
Reviews

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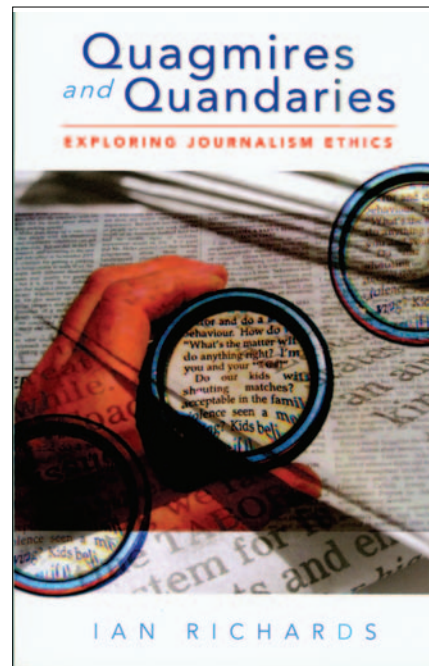
Quandary over contrasting ethics texts

Journalism Ethics: Arguments and Cases, by Martin Hirst and Roger Patching. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005, 360pp., ISBN 0 19 555039 0.

Quagmires and Quandaries: Exploring Journalism Ethics, by Ian Richards. Sydney: UNSW Press, 178 pp., ISBN 0 86840 6236.

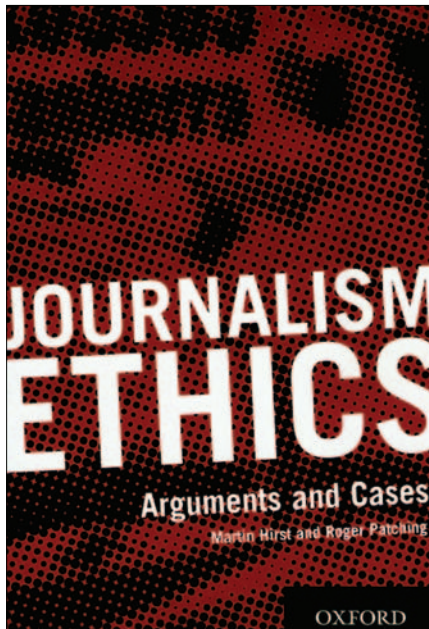
GIVEN the nature of these works, it is imperative a reviewer be absolutely transparent and declare any interests. Frankly, I am in a bind. I have known and admired two of the authors—Roger Patching and Ian Richards—for the best part of two decades and the third author Hirst for at least 10 years.

I gave Richards feedback on his doctoral thesis on this very topic and



at one stage was going to co-author an ethics text with him. He asked me to launch this volume at the 2004 Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference in Suva, Fiji. Patching has just been appointed associate professor at my institution and our offices face each other in a small corridor.

I have sought advice from both texts on this kind of dilemma: journalists allowing personal allegiances to influence them in the course of



their duty. Richards points to the flaws in the Australian MEAA Code of Ethics' clause 4 which stipulates journalists should not allow 'personal interest or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit' to undermine their accuracy, fairness or independence. He suggests it falsely assumes journalists are, firstly, aware of their beliefs and, secondly, capable of rising above those beliefs when reporting (Richards, p. 63).

Hirst and Patching make much of an 'ethical fault line' metaphor throughout their text, and refer to objectivity as 'one of the most volatile fault lines in the ideology of reporters, and in their often acrimoni-

ous relationship with the public' (Hirst & Patching, p. 40). They canvass the deeper philosophical approaches to objectivity before offering the only realistic advice you can give a journalist: 'If these decisions are made fairly and with the best interests of the audience and the story in mind, you will be on the right track' (p. 40).

They tackle the issue from a different perspective in Chapter 10—'Issues of deception'—where they address the personal conflict of freebies, junkets and compromising positions. They point out that journalists are quick to accept gifts from sources and place themselves under an obligation by doing so (pp. 249-250). Sadly, most organisations turn a blind eye to the practice.

These are very different books, and I hope the small market can accommodate both of them. Hirst and Patching, while offering adequate depth in their theory sections, have unashamedly produced a textbook on ethics for journalism schools. It is double the size of the Richards book, with most of the extra content taking the form of case studies which lend themselves to tutorial reading and discussion.

My major suggestion for their second edition is that the authors should bite the bullet and offer many more solutions to the ethical dilem-

mas they pose. Too many topics are left on an undecided note, and you can imagine tutorial groups engaging in heated ethical debate without resolution. As tertiary educators, we owe it to our students and the industry to declare actual boundaries in the realm of ethics—to label the red light zones as such.

They need to be given the tools to make actual, defensible, ethical decisions. For example, their discussion of death knocks (pp. 179-180) accepts the reality of intrusion into grief as a sometimes necessary part of a journalist's job, and then proceeds to explain all the problems with it. The only suggestion is that reporters should try to work through an intermediary rather than dealing with a grieving family directly. It would be useful to see a checklist of rights and wrongs in the next edition to reinforce the fact that ethical decisions actually have to be taken, not just discussed.

Metaphors have been flying in my preceding paragraph, prompting mention of Hirst and Patching's fault line metaphor which is a useful descriptive device, but it is no more than that: a metaphor. I would hesitate to describe it as a theoretical revelation rather than a useful prism, an explanatory aid, by which we can help students detect and navigate the ethical issues that confront them.

Richards' book is less a text and more a work of intellectual analysis of 11 key issues in the realm of journalism and ethics. It is essential reading for anyone conducting research in the field of applied ethics.

Why? It grounds itself in the historical and philosophical origins of ethics in journalism and uses these as its theoretical backbone to the discussion of modern dilemmas.

It takes the higher ground in looking at the societal implications of journalism and exploring the strengths and weaknesses of attempts to influence and control reporters and their behaviour.

Richards' highly acclaimed doctoral thesis was the backbone for this work, and it operates at that level: questioning, theorising and proposing educational and professional strategies for addressing the deeper shortcomings of a fraught profession.

So, personal interests aside, would I set Richards or Hirst and Patching as the ethics text for my own students?

And the winner is ... [nervous opening of envelope] ...

Hirst and Patching for undergraduates, Richards for postgraduates.

Now I've probably upset all of them, as any self-respecting journalist should.