

BOOK REVIEW

Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age, Clifford G. Christians, 2019, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 428pp., £27 (paperback) ISBN-10: 1316606392

Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age (henceforth *Media Ethics*) provides an elegant juxtaposition of key concepts from contemporary work in media ethics, communication theory and the philosophy of technology. Coming from a philosophy of technology and interdisciplinary studies background, this review provides a reading of *Media Ethics* slightly different from recent reviews coming from media and communication studies (for example, Cortes, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

Media Ethics contains six chapters with two main objectives: (1) to trace key developments within the evolving field of media ethics from traditional media ethics to contemporary ideas on cosmopolitan justice, and (2) to introduce an original media ethics theory of global justice grounded in the principles of truth, human dignity, non-violence and cosmopolitan justice treated as core proto-norms for guiding globally acceptable standards for media ethics. The interweaving of these two objectives throughout the book provides the reader with a rich portrait of the current landscape of media ethics from a global justice perspective. The second objective is more ambitious and will be considered after a more general review.

The good

The six chapters cover essential ground in media ethics and related scholarly domains. Chapter 1, discusses the change in mindset within media ethics and philosophy of technology from adhering to instrumentalist views of technology as neutral tools to developing a more nuanced human-centred and value laden approach to media ethics better aligned with emerging digital technologies and the web 2.0 transformation. Drawing on seminal ideas from Innis, Heidegger, Ellul and others, the author sets the stage for situating his unique media ethics theory based on current conceptions of transnational justice. Chapter 2 introduces selected ethical principles (sacredness of life, communalism, Confucianism, contractual naturalism, and feminist caring) rooted in an underlying proto-norm centering on the sacredness of human life and the importance of finding common values to help navigate the ethical complexities of public life within a

changing media landscape. Chapter 3-5 build on the first two chapters by introducing ideas derived from leading ethical approaches (ethics of truth, ethics of human dignity and ethics of non-violence) taken as key components of justice in a globalizing world. In the final chapter, the author brings together key ideas discussed in previous chapters to sketch out a media ethics vision of global justice. This chapter provides a diverse interweaving of concepts drawn from Augustine, Hannah Arendt, Amartya Sen, Agnes Heller and others to help ground a theory of international communication ethics which highlights global justice and human-centred perspective in alignment with trends in contemporary philosophy of technology. From start to finish, this work attests to a thoughtful integration of relevant literatures by a well-established leader in the field. Perhaps the biggest contribution of this work lies in connecting relevant literatures from media ethics, philosophy of technology and global justice to inform the new challenges within media ethics arising from the global penetration of media in our digital age.

The bad

Like other books in applied areas of ethics, this book tries to reconcile concepts that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. As noted in the foreword by Herman Wasserman, “The ultimate challenge of this book, therefore, is one that oscillates between the local and the global the specific and the universal. Final closure is not achieved; the dialectic ensures that ethical reflection remains dynamic and productive (Wasserman, 2019, p.xv). On the one hand, in a broad scoping work like this, it is necessary to cover the essential literature, which includes opposing views and positions on media ethics. On the other hand, it is difficult to make meaningful connections between opposing views and positions in a way that helps readers advance their understanding of existing theoretical tensions and accommodate tensions when confronting real life media ethics problems. This book would have benefited greatly from more practical real world examples and cases that help draw out the strengths and limits of different perspectives in specific media ethics contexts. Given the current ethical debates revolving around global media response to the COVID-19 pandemic, one would hope the next version of this book will draw on recently-documented media controversies to help the reader better comprehend the uncertainty, complexity, and challenge of applying ethical theories and perspectives to pressing global challenges in media ethics.

The sacred

What separates the contribution of this book from that of other general texts on media ethics is a broad scoping look at contemporary media ethics sketching out a promising theory of global justice that aligns well with our evolving global media landscape, within which humans must live and function. It is rare to see an academic so versed and comfortable with the multidisciplinary knowledge base that grounds this volume. The ‘technology with a human face’ perspective, which is common within contemporary philosophy of technology and technoethics, is rarely dealt with in media ethics and communication studies with this level of precision. This book provides a useful framework for both seasoned and new scholars to help guide contemporary media ethics while building on the success of the previous scholarship that made the field what it is today.

References

- Cortes, Robert (2020) ‘Clifford G. Christians's media ethics theory of global justice’, *Church, Communication and Culture*, 5, 1, pp.131-5.
- Roberts, C. (2020) ‘Book review: media ethics and global justice in the digital age’, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 97, 2, pp.536–8.
- Wasserman, H. (2019) ‘Preface’ in Christians, C. (2019) *Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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