

*JAMES HOLLINGS is a senior lecturer in global journalism at Massey University.*

## Shameful exposé of Afghan war but not enough media grunt

***He Toki Huna (The Hidden Adze): New Zealand in Afghanistan.*** Documentary directed by Kay Ellmers and Annie Goldson, 2013. 60min.

NEW ZEALAND'S war in Afghanistan is our longest-ever foreign engagement. Our troops have been there for 10 years—more than World Wars One and Two combined. It has cost the country around \$300 million, and one soldier has died for every year the New Zealand military has been there.

And for what? That is one of the questions this documentary, perhaps the first serious attempt on film to question New Zealand involvement in the International Security Assistance Force, tries to answer.

It is a slick effort—it opens with close-ups of freelance Kiwi journalist



Jon Stephenson. He tells us, on the way to an interview, about the risk of attack from insurgents. There is jerky in-car footage, no doubt meant to suggest imminent danger, bracketed by shots of ute-riding men with Kalashnikovs and RPGs.

Cut to a sinister humming soundtrack, burnt-out Russian tanks, the inhospitable grandeur of the Afghan countryside. All very *Lawrence of Arabia*, beautifully shot, romantic, pretty to watch.

The main theme, it eventually emerges, is the lack of serious media scrutiny of New Zealand's role, both in the so-called provincial reconstruction team in Bamiyan province, and as special forces SAS. Stephenson is portrayed as a lone figure, virtually the only person to defy warnings

about the risks of acting independently, and to go and see for himself what local Afghans really think of our engagement.

There are clips of very articulate English-speaking (and translated) Afghans, interspersed with commentary from New Zealand-based critics, such as *Other People's Wars* author Nicky Hager (2011), balanced with comment from the New Zealand Defence Force. Some of the most interesting footage is of Stephenson asking the locals what they think of the New Zealand effort. Ill-directed, several said; if they wanted to do something useful, they should have built a dam and brought them electricity.

Most effort has gone into patrolling; another said the security was already good there anyway. They seemed to view it rather like an uninvited visit from a mother-in-law; bossy, well-meaning, but ultimately ineffectual.

Watching Stephenson's foot-slogging around the villages, I felt a growing cringe of embarrassment at the timidity or lack of initiative of so many mainstream New Zealand journalists who have been there, paid for by the military, and not bothered to venture beyond the compound.

From this distance, set against the Afghan villagers' voices of which we have heard so little, embedded journalism looks even uglier than it did at

the time; a dark and shameful stain.

Perhaps the biggest black hole has been around the role of the SAS, New Zealand's special forces. Stephenson was the first, and only journalist, to raise questions about their role, and particularly whether they had handed prisoners over to be tortured (Brown, 2011). For daring to ask such questions, he was subjected to an extraordinary personal attack by Prime Minister John Key; the sort of thing one might expect from a third-rate central Asian dictator.

Sadly, this film does not explore those claims further. It does look at one raid, and suggests we were misled about the SAS's role, but not really conclusively.

Unfortunately, in a film about media scrutiny, it doth at times protest too much. Some of the claims made about New Zealand media are accepted uncritically. More importantly, it suffers from its own lack of balance, by neglecting to put some of these questions to the faces behind these decisions.

It would have been good to see Fairfax, APN and TV chiefs explain themselves. Did they really have an 'arrangement' not to publish pictures of New Zealand soldier's faces? Why? What else are they self-censoring?

Most of all, why, given they can send several journalists to each All

Blacks tour, could they not pay for one independent journalist to cover Afghanistan, when the much-smaller *Metro* magazine could? Given the scale and length of New Zealand's involvement, the wilful ignoring of it by New Zealand media executives just embarrassing, but almost sinister.

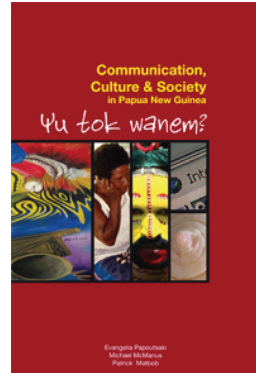
Nor does the film put the serious questions about media manipulation to any of the politicians responsible. It ends, rather lamely, with a plea by Stephenson for the worth of independent scrutiny; which struck me as almost a capitulation to the idea, that the military's spin doctors would have us believe, that 'real' journalism is dangerous to our troops.

In fact, real journalism might have saved some of the troop's lives, by questioning earlier the Labour government's shameful delay in sending LAVs, for example. A thoughtful and worthwhile film, but behind the slickness, some more journalistic grunt would have helped.

### References

- Brown, R. (2011, April 26). More secrets and lies. *Public Address* [weblog]. Retrieved on April 27, 2013, from <http://publicaddress.net/hardnews/more-secrets-and-lies/>
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## COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: YU TOK WANEM?



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EVANGELIA PAPOUTSAKI  
MICHAEL MCMANUS  
AND PATRICK MATBOB  
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YOUNG, EMERGING AND  
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