
Media ethics has been one of the most significant socio-cultural issues in both journalism practice and academic discourse. From the print era to the contemporary digital era, media scholars, journalists, and policy makers who create and develop media products and academic articles are interested in the evolving media ecology in which unethical media behaviours, including fake news on social media, are rampant. Up until now, academic discourse and journalistic practices driven by the global North have addressed media ethics predominantly from instrumental and national perspectives. In contrast to conventional wisdom, Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age investigates media ethics through a global standard grounded in three principles—truth, human dignity, and non-violence—and emphasizes the ways in which these tri-level principles are applied across various domains, in particular “justice.” Developed from his lifetime academic work on media ethics, Clifford Christians eloquently advances new theoretical frameworks that address the philosophy of human-centric media ethics, which is a move beyond Euro-American media ethics.

This book starts with the rationale of the necessity of new theories in the digital age. As is well documented, media ethics historically developed in parallel with print technology; however, the technology of news systems changed in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century from broadcasting to social media platforms. Thus, Christians argues that media ethics is challenged to develop new agendas that reflect the distinctive properties of the recent global system, and he accordingly develops the ontological approaches to media ethics and justice in the digital era.

Christians discusses his major themes and theories in six chapters after the introduction. In Chapter One, he explains the purposes of the book by positing them in the media ecology tradition developed by several theoreticians, including Jacques Ellul, Harold Innis, and James Carey. He does this while clarifying his challenge to technological instrumentalism, focusing on neutrality, because he believes that the epistemology of the neutral view in technology is erroneous. What he underscores is the “human-centered philosophy of technology” within the intellectual genealogy of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul. Chapter Two addresses an ethical protonorm embedded in “Being.” He contends that “absolutist theories in media ethics have failed as universals because they have not incorporated the complexities and richness of the presuppositional” (p. 107). By emphasizing community as a normative ideal and the necessity of transnationality and multiculturalism as ethical norms, Christians develops theoretical pluralism, which requires critical scholarship: addressing the sacredness of life, communalism, Confucianism, contractual naturalism, and feminist caring in which their general commitment to humanist universals gives three major principles priority, namely truth, human dignity, and non-violence.
The next three central chapters are devoted to advancing these norms. Chapter Three articulates the intellectual history of truth, which was based on objectivity; however, Christians argues that “the elementary view of truth as accurate information is now seen as too narrow for today’s social and political complexities” (p. 141). Instead, he advances the ethics of truth in the comparative terms of three paradigms, including rationalism, discourse, and aletheia. Chapter Four discusses the reasons why human dignity should be presented as a multicultural standard, as human dignity works as a reference point for a number of issues not only political and socio-cultural, but also philosophical “as a philosophy of the human and the facilitative model of media responsibility coalesce around the concept of cultural diversity” (p. 200). Chapter Five emphasizes nonviolence as one of the most significant ethical principles built “in the sacredness of life.” Christians argues that “the ethics of nonviolence is integral to the universal sacredness of life, but nonviolence needs theoretical precision and international application to be taken seriously in media ethics” (p. 290). Finally, Chapter Six highlights three ethical principles discussed in Chapters Three to Five as major components of justice. By challenging the traditional norm of justice as right order which has been dominant in Western society, he claims that “the meaning of justice must be given a different conceptual foundation and fundamentally new orientation than the way justice has been traditionally conceived” (p. 302), which is the cosmopolitan justice of being.

There are several primary merits to Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age. First of all, this book is textually rich and historically well-grounded. In addition to providing several case studies, Christians aptly supports his arguments by utilizing works done by both established philosophers and young thinkers. Indeed, one of the book’s most pronounced features is his mastery of the existing literature, both old and new, and he treats both fairly with no prejudice, which demonstrates his practice of ethical standards. The book’s use of historical thinkers, such as Aristotle and Plato, is not separated from the ideas of our contemporary theoreticians, which gives readers ample opportunity to contextualize their main philosophies around the necessity of media ethics in the global and digital era.

The second primary characteristic of the book lies in its well-organized structure. Each chapter provides clear definitions, historical overviews, and key case studies, followed by summaries and conclusions of a few major concepts whenever new terms come up. This structural strength allows the readers to make connections with concepts and theories. Likewise, each section offers the ideas of several key thinkers or major philosophical grounds so that the reader can easily understand the main points of the book. Another primary feature of the book is Christians’ emphasis on the normative values of media ethics in the global context. By articulating the de-Westernization of media ethics in the digital age, he clearly addresses the significance of global media ethics embedded in multicultural and cross-cultural settings.

Despite these valuable features, there are a couple of issues that the book could have further developed. On the one hand, while the book uses several social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as examples, it does not provide some ethical issues rooted in smartphone technologies and over-the-top technologies, like Netflix, which might provide a richer discussion as they are essential parts of contemporary
digital media. On the other hand, while the book historicizes the growth of digital media and relevant new media ethics in tandem with journalism practice, it does not address in much depth the significant role of media corporations and digital tech firms in establishing their own ethical standards.

Overall, Christian’s book is highly recommended for a wide range of readers who are interested in media ethics and global justice. The discussions in the book are some of the most compelling I have read, and the chapters are enjoyable and very informative. Since it offers insights into global media ethics in the digital era by offering empirical detail and useful historical milieus in conjunction with Christian’s mastery of philosophical ontology, it is presented as a convincing contribution to a growing body of literature on global media studies, in particular media ethics, digital technologies, and community engagements.

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