

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass  
Communications

Journalism and Mass Communications, College of

---

3-2015

## Book Review: *Ethics of Media*, edited by Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, and Amit Pinchevski.

Sue Burzynski Bullard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sbullard2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

---

Bullard, Sue Burzynski, "Book Review: *Ethics of Media*, edited by Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, and Amit Pinchevski." (2015).  
*Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications*. 87.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub/87>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journalism and Mass Communications, College of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEW:

*Ethics of Media*, edited by Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, and Amit Pinchevski. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 312 pp. \$85.69 hbk. \$27.57 pbk.

Sue Burzynski Bullard

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

Credible media outlets work to maintain their credibility and that invariably leads them to the ethics of the business. Ethics, if converted to a slogan, could be reduced to “do the right thing.” But exactly what is the right thing? How do you know it is the right thing? What exceptions are allowed, if any? How does the digital age affect ethics?

The answers to such questions spawn convoluted—even contradictory—answers. *Ethics of Media* sorts through the history of ethics and provides plenty of insight to explore the topic in depth. The book is not a how-to guide on writing an ethics code. Rather, it offers readers context and case studies. It includes references to deep thinkers of the past (e.g., Plato and John Stuart Mills), as well as insights from modern philosophers and ethicists.

Editors divided the book into sixteen standalone chapters from a number of contributors. Each section provides a different take on ethics, examining such things as blogging practices and standards for publishing graphic photographs. A chapter titled “Media Freedoms and Media Standards” by British philosopher Onora O’Neill raises the prospect of tighter reins on the press. “It may be necessary to secure media standards through forms of state-backed but independent regulation that forbid censorship of content but regulate media process,” she writes.

Assuming government capable of fortifying journalism’s ethical backbone is, at a minimum, controversial, even before O’Neill layers in this thought: “What would be wrong about rating proprietors, editors and journalists, with the aim of identifying those who communicate well . . . and requiring the publication of these ratings?”

Official ratings for journalists would be a giant step in societies used to a free press, where approval is more often measured in terms of audience size and profitability. If an American lawmaker proposed rating the news industry, you can just about guess the response from a typical overworked, underpaid journalist: “Seriously?” A different take on ethics comes in a chapter titled “When Practice Is Undercut by Ethics” by Barbie Zelizer, author and professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania.

“I will argue,” Zelizer says in her introduction, “that journalism practice—as it takes shape in news gathering, news presentation and news distribution—defies the establishment of meaningful ethical standards.” She goes on to explain why.

The views expressed in *Ethics* are not just for navel gazing. They can be applied to recent big stories, including the spy secrets downloaded from the National Security Agency (NSA) by Edward Snowden. Publishing Snowden’s data

is, technically, dealing in stolen goods. Is it ethical to deal in stolen goods? Or does overriding public interest offset any perceived lack of ethical behavior? Given the eye-popping nature of the NSA story, would news outlets have been derelict for not sharing it with the public?

Yes, questions of media ethics are often murky and controversial.

In a chapter titled "The Culture of Blogging: At the Crossroads of Narcissism and Ethics," Joanna Zylinska provides novel insights into emerging social media. Some readers will get a kick out of imagining their favorite babbling bloggers as narcissists. However, beyond that, online media can help develop a new form of media ethics, an ethical framework for being with others in "global or transnational media spaces," argues Zylinska, a professor of communications at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Overall, *Ethics of Media* raises compelling questions about media, with plenty of ideas on what the answers might be. As in any collection of essays, some entries are more persuasive than others. However, the editors did a superb job of mixing issues and views. Questions on ethics are endless, and so are the answers. This book helps sort through the complexities.