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## How 'alternative' media can again be mainstream

***Challenging the News: The Journalism of Alternative and Community Media***, by Susan Forde. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2011, 214pp. ISBN 978 0230243576 (pbk).

IRONICALLY, alternative and independent media were not always marginalised. Less than two centuries ago, they were the 'mainstream'. They being the radical and working class media of Europe and the new world colonies.

This is a central point made in Susan Forde's *Challenging The News* in her search to find a refocused critique of the Fourth Estate notions that make sense of the contemporary alternative media's role. An essential element, she concludes, is the 'key importance that someone is watching the watchers; that media power itself must be monitored, assessed, critiqued, and challenged. Alternative journalists provide that critique' (p. 169).

Forde agrees with McChesney (2003) that the dominating forms



of corporate journalism in Western countries will 'never allow an effective, truthful, mobilising type of rich journalism to emerge'. A political economy perspective on the media is radical alternative journalists' 'bread and butter'. The links between politics, economy and media power are essential to their work, while, according to McChesney, such connections and debate are 'off-limits' in the mainstream (p. 170).

Forde notes that many journalists included in her book dislike the term *alternative*. They are often far more comfortable with using the tag

*independent*. Whom does the author include in her definition? She interchanges the concepts of community, radical, independent, citizen and participatory journalism throughout the book as ‘sub-sectors’.

However, much of the journalism that people featured in the book actually do is political or social justice-related with a radical edge, albeit more modest—‘for example, making the public more aware of racism in their society, as opposed to a radical journalists’ aim to usurp the entire power struggle’ (p. 172).

The genesis of Forde’s book had its origins in the first national Australian study of ‘alternative’ press journalists conducted by the author and published through a series of media journal articles in 1997/8 and three other major research projects. This was a natural development for Forde, having worked in the alternative and independent media before becoming an academic. She recalls in the introduction:

I was committed to and driven by the social change that my words could make—the impact they could have on communities, on political movements and on the broader public. (p. viii)

*Challenging the News* has eight chapters, ranging from ‘understanding

alternative and independent journalist’, to ‘looking for answers: how alternative media journalists engage their audiences’, and to the global policy environment for alternative and community media.

One of the most useful components of Forde’s valuable book is the sifting of evidence to produce some characteristics of alternative journalism, what sets it apart from the mainstream. She concludes: 1. alternative journalists are committed to encourage participation and political activity; 2. priority is given to ‘immediately relevant’ local news (I am not sure that I entirely agree here); 3. stories are chosen to represent ‘the untold’, or ‘the scoop’ about the voiceless; and 4. critiques are made of the dominant news ethos and its processes (p. 175).

These factors alone do not define when a journalist is ‘alternative’ or not, argues Forde. In her view, what is critically needed is ‘the instinctive commitment to the defining characteristics enunciated by journalists themselves, that is what makes alternative journalism’.

Excellent book though it is (and I have included it as a course text for one of my postgraduate papers), I found myself rather dissatisfied on a couple of points. Although *Challenging the News* is focused on Australia,

it has also expanded on the earlier research to examine alternative journalism in some countries in the European Union, primarily Britain, and in the United States.

Even New Zealand is touched on when Forde cites the case of Wellington's *City Voice* (pp. 9-10) after a section on the online *Crikey* in Australia. She quotes two of the founders, Simon Collins and Jeremy Rose (2004), for explaining their mission as trying with 'public journalism to empower people to understand issues and to actually do something about them'.

The much-lauded *City Voice* closed after eight years, but it is disappointing that the book offers no other New Zealand case study, such as *New Outlook* magazine (where I was an associate editor in 1982 to 1986), which challenged the corporate mainstream; *The Nation* (1980-1), a national weekly tabloid; Chris Trotter's *Political Review*; and socialist investigative journalist and political strategist Bruce Jesson, who published *The Republican*. Also, there was no mention of Gordon Barton's Melbourne *Sunday Observer* (of which I was the second editor in 1970) that played a critical role in campaigning against Australian involvement in the Vietnam War (Robie, 2009, p. 221) and later spawned *Nation Review*.

I questioned Forde about these gaps before writing this review: her response was that her editorial brief from the publishers was to focus on Britain and the US. As she 'was aware of the *City Voice* case and a few others' she integrated the literature material where she could.

Another critical point, in my view, was the absence of a chapter or section in the book about the independent and alternative media published out of the region's university-based journalism schools. Having been involved with three award-winning university campaigning papers over two decades, I regard this as an increasingly important part of the region's alternative press stable.

In response, Forde agrees that university publications are a form of independent and alternative media in their own right. But she also argues that it is hard to know where to draw the line with a book such as this: 'I began my serious journalism at the University of Queensland's student union newspaper, *Semper Floreat*, where I worked for 12 months so I don't underestimate their importance and place as a breeding ground for serious independent journalism' (Forde, S., personal correspondence with the author, 27 July 2012).

Since this otherwise inspiring book's publication, interest has

focused on the online *Global Mail*, which Forde believes fits into her 'benevolent proprietor' model of economic viability that one of the chapters discusses. With a guaranteed \$5 million for publication, *GM's* progress will be watched closely.

### References

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