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Book Review: *The Ethics of Emerging Media: Information, Social Norms and New Media Technology*

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The Ethics of Emerging Media: Information, Social Norms and New Media Technology. Bruce E. Drushel and Kathleen German, eds. New York, NY: Continuum, 2011. 288 pp. \$120.00 hbk. \$34.95 pbk.

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Discussions of new media and ethics sometimes include the notion that “ethics are ethics” – that doing the right thing is, and has been, a constant over time and across media.

The idea has a certain appeal. But it gets new twists in *The Ethics of Emerging Media*, by Bruce E. Drushel and Kathleen German, assistant professors of communication at Miami University. New media cre-

ate new ethical questions and opportunities to cross ethical lines, as the thirteen contributors to this collection examine. Take *American Idol*, the popular TV “reality” show that launches successful contestants on lucrative careers. It’s interactive. Fans vote for their favorite singers, and the weekly tally is said to be strictly legitimate, in conformance with federal law. But in the early shows of each season, *Idol* producers allot unequal airtime to contestants based, no doubt, on legitimate entertainment values and other concerns connected with television production and profit. “[T]he preponderance of evidence appears to point to a clear correlation between screen time during the audition episodes and continued success in the competition,” concludes Christopher Bell, author of the chapter “*Idol* Concerns: The Ethics of Parasociality.” “Just because they [corporate entities] evidently can influence who the audience votes for through the parasocial contract, does it mean that they should?”

New media also have outpaced law enforcement. Some children have “sexted” suggestive photographs of themselves to friends, the electronic version of “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.” Is it ethical to charge them with a crime for using new technology to do what teens have done for eons—explore their sexuality? In Pennsylvania, a zealous district attorney threatened prosecution of a girl who was photographed wearing a bathing suit. In New Jersey, a fourteen-year-old girl was charged with child pornography for posting explicit photographs of herself on MySpace. Such charges can result in long jail terms and being tagged as a sex offender for life. In effect, a law designed to protect children from pornographers was used to charge a child with pornography. The New Jersey teen was given probation after a public outcry.

But the ethical questions remain. Even if it was legal to charge the girl, is it the right thing to do? In “The New Pornographers,” chapter author Brett Luncford says such cases reveal a need for greater nuance in legal and ethical considerations, not only concerning pornography, but regarding adolescent sexuality in general.

Even the federal government has been mired at the junction of ethics and new technology, as coeditor Bruce E. Drushel demonstrates in a chapter about conundrums presented by changes in TV technology. Former FCC chairman Kevin Martin urged Americans to commit fraud to keep up with changes in broadcast television, Drushel recounts. He had his reasons. Then new U.S. technical standards required television broadcast stations to switch from analog to digital signals by February 17, 2009. Millions would be left without over-the-air television unless they bought new TVs or a converter box.

A federal coupon program was designed to help families buy a converter box; else the changeover to digital would largely affect the less af-

fluent. But some coupons had expired. A few weeks before the change-over date, Martin urged people with expired coupons to find someone else to apply for them—an action prohibited by federal rules. In other words, the FCC chairman was suggesting, the way to cope with mandated technological change was to commit fraud. Ethically, Martin saw the greater good in serving people who needed converter boxes, as opposed to strictly following sticky federal rules. It's the kind of question that didn't surface when, say, the country adapted to radio in the first half of the last century.

But was Martin's advice ethical? One school would harshly criticize the former federal bureaucrat. But Machiavellians might judge him more kindly, Drushel surmises.

Other chapters include analysis of the ethics concerning eBay, Wikipedia, Google, citizen journalists, Facebook, blogs, and Web journalism. Some of it is heavy reading, dropping into academic speak to make and parry points. But the content is worth the effort and time.

Emerging technology has put journalists and others in new situations for which there is little or no precedent. For big media companies, temptations to invade privacy are found in the potent combination of fast computers, fast Internet, and virtually unlimited space in "the cloud" — that nebulous depository for trillions of bytes of information.

It's hard to keep up. *The Ethics of Emerging Media* can help.