring

(and ethical) exemplar of how those working inside and outside the academy can respect each other's viewpoints as thinking, human subjects (as Ghassan Hage argues is key to ethical cultural production)—rather than mocking and dismissing each other's skills and knowledge.

At the heart of the book's project is a distinction between two approaches to ethics. On the one hand is the traditional approach of teaching journalism ethics. Here ethics is seen to consist of particular forms of behaviour—a list of rules that can be learned by rote and followed in everyday practice (or, as Probyn and Lumby cheekily suggest, 'be forgotten or discarded once [journalists] are in the thick of the action', 10)—and judgements are made, as Anne Dunn notes, on 'the behaviour itself, the act and whether it is wrong or right'. (146) This approach sees ethics as an objective and unitary set of rules to be followed. There can only be one set of ethical behaviours in a society, and there must be general consensus on them.

On the other hand we have 'virtue ethics' —where ethical behaviour demands self-reflexivity. Here, judgements about ethics are made on the basis of whether people take time to think about their actions, and about their implications for the lives of others. (Dunn, 149) From this perspective, ethics is relational—ethical behaviour is worked out on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the relationships between the people involved and their expectations of each other. This means that there can be many different ethical systems in a society, depending on the groups involved in the negotiation. Duncan Ivison and Anne Dunn explore the philosophical distinction between these two approaches in detail. Kath Albury offers the most powerful example of it in her analysis of the ethics of Internet pornography, where she makes explicit that while Net porn production is immoral (in the sense that it does not follow traditional rules of good and bad behaviour), it is also intensely ethical (that is, respectful of the needs and desires of everyone involved in its production). (206)

While Turner and Hage stand out for using a traditional, singular mode of ethical thinking, most of the authors in this book favour the second—postmodern?—mode of thinking about ethics. They emphasise that different situations—and, in particular, different media genres—function with different expectations on the parts of producers and consumers: 'the types of issues presented by different media genres will be understood in particular ways by viewers'. (Probyn and Lumby, 4) The editors take the opportunity offered by the challenge of new media to open up thinking about which genres can be discussed in terms of their ethics —and in doing so, challenge traditional thinking of ethical behaviour for media producers. '[I]t 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*', (5) the editors argue; and this is also true for food journalism, sports journalism, Internet pornography, novels, plays, satirical comedy and the other media genres that are addressed in this book.

Taking this stance, many of the authors make a fascinating intellectual move: arguing that 'the "ethics of journalism" reside as much in the reader or viewer as in the journalist'.

(John Hartley, 48) When ethics is understood to be relational, it is necessary—in order to make judgements about whether particular media events have been ethically managed—to understand practices of consumption as much as practices of production, as well as the relationship between the two. Readers of the book will thus find instruction on how to consume media ethically: 'the power of the consumer can be just as powerful as the media. If you accept or don't accept what you've seen or read—make it known'. (Kerry Klimm, quoted, 65) Michael Moller maps out the 'ethics of sport consumption' developed by fans of the National Rugby League's Sydney Souths, involving 'the formation of a community … around a specific set of consumption practices … which bind supporters together in pursuit of a common cause'. (221) The strongest example of this ethical consumption is the media pranksterism discussed by Milissa Deitz. This includes the 'culture-jamming' group who created a mythical 'dole army'—who were supposedly supporting dole bludgers in their attempts to rort the system—and sold the story to commercial current affairs shows. These consumers believe that their stunt 'proved that there are a lot of people that get paid a lot of money to make really bad media with very little integrity'. (quoted, 238) These are all examples of media consumption being thought through as an ethical practice: Margo Kingston even reproduces the code of ethics that she asks her readers to abide by in posting material on her website. (171)

From this relational perspective, a key ethical issue running through the collection is trust: ethical behaviour is that which promotes and deserves trust, both from consumers and from producers. As Dunn tells it, the advertising industry understands that trust is key—they know that consumers will not buy from companies they don't trust. (139) Kingston places it at the centre of her ethics of journalism: 'I have no excuse for failure to correct [mistakes] and any fear of correcting is far outweighed by the fear of losing credibility with the reader who points out the error'. (169) The question of what kind of behaviour is trustworthy again means that we must understand the role of the consumer, the role of the producer, the generic expectations of both sides, and the relationship between them. To return to the example of 'cash for comment', Turner's chapter is instructive. His contribution is rather different from many in the collection, in that he does not buy into the argument that ethics is relational. In writing about cash for comment, he doesn't mention listeners—their responses to the situation, or their ways of making sense of it. Using a traditional journalistic understanding of ethics, he sees ethical codes as being, of necessity, imposed on consumers from above. While other authors in the collection see in the media around them the emergence of multiple ethical codes in negotiation between producers and consumers, Turner rather sees 'the decline in the relevance of ethical standards for media practice in Australia' and the loss of an 'expectation of civic responsibility'. (88) For him it is necessary for the state to impose 'checks and balances to exert a public policy influence' on the media—because if it is left to audiences to set ethical standards for the media through

their feedback and consumption practices then 'ethical constraints will give way in the face of unregulated commercial competition'. (92, 94)

But from the perspective offered by other authors in this collection, consumers develop their own ethical systems, and involve the media in them. Mike Carlton claims that the 'cash for comment' scandal gives us an insight into the ethical system of talkback: 'I think to a great degree [Laws's listeners] know that he will spruik anything. He's as obvious as the demonstrator standing in Coles frying little sausages and handing them to you on toothpicks.' (100) In order to judge the ethics of Laws's behaviour, he suggests, we have to know what his listeners expect and what they understand his role to be. In Moller's NRL example he shows that in at least one case consumers reacted very badly to what they saw as unethical behaviour on the part of a newspaper. The paper, owned by News Ltd, was supporting the dropping of the Sydney Souths from the NRL—a move that was being pushed by News Ltd, who actually owned the league. Through boycotts the supporters managed to get circulation figures to drop by five per cent, prompting the paper to change its tone in its coverage of the controversy.

If consumers are able to challenge a media outlet when it behaves in a way that they think unethical, then when behaviour that formally educated commentators think is unethical goes unpunished it might turn out that in those cases, the consumers don't agree that it was, in fact, unethical. Maxine McKew points out that the *Australian* published conclusive proof before the 2002 election that the Howard government had systematically lied about the children overboard affair—but that voters seemed not to care. (72) They did not think the government's behaviour inexcusable. She refers to this as the 'big disconnect'—the possibility that different groups (media producers and media consumers) may have quite different ideas of what counts as an ethical requirement. (73) In her discussion of SMS marketing, Dunn makes a similar point: 'It is rare to see an article reporting that the young targets of SMS marketing (who use SMS so much themselves) may enjoy and value the entertainment, information and offers that such advertising usually contains'—and thus not see it as an invasion of privacy. (145) Similarly, Jim Moser comments that 'I think that every infomercial I've ever watched is a blatant commercial message … As long as I see at the top in clear letters that it says advertisement or commercial message, then I don't have an issue with it.' (154, 155) Lumby argues that if the young female viewers who make up the target demographic of *Big Brother* know perfectly well—as research continually proves is the case—that the program fictionalises reality for them, and this is part of the unspoken contract between viewer and programmer, then it is no longer an ethical requirement for the producers to continually state this fact in the program text. Its absence does not signify an unethical attempt to trick viewers into believing that they are watching unfiltered reality; rather, it is a sign of the strong bond of mutual understanding and respect between the consumers and producers of the program, who all understand that reality television presents 'ordinary people improvising around the theme of being themselves'. (Andy Hamilton, 22)

Writing about her experience of having readers submit material to her webdiary, journalist Kingston notes that 'developing an honest, open, transparent relationship with readers eventually built my confidence. I began to trust *them*.' (163) The idea of trusting consumers strikes me as an important one, and one that throws our established modes for measuring media ethics into confusion. As Lumby notes: 'Codes of ethics are promoted as tools for protecting "ordinary" people from media producers and practitioners'. (16) Kingston tells how she invited readers of her webdiary to contribute material, asking them 'that if it would be reasonable to perceive a bias or conflict of interest in what you write, that you disclose this'. She does not check up on this, and there are no sanctions in place for failing to do so, yet she notes that 'since then, many readers have disclosed their affiliations'. (169)

One of the radical effects of thinking about ethics in such a way is that objectivity becomes not an ethical prerequisite for media producers, but a dangerous and unethical bluff. Hartley argues that for a journalist to be objective in Australia when indigenous citizens suffer so many well-documented social and cultural disadvantages is not an ethical position: '*Good* journalism requires fearless critique, impartial treatment and no allegiance to party or faction —it requires professional *indifference*. But this is exactly what looks like *unethical* journalism to people in an outsider group whose organizations and leaders are dragged over the coals on what seems like a routine basis … It is not simply unethical, but destructive.' (44) Kingston argues that 'I have thrown off the shackles of the myth of objectivity, which is really an excuse to hide the truth from readers, not expose it. It also falsely sets up the journalist as observer/judge, not participant.' (162) Several writers point out that when a code of ethics is seen as something to be learned by rote—to avoid thinking about the ethical implications of any particular situation—then it can be used to justify the most unethical behaviour, with the claim of simply being 'objective'. Some of the contributors who have worked in the non-academic media go further, and even argue that it is important to be able to admit when you have been wrong, without any sense of defensiveness or anger about this (as Maxine McKew does in this collection, 68). Kingston argues that 'Ethics rely on the judgement of journalists … readers trusting them … and regular dialogue between the two when real-life examples crop up'. (165)

I like this collection a lot. It will be attractive to students: it addresses issues that they will be familiar with from everyday culture and includes plenty of material from real-world practitioners. It will also be useful for them—precisely because it doesn't give them lists of ethical behaviour to learn by rote, but rather confronts them with questions about what it means to be ethical and encourages them to think about their own personal responsibility in making those decisions. It is intellectually innovative while remaining practical and accessible. I can highly recommend it.

ALAN McKEE runs the television degree in the Faculty of Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology. His most recent book is *The Public Sphere: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).