



## BOOK REVIEWS:

### Profiles in Ethics Proffer Insights into Courage

Review by Pam Parry

Tom Cooper, *Doing the Right Thing: Twelve Portraits in Moral Courage* (Paperback and Electronic Versions). Abrams, August 11, 2020. ISBN-10: 184549766X or ISBN-13: 978-1-84549-766-8.

Similar to JFK's *Profiles in Courage*, this case study book focuses on eight men and four women who transformed the world by making ethical decisions in the face of seemingly impossible options. They were not selected necessarily because they displayed sterling character in all situations, but in the face of at least one significant ethical dilemma, they triumphed. As a result, they made the world a better place.

The 302-page paperback focuses on John F. Kennedy, Queen Esther, Socrates, John Adams, William Wilberforce, Marie Curie, Mohandas Gandhi, Harry Truman, Rachel Carson, Edward R. Murrow, Nelson Mandela, and Malala Yousafzai as a lens in ethical decision-making. One criticism of the book could be who was left off this list and how these particular people made the cut. But the author anticipated this potential critique by acknowledging other historical figures could have been profiled and encouraging the readers to think about who they would choose and why. He uses this arguable point of who should be profiled as a means of getting the readers to think critically for themselves. He provides ten components of making an ethical choice and uses them to illuminate each case study.

In the Preface, Clifford G. Christians of the University of Illinois promises readers that they are about to embark on a special journey: "This profound book teaches moral philosophy with ingenuity," adding that it "has the promise of becoming a twenty-first century classic" (p. vii). That laudatory comment could set readers up for disappointment if it failed to deliver.

But it did not do so.

*Doing the Right Thing* examines morality and ethical choices in a fresh light with excellent writing and a new approach to ethical thinking. The book, which Cooper describes as "a story of stories," will be of keen interest to mass media educators who may want to adopt it in their ethics courses (p. 4). The chapter about Murrow's courageous decision to take on Senator Joseph McCarthy will interest them in particular. Also, this book, replete with great storytelling, is the sort of content mass media professors love. But more than the twelve profiles, Cooper provides a method for examining other ethical situations that are applicable today. Mass media students could greatly benefit from learning the decision-making processes of these remarkable people. "Ethical decision-making may be challenging, but it can also be fascinating, engaging, and fun," the author writes. "To my view, what is most important is to keep an open door, an open heart, and an open mind" (p. 15).

The strengths of the book are the obvious expertise and ethics experience of its author, who makes the text challenging to other experts while simultaneously making the material accessible to less seasoned readers. This is an unusual text because a talented teacher could use it to challenge undergraduate students while provoking graduate students to dig deeper in their ethical approaches to decision-making. It accurately and effectively hits both targets.

This excellent tome sheds new light on how ethical decisions can be transformative by showing how

12 remarkable people have done so, providing a road map for how people today can replicate their choices through an ethical process.

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## Insider unravels social media ills

Review by Marti Maguire

Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health* (Hardcover, Paperback, Ebook and Audio Versions). Currency, September 15, 2020. ISBN: 97805525574514

In a *Pearls Before Swine* cartoon strip, a man rubs a lamp and asks the genie for “a wonderful world where people of all creeds and nationalities can share ideas and communicate freely.” The genie creates social media, and the man recoils as the genie explains that his invention allows everyone to say what they want, while no one knows what is true and everyone is confused and angry.

The strip could serve as the TL/DR (Internet shorthand or social media acronym for Too Long; Didn't Read) for Sinan Aral's *The Hype Machine*, which delivers a comprehensive breakdown of the ills social networks have wrought on society. There is ample discussion on the well-known threats caused by misinformation, including a detailed analysis of the Russian election interference. But Aral is at his strongest when he explains how the large-scale personalization made possible by social media fosters these types of efforts. In Aral's telling, the “Hype Machine” is formed when social networks (Facebook, Twitter) use machine intelligence (feed algorithms) in the always-on environment created by smartphones to radically change the way we produce and consume information – ultimately changing human behavior, and necessarily, humankind.

It's a big claim, but one that Aral, who heads the Social Analytics Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, makes plausible through vivid, clearly explained examples. He tackles everything from online restaurant reviews to social inequality to exercise apps – with frequent returns to elections issues – to show how human thoughts and behavior are warped as they make their way through the Hype Machine. Think the internet can marshal collective intelligence? Not

when the Hype Machine undermines it by magnifying polarization. What about the diversity of ideas on social media? Not when the algorithms favor serving us up emotional and shocking content.

Aral is both insider and critic. He's worked in partnership with companies such as Facebook and Twitter, but he's not afraid to call out missed opportunities to improve the information ecosystem they largely – if inadvertently – control. He thankfully describes a number of concrete ways to ameliorate the problems he describes, even if his modest proposals hardly seem up to the task. As a professor, I found the book provided a compelling big-picture view of our current information landscape; I often find myself mining its trove of anecdotes to help my students envision the magnitude of societal change brought on by social media.

Among the drawbacks of a book like this is that it is necessarily out of date the moment it is released. Aral tried to wedge in the most recent developments, including information surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, but it's clear that we'll have to wait for his next book to understand the most current model of the constantly evolving Hype Machine.

In the comic strip, the man who wished social media into existence yells “Back in the Bottle!” Short of that, Aral's book provides a helpful roadmap to an uncertain future.

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# Challenging Biases and Varying Perspectives

Review by Charlotte Graham-McLay

Rachele Kanigel, editor, *The Diversity Style Guide* (Hardcover, Paperback and Electronic Versions). Wiley-Blackwell, January 2019. ISBN: 978-1-119-05515-0.

“Things will not change unless people get in touch with us or complain,” [said one news boss](#) addressing an audience question about racist media content. “Otherwise we’ll keep doing dumb things, ignorant things, until such time that we’re told that what we’re doing is ignorant or dumb.”

Such a view underscores the need for a book – not only for journalism students but for newsrooms and all who work in or run them – like *The Diversity Style Guide*, edited by Rachele Kanigel, the chair of the journalism department at San Francisco State University. Rejecting the idea that reporters should expect marginalized communities to do the work of challenging their assumptions and errors about race, sexuality, immigration, gender, and other matters, Kanigel’s book offers a clear and – on face, at least – straight-forward set of suggestions for how newsrooms can challenge their biases and vary their perspectives, and why it is so critical that they do.

From questioning assumptions to seeking out those of different viewpoints and challenging organizational style guides, the book offers enough practical advice for even the most junior reporters. The larger question, perhaps, is whether the conversations Kanigel urges are happening in the highest echelons of news leadership as well. News content that more accurately reflects our world and the lives of diverse communities can only come from diversifying newsrooms, Kanigel argues, and that is a more difficult quest than individual reporters improving their practice.

The Guide began life as, and remains, [an up-to-date website](#) of “more than 700 terms related to race/ethnicity, disability, immigration, sexuality and gender identity, drugs and alcohol, and geography,” and as language evolves and adapts, advice will change.

At first glance that makes Kanigel’s decision to commit the work to book form a curious one: What happens when it is out of date? Certainly, a chapter about Asian Americans, which focuses on the “model minority myth” feels distant when refracted through the lens of COVID-19 and the racism against Asians

worldwide over the past year.

But the book is a more than a mere (though useful) glossary of terms. With chapters devoted to different groups that have been traditionally marginalized or discriminated against in the news, Kanigel and her co-authors examine why such coverage occurs, how it is harmful, and what can be done to prevent it in future.

Part of the challenge – which Kanigel only touches on – is the way that using accurate and sensitive language has been framed in recent years as “political correctness” rather than as rectifying historical inequalities. Kanigel decries the “snide” use of the phrase to equate, essentially, to liberal political views. But the book’s tone remains moderate. A discussion of invisible biases also proves useful for those who have not examined themselves in such a way.

But with even basic teaching about racism in schools becoming a rallying cry against a perceived liberalism, and with everything from Dr. Seuss books to Mr. Potato Head toys becoming politically contested objects, journalism schools and newsrooms will increasingly face a more difficult task than this book outlines in convincing some aspects of their audience that anti-racism and anti-discrimination work throughout their coverage is a matter of humanity, fairness, and even accuracy – not one of politics.

Kanigel does emphasize that while language is political and laden with baggage, a news media that reflect our real societies and communities is about more than using the right words. In this, the book is likely to have a helpful and broad appeal – although advocates for the communities discussed might feel it does not go far enough in its language about pervasive institutional racism that remains in pockets throughout the media.

Each chapter contain activities, discussion questions, and further readings that should be explored fully. Rather than a book to be assigned as at-home reading, or consigned to a “diversity” section of the journalism education curriculum, it is one that de-

serves to be woven through every aspect of what students learn.

While some chapters will not be relevant in every country, the book is still a useful tool in concert with local materials, as the first principles driving individual topics ring true even from the opposite side of the world, where newsrooms and journalism schools are fairly white. It would be a shame if the book was only read by students; any working reporters who have not had this reckoning with their own work should consider the challenges presented in it as long overdue.

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