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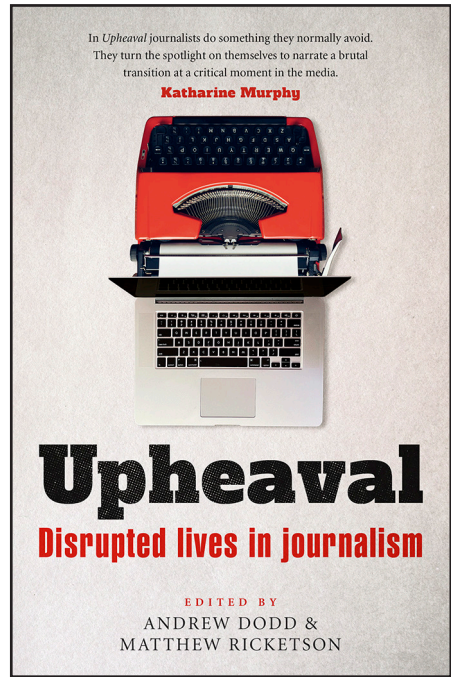
# Tears flow as redundancy stories spell end to journalism's heyday

*Upheaval: Disrupted Lives in Journalism*, edited by Andrew Dodd and Matthew Ricketson. Sydney: UNSW Press. 2021. 368 pages, ISBN 9781742237275

**I** DOUBT there is anyone who has worked—or currently works—in journalism that would not have tears rolling down their cheeks as they read the stories of redundancy within Australia's faltering news industry in this carefully edited collection.

That's not to say that *Upheaval: Disrupted Lives in Journalism* doesn't also provoke laugh-out-loud moments at memories of newsroom antics or angry agreement about bullying, misogyny and blatant gender discrimination, but there is no getting around the fact that the central point of this book is tell the stories of the human impact of the brutal gutting of Australia's media.

To be honest, *Upheaval* almost needs a mental health warning—particularly the three chapters, 'Should I stay or should I go now?', 'Mate, this



gives me absolutely no pleasure, but ...' and 'The walk to the lift: last days at work'. These chapters reinforce what we all know—organisations can be calm, considerate and compassionate when telling someone they no longer have a job, or they can be cruel. And, in that, there are very few news organisations in Australia that have been better than others.

Many readers of a particular generation are likely to open this book straight to the index, to check their own name isn't there and then to note the sheer number of journos they know who have been forced out or accepted redundancy. Each story is devastating, even when someone recounts their decision to go voluntarily.

There are three featured interviews with Amanda Meade, David Maher and

Flip Prior that provide some light against the heavy themes of other chapters. But, throughout, there are snippets of personal stories of journalists around Australia discussing their first bylines, errors, the thrill of the chase and what drew them to the profession in the first place:

The range of impulses and motivations that bring people to journalism is wide from idealising heroic role models to parlaying a love of writing into a career; and from being introduced to media at home, to serendipitous events. Some just knew from an early age that journalism was all they wanted to do, while others strayed into it without even meaning to, and yet others decided to give it a go for want of any clear idea about a career. (p. 27)

It is in many ways a survivor's tale—because those who are featured are those who were strong enough to be interviewed, to tell their story, without slinking off into the shadows. There are stories of excellent, award-winning journalists—such as Veronica Ridge and Michael West—who have created successful journalism businesses on the back of the skills learned in a newsroom and others who have used their skills in entirely new ways.

Perhaps the journos who agreed to be interviewed did so because they believe the work of journalism mattered, because it shaped them, as Dodd and Ricketson noted:

It wasn't always fun, and it wasn't without its frustrations, but it was usually interesting, often exhilarating, and it certainly defined them as people. (p. 277)

*Upheaval* has a strong sense of cohesion, which is clearly the result of the efforts of editors Dodd and Ricketson—who have overseen 18 chapters themselves—as well as Laurie Zion, Penny O'Donnell, Merryn Sherwood, Brad Buller and Timothy Marjoribanks from their work in the New Beats project. New Beats conducted whole-of-life interviews with 60 journalists who had taken redundancy. Their work was for an academic project that involved the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the National Library of Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

This is an important book for a number of reasons. Specifically, it captures a particular time in journalism, mostly between the 1980s and 2010s. As Dodd and Ricketson note, many of the interviewees come from the last generation of reporters trained in analogue media:

They used typewriters and knew about compositing and how to splice audio edits on quarter inch tape. They worked alongside copy kids in highly structured hierarchical newsrooms, where sub-editors wrote headlines and reporters didn't dare take photographs. They saw Saturday editions thick with classified ads and had travel budgets they were encouraged to spend. Some even worked where public relations operatives didn't block their access and politicians hadn't yet been media trained to say nothing. Their stories might just be a testament to journalism's heyday. (p. 277)

If there is a criticism of this book, it is that it could have been much longer and spent more time talking about commercial television and radio. It could have called out the ABC redundancies for being of an entirely different nature to those in commercial entities, which were forced by the decline in advertising revenue and an uptake in social media. There is a clear nexus between the loss of advertising revenue and job losses in newspapers, but a lack of real discussion about the failure of those, particularly in the print industry, to acknowledge the coming tsunami and the tendency of some parts of the media to turn upon the national broadcaster, as if to bring down the ABC would somehow save them.

There is also much more to be said about the loss of journalism to particular communities, especially regional and suburban ones, as well as the loss of senior journalists to guide newcomers. After all, newsrooms were a wonderful training ground, as David Marr recalled:

They were these crazy universities full of experts on the strangest things, people with real understanding and experience of things that mattered, places where you could ask anybody anything, though you might get your head bitten off if you interrupted someone on deadline. (p. 164)

Pollyanna readers are likely to demand a sequel that proposes a solution to the decline of newsrooms. There is an attempt to do that in several chapters, with some sugges-

tions about the role of the modern university in preparing journalists for life without a newsroom, specifically the idea that young graduates can be part of reinventing journalism. It is certain that a new generation of journalist wants to do things differently, as Antoinette Lattouf noted:

So many of the successful journos that I know, all the foreign corres have such screwed up personal lives. They're alcoholics, they're into their eighth wife. They have four children (from five marriages). You know, in five different continents. And that was something that really stuck with me. I could easily become a 42-year-old, six-time Walkley-award winning single lady. Or I could marry my husband and carve out a different journalistic career. (pp. 149-150).

Back in 2013, I wrote in a review of another book that we needed to save journalism, not newspapers (Wake, 2013). Although I loved every moment of my time in newspapers, *Upheaval* does not make me want to go back to the smoke-filled newsroom of my youth. *Upheaval* records some of the very worst bits of newsrooms processes, from deceptive death knocks to hard-as-nails bosses who would ask you to pretty much do anything to get the story. However, it does make me want to continue the fight to save quality journalism. Journalism remains important for every one of us, in every community. As Di Thomas from *The Border Mail* said:

The power of good journalism remains the power to hold officialdom to account and to address things like mental health issues, institutional child abuse. Those things don't change because of what's happened with resources. That need remains. (p. 273)

We just need the money to do it. Until then, it's going to be a long time until some can write *Revival: How Journalism saved our Democracy*.

### Reference

Wake, A. (2013, October 9). Stop press: We need to save journalism, not newspapers, *The Conversation*. Retrieved August 28, 2021, from <https://theconversation.com/stop-press-we-need-to-save-journalism-not-newspapers-18833>

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