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Book Reviews: Volume 10

Tony Harcup *The Ethical Journalist*

London: Sage Publications, 2006. 224pp., £60.00 £19.99 (pbk.)
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Tony Harcup insists that this book is not another book about ethics, but a book about journalism, and he is correct. There are no mentions of Plato, Aristotle or Kant nor is there anything about deontology, utilitarianism, relativism or consequentialism. What it is about is journalism, but within an ethical context. It is a work that is designed to encourage journalists to think about doing journalism, to reflect critically on journalism while they are doing it.

Journalists in Britain and Ireland have famously brushed ethics aside as something that might stop them doing their jobs, that would put obstacles in their way, as if ethics was something real hacks knew nothing about and were better hacks for that.

Harcup takes a different view:

> Whether we recognise it or not ethics are involved in every story we follow up or ignore; every quote we use or leave out or tidy up; every bit of context we squeeze in, simplify or exclude; every decision to create (sorry report) a 'row'; every photograph we select or 'improve'; every sound bite we choose to use; every approach from an advertiser trying to influence editorial copy; every headline we write, every question we ask or don't ask. For the ethical journalist, it is not enough to have a bulging contacts book or a good nose for news, being an ethical journalist also means asking questions about our own practice. (p. 6)

In other words, ethics is where the big questions are asked such as: What is good journalism? What is the purpose of journalism? What are news values? In other words, Harcup puts ethics central to journalism and journalism education.

There is good reason for this. In Britain and Ireland journalism education comes out of a vocational tradition that placed emphasis on how to do it, with little reflection on why. As journalism has developed as an academic area of study, it has struggled to establish a theoretical base. It has often borrowed from areas of communications or media studies that are not particularly relevant or fruitful as they do not focus on the essence of journalism as a field of professional practice.

Into this came ethics as a subject that had already been adopted as a place where discussion could reflect on what journalism was about. It has been assumed that this came from the US where ethics has played a major role in academic journalism, for a number of reasons, mainly, I believe, because it offered something approaching academic respectability within the US system.

This has not been the case this side of the Atlantic, especially in Britain and Ireland. As is the case with a number of journalism academics here who now teach and write about ethics, Harcup come from activism within journalism. He has been involved in the alternative press, has been an activist in the National Union of Journalist and has been a member of the NUJ's ethics council. The concerns of union activists over the past 20 years are evident in the issues Harcup has chosen to raise, especially his comments on how journalists can take action to defend ethical standards and the role of collective action in this. The immensely practical nature of this work is an indication of Harcup's background as a working journalist, involved for many years with people who thought

about what they do, not in an academic context but in the newsroom, at meetings and with other journalists. It is also evident in how the book is put together. As well as showing an impressive grasp of recent scholarship, he also includes many interviews with journalists, and it is refreshing to hear the voices of journalists talking about their practice.

It is that background that makes this book a surprisingly optimistic work. His examples of where journalists have served society and democracy well are here alongside the bad examples. At the same time he is not complacent. This book chronicles the bad and the ugly as well as the good.

He is particularly good on the British regulatory system, a chapter we in Ireland should read carefully. The model planned for this country has already taken on some of the criticism Harcup makes of the British Press Complaints System (PCC), especially the make up of the press council itself. Unlike the British model it is planned that our Council will not merely include editors as is the case in the UK, but also working journalists and members of society who are not journalists. Harcup talks of the PCC's 'narrow remit' and the fact that 'from the start it was based on the model of a customer complaints department rather than on an engagement with journalism and ethics as components of citizenship, social responsibility and democracy'. The PCC was the regulatory model most favoured by Irish proprietors and the editors of the British newspapers in Ireland. Read Harcup and you will understand why.

However, where this book scores is in how journalists can take control themselves in defending journalism standards, which is probably the most important thing we can teach our students. He gives examples, from the *Daily Express* to local newspapers, to journalists in Russia, Greece, and Ukraine, during the Orange revolution, who took action to defend editorial freedom, to oppose censorship, or to offer society a vision of what journalism can do. It has not always worked but sometimes it does. In the UK journalists seeking higher ethical standards received no help from the PCC.

This is Tony Harcup's second book. His first was *Journalism Principles and Practice*, published in 2004. That was hugely well received. It attempted to bridge the gulf between the practice of journalism and the theory. Failure to find that bridge leads young journalists to replicate the mistakes of their elders and continues the anti-intellectualism within journalism that discourages questioning or reflection. This book carries on the work of the first. *The Ethical Journalist*, as the title implies, puts ethics and reflection back onto the journalist and makes it central to what he or she does while emphasising the importance and role of journalism in democracy.

As with his previous book there is a very comprehensive and useful bibliography. One small correction. *The Guardian* newspaper's readers' representative, which he praises and claims as the inspiration for such offices in many parts of the world, was in fact inspired by the readers' representative at *The Irish Times*, as *The Guardian* acknowledged when its office was established.

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Kelly,M. (1984) 'Twenty Years of Current Affairs on RTÉ' pp89-106 in M.McLoone and J. MacMahon (eds.) Television and Irish Society. 21 Years of Irish Television. Dublin: Radio Telefís Éireann.

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