Communication ethics:
A survey of recent literature

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Communication ethics is a field of inquiry that overlaps with other areas of professional and applied ethics (such as journalism ethics), and appears to lie at the intersection of ethics (a traditional branch of philosophy) and communication and media studies. Recent literature in communication ethics reflects the influence of ethics (and journalism and media ethics) on the one hand, and communication and media studies on the other.

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Naturally, communication ethics concerns itself with the ethical dimension of communication. However, there is a tendency among some theorists of communication, notably those influenced by some forms of postmodernism, to collapse ethics into politics, and to view all human activity as ultimately communicative, and fundamentally about ‘texts’, ‘meanings’, ‘knowledges’, and so on.

I believe that ethics should not be collapsed into politics. Nor should communication be understood so broadly as to include all forms of human activity. When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a message was sent to the Japanese military command. But this was not simply a communicative act. It was also, indeed it was principally, an act of physical and human destruction. Moreover, while the decision to drop the atomic bomb may have been a politically astute move in a power game, it was profoundly ethically problematic.

The ethical dimension of communication is complex and shifting. It is complex, partly in virtue of the multifarious forms of communication, the levels at which they exist, and the kinds of communicators, messages, and audiences. This complexity gives rise to a plethora of intersecting (and contestable) distinctions. There is linguistic, bodily, and visual communication, but also interpersonal, organisational, and mass communication. There are various categories of professional communicators, and whole taxonomies of audience types, and there is political but also scientific, technical, religious, etc. communication.

The ethical dimension is shifting, in so far as the social and institutional structures within which communication takes place undergo change, and in so far as technological change brings with it new and different means and modes of communication. For example, the coming into being of the modern multinational corporation and of new communicative technologies such as satellite TV has provided certain communicators with unprecedented communicative power, and has raised a host of ethical problems concerning cultural domination and the preservation of cultural identity.

Theorists working in communication ethics have a long way to go in terms of providing an adequate and comprehensive account of the ethical dimension of communication. However, there is a growing body of literature addressing many of the central issues, and the above list of books is a contribution to this literature. This list conveniently exemplifies much of the recent work undertaken in the area of communication ethics.

The list of books tends to divide into two categories. In the first category are journalism and media ethics textbooks, or anthologies that essentially serve the function of textbooks. Hurst and White’s *Ethics and the Australian News Media*, Goodwin and Smith’s *Groping for Ethics in Journalism*, Patterson and Wilson’s *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases*, and E. D. Cohen’s *Philosophical Issues in Journalism* belong to this category.

As textbooks for would-be practitioners of journalism and related
occupations, these books are not works in communication ethics *per se*. While such practitioners are employed in the communication and media industries, some of their activities are not intrinsically communicative and, therefore, do not give rise to questions of communicative ethics. For example, a journalist who is both a member of a striking union and an employee of a corporation may confront a conflict of interest, but this is not necessarily an issue in communication ethics. And there are many issues in communication ethics not confronted by journalists or others in specific occupations in the communication and media industries.


Because these books are textbooks, they must be judged as textbooks. For example, it would be unfair to expect that they make an original contribution to knowledge or understanding. Rather, the expectation ought to be that they provide readable and reasonable coverage of the salient issues and standpoints, and serve to impart an adequate understanding of those issues and standpoints.

This 'genre' proceeds by presenting case studies, which often consist of moral dilemmas confronted by (typically) journalists. These cases exemplify such ethical issues as confidentiality of sources, objectivity of reporting, accepting freebies, conflicts of interest, respecting privacy, editorial autonomy, and so on. The case studies chosen tend to reflect nuances of difference in journalistic experience in different countries and over time. For example, Hurst and White's case studies relate to situations confronted by Australian journalists in recent years.

To help students resolve the moral dilemmas embodied in these case studies, authors invoke philosophical theory of a certain sort. Aristotle's golden mean, Kant's universalisability test, Mill's principle of utility, and (more recently) Rawls's principles of justice are among the standard theories wheeled out to help determine the ethically acceptable course of action. Other theorists of a less overtly philosophical complexion – used especially in US textbooks – are John Milton, Thomas Jefferson, and Walter Lippmann.
This way of proceeding introduces students to a number of ethical issues that they are likely to confront, and also to a range of general principles and distinctions which may well assist them in their reflection on these issues. Therefore, these books serve an important function, and this should be acknowledged. However, there are a number of general deficiencies in these textbooks, some of which are exemplified in the books by Hurst and White, Goodwin and Smith, and Patterson and Wilson.

Firstly, the philosophical theories appropriated suffer significant distortion. Let us take, as an example, Kant's moral theory. In Hurst and White, this is rendered as: 'In essence he [Kant] proposed that in assessing moral worth all one had to look at was the good will, or the ability “to act solely from duty and for the sake of duty”' and 'It was Kant who introduced the notion of the categorical imperative which dictates that a certain action must be done, whatever its results' (p. 12). This rendering fails to adequately represent Kant's moral theory. Roughly, Kant identifies, and attempts to integrate, three moral notions: acting from the motive of doing what is morally right, rather than from self-interest or momentary inclination; acting only in accordance with self-imposed, rather than externally (physically or socially) imposed, rules; and acting only in accordance with rules that one and all others could consistently adhere to.

Secondly, Kant's abstract theory is insufficient, and was never intended to be sufficient, to determine the appropriate actions to be performed in the socio-historically and institutionally contextual situations confronted by past, present, and future communicators. Kant's theory is presented as, and indeed is entitled, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals'. There is a need for ethical theorising at lower levels of abstraction than this theory. In particular, there is a need for theorising at the level of communication institutions, and at the level of the individual professional communication practitioner. Moreover, this theorising needs to recognise the particularities of the socio-historical contexts in which these institutions of communication exist, and in which these communication practitioners act.

Thirdly, these textbooks/anthologies tend to present ethical analysis as a kind of timeless and mechanistic application of principles and theories to particular situations. Perhaps the most notable example of this way of thinking is the so-called 'Potter Box' advocated by Christians, Rotzoll, and Fackler. The Potter Box is a process for solving ethical problems, comprised of five steps: define the situation, identify one's ethical values, specify one's prescriptive principles (e.g., the principle of maximising utility), determine one's degree of loyalty to the various interested parties, and make one's ethical judgment.

Patterson and Wilkins also think in this way. They present their
three-step process for dealing with ethical problems: consult your conscience, consider your alternatives, and hold ethical dialogue with all interested parties.

Since ethical problems cannot, in fact, be 'solved' in this mechanical fashion, these authors tend to present somewhat simplistic and artificial solutions to ethical problems, or, as in the case of Hurst and White, and Goodwin and Smith, simply fail to make much use of the philosophical theories and principles presented in their opening chapters. Rather, these books tend to be a mixture of limp gesturing at bits of philosophical theory, followed by an enumeration of whatever ethical considerations journalists tend to use in practice, or at least pay lip-service to. The books present sets of disparate and unintegrated ethical considerations for and against alternative courses of action in ethically problematic situations. ('On the one hand, there is the right to privacy, on the other hand, there is the public's right to know.') The net result is a kind of intellectual fence-sitting. Thus Hurst and White conclude: 'Whatever the truth of the matter, the journalist and the editorial executive are faced with a range of difficult ethical decisions whenever the business face of the news media confronts its indivisible twin, the publicly accountable social institution' (p. 251). Philosophical theory has not been integrated with journalistic experience to yield insightful, or even mildly illuminating, and certainly not decisive, responses to the ethical problems in question.

Having described the general features and deficiencies of textbooks in this 'genre', I note that there are exceptions to the rule. One textbook that escapes many of these criticisms is *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession* by E. B. Lambeth (1986). Lambeth opts for a form of mixed-rule deontology, which enables him to offer a more complex and less mechanistic account. However, his account still suffers from insufficient theoretical attention to the institutional level of communication and journalistic ethics.

Other exceptions include anthologies of articles which were original contributions to knowledge at some time in the past, but which now function as textbooks. Cohen's collection, *Philosophical Issues in Journalism*, is a case in point, as is Henningham's *Issues in Australian Journalism*. However, I will treat these collections as if they were not textbooks, or at least as if they were more than textbooks. They belong to the second general category into which the list of books under review falls, namely that of the non-textbook anthology of various issues. All the remaining books listed at the beginning of this survey fall into this category, with the exception of Kerry Stokes's 1994 Boyer Lectures. Stokes's book is a series of public lectures, and, as such, is not like the other books being considered.

Once again, these anthologies have to be judged *qua* anthologies and
not qua magna op. Nevertheless, the absence of a magnum opus in the area of communicative ethics is itself indicative of the pressing need for further and, I would contend, inter-disciplinary work in this area. There have been a number of important books dealing with theoretical aspects of communicative ethics. These include such well known works as *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* by Jacques Ellul (1973), *Four Theories of the Press* by F. S. Siebert, T. Peterson, and W. Schramm (1956), *The Imperative of Freedom: A Philosophy of Journalistic Autonomy* by J. C. Merrill (1974), *Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life* by Sissela Bok (1978), *The Virtuous Journalist* by S. Klaidmann and T. L. Beauchamp (1987), and *Disenchantment: Meaning and Morality in the Media* by J. M. Phelan (1980).

But none of these works provides an adequate and comprehensive account of communicative ethics. Instead, each is concerned with an aspect of communicative ethics. Ellul and Phelan are concerned with some of the ethical aspects of communication as an institution in the late twentieth century, namely its tendency to function as an ideological apparatus and (relatedly) to be fundamentally engaged in selling a way of life. Siebert et al. offer four ethico-political theories of the press, including the authoritarian, the liberal, and the socially responsible models. Klaidmann and Merrill offer ethical analyses at the level of the individual journalist (though Merrill's account is underwritten by a libertarian theory of the institution of the press). Bok deals with the ethics of a central kind of communicative act, namely lying, which can be performed in a whole range of personal, professional, and institutional contexts.

Perhaps the most influential and ambitious of works in the area of communication ethics is Jurgen Habermas's text, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1 (1981) and 2 (1987). In this and other works, Habermas outlines what he takes to be the general features of communicative action, including the ethical dimension of such action. His theory locates the ethical dimension in terms of such ethical values as truth, sincerity, trust, and so on. He reminds us that communicative activity of any sort can only take place in so far as communicators aim at truth, and in so far as there is trust between communicators and audiences. If falsity becomes the norm, communication would largely lose its point and cease to take place. Furthermore, if I do not believe you are sincere most of the time, I will cease to believe you.

Habermas offers a neo-Kantian, or at least neo-Enlightenment, normative account of communication and the public sphere, an account which sees ethical values, such as truth-aiming in communication, as rationally justifiable. However, his concern is with a normative framework for communication at a general level—and with attendant conceptions of the public sphere (see also his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*).

Sphere, 1989). He is not concerned with the full range of specific and contextually delimited issues and problems in communication ethics.

The anthologies considered here can themselves be divided into two groups: those covering general issues in communication ethics, and those with a more specific focus. Benhabib, Henningham, Denton, and Dahlgren have more specific foci. Taitte, Cohen, and Lichtenberg range more widely.

Benhabib's collection is a useful contribution to the philosophical debates on communication ethics mentioned above. The collection features the views of Habermas and Karl-Otto Appel, and serves as more of an update for English readers than anything, since most of the essays are translations of essays written in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, they include a range of critics of Habermas's standpoint. The essays constitute an interesting set, though most suffer from the absence of the kind of detailed piecemeal analyses favoured by their trans-Atlantic, cross-Channel, and Antipodean brethren. For example, Lubbe's article on the justifiability of norms proceeds without reference to existing detailed definitional work on norms. This tendency is unfortunate, given that Habermas's basic account is itself - as he acknowledges - a highly generalised derivation of the work of speech act theorists such as J. L. Austin and John Searle.

The focus of Henningham's collection is journalism in Australia. From a communication ethics perspective, the collection is a mixed bag in at least two ways. Firstly, many of the essays are not explicit contributions to communication ethics, though most have implications for communication ethics. Paul Chadwick's very direct and forceful account of the concentration of media ownership in Australia is a case in point, as is Henningham's measured discussion of journalism as a profession. Chadwick's description of the failure of journalists to resist developments that ultimately undermine their independence as journalists implies an absence of one of the defining ethical features of the professional - a feature noted by Henningham - namely, a degree of individual journalistic autonomy and the integrity to defend threats to it.

Secondly, the collection is mixed in its quality. Lawrence Apps's essay is a particularly confused piece of writing. At one point, Apps suggests that philosophical theories such as those of Kant, Rawls, and Christian charity are "[in a sense . . . all the same]" (p. 72). Given that love is a central notion of Christianity, that reason-based duty is central in Kant's work, and that God does not act as a source of moral value (or in any other capacity) in Rawls's work, this is indeed a stunning claim. Apps also claims, 'Rawls' concept of justice as fairness does not explicitly condemn systemic support for social and economic inequality; indeed his theory seems able to accommodate this' (p. 72). But a centrepiece of Rawls's account is that social and economic inequalities should be
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tolerated only in so far as they favour the least advantaged. According to Rawls, the reason that we, in modern democracies, should not tax the rich to the point where their income is equal to that of the poor is that this would decrease the total wealth and make the poor even worse off. In contrast to Apps's claim, Rawls favours tax arrangements that benefit the least well-off. Apps goes on to present the familiar and crude Marxist theory that all ethical systems represent an idealist world divorced from life. Unfortunately, as has often been pointed out, this leaves no room for any ethical values — including Marxist ones.

The focus of Denton's collection is political communication. Once again, the collection is mixed, both in respect of subject matter and quality. Some of the essays, such as Johannesen's, are explicitly ethical — he argues for the importance of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in relation to political communicators. Kaid outlines some of the new ethical issues that have arisen in political advertising with the advent of new technology. For example, new computerised video technologies make it possible to alter moving video images: 'live' video can now consist of a substantially false representation of what is actually taking place.

Other essays attempt to give theoretical accounts of different kinds of political communication, but without focussing explicitly on the ethical dimension of such communication. For example, Denton describes the new age of the 'prime-time Presidency' — in which Presidents increasingly rely on TV for their political communications — and the consequent tendency for Presidents to take on the artificial features of media celebrities. Ronald Reagan is the obvious case in point. Selnow explains how computers can combine and integrate data bases provided by polling and other means. These developments have profound ethical implications in many areas, including privacy.

Most of the essays in this volume are worth reading. Woodward's contribution is a particularly good discussion of political news. He gives a more balanced account of the news media than those offered by many commentators, whether they be the uncritical pious noises favoured by proprietors and editors, or the lop sided accounts proferred by some left-wing critics. According to Woodward, US news media devote much time and space to national politics, and major dailies sometimes report brilliantly. However, there is much that is undesirable. For example, says Woodward, CBS News, Time, and Newsweek are explicitly presented in the form of morality plays, with beginning, conflict, and denouement; news subjects are subordinated to the exigencies of narration and celebrity journalism; and TV journalism is vitiated by the insistence that success should be measured in largely commercial terms. Woodward goes on to argue strongly that:

presenting difficult choices, communicating the substance of political debate and exploring the social origins of problems should remain the
goals of political journalism. Because it is a linchpin of a functioning representative democracy, political intelligence has an educative function that justifiably includes providing citizens with what they need to know, not just what they want to know (p. 217).

I cannot complete this review of Denton without commenting on the unfortunately poor essays by Fishwick and Cooper. Fishwick provides a poorly informed pastiche of philosophy and cultural studies, or, more specifically, ethics and popular culture. He believes popular culture is in opposition to prevailing conventions and tastes; he believes in the concept of 'unpopular popular culture' (p. 8). He thinks that Mill's principle of utility is essentially a commitment to democratic decision-making, whereby the morally best outcome is whatever most people prefer to do. This is the sort of error one might expect in a first-year student's essay.

Cooper's essay also shows a high degree of ignorance of the philosophical tradition she seeks to attack. Cooper claims that 'postmodernism unlike traditional approaches recognises that truth may be elusive and partial' (p. 42), and, further, that, 'from a postmodern perspective, the guiding principle for motives of political advocates is the preservation of others as autonomous subjects' (p. 42). She goes on to state that:

Instead of assuming the existence of ethical subjects in the form of citizens, as in the case of traditional approaches, a postmodern ethic problematises the agent of ethical action and suggests that ethical considerations focus on reestablishing the possibility of citizenship (p. 43).

Cooper is blissfully unaware that Enlightenment figures such as Rousseau, and liberal thinkers such as Mill, were deeply concerned with the education and self-development of individuals so that they could take their place as autonomously acting citizens. Nor could anyone who has read Mill's On Liberty possibly entertain the thought that Mill was unaware that truth was partial and elusive. In contrast, postmodernist thinkers have always had a difficulty with the proposition that there is any such thing as truth, however partial and elusive. But the most staggering of Cooper's claims is that, somehow, we owe a commitment to the preservation of autonomous subjects not to Kant, Mill, and the like, but to postmodernism. Cooper is evidently unaware of doctrines such as the death of the author, and of postmodernism's virulent opposition to any notion of a substantial moral agent.

Dahlgren and Sparks's collection deals with the public sphere as it exists by virtue of the modern institution of the media, and, in particular, by virtue of the political communication emanating from, and mediated by, the media. Some of the articles are concerned to provide accounts of this public sphere in quite general terms. Thus Sparks offers this perspective: 'The mass circulation press is no longer concerned
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primarily to articulate the different opinions of competing sections of a narrow political elite, but with the general maintenance of the conditions upon which the continued dominance of that elite rest’ (p. 60). Other articles analyse particular characteristics or elements of this public sphere in different countries, including Italy, Germany, the USA and Poland. Thus, Mancini argues that ‘in the Italian political sphere the major function of political communication is to connect horizontally various elite groups rather than connect vertically the elite and the citizens as stated in the classic handbooks of journalism’ (p. 150).

Most of the articles are not explicit contributions to communication ethics, though their import has ethical implications, particularly for the normative notion of being a citizen. Most striking in this connection are Phelan’s account of the public sphere as a televised market-place, and the discussion by Gurevitch et al. of the concept of global citizenship. In contrast, Van Zoonen’s article is very weak. It presents a familiar pattern: ‘the bourgeois public sphere model assumes and prescribes a universal distinction between rational public aspects of human nature and emotional private ones’ (p. 231). Ian Connell’s argument is similarly unoriginal and unconvincing. He argues that, while the tabloid press is uninformative, devoid of analysis, and preoccupied with ‘girlie pics’ and the scandalous lives of show business personalities, it is nevertheless somehow deeply subversive of the socio-economic power structure and certainly should not be regarded as of low quality.

Phelan’s contribution, while instructive, lacks the power and originality of his earlier book, Disenchantment: Meaning and Morality in the Media (1980). His empirical overview of the state of play in the US broadcasting system – networks part of larger conglomerates, local stations providing soft news, serious misreporting in syndicated public service/community campaigns – does not quite warrant his conclusion that ‘broadcasting in effect is the American Ministry of Culture’ (p. 91). Nevertheless, he has identified disturbing features of broadcasting in the USA, which have clear ethical implications for citizenship.

Gurevitch et al. argue that the technological preconditions for the emergence of a global community – technology capable of creating a global communication system – have been fulfilled. However, they suggest that ‘while the images may have global currency, the meanings given to them may not necessarily be shared globally’ (p. 214). The reason given for this divergence in meaning is the reshaping of images by domestic reporters, editors, and so on. There is obviously something in this line of argument, but Gurevitch et al. fail to deal with two questions upon which their conclusion depends. Firstly, there is the question of the relative importance of globally communicated news to non-globally communicated news. Secondly, there is the extent to which the meanings provided by local reporters, editors, etc. are in fact mean-
nings that are not globally understood. At any rate, this notion of global community has potentially profound ethical implications, in relation to, for example, the central moral category of the self, and Dahlgren and Sparks's collection makes a contribution to our understanding of it.

The collection edited by Taitte consists, in the main, of lectures given by prominent editors, university administrators, and academics. Many of these lectures consist of little more than self-serving pronouncements and bad arguments. For example, Osborne (a prominent Texas newspaper editor) states that:

It is my belief that newspapers, even in one newspaper cities, do not have monopolies. The fact is that newspapers run on two things - readership and revenue. And with or without another newspaper in town, plenty of competition exists for both. There are many other ways that potential advertisers can spend their dollars and that potential readers can spend their time and get their information (p. 28).

There are some good lectures, including those by Hume and Janeway. In different ways, these two authors draw attention to ethical deficiencies in American broadcasting and print journalism, especially in relation to content. Among other things, Hume argues that 'values cannot be separated from facts and therefore they must be discussed in news stories' (p. 100). This is an important issue that needs to be pursued further.

Cohen's collection consists of a wide variety of mainly philosophical articles, or, in some cases, excerpts from books and longer articles. Each section is preceded by a useful summary and a critique of the ensuing articles. Topics covered include newsworthiness, objectivity, the virtues of a journalist, free speech, privacy, and political power and the press. Some 'articles' are excerpts from 'classic' authors such as Lippmann and Mill, and many are somewhat dated.

Cohen's collection is a mixed bag of philosophical articles. Some are, or were, genuine contributions to philosophical understanding. However, many articles are of limited use to aspiring journalists, because they tend to insufficiently integrate day-to-day journalistic experiences into the philosophy presented. This problem is analogous to that facing the textbooks based on case studies, described above.

But there are some good philosophical discussions in Cohen's collection. Parent's article offers a philosophical definition of privacy and seeks to defend it. Having a workable definition of this type is a necessary precursor to setting the proper limits of journalistic intrusion. While persuasive in some respects, the definition confronts at least one specific difficulty. Parent claims:

Privacy is the condition of not having undocumented personal knowledge about one possessed by others. ... (Personal knowledge ... consists of facts about a person which most individuals in a given society at a given time do not want widely known about themselves (p. 92).
A problem with this definition is that personal knowledge and, therefore, privacy, is completely relativised to what people in a particular society, at a particular time, are prepared to disclose about themselves. Accordingly, if, in some society, everyone is prepared to disclose everything about themselves to everyone else, then they are still, on this definition, in a condition of privacy. They are surely not in a condition of privacy. Rather, they have chosen to abandon such a condition.

More generally, Parent's definition fails to sufficiently accommodate the differentiated nature of privacy. Privacy can exist for an individual, or for two people in an intimate relationship, or even for a group such as a family. Her account also lacks the power to deeply illuminate the contrasting notion to privacy, namely, publicity. This shortcoming is a significant drawback for the reader interested in communication ethics. The implication of the new computer-based communication technologies for the public/private dichotomy is central to contemporary communication ethics.

Some of the excerpts in Cohen's collection could have been better selected. For example, the excerpt by Klaidman and Beauchamp is not a strong piece. There are much better parts of their book to choose from, such as their discussion of bias. This is a very good philosophical discussion of an everyday concept in journalism. They argue that 'bias is a distorted and unfair judgment or disposition caused by the values or a reporter, editor or institution' (p. 61). This definition enables them to avoid many of the pitfalls surrounding this concept. They can distinguish the concept of bias from the (related) concept of lack of objectivity, from value-ladenness, and from ideology-ladenness.

Democracy and the Mass Media, edited by Lichtenberg, is a substantial and wide-ranging collection. It deals with policy questions and the more philosophical questions that arise at the interface of democratic government and the institution of the mass media in the USA. Much of the book is not, strictly speaking, relevant to our purposes here, since it is not specifically concerned with issues in communication ethics. There are, however, a number of discussions which are highly relevant and of a very high quality. I will concern myself only with the article on the foundations of press freedom, written by Lichtenberg herself.

Lichtenberg argues convincingly — and against a whole tradition of philosophical journalism, including Jefferson and Merrill — that freedom of the press must be sharply distinguished from freedom of speech, and that freedom of the press is merely an instrumental good, and one derived (in part) from a non-instrumental foundational good, namely, freedom of speech. Accordingly, there is no fundamental right to publish. Rather, according to Lichtenberg, the right to publish is really a disguised property right. But, in general, property rights are overridden by the right to free speech. Lichtenberg goes on to argue that rights to
publish should be respected only in so far as they promote free speech. Here she understands freedom of speech as existing when there is no interference with attempts by individuals to communicate, and when there is 'a multiplicity of voices'.

The implications of these important arguments are clear. Kerry Packer's or Rupert Murdoch's right to publish ought to be respected only in so far as their media organisations assist in the promotion of freedom of speech. Analyses of these organisations suggest that their stranglehold on public communication is far from enhancing the optimum level of freedom of speech, including an optimum number of 'voices'.

While I endorse the general drift of Lichtenberg's argument, I have one criticism. She does not sufficiently distinguish between the publisher or proprietor, on the one hand, and the journalist on the other. There is an important role for the journalist and, perhaps, editor as a communicator and investigator relatively independent of both the public and of the proprietor. This role is insufficiently attended to by Lichtenberg. I accept that this role is ultimately derivative; it should exist only in so far as it contributes to freedom of speech and the multiplicity of voices. However, Lichtenberg understates the distinctiveness of this role, and the autonomy it requires if it is to be performed adequately. Journalists are not just other voices, or mouthpieces for voices; ideally they have investigative capacities and distinctive perspectives, from which modern communities can greatly benefit. It follows that they require an autonomy and an array of privileges not necessarily available to all citizens.

Finally, I will consider Kerry Stokes's useful intervention in current debates in communication ethics in Australia. In his 1994 Boyer Lectures, Stokes makes a number of sensible recommendations. For example, he suggests that the way to avoid intrusive journalism, without jeopardising freedom of the press, is to relax defamation laws, legislate for a right to privacy, and put in place an independent system of accountability for journalistic misconduct.

Stokes's larger thesis concerns globalisation and the new communication technologies. He draws attention to the apparent discrepancy between the cost of the proposed superhighway and the reality of the benefits it is likely to produce. While we are being swept up in a wave of enthusiasm for this 'miracle' of technology and its ability to 'change our lives forever', Stokes brings us back to earth. It will cost ten billion dollars to provide more channels, video on demand, video telephone, and home shopping. The superhighway will also provide access to a wide array of databases, but such access is already - or soon will be - available to professionals and students. Given the inadequacy of current TV and video fare, Stokes suggests, this revolution is looking more like a confidence trick by the media and commercial technology interests than a miracle for ordinary Australians.
Stokes also emphasises the dangers of these developments. There is the further threat to press freedom posed by this new technology, given the existing concentration of media power in the hands of national and, especially, international media conglomerates. According to Stokes, 'no federal government has ever had the guts to make the hard decisions for the long term national good that would ensure a free, a more diverse and an Australian owned press' (p. 29). But the principal danger, as Stokes sees it, is that Australia may 'become swamped and our own culture eroded by the avalanche of material from other countries, particularly the United States' (p. 3).

While I accept the spirit of Stokes's claims, I would put things somewhat differently. In the first place, the principal danger is that we become swamped by an avalanche of low grade junk; whether it emanates from the USA or is homegrown seems, to me, to make little difference. Secondly, and relatedly, there is an assumption implicit in Stokes's argument that our culture is something we develop by ourselves, and which we must preserve in all its details. This is naive. Much of what is best in our culture has been imported. For example, our political institutions and values, including freedom of the press, are ultimately borrowed from Anglo-Saxon culture. Furthermore, cultural development is not achieved simply by avoiding destruction by forces within or without – though it is necessary to avoid such destruction, as the recent history of the indigenous people in this country decisively demonstrates. It is also a matter of, as Aristotle would put it, aiming at the good. We have to make judgments about what kinds of program content are worthwhile and what are not, what institutional arrangements are beneficial and what are not. Nevertheless, Stokes's book is a useful and timely contribution to the process of arriving at these judgments.