

Book Review: Ethics of Media

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*Do digital media create new ethical dilemmas? What is our responsibility as spectators and witnesses? Bringing together philosophers and media scholars and drawing on a range of contemporary case studies, **Ethics of Media** aims to highlight the diversity of competing answers to the question, 'is there an ethics of media?' **Patrick Weir** finds that this is thought provoking first step in discussing the place of ethics in media.*



Ethics of Media. Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, Amit Pinchevski (eds). Palgrave Macmillan. June 2013.

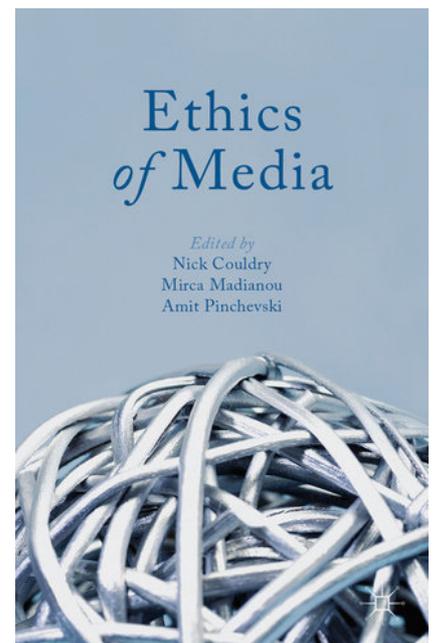
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Recent high profile debates around the freedom and possible regulation of the press in the aftermath of the Leveson inquiry, alongside those relating to online misogyny on social media have highlighted the need for deeper engagement with the ethical relations grounding our relationship with media. This collection is a timely series of contributions from a range of philosophers and communications scholars seeking to engage with a set of questions about what it would mean to think of an ethics of media, as distinct from what seems to be the increasingly outdated legalism of "media ethics".

Contributions to the first section, "Framings", interrogate paradigmatic ethical frames of deontology (goodness grounded in right, as in Kant's categorical imperative); consequentialism (ethics grounded in good consequences of actions, e.g. utilitarianism); and finally virtue ethics, which attempts at a synthesis through escape, by asking the question "what does it mean to speak of right and wrong?" As editor [Nick Couldry](#) puts it, 'Since media, distinctively, link people living parallel lives in multiple places into the same causal nexus... how should any of us act ethically within and through media?'(p.46)

Roland Arnett's chapter proposing a connection between the question of media ethics to that of heterodox traditions. Using Hannah Arendt's moral philosophy, Arnett asks "How can the media assist in understanding multiple traditions through the complex interplay of history, authority and freedom that frames these different traditions?" answering that "If we are interested in a public arena shaped by media ethics... then the focus on learning about what we do not know is central to the diversity of opinions in the public square"(p.69). Such a position takes into account both the novelty of new media technologies whilst recognizing that, fundamentally, ways of (ethically) approaching their use can be drawn from a wealth of existing literatures on the role of the public sphere in the production of ethics.

Clifford Christians' and Stephen Wards seek to rescue a notion of "Anthropological moral realism" through a navigation between moral pluralism and monism, curiously chooses to describe the former as typified by an "anything-goes" relativism, whilst the latter stands for a rigid code-following. This seems a rough and ready typology and ignores strands of—particularly continental—moral philosophy regarding moral relativism as simply another species of monism. This can be evidenced, for example, in various strands of Zizekian argument regarding the hegemony of tolerance, itself a deeply ideological position presenting itself as post-ideological.





Leveson Report demo. Credit: [cactusbones](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Brand & Amit Pinchevski's chapter on "The ethics of seeing" and the immediately following contribution by Piotr Szpuanr on the "about-to-die" image both engage with the ethical philosophy of Levinas in relation to production and consumption of media images. The former quite rightly point to the Levinian "face" as operating at a level of complexity far deeper than that of the visual image, as both noun and verb; "a concept that includes both an appearance and a relation with what shows itself through the appearance"(p.110). Szpuanr offers a close reading of a particular image, that of the Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi whose death arguably sparked off the Arab spring. Reflecting on the manner in which the "face" of Bouazizi, close to death, creates an ethics of "interruption", which "'speaks' to us, it unsettles the reader, disrupting her complacency in being."(123).

Given this extensive engagement with Levinas then, it is unusual that what the second section "Interfaces" lacks is reference to the phenomenology immanent to media technologies an embodied element of ethics. Missing too is reference to the German school of media technologies-as-prosthetics, exemplified by Freidrich Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst and others. Joanna Zylinska's chapter on the spectrum of narcissism inherent to blogging and social media does begin to hint at these issues, through reference to the view argued for by Bernard Steigler that "any technical instrument registers and transmits the memory of its use...technology becomes a condition of our relationship to the past."(p.101).

Final sections on "Mediations" and "Practices" engage with more practical aspects of the meaning of ethical subjectivity in a variety of case studies. Peter Lunt and Joseph Livingstone offer an extraordinary meta-ethical examination of an episode of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. Resisting a simplistic normative critique and instead employing a sophisticated analysis of the subject positions allowed, and disallowed, within the construction of an individual media text. Such an approach "enables us to make sense of interactions in terms of their different positions—not so much on what is right or wrong but on what constitutes 'rightness' or 'wrongness' (p.210).

Ethics of Media is clearly the product of an intense academic engagement between scholars within a fruitful area of debate. In a sense, it perhaps tries to cover too much ground, even for a collection. If a single thread runs through these contributions though, it would be the ethical phenomenology of Levinas is more germane to the construction of an ethics of media, as it tries to escape the deontology/consequentialist/virtue ethics triad. The complication and collapsing of proximity as a condition for ethics brought about by media technologies certainly require new ways, perhaps even impossible ways of thinking about ethics. This collection is a welcome first step in that process.

Patrick Weir is a PhD student in Cultural Geography at the University of Exeter, where he arrived after completing an undergraduate degree in Philosophy at Glasgow University and an MLitt in International Relations at St Andrews. Patrick's PhD research surrounds cultural geographies of foreign news, with a focus on re-examining the media representations of distant suffering in light of non-representational theories. [Read more reviews by Patrick.](#)

