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Exposing reality about the mythic 'age of truth'

Myth of 'Free Media' and Fake News in the Post-truth Era, by Kalinga Seneviratne. New Delhi, India: Sage. 2020, 348 pages. ISBN 9789353881276

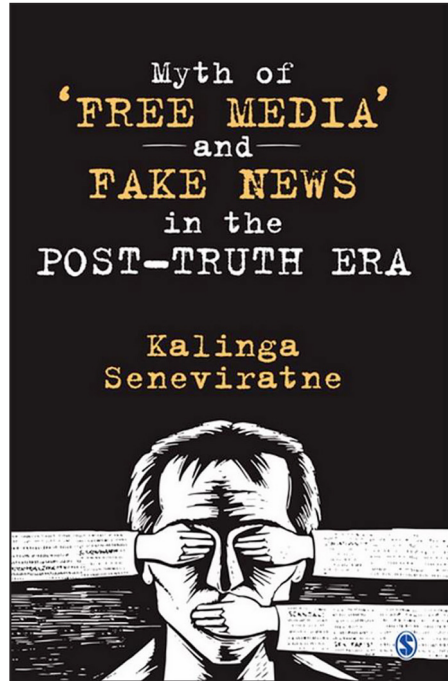
Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development: Perspectives from Asia, edited by Kalinga Seneviratne. New Delhi, India: Sage: 2018, 353 pages. ISBN 9789352805518

POST-TRUTH? Was there ever really such a thing as the Golden Age of Truth as trumpeted by the liberal Western press? According to Kalinga Seneviratne in his latest challenging book, quite simply 'no'.

In some countries, such as New Zealand, fake news and the manipulation of half-truths and disinformation has been dismissed as a by-product of the Trump era in the White House and the Brexit debacle.

Writing as early as the end of March 2020, when New Zealand had introduced its initial successful lockdown in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, lawyer and blogger Liz Gordon highlighted British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's 'stressed' look when he contracted the coronavirus, the first national leader to do so.

If I had substituted 'virus' instead of



'stress', I would have been bang on. And jolly good, too—he deserves it for all his jolly posturing and manic hand-shaking. What do you mean that's a little harsh? Come on—you think so too. Trump needs to get it too. He is so narcissistic that he will only take it seriously when he has experienced it. Get the virus to acknowledge the truth of what is going on. (Gordon, 2020)

The problem is that Trump *did* get it. And he *didn't* acknowledge the seriousness. 'I feel powerful,' he crowed after his 10-day 'illness' as his COVID-19 disinformation continued unabated in denial of the almost eight million cases and more than 216,000 deaths in the US.

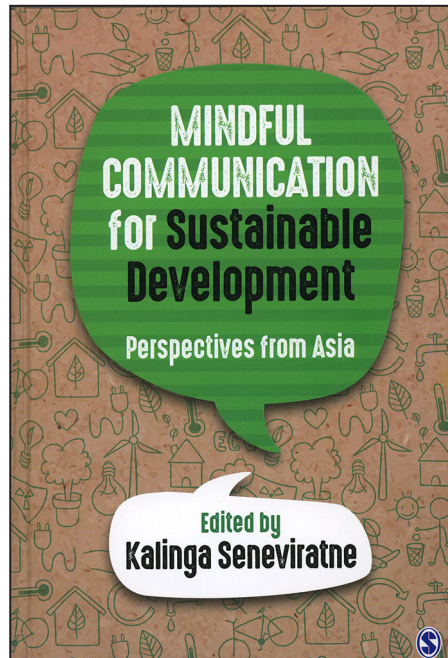
In this book, *Myth of 'Free Media'*, Seneviratne stresses that the distrust of mainstream media, especially Western

television, the reporting of wars, natural and human-induced disasters and the glaring global gaps between the haves and the have-nots, actually began long before the Trump-Brexit era and with Pope Francis branding the spreading of fake news as a ‘sin.’

While Seneviratne unsurprisingly parallels Herman and Chomsky (1988) and their dismissal of any mythic ‘age of truth’ in their classic propaganda model, he squarely lays the blame for the origins of the current ‘fake news’ notion on the Western media’s reporting of the 2003 Iraq War, especially by mainstream outlets in the US, when Washington and London deployed discredited and false information about Saddam Hussein’s ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ to justify the invasion and destruction of a nation. Since then, the lie-fuelled War on Terror has laid a wasteland in several countries such as Afghanistan, Libya and Syria and left virtually nothing positive to show for the devastation.

The disinformation and fake news has continued with the US-led smearing of Iran and the Palestinian cause for peace and justice, when any serious research of the issues demonstrates that the brutal and callous war waged by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates on the Yemeni people is a far greater threat to Middle East peace.

The list of global lies and hypocrisy goes on. Closer to home we had 24 years of Indonesian colonial occupation of Timor-Leste before the tiny nation finally regained independence in 2002. West Papua currently faces a similar



struggle, shunned and unreported by the New Zealand mainstream media.

Seneviratne, a Sinhalese journalist who was for many years lead researcher for the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), previously based in Singapore and now in Manila, devotes much of this book to critiquing the subjective coverage of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009.

Overall, the book is a must for journalists and media educators. However, at the exorbitant prices of \$80 (paperback) or \$108 (hardcover), it is largely out of reach of the average journalist or media academic except through libraries.

SENEVIRATNE’S arguments in favour of a ‘mindful journalism’ were explored in an earlier volume he edited two years ago, *Mindful Communication*

for Sustainable Development (2018), a sort of antidote to Western liberal media orthodoxy. Divided into five sections devoted to Philosophical Perspectives, Training for Mindful Thinking, Mindful Communication and Sustainable Development, Applying Traditional Practices, and Mindful Communication and Contemporary Media, this book draws on the combined wisdom of 25 Asian scholars from many global locations.

However, the book also warns of the dangers of ‘practising mindfulness’ in communication—especially in the West—without its ‘spiritual and ethical leanings.’ While the book presents a new paradigm of teaching innovative ideas about teaching in fields such as digital communication, and reporting on economic, environmental, and developmental issues, the focus is on ‘human-centred journalism.’ For myself, I found this approach has many parallels to ‘human rights journalism’ that I have taught for many years, especially in the Pacific.

Some of the chapter titles give good insights into the breadth and scope of this book, such as ‘A Japanese path to mindful communication: understanding the silence of the Japanese,’ ‘Practising mindful communication in a multicultural society: case study of Malaysian news reporting’ and ‘Philippines: Beyond the body count—mindful journalism and the human-centric approach to reporting the drug war.’

Seneviratne ties all these strands together in his concluding chapter where he argues: ‘What Asia needs today is a new journalism for an emerging

Asia that is able to rid Asians of this hangover of cultural imperialism and critically examine and assess itself as well as the outside world, especially the news and information coming from the West’ (p. 338).

What is next on the busy publishing agenda for Seneviratne? He has gathered another group of colleagues, this time to tackle the issue of COVID-19, racism and politicisation. Watch this space for early next year.

References

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