
Ethics—with its many theories, concepts, applications and cases—is hard work. Neophytes and newcomers easily get bogged down in catchphrases (the “greater good,” for example) and catchy terms (the Golden Mean, anyone?), but working through ethical theories and applications is difficult and sometimes daunting. It takes commitment, critical thinking and constant re-evaluation. Casual students and other beginners may be distracted from the intellectual requirements of ethics education. Fortunately, Christopher Meyers recognizes that the study of ethics is hard work, and his edited volume, Journalism Ethics, A Philosophical Approach, skillfully addresses that important assumption. This book covers theoretical and practical issues in media ethics within a philosophical framework. It is a collection of thoughtful essays divided into two sections—Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations and The Practice of Journalism—that can be read altogether or separately; the details and moral reasoning evident either way.

Contributors to this book are some of the best-known and well-respected ethics educators, philosophers, and researchers in the field of media ethics today. They deliver valuable insight on topics as diverse as press freedom and responsibility within the framework of a democracy, and definitions about who is a journalist and whether journalism is, or should be, a profession (including a compelling Socratic definition of “profession”). There are reasoned discussions of journalism issues that might be expected, such as confidentiality, loyalty, and conflict of interest, as well as critical analyses of current issues that beleaguer the profession and the professoriate alike: the decline of the news business, whether objectivity is possible in newsgathering, and how to report well and ethically.
This is a high-quality textbook for journalism students and would be an excellent choice as a main title or supplementary text for courses in journalism ethics, social role of the media, and media effects, among others. Researchers interested in ethics also will find it useful, especially the detailed references and citations that accompany each essay. Certain chapters—on privacy, sources, and visual journalism, for example—also would strengthen any media law curriculum.

There are no case studies here, no questions for discussion. The first chapter provides the basis for philosophical inquiry with questions about journalism serving the public and whether good journalism serves the “public good.” From there, writers Deni Elliott and David Ozar provide an ethical decision-making model called the Systematic Moral Analysis that can help reporters determine whether harms they may cause in the course of their work are justified. Goals of the SMA are explained in terms of the resulting harm and the resulting good for people involved. Questions are provided to help journalists work through the SMA.

Two chapters on privacy (Part VI, p. 197-230) are particularly strong as is the exercise (p. 200) that gives readers and students the opportunity to rank hypothetical issues of personal privacy. When completing this privacy inventory students are likely to convey surprise at the nature of the questions. Beyond that predictable element of surprise lies a crucial point for discussion about how much control one has, or should expect to have, over personal information.

Theories, concepts and definitions are the focus of this edited volume, which forces critical thinking. Will critical thinking lead to reasoning and ethical decisions? What are the consequences for reasoned media ethics decisions? The implications of these and other questions help explain why ethics is hard work—a theme Meyers emphasizes throughout.

Essayists deliver strong logic for their conclusions and equally strong interpretation of their topics within a philosophical outline. See, for example, the outstanding treatment of conflicting loyalties by Jacqui Banaszynski, conflict of interest by Ed Wasserman, source confidentiality by Aaron Quinn, and obligations of news consumers by Wendy N. Wyatt, all in Part VII (p. 231-295), about the ways reporters and audiences approach the news. Meyers and these authors recognize the difficulty that practicing journalists face in actually doing their jobs and the hard work that is required of acting ethically while producing and consuming news. They provide justification for ethical behavior based on character, values and moral systems without preaching or prejudice.
One slight omission in this book is an examination of journalism ethics and social media. Jane B. Singer offers a thorough explanation of online media ethics, the role of the journalist as gatekeeper, and “shared space” on the Internet. But Singer’s essay focuses mainly on traditional media use of the Internet. It touches only briefly on journalists as bloggers and on user-generated content. Considering the explosion of technology and people’s new reliance on the Web for information, there is room here for additional ethical perspective when it comes to journalists using social media for reporting, the credibility of linking, the consequences of anonymous comments, and more.

Meyers is professor of philosophy at California State University-Bakersfield and director of CSUB’s Kegley Institute of Ethics. He also is a hospital ethicist and consultant. Meyers’ professional and teaching experiences are apparent in his premise that journalism must be believable and that reporters and aspiring reporters should consider the most ethical methods for practicing journalism. That practice requires a solid philosophical foundation. It is with that background that Meyers provides a focused introduction to each topic area. His succinct descriptions and comparisons of essays provide justification for understanding and applying philosophy to the practice of journalism.

Meyers’ book is not a collection of “Do’s and Don’ts.” It is serious without being somber; complex without being complicated. It guides readers smoothly through history and theory to ethics concepts in everyday journalism, which is, after all, hard work.