Meta-Crash

Ethics and relatives

Jock Given on Catherine Lumby and Elspeth Probyn, Remote Control


Remote Control ends with John Safran’s comment that: “it’s pretty hard for satire to change things, but overall it helps add to a liberal kind of culture.” Safran thinks alternative culture is doing it a little tough at present: “If you’re working on your own little alternative cartoon, how do you make it more subversive than this thing [The Simpsons] that’s put out by Rupert Murdoch’s Fox?” This observation reflects the complex ground that technology, increased competition and global capital and information flows have created for contemporary media makers.

Safran is the subject of one of 7 interviews that supplement the 13 short essays in this book on the “ethical dilemmas thrown up by the contemporary media.” Like Safran, editors Lumby and Probyn and most of the contributors are modest about what they want and think they can do. Remote Control is not an attempt to create a new charter of ethical principles for a new media age. In fact it’s quite the opposite. It is sceptical about such universal standards. It’s primarily a plea for ethical reflection, which acknowledges and celebrates the likelihood that different producers and consumers will choose different standards.

As the editors argue, there is an urgent demand for greater consideration of “how emerging genres and technologies are re-shaping our public sphere, and how this might in turn cause us to rethink the assumptions grounding our ethical norms.” Lumby writes about Reality TV, Probyn about food journalism, Michael Moller about the campaign to save the South Sydney Rabbitohs and Kath Albury about internet porn and the contrast between the ethics of the commercial industry and ‘amateur’ producers.

Each of these is an example of media ethics not as “a specialised domain to be deliberated upon by experts”, but as a “politics of everyday life.” Reality TV “might be said to humanise ethical dilemmas”, food media might provide “fodder for rethinking ethics” and the proliferation of online sexual imagery that transcends conventionally desirable porn stereotypes might offer “a perfect example of internet porn’s ethical sensibility.” The Souths’ fans struggle shows “responsibility, opportunity and respect for the emotional commitments of others communicated through the consumption of media products”, through the audience’s resistance to Foxtel and the dumping of Murdoch’s Daily Telegraph in favour of Fairfax’s Sydney Morning Herald.
This exploration of particular ethical challenges and opportunities is welcome, but the case against ‘universal’ ethical standards seems to be oversold. The principles embedded in media codes already often express less than slavish adherence to “universally desirable...goals and ideals.” The best of them are drafted precisely to allow the kind of difficult weighing of competing interests—privacy versus public interest, disclosure of sources versus confidentiality—that is the bread and butter of ethically reflective journalism.

Beyond mainstream journalism, new genres raise familiar as well as novel ethical issues. Probyn’s case for food journalism is a particular case in point. “Detachment and distance are at odds with the passionate, subjective and close relationship of food journalists to their topics and ultimately to their readers” she writes, but this could also be a description of film reviewers, sports writers and the Press Gallery. The internet didn’t invent subjectivity and most journalists live with a daily awareness of the impact of stories on the commercial health of particular enterprises, the reputation of individuals and the durability of personal relationships.

There is, however, much evidence of ‘universal values’ in many of the contributions. Duncan Ivison wants individual freedom, self-rule and distributive justice, which seems close to Ghassan Hage’s desire to sustain each other’s “viability as human beings.” He uses an everyday Lebanese exclamation—‘Hey! Include me in your dreams!’—to guide journalists choosing ethnic identifiers, a practice that turns them into participants in “people’s struggles to construct viable fantasies of themselves.” Graeme Turner draws a universal line in the sand before ‘cash for comment’, which Probyn seems to agree with. She suggests that “the dodgy practices of ‘comps’, the collusion with restaurants or any perception of nepotism needs to be closely regulated. In fact, perhaps more than any other genre, food journalism needs to be strictly scrutinised.”

Finding words for these positions need not turn “the politics of everyday life” into ethical stone or blind us to the specifics of future practical dilemmas. It just enables us to remember how we resolved the problem last time, what we learned and what should happen in the future. The words can change as new things are learned, but not just because they become uncomfortable or inconvenient. Margo Kingston’s chapter provides a fascinating description of the invention and modification of a code of practice for her WebDiary that borrowed from, but adapted in crucial ways, the Media Alliance’s code for journalists. Cherry Ripe similarly articulates wise, hard-won lessons and principles from long experience in food writing.

Duncan Ivison argues that “our philosophical orientation should be less towards consensus and more towards how we can live with the disagreements we have with each other.” He is, however, reluctant to concede that there is no point talking about common values. As he reminds us: “States can declare war. In some places, they can execute people. Decisions have to be made about the allocation of scarce resources...in liberal democracies at least, a public view has to be formed about these things.” Some liberal democracies, even the World’s Best Practice ones, still go to war without popular mandates, on the basis of inaccurate information and then argue that the ends justify the means.

It is pretty hard to change these things. “A liberal kind of culture” helps and Remote Control provides a great snapshot of the lively, contested ways that culture is evolving
Control provides a great snapshot of the lively, contested ways that culture is evolving in Australia. An ethics that does not engage with the shifting everyday realities of people’s lives is not an ethics at all. But neither is one which is not constantly reaching beyond itself and its specifics to the often frighteningly large issues which shape the ground on which lives are lived.

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