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❖ **Craig, David A. - Excellence in Online Journalism: Exploring Current Practices in an Evolving Environment, Sage Publications, 2011, (180pp) ISBN: 052285866X, 9781412970099**

Reviewed by Michael Mullins — Editor of eurekastreet.com.au

Now that much journalism is online, its goalposts have shifted. How does that change the nature of journalistic excellence? In some ways, not much at all. Traditional journalistic virtues such as integrity, fairness, balance and accuracy remain. But there is a set of new qualities that online journalists need to consider in their quest for excellence.

David A. Craig of the University of Oklahoma boils these down to the four elements that are the focus of this book's discussion. They include: speed and accuracy with depth in breaking news, comprehensiveness in content, open ended-ness in story development, and centrality of conversation. He looks at these goals through the eyes of working journalists in the United States, and also what he calls an "ethical lens", specifically the theory of excellence of Notre Dame philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and the ideas of two scholars who have applied his work to journalism.

A central aspect of MacIntyre's thought is the big-picture goal of the *telos*, which comes to us from the ancient Greeks. Aristotle's happiness or "flourishing" is the primary good for humans. It is described in more contemporary language as "maxing out" as a human being', and it can readily be applied to journalism's role in democracy. Contained within the big picture is a set of what Craig calls "internal goods." These are not specific to online journalism but the new medium gives them further possibility. For example, the good of journalistic inquiry now includes interaction with the end users. This offers the potential to uncover a greater depth and breadth of knowledge.

The first part of the book may focus on ideals, but Craig is mindful of the commercial realities in which much journalism is operating. MacIntyre was wary of institutions and warned that "the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution." Acquisitiveness refers to the increasingly fraught pursuit of profitability. All being well, this makes it feasible for media companies to give reporters time to undertake in-depth journalism. Craig ends his ethics chapter with the truism that journalists' individual pursuit of excellence "is constrained by the limitations of the institutions in which they work." Because few companies have been able to persuade consumers to pay for online journalism, it follows that the new medium's adverse effect on profitability is a threat to the tradition of excellence in journalism.

But conversely Craig claims that the online environment provides new opportunities for excellence in that it "recasts the idea of what excellent journalism means." For example, in his discussion of breaking news, he argues that online writers and editors work quickly to produce multiple stories in multiple forms and invariably achieve a more nuanced result. He gives the example of the *New York Times'* coverage of the 2009 Hudson River jet landing. The paper's effort combined rapid writing in the tradition of wire services with live blogging, multimedia elements and visual and text contributions from readers. As a result, it reflected a standard of excellence rooted in the best of old practices but embodying a new and distinctive combination of rapid accuracy and detail that did not appear in old media (p 36).

The book itself takes a multi-layered approach, building its chapters on practice around profiles and perspectives of working journalists. These include Robert Quigley, social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*. Quigley was given an evangelical role in the paper's newsroom and was charged with spreading the word among his colleagues about the what new medium offers and what they should watch out for. Journalism was now a two-way street, and editors had to exercise careful judgment to separate speculation from fact when they published information submitted by users. In describing his use of social media sites to source news on the developing story of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting rampage, he said that much of what he came across was unsubstantiated rumour and speculation, and that as a result the newspaper had its work cut out.

People turn to the *Statesman* to tell them what's really happening, so I work hard to be sure that what I'm telling them is properly attributed and true to the best of our knowledge (p 112).

The book's weak point is that its discussion of independent and community journalism is an afterthought and compressed into a single chapter before the conclusion. This is despite Craig's assertion that "some of the most interesting news and conversation about issues is coming from outside the big outlets, and the big ones are not always the fastest to innovate" (p

143).

Unfortunately this chapter also goes to the other extreme and focuses on very small publications such as the self-styled one-person operation QuincyNews.org. It is titled "Beyond the Big Guys", however it deals only with the "small guys." There's no mention of those in between such as the dedicated online outlets that, in many readers' minds, set the standard for excellence in online journalism in the United States. These include *Salon*, *Slate* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *ProPublica*.

Craig explains in the introduction that he has elected to focus on the work of the four news organisations msnbc.com, washingtonpost.com, WSJ.com and NYTimes.com. He says that these four are among the largest web news organisations in staffing and audience but then asserts that these outlets "don't have a monopoly on good work", and that some of the best work has flowed from others including independent operations. It is a puzzle and a pity that the body of his otherwise worthwhile study, overlooks this work.

**About the Reviewer**

Michael Mullins has been editor of eurekastreet.com.au since 2006, when he transformed the established Melbourne-based print review of public affairs, the arts and theology to an online only publication. He is also a postgraduate student in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. Previously he founded the CathNews news aggregation website for the Catholic Church in Australia and worked in religious and network programming for ABC Radio in Sydney.