Book: Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies
Author: Howard Good (Ed.)
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Reviewer: Amira Firdaus

Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies is both a classroom text and a reader. Edited by Howard Good (who incidentally, has written extensively on popular portrayal of journalists as well as public education), each chapter revolves around a movie in which either a journalist, or a spin doctor (in the case of Berrin A. Beasley’s chapter), is featured as a key protagonist. A central element in each chapter is the presentation of movies that function as dramatized case studies of ethical dilemmas for journalists.

At a time when multimedia, multiplatform, and multichannel media environments surround tech-savvy university students, Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies approaches the topic of journalism ethics in a communicative fashion that reflects what Don Tapscott calls the ‘net-generation’s (Tapscott, 2009) approach to life – meshing work, study, and entertainment. Similarly this book combines entertainment with ethics education. By using movies to explore journalism ethics, the book presents the ethics teacher and ethics student with engaging and accessible case studies. According to Good, “case studies are stories, but, at a thousand words or so apiece, thin ones. Movies can tell longer, more complex stories of journalists who run up against ethical dilemmas – and do it with popular stars like Cate Blanchett and George Clooney in the lead roles.” (p. 5) With the help of movies such as Mr. Deeds and Die Hard, the twelve main chapters of the book explore a wide range of ethical issues confronting journalists and the institution of journalism. Major themes include the ethical treatment of truth and objectivity, media manipulation, and journalist-source relationships.

Sandra L. Borden’s chapter on the ethics of the continuous pursuit of truth under occupational constraints such as deadlines, explores what Lorrain Code calls ‘epistemic responsibility’ “which highlights the moral significance of the investigative processes journalists use to make sense of the world for citizens living in today’s information society” (Borden, p. 10).

Similarly, paying particular attention to the “thoughtful moral reasoning” (p. 120) that guided the work of iconic American journalist, Edward R. Murrow, Michael Dillon’s chapter looks at the ethical issues involved with maintaining journalistic integrity in the face of political and financial pressures on the news organization. With a focus on the ethics of combining journalism with entertainment, Lee Anne Peck also explores the implications of corporate bottom-lines on journalistic values. In another treatment of journalistic truth, Matthew C. Ehrlich discusses the role of organizational culture in enabling the unethical practice of fabricating truth. Berrin A. Beasley, in her deconstruction of the movie Wag the Dog, explores the failure of the fourth estate in the face of PR exploitation.

Emphasizing manipulation on the part of media, Joe Saltzman explores the ethics of undercover reporting and manipulation of news sources. S. Holly Stocking, John Carvalho, Robert Brown, and Howard Good all touch upon the ethics of journalist treatment of news sources. Stocking explores journalists’ responsibility to protect vulnerable sources. Carvalho examines the extent that friendships between journalist and source cloud objectivity. Brown discusses the dangers of personal involvement with underworld crime sources, and Good explores the tensions between maintaining journalistic objectivity and providing humanitarian aid to news sources in a war zone.

Organization of the Book

As the editor notes, each chapter is written by an academic with experience teaching ethics courses. And “although no traditional textbook” (p. ix), this book comes with additional learning resource sections typically found in an average college textbook. The book’s twelve main chapters are preceded by a section titled ‘How to Use this Book’, in which Good suggests ways of incorporating the book into journalism courses. He also lists the website of a Norman Lear Center, University of Southern California scholarly project on Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, where readers may learn how to obtain a free DVD compilation of clips from the movies featured in the book. Finally, the closing sections of the book include discussion questions, suggestions for further reading, a list of selected journalism movies for further viewing, and suggested class projects for instructors.

Chapters are written in an engaging manner in which authors “specifically address many of their comments to journalism students, often sounding as if the students were sitting right there in front of them” (Good, 2008, p. ix). The use of end notes rather than author-date citations or footnotes adds to the conversational flow of the
book. Many chapters – particular Good’s opening and closing chapters – are as accessible as newspaper op-ed pieces.

In addition, Stocking’s chapter on the moral and technical dimensions of ‘good work’ provides readers with a glimpse of how the author uses the 1981 movie, Absence of Malice, in her ethics course. Stocking reports showing the movie in clips to allow students the time to explore the ethical issues presented in the movie, before showing them the final scenes.

Considering that Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies is a textbook complete with learning resources such as discussion questions and a reading list, it is somewhat surprising that the book does not also include some form of ethics code to supplement its other resources. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics would be a relevant possibility. It is cited numerous times in several chapters. For example, Beasley’s chapter on political manipulation of news by professional spin doctors refers to the code’s emphasis on the public’s right to information regarding the reliability of news sources, its stance against the distortion of news photos and videos, and the code’s call for journalists to respect the privacy of private citizens. Similarly, Reader’s chapter on journalists as first responders at critical incidents refers to the SPJ Code of Ethics tenets “regarding reporting on critical incidents, interviewing children, and endangering victims” (p. 92). Harry’s deconstruction of a fictional journalist’s decision to report a truth that, if widely known, could ignite a civil war, also refers to the code’s first two principles of seeking and reporting truth, and minimizing harm. It would be very helpful for students and teachers to have the SPJ Code of Ethics included as an appendix. At the very least, the URL address where it can be found (http://www.spj.org/pdf/ethicscode.pdf) should be included in the reading list provided at the end of the book, where it would be more visible and easier to locate than in obscure end notes.

**Limitations**

Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies is premised upon a Libertarian model of the press, where normative ideals such as journalistic objectivity, the public’s right to know, journalism’s fourth estate role, and codes of ethics, are structured into the tripartite relationship between journalism, the public, and the state. In a news model such as this, journalistic organizations operate relatively independently, free from fear of sanction. Thus for students and teachers in relatively democratic settings, the ethical challenges and lessons from this book are highly relevant. Additionally, had this book been conceptualized wholly as a contribution to scholarly literature targeting a researcher-audience, the Libertarian assumptions underlying each chapter would also not be an issue. These assumptions would simply be an indication of the book’s scholarly parameters.

However, the utility of ethics lessons gleaned from Hollywood movies may be lacking for aspiring journalists from countries where governments censure or impost strict controls on the media, or in journalistic hotspots where journalists are routinely kidnapped or killed.

To be fair, the last three chapters all explore journalism ethics in unstable environments – Brown’s focus on editors’ responsibility to reign in and protect the safety of an overzealous underworld crime reporter; the volatile Suharto-era Indonesian setting of Harry’s exploration of utopian journalistic truth; and Good’s analysis of journalist humanitarian intervention in war-torn Sarajevo. The ethical issues discussed in these chapters would undoubtedly resonate with journalists operating in violent criminal or conflict environments. Nevertheless, despite the obviously non-Liberal socio-political settings of the movies referenced in Harry’s and Good’s chapters, these authors remain with their Libertarian model of journalism, exploring Libertarian notions of journalistic truth, objectivity, and journalist-source relations. Furthermore, even in his focus on dangers and ethical pitfalls unique to underworld crime reporting, Brown emphasizes the uncommonness of journalist-murders in Ireland, noting ”shooting by motorcycle assassins may be an almost daily occurrence in Colombia . . . but nothing like this had ever happened before to a reporter on the streets of Dublin in broad daylight.” (p.125)

Thus for journalism teachers and students in Colombia, or war-ravaged countries, or even peaceful but authoritarian nations where the Libertarian business model of journalism does not apply, the book offers little ethical relevance. And yet, it is precisely in such challenging environments that journalists can use some ethical guidance. For example, what ethical solutions do journalists have when the media system in which they operate oblige them to distort or cover up information that can save lives? Or how do journalists reconcile their moral obligation to minimize harm to the wider society when faced with fatal threats to their family’s safety?

It may rightly be too much to expect college professors in the US – or in the UK in the case of Robert Brown – to tailor their work to the many different media systems the world over. Academics are after all defined by specialist fields. Yet, at the same time, the possible international reach of this book must also be noted. Western academic publishers have put US and UK textbooks in universities around the world. The popularity of the US
as a global higher-education destination also places aspiring journalists from other countries in US classrooms. The addition of chapters dealing with journalism ethics for local (i.e. non-Western) journalists in non-democratic media systems and violent conflict regions would certainly expand the book’s relevance and utility to a wider audience, without sacrificing the needs of US-based readers.

Notwithstanding this drawback, *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies* is indeed a thought provoking yet easily digestible textbook for a journalism ethics course, as well as a useful reference for scholarly research.

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**References**