

Voice of the Voiceless

Investigative Photojournalism

Professor David Robie

‘The Pacific Islands have long been a refuge,’ wrote celebrated Vanuatu-based investigative photojournalist Ben Bohane in the introduction to his extraordinary 2013 collection *The Black Islands*, ‘for eccentric foreigners and castaways too, who often fell into one (or several) of these categories: mercenary, missionary or misfit.’ Adding to his message of how the region was a magnet for mystics and mayhem, he wrote:

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through these shimmering islands, perhaps I am a crude mix of all of the above. I was drawn to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of its conflicts were largely unreported. There were family connections too.

So beginning in 1994, I ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomon and coups in Fiji ... (Bohane, 2013)

Ben began his long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal (and thus the Pacific Media Centre) with an illustrated investigative article in 2001 about the complex divided loyalties within the Fiji military

following the George Speight attempted coup debacle in May 2000. He characterised the crux of the divide to be between the ‘professional’ soldiers, typified by then Commander Voreqe Bainimarama (later coup leader and ultimately elected prime minister), who believed the military should stay out of politics, and the ‘politicals’, who sought to ensure the supremacy of indigenous Fijian rights.

He followed this up with two powerfully evocative portfolios of photographs published in 2006 (Dean & Bohane) and 2014 (Bohane) editions of the journal. In the former, Ben featured some of his photos from the Bougainville war, which started in 1989 in response to an environmental crisis over Panguna copper mine; a troop deployment of Australian troops (and other Pacific forces, including from Fiji and New Zealand); the controversial arrival of 43 West Papuan refugees in 2006 and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the Solomon Islands the same year.

Bec Dean, curator of Ben’s original Black Islands exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, noted that the photographer’s long-standing journalistic focus in the region had been to explore the connections between *kastom* and resistance movements. As she described it, *kastom* is a broad term ‘derived from the Tok Pisin (Melanesian pidgin) for “custom” used to

describe dynamic new religious movements with a traditional and spiritual base’. As Ben himself described it:

As an Australian, resident in Vanuatu, I see myself as a Pacific islander and reject the grandiose claims of Australia being a ‘continent’. I believe that this notion has blinded Australians to the reality that we remain forever linked to other Pacific islands through the blood and songlines of our indigenous people and our historical and military legacy in the region.

Another influential photographer, this time in Aotearoa New Zealand, has also had a long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* and the Pacific Media Centre with his trajectory of civil rights, anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear, social justice, political transformation and indigenous struggle. John Miller (Ngapuhi) received a Media Peace Prize Lifetime Award in 2003 for his contribution to the struggle for peace as a ‘sympathetic observer’. Recently his enormous archive—and he has a prodigious memory—on events such as the Springbok tour of 1981, the hikoi (Māori Land March), Waitangi protests and the 2006 *tangi* of the Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Atiangikaahu has been developed into an iconic collection. He has been a frequent guest lecturer for the Pacific Media Centre, and was one of the recipients of the first centre research grants in 2007 which

led to the photoessay ‘Seeing the wood for the trees—Ngatihine’ published in 2011.

The first Nga Tamatoa protest at Waitangi in 1971 launched a new era of assertiveness in the struggle for Māori Treaty, land, and cultural rights. Such events as the Māori Land March (1975) and the occupations at Bastion Point and Raglan (1978) received prominent treatment in mainstream media of the day, noted *Pacific Journalism Review*. However, how well equipped were the then predominantly monocultural news organisations in understanding underlying issues behind such protests? John sought some answers:

My own interest in issues of media coverage comes from an involvement in a complex legal dispute over a Māori-owned land block 35 years ago, during which I had much contact with journalists of the day, at a time when the media landscape was much less ethnically diverse. Of the 41 or so ‘mainstream’ journalists I had varying contact with over a 24 month period from 1976 to 1978, 36 were Pākehā, three were Māori (one of these a trainee) and two were Samoan. I was effectively presenting a minority culture issue to media workers overwhelmingly of the majority culture. I discovered that the subject was virtually unknown territory to these journalists. This was certainly a ‘blind spot’ issue. (Miller, 2011)

Social psychologist Emily Pronin first coined the term in research relating to the bias blind spot in 2002. While the research was primarily about the bias of the average person (85 percent of a sample of 600 people considered that they were less biased than the average American), it has a particular applicability to news media too. Situations abound where editors and news directors fail to provide coverage or analysis of issues and thus creating blind spots for their audience. Marginalisation by mainstream news media in New Zealand of the West Papua human rights crisis is an obvious example of this.

My own work has certainly focused on media blind spots and human rights, which has led to photographic exhibitions in Kenya (a social justice portrayal of Madagascar), Auckland ('Faces of Africa' and 'Nuclear Exodus: The Rongelap Evacuation', later turned into a video broadcast on *Tagata Pasifika*) and Wellington, and books including *Eyes of Fire* (1986), *Blood on their Banner* (1989), *Mekim Nius* (2004) and *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (2014).

In the past decade, the Pacific Media Centre, especially through its publications, *Pacific Journalism Review*, *Pacific Journalism Monographs* and books, has sought to challenge blind spots, and offer a voice for the voiceless. Journalism schools prioritise journalists as detached observers, keeping their distance.

However, we need to examine our media role more closely and more critically. Does our journalism perpetuate human rights violations or conflict, or does it contribute to restoring peace and justice?

Nepali Times editor-in-chief and publisher Kunda Dixit, is the author of *Dateline Earth*, a critique of Western mainstream media and the control of news by multinational corporations reflecting the interests and preoccupations of industrialised countries. The original edition of this book (in 1996) was essentially before the rise of the internet and social media networking: 'News was whatever happened in the US, Western Europe, Australia, and the periphery wasn't deemed to be important.' When the revised edition emerged in 2011, says Dixit, the mediascape wasn't any better; corporate media control still persisted in the internet age, although by now it was also struggling to maintain a successful business model.

However, with the cybernet revolution, believes Kunda, photojournalism, especially of an investigative edge, is enjoying a resurgence. Kunda was keynote speaker at a 2011 'Investigative Journalism and Technology' conference at Auckland University of Technology, which later provided an incentive for the founding of New Zealand's Centre for Investigative Journalism. His inspirational exhibition of 'peace photographs' by a range

of photographers featuring the 10-year Maoist civil war in his country created quite a stir. Some of the images, including the cover of this book, are featured in this collection and were drawn from his trilogy *The People War*. I wrote in a review about the influence of his works:

Dixit's prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a normative. Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. (Robie, 2009, p. 230)

Many staff, students and volunteers affiliated with the Pacific Media Centre have achieved outstanding results in investigative photojournalism and documentary work, including Karen Abplanalp (2012), whose investigative feature 'Blood Money' in *Metro* magazine, forced the NZ Superannuation Fund (NZSF), which has an ethical investment policy, to withdraw from the American and Indonesian-owned Freeport copper and gold mine at Grasberg in West Papua. This feature won several investigative journalism awards. Del Abcede has chronicled the personalities, cultural diversity and initiatives of the centre for the past decade with empathy, depth and

passion. Film maker Jim Marbrook's feature-length documentary *Cap Bocage* on a New Caledonian environmental saga began its genesis with a small—and inaugural—seed grant from the PMC in 2007 (Marbrook, 2015). His initiative created the impetus for this book and he has inspired a documentary dimension to the Pacific Media Centre's work through Te Ara Motuhenga.

News media ought to be vigilant in countering elected despots who use their mandate to destroy the very institutions that allowed them to be voted into power in the first place, argues Kunda Dixit. When he spoke in Auckland six years ago, he issued a challenge which is just as valid today:

Let's work on a paradigm shift in the way we in the media approach stories. We should strive to cover deprivation and the causes of social injustice, not just its effect. It means each of us having a conscience and using it—by striving to be fair in an unfair world. (Dixit, 2011).

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