

## Book Review: The Ethics of Journalism: Individual, Institutional and Cultural Influences, edited by Wendy N. Wyatt

*The landscape in which journalists now work is substantially different to that of the twentieth century. The rise of digital and social media necessitates a new way of considering the ethical questions facing practicing journalists, and this volume aims to consider the various individual, cultural, and institutional influences that have an impact on journalistic ethics today. This book of essays is a useful provocation on a subject that has had far less consideration in the academy than it deserves, writes **Angela Phillips**.*

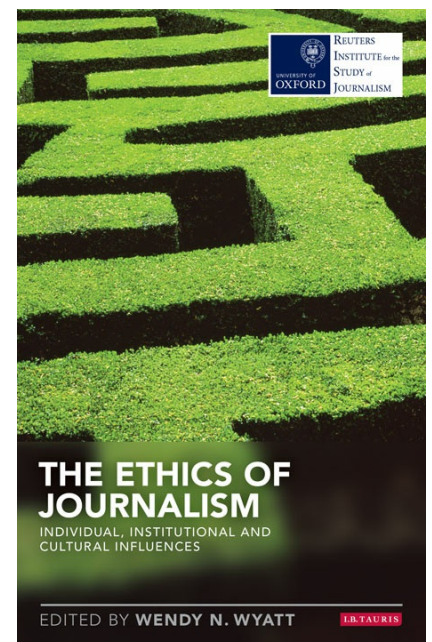


**The Ethics of Journalism: Individual, Institutional and Cultural Influences.** Wendy N. Wyatt (ed.). I.B. Tauris. February 2014.

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This week the news industry-organised [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO) announced that it would be up and running by the summer and that [Sir Alan Moses would be its first chairman](#). For many, the announcement ended any real hopes that the Leveson Inquiry into the ethics of the British press would produce a lasting and truly independent regulator. At the same time, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has published *The Ethics of Journalism*, which Sir Alan might do well to order.

The 15 essays, written by authors from nine different countries and cultures (albeit with a strong US inflection), set up a debate between approaches rather than settling with a particular narrative or position. One highpoint for me was a lucid descriptive essay by Thomas H. Bivins (p.165) on virtue ethics and the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and its particular relevance to media ethics, a point made also by Nick Couldry in his book [Listening Beyond the Echoes](#), and in my own work (see Phillips, Couldry and Freedman in [New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age](#), and [Journalism in Context](#), forthcoming).



However, while Bivins recognises the value of the Aristotelian tradition as a means of considering how ethical journalists could look for guidance, he fails to make the connection between the individual and the structures that they work within. He is not alone in this. In spite of the fact that the introduction to the book points out on the very first page that: “institutional influences, particularly those in the news industry, can be incredibly strong,” few of the authors go beyond the individual to assess the impact of external influences on the internal organisation of news rooms in their fields (see [Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field](#) by Benson and Neveu, and [Journalism in Context](#), forthcoming). This may be because few of them have anything other than a glancing relationship with the European tradition of media and cultural studies and most of the essays appear to start with the assumption that individual behaviour (of either the journalists or their masters), is the inevitable starting point for any consideration of ethical behaviour.

A couple of essays do move towards the rather more fertile territory of institutional and regulatory influence. One of these is by Lee Wilkins, chair of the Department of Communication and Wayne State University and editor of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. Wilkins situates her critique in the context of Leveson and the News of the World phone hacking scandal and uses insights from literature on business ethics and organisational change. Her use of research on corruption provides a means of analysing the particularly poisonous atmosphere within the News of the World, as evidenced by the unfolding phone hacking trials and the Leveson Inquiry.



*News International in front of the Select Committee / Speak No Evil See No Evil Hear No Evil. Credit: [Surian Soosay](#) CC BY 2.0*

However, one of the difficulties of using business ethics literature as a starting point, is that it takes for granted the autonomy of businesses and of their leaders and has a tendency to see solutions in better business practices or better leadership. It therefore fails to provide tools for grasping the broader frameworks in which businesses are situated and which militate against good practice when profit is at stake. Wilkins sees these limitations. She recognises that, “all organisations have some capacity for corruption” (p.49), and she locates the current crisis in British journalism to some extent in external factors (intense focus on speed for example) but she falls short of suggesting that there could be problems inherent in the organisation of the media itself, or that a reliance on the single normative value of press freedom, might in itself encourage a news room culture in which the freedoms of those who are reported upon have less value than the freedoms of those who report. She mentions in the context of the literature on corruption that: “a strong regulatory structure, including codes and laws, is [also] essential” (p.46) for mitigating the effects of corrupt practices but she fails to take this further into a debate about whether or not journalism could itself do with a stronger regulatory structure.

A chapter on Journalist Ethics and Media Accountability by a team of European researchers (Susanne Fengler, Tobias Eberwein, Julia Lönnendonker, and Laura Schneider-Mombaur) starts from the opposite assumption. Where Wilkins doesn't mention the societal impact of an untrustworthy media, or consider regulation as a means of improving the organisational climate for journalists, the European team start with the assumption that societies have an interest in the quality and function of news organisations. Their research (the Media AcT study) is an examination of regulatory regimes in 12 European countries (and two Arab countries) and their impact on the attitudes and behaviour of journalists.

They found that journalists take most notice of the law and that press councils or regulatory authorities are far less influential. They suggest that this is because, “journalists are afraid of potential sanctions that laws can bring, and they expect more drastic punitive measures from the laws than from self-regulatory mechanisms” (p.95). It is interesting however that company editorial guidelines (that are not backed by law) hold almost as much fear as legal sanctions and this opens up another question. If journalists are as afraid of their employers as they are of the law but so much less concerned about self-regulatory mechanisms is it because they don't believe that their employers care much about them? This would certainly square with [my own research](#) which suggests that journalists, often working on short term contracts, are mainly concerned to avoid conflict with their superiors because of the insecurity of their employment.

The researchers also found that 25% of respondents said that user comments had a “high or very high” impact on accountability. While this is a great deal less significant than the impact of the law it does open up the possibility that a statutory right of reply, as recommended in the [Media Reform evidence to the Leveson Inquiry](#), could be a

useful instrument for future consideration as it combines law and audience response in a way which fits in well with changing patterns of news consumption.

This book of essays is a useful provocation on a subject that has had far less consideration in the academy than it deserves. The contributions are at times rather limited in their perspective but are nevertheless very welcome.

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