
Reviews

COLIN PEACOCK is presenter of Radio New Zealand's Media Watch programme.

A recipe for journalism's fight back for public interest

News 2.0: Can Journalism Survive the Internet? by Martin Hirst. Sydney: Allen and Unwin. 2011, 242 pp, ISBN 978-1-742370-57-6

AT THE front of the book, University of Queensland journalism professor Michael Bromley says this has 'much needed grounded insight and foresight'. And as some academics' writing about journalism seems to fit into a matrix of media theory few general readers could fully understand, a book dealing with what's really going on in journalism is a great idea.

But the bibliography of *News 2.0* takes up nearly 30 of the book's 240 pages. The preface begins with a quote from The *Communist Mani-*



festo, and the concluding chapter has this:

My radical suggestion is to argue and agitate for workers' control of the newsroom and the news production process. (p. 204)

So is this a simply a Marxist complaint about capitalism and corporate owners undermining journalism, with reference to the previously published thoughts of many other experts?

Thankfully not.

For one thing, you don't have to be a card-carrying Marxist to see that the business model that's underpinned

modern journalism is creaking these days.

And secondly, Martin Hirst of AUT University takes care to separate out what he calls a crisis in journalism from a commercial crisis in the news industry, while also making clear the ways in which the two are linked.

He presents a concise and convincing account of how commercial pressures on the modern news media have made it hard, and in some cases impossible, to sustain the quality, depth and range of journalism the public have enjoyed in the past. An example: his summary of the effects of price-cutting by British newspaper publishers. It's got to the point where some have undermined their paid-for titles by putting out low-quality free papers in London because they are so desperate to retain readers.

Consequently, Hirst is convinced much of modern journalism is in decline and that people are losing faith in journalism today because journalists are failing to protect and promote the public interest in their work.

They are, he says, guilty of 'spoiling their public image almost beyond repair'.

But in this, I think he overstates the case.

Take New Zealand, where he currently lives and teaches.

There have been many years of

thoroughly commercial management of the media, critical howls about dumbing-down, sharp reductions in the number of journalists employed to sort the wheat from chaff and scrutinise specific areas of social, political and economic life—and turn out news. There is also some evidence that the public hold journalists in fairly low esteem.

Yet hundreds of thousands of people still watch the news provided each night on the main free-to-air TV channels. The majority of households still get the local daily paper. Private and publicly-owned broadcasters alike have retained a mass audience, as well as their national recognition and significance. Major media companies have a big presence on the web, and overwhelmingly people looking for news habitually go to their sites.

News 2.0 also addresses what he calls the 'web first' culture that is taking over in publishing and broadcasting and, allied to that, people's expectation that online news is something to be had for free.

Again, it is a convincing account even though this is a fast-moving field. Since this book's publication, Rupert Murdoch has moved forward significantly with his plans to put news behind a viable paywall—something Martin Hirst anticipates in the book.

But is professional journalism as we know it today destined to die in the foreseeable future, as the book's subtitle asks?

This is serious stuff which panics some pundits. In *The Cult of the Amateur* for example, author Andrew Keen (2007) argued the end of journalism could even mean the disappearance of truth itself.

But that's not Hirst's view, because journalism as we know it is changing.

As profits of the established modern media decline—along with its credibility, if you believe him—bottom-up user generated content is on the rise. Adopting US scholar Robert McChesney's concept of 'rich media, poor democracy', Hirst believes—like McChesney—we are now at a critical juncture with several foreseeable futures possible.

Many others authors see 'user-generated content'—or so-called 'citizen journalism'—as challenging journalism in an increasingly digital future, but Hirst instead predicts not only that journalism will adapt to it, but that commercial media companies will co-opt it, and profit from it.

Indeed, he writes about how this is already happening, for instance in CNN's 'i-report' initiative, where people round the world volunteer their thoughts and images to the

broadcaster—which then also takes ownership of it.

Instead of comparing citizen journalism with the products of traditional industrial journalism, as many writing about the media do, Hirst identifies it as something different: 'user-generated news like content'—or UGNC for short.

This includes, for example, digital video and twitter updates of newsworthy events, such as we have seen in spades from protests in the Middle East and North Africa this year. Some of it was compelling, some of it newsworthy and revealing when interpreted and verified by the news media.

But en masse and unfiltered, it was just an online mess.

Likewise, the mass dumping of diplomatic cables by the WikiLeaks website would have been impossible for individuals to interpret online, but collaboration with the likes of *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK and *Der Spiegel* in Germany meant that comprehensible summaries with clout were published in the mainstream media, and made worldwide headlines.

Dr Hirst believes the commercialisation of the amateur media spaces is what will take place now, as 'commercial news capital fights for its life'. He argues that the best way forward is for the professional media we depend

upon today to become the gatekeeper of as much of it as possible, with the public interest at heart.

That's a nice idea—but how could such a common understanding be forged across competing private and public media companies? And where would the money come from?

His answer seems to be that at some time yet to come there'll be 'collective control by news producers and the people we used to call the audience'.

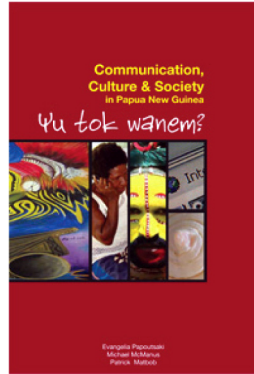
And how will that come about? Sadly, that's where this book ends.

Maybe he'll deal with that magical Marxist transformation in a book called 'News 3.0', to be published in a future beyond a capitalist-controlled news media industry.

Reference

Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture*. London, Boston: Nicholas Brealey.

**COMMUNICATION,
CULTURE AND SOCIETY
IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA:
YU TOK WANEM?**



**EDITED BY
EVANGELIA PAPOUTSAKI
MICHAEL McMANUS
AND PATRICK MATBOB**

JOURNALISM AND MEDIA TOPICS
RANGING FROM INVESTIGATIVE
JOURNALISM, TO HIV/AIDS
AWARENESS, DEVELOPMENT AND
THE MEDIA, CONFLICT RESOLUTION
AND MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS.

9781877314943
PUBLISHED BY DIVINE WORD UNIVERSITY
PRESS,
MADANG, AND PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE,
AUCKLAND

PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE
AUT UNIVERSITY
ORDER FROM WHEELERS BOOKS
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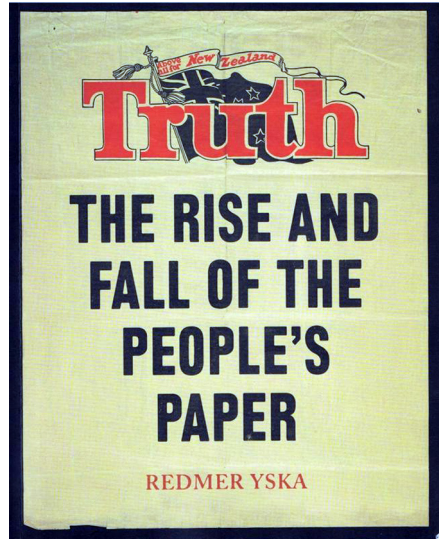
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Truth: An institution that refused to be institutionalised

Truth: The Rise and Fall of the People's Paper, by Redmer Yska.
Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2010,
204 pp. ISBN 978-1-877517-30-3

IT MAY seem unusual to start a review of a book by first considering another publication. But it seems such a coincidence that while writing this review of Redmer Yska's book *Truth: The rise and fall of the people's paper*, the front pages of the last two *New Zealand Herald*s have carried lead stories that would not have gone amiss in that now defunct weekly. The screaming headlines, lurid and over-hyped personal details about scorned women and dastardly killers would have had former editors of *Truth* smiling in their graves at this turnabout.

Has Granny *Herald* taken up the mantle cast off by *Truth*? Leaving



that dire thought for another time, this space is devoted to Yska's book, partly motivated by the years he spent working as a journalist for *Truth*, but also by his desire to investigate the paper's role in shaping 20th century New Zealand society, press and popular culture and to ensure it receives its due within the pantheon of the country's press. For this research, Yska won a National Library Research Fellowship and he spent 2008 reading microfiches and mouldy old hard copies of the weekly in the basement of the library. He must have gnashed his teeth when a year later the library digitised early copies of the paper for PapersPast, that cornucopia of early New Zealand publications that now numbers 63 titles. Copies of *Truth*

from 7 July 1906 to 22 December 1930 are now available online (paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

Yska's introduction to his work is a skilfully written and doughty defence of his old paper which acknowledges his personal interest in *Truth*, but convincingly encourages the reader to accept that the weekly deserves to be recognised for its impact on both journalism and New Zealand society as a whole.

I should confess my own biases, before I write anything further. My strong family background of Presbyterian elder parents, being raised on a Waitoa dairy farm and educated at private schools meant *Truth* passed me by in my youth. If it was mentioned at all, it would have been with disproving tut tuts and strictures not to read it. It was known as this racy, raunchy, 'rabid' paper that no nicely brought up young woman would ever dream of reading. Maybe I did at some stage, but I don't remember.

There was one positive '*Truth* effect' however. When I was a young reporter at the old Auckland Magistrates Court in the early 1970s, *Truth's* Bill Cullen was a wonderful mentor. He taught me everything I needed to know about how to be a good court reporter. He was highly regarded by the legal fraternity and on his death received a packed farewell in Court-

room No 1 from lawyers, judges and journalists. I now find the weekly a fascinating read, especially in my era of interest, late 19th and early 20th century New Zealand. *Truth* was a strident critic of Malcolm Ross, the World War I war correspondent who was the subject of my doctoral thesis. It harried and harassed him in its columns in prose and verse ('Our war correspondent. Malcolm Ross's ragged writing', 1915; 'Poor old Ross! The misfortunes of Malcolm', 1916).

Truth was established in June 1905 and its early development is the subject of Yska's first chapter 'Wowser wars'. The writer is splendidly evocative of those times and I particularly liked his description of *Truth* founder, Australian John Norton, as a 'combustible mix of tycoon, journalist, do-gooder and chronic, fall-down pisshead' (Yska, 2010, p. 15). It's clear that many across the Tasman were in two minds about Norton but seemed to forgive him his many sins. Cyril Pearl (1958) called Norton a 'flamboyant example of the larrikin demagogue' (p. 9) and Michael Cannon (1981) described him as a man completely at the mercy of his emotions with a lust for power, sexual conquest, political dominance and all fuelled by alcohol (p. 3).

He did not appear to practise his many dubious peccadilloes when in

New Zealand, but he did leave many a bludgeoned and bruised figure behind him in Australia, not the least a New Zealand journalist who dared take Norton on in court in 1897. William Kitchen sued Norton for libel ('Local and general', 1897) endured a long, drawn-out trial in Sydney. Although he won his case, his reputation was in tatters and he took his own life not long after ('Intercolonial', 1897). *Truth* in New Zealand also left behind a trail of battered figures, among them Bill Sutch and Marilyn Waring (pp. 161-175).

The first chapter shows a wealth of painstaking research which together with Yska's inimitable writing style makes for thoroughly interesting reading. This continues in further chapters as it traces the paper through the First World War, depression, Second World War and on to the 21st century, the latter very briefly. The weekly was a riotous mix of political and legal debacles, scurrilous and ground-breaking stories, good and bad journalism, strong investigative pieces and banal sex scandals, often based on salacious court reports of divorce cases. As Yska notes, in 1958 the press was stripped of its right to 'unfettered reporting' of divorce hearings—'a *Truth* mainstay since its founding in 1905' (p. 125). But while the reporting might have been slightly

less exuberant, divorce reporting remained popular until at least 1980 when no-fault divorces were finally permitted.

Yska has charted the hectic ride of the myriad editors that steered the good ship *Truth* through its history. Many of the journalists working in today's papers started work there, as the author has noted. One alumni of *Truth* is Edward Rooney, now at APN's *The Aucklander*, but a foot slogger for the weekly over a period of nine years. He has read the book and is pleased someone has written the paper's story. As he says, it's a thread of New Zealand history that has not been chronicled because of the 'disdain factor'. But he found it a 'harrowing' read. While many *Truth* stories were commendable and demonstrated the best qualities of good journalism, he says, much of it harmed a great many people, both those who were written about but also those who did the writing. Burnout among the journalists was common and many who left *Truth* had to go offshore if they wanted to remain in the profession.

Rooney started at the paper as a naive country boy of 19 but after a year was 'totally burnt out and freaked out'. He returned for further stints and faced many a dramatic moment, being sued, persecuted by

Robert Muldoon and being threatened with having his head blown off with a shotgun. He earned his odium or danger money—the 12.5 percent more money *Truth* journalists received over their mainstream colleagues. The stories told in the book by those who remembered working for *Truth*, Clive Lind, Rick Neville, for example, are of particular interest. There are few personal records extant of how it was to be a journalist in previous years. However, the author chose to end the tale in 1982 when the weekly shifted to Auckland with just a brief epilogue to cover the remaining years, so there is a further chapter to be added to the history at some point.

The author has been thorough in recording colourful and significant episodes in the weekly's life, from the Police Commissioner and the phone-tapping saga of 1953, the Holloway trial of 1959 to the Sutch File stories of the mid-1970s. It is a sweeping tale and has done what the author set out to do—delivered an 'accessible, popular work that captures the salty flavour of the paper itself' (p. 11). *Truth* was a paper that pulled few punches and it sent many a person reeling but for 100 years it shocked, titillated, informed, investigated, entertained and possibly educated the New Zealanders who chose to buy it. It was never bland. It was never middle-of-the-road. It

was an institution that refused to be institutionalised. It does deserve its place in New Zealand press history.

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JON STEPHENSON has reported on the Afghanistan conflict since the US-led war began in 2001.

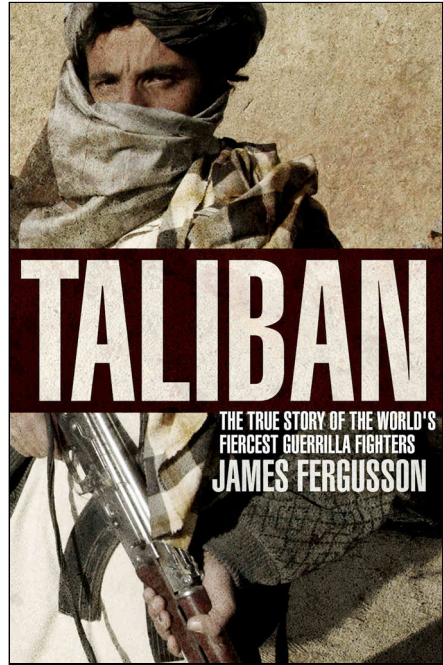
Shades of gray: The Taliban phenomenon

Taliban: The True Story of the World's Most Feared Guerrilla Fighters, by James Fergusson. London: Bantam. 2010, 310 pp. ISBN 978-0-593066-34-8 (hardback)

I JUST CAN'T understand the Americans,' an Afghan mullah tells British writer James Fergusson. 'What they are doing makes no sense—and if they go on as they are, the whole country will rise against them.'

The mullah—an educated, apolitical man, fluent in five languages—is hauled from his bed one night by US commandos. Beaten and dragged off to the notorious Bagram detention centre, he is later released, but is so outraged he joins the Taliban.

Fergusson's story of the mistreated mullah is one of many amassed in his 14 years of reporting on Afghanistan. With crystal-clear writing and first-rate analysis, he deploys such



anecdotes to devastating effect in *Taliban*, subtitled *The True Story of the World's Most Feared Guerrilla Fighters*.

The topic is complex, but the book's structure is straightforward: the author first tells us who the Taliban are, how their movement arose, and what they want. He then asks if a deal with them is possible—one that would see Western troops leave Afghanistan in exchange for a guarantee the country would not revert to a terrorist safe-haven.

It is not only possible, he suggests, but desirable. The insurgency is growing; the US military strategy

and Karzai administration are failing. We need a new plan, says Fergusson, and ‘a negotiated settlement with the Taliban looks increasingly like the West’s only way out of the mess’.

If the first principle of war is ‘know your enemy’ then, in Fergusson’s eyes, the Americans have a lot to learn. The insurgents do not reject the West so much as the presence of infidel troops imposing Western political and social mores.

As a movement the Taliban have been ‘relentlessly demonised’. They shared the same ideology as al Qaida, right? Wrong, says Fergusson. The relationship between Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden was 90 percent about money.

They banned all education for women, right? Wrong again, says the author, whose nuanced explanation of the mullahs’ mindset is fascinating. While their attitudes were not enlightened by Western standards, ‘the Taliban were never quite the bearded bigots of popular Western imagination’.

They emerged as a force in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. But the Taliban—Pash-tuns with a fierce tribal code who adhere to an austere form of Islam—existed long before the Bear got its paws burnt in the graveyard of empires.

When the Russians left Afghanistan in 1989, the mujahideen and

warlords who had ousted them started battling each other. Butchers and bandits ruled the land. By 1994 the Taliban had had enough. They left their madrasahs and fought their way to power with two key goals: to impose security and Sharia.

‘Many worse things have happened to Afghanistan than the Taliban government of 1996-2001,’ says Fergusson. He does not brush the Taliban’s dirt under the Afghan carpet—their treatment of the Hazara people was especially egregious—but argues they were for the most part misguided, not evil.

‘It is not as if the West’s track record in Afghanistan over the past nine years is anything to boast about,’ he says. ‘Lawlessness, corruption, poppies: the Taliban arguably dealt with all those better than we have since 2001.’

Today US-led forces are supporting a corrupt and ineffective regime that includes warlords and criminals the Taliban ousted—one in particular whose human rights record is far from distinguished. The idea that this regime’s drug-addled and illiterate soldiers might ‘stand up’ to enable Western troops to ‘draw down’ sometime soon is rightly dismissed by the author as fanciful.

As the tale of the mistreated mullah reminds us, the way the US has prosecuted its counter-insurgency

has only made things worse. Invading homes, detaining the wrong people, treating them with contempt—these are seen not only as an attack by infidels on Muslims but as a violation of the Pashtun code that cannot go unanswered.

This goes to the heart of the West's failure in Afghanistan. Introducing Western-style institutions, backing leaders who have lined their own pockets while ignoring their people, and the wayward air strikes that have killed and injured innocent Afghans have all generated anger and resentment.

But in a place where respect and religion are paramount it is the offences against honour and Islam—both real and perceived—that have arguably done the most damage, fanning the flames of an insurgency that refuses to be extinguished.

The bottom line? It's time to talk. As Fergusson says, all insurgencies end in negotiations. How can we know if the Taliban will moderate their ways and share power responsibly if we have not spoken to them?

Critics will argue that they have not learnt from their mistakes and cannot be trusted—that the Taliban will open the back door to Al Qaida as the West shuts the front door on its way out of Afghanistan. Others will oppose giving ground on the insurgents' desire to reintroduce Sharia.

The issues are complex, but it is worth remembering that the 2001 US-led invasion was justified as a response to terrorism, not the woeful predicament of Afghan women. If Western leaders want their troops to stay to curb Sharia they should say so, and be prepared to pay the price in blood and treasure.

As for Al Qaida, most assessments suggest its presence in Afghanistan is essentially at an end, and that the Taliban's goal is to end the occupation rather than advance bin Laden's goals or ideology. If an agreement to deny the terrorists sanctuary was broken, they could be countered more effectively by drones and special forces than by an army of occupation.

In any case, it seems increasingly clear that the occupiers have lost the battle for Pashtun hearts and minds, and as America's former Afghanistan commander General Stanley McChrystal once noted, 'If the people are against us we cannot be successful.'

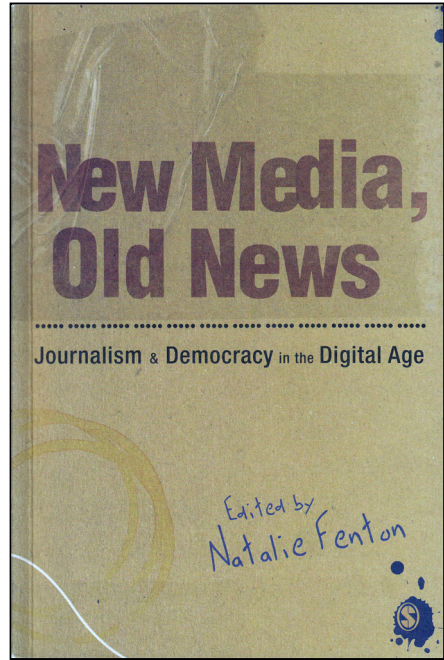
Debates aside, this is a stunning book. Avoiding cliché or the black and white analysis all-too-common among Afghanistan observers, Fergusson illuminates many of the benighted nation's shades of grey. Meticulously researched and deeply thoughtful, it is explanatory journalism at its best.

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Challenging the critical impact of the internet

New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age, edited by Natalie Fenton. London: Sage. 2009, 220 pp. ISBN: 978-1-847875-74-7.

THERE ARE many in journalism, in both the academy and in practice, who on reading *New Media, Old News*, will shout, ‘See, I told you so!’ because the conclusions can be used to back up a very institutional, traditionalist approach to our profession. Others will vehemently disagree with the researchers’ methods and conclusions, turning on them for presenting what was a large-scale, extensive and ambitious review of digital-age journalism in Britain which concludes, largely, that *plus ça change*. For me, as a researcher who teaches and continues to practise reporting and editing, this book is a difficult dish, rather challenging and exciting but—like my first Périgord black truffle—just a little disappointing.



Challenging and exciting because it examines (in a Facebook kind of way) most of the areas I think journalism scholars should be investigating now, and the team from Goldsmiths at the University of London covers the literature quite comprehensively and even-handedly. There’s a lot for me to cite in my own ongoing research. Disappointing? When the review copy arrived in my mailbox I dreaded the thought that the title might actually describe the contents accurately. It did.

Many of the chapters seem eager to challenge the impact of the internet and digital technologies on

contemporary journalism even as the authors acknowledge that ‘something big is happening’. It’s like the climate change debate: ask people on any island in the South Pacific, or on any coastline in Australia (especially my own Queensland in 2011) whether climate change is happening and they’ll vigorously agree. But just try to get general agreement on the reasons or the causes for climate change and the party splits up to all corners of the room.

How can this be? What were Natalie Fenton and her colleagues looking for? What did they miss? They have, as they acknowledge, used British case studies and the British journalism environment almost exclusively. So maybe nothing substantial is happening there? No: I spent two months of 2010 shuttling in and around Cardiff and London and a few ports further afield into the European Community and I’m here to vouch that something is indeed happening in journalism, mostly for and among people aged 25 and younger, mostly on alternative media blog and video sites, and ultimately in their pockets and on their phones.

But is the British journalism establishment—as many have confirmed for me—so hidebound in its local class structures that nine eminent scholars, two of them journalism

practitioners, might have gazed off into the distance *right over the top* of Gen Y and concluded that all is definitely quiet on the western front?

In Chapter 1, James Curran takes the lead by stressing ‘the need for skeptical caution when assessing the impact of new communications technology’ (p. 19). He suggests that ‘the hyping of new technology sometimes took a form that served a neo-liberal political agenda’ (p. 32). All this in an era when ‘new technology’ is hardly *new* any more, or even *technical* (requiring special knowledge to understand).

In Chapter 2, Des Freedman concludes that ‘predictions about the “end” of newspapers and the “collapse” of network news in the light of the dramatic shift online of audiences and advertisers miss out on a number of important points’ (p. 47).

News organisations are not therefore about to lose entire swathes of readers and viewers as long as they continue to invest in original journalism and look for ways to make themselves relevant to audiences. (p. 49)

Freedman notes—with validity—that the drought of newspaper audiences started long before the Internet effects set in (p. 48). He also suggests—perhaps unwittingly harking back to Julianne Shultz’s 1994

edited volume *Not Just Another Business*—that ‘the news industry is, by and large, not a normal industry’ (p. 49)—this in itself a hotly contested matter and not at all settled in 2011. But worst of all, he offers no constructive outcomes of his research to suggest a way forward. What we need is recognition of an issue and researchers to take the issue forward, please.

In the same un-deconstructed way, Angela Phillips, Nick Couldry and Freedman in Chapter 3 fail to attempt to unpack what ethics might mean for the contemporary journalist but prefer—‘because it is an approach with which we are familiar’—a neo-Aristotelian attack which they use to assert that ‘journalism matters’, that ‘we (society) need news media that ... help us sustain a successful, indeed peaceful, life together’ and that ‘journalism is a practice which is directed towards the circulation of necessary information’ (p. 53).

Not everything is bad in *New Media, Old News*, as I mentioned at the beginning. Peter Lee-Wright’s Chapter 4 foray into BBC online newsrooms uncovers some very useful points, principally by talking to working journalists. Angela Phillips correctly points out in Chapter 5 that many Big Media news websites cannibalise content and that you can get

the same new stories from umpteen different companies.

But she fails when she suggests that ‘the only significant movement towards a broadening of sources and contacts is in the use of social networking sites, electoral rolls and online directories by journalists’ (p. 100), referring to ‘journalists’ only in a mainstream establishment way. She also fails to highlight the 154,839,385 blogs and Small Media news sites out there today¹, many of which carry original news content, such as slashdot.org/ (news for nerds), www.askamum.co.uk/News/ (pregnancy, baby and parenting news) and of course www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml (lots of alternative sources). I was heartened to encounter Joanna Redden and Tamara Witschge’s references to alternative media, especially IndyMedia in Chapter 10 (p. 185).

James Curran and Tamara Witschge make the bold statement in Chapter 6 that ‘the international public sphere does not exist ... because communication about public affairs has not been properly globalised: the most important source of news in much of the developed world is still television’ (p. 103). In Chapter 7 Aeron Davis suggests that the ‘expectation’ that ‘new media enhances communicative exchange and thus brings stronger forms of social

capital' remains 'relatively unfulfilled' (p. 121). He continues (p. 122) that 'new media is equally likely to be a contributory factor in weakening communicative ties, social capital and public engagement'. Let's try all these assertions on the new battalions of bloggers in Malaysia and the texting, Facebooking protesters in Tunisia and Egypt as I write this review.

Consider the book's often pejorative or patronising references to citizen journalists as 'self-appointed' (p. 85), 'de-professionalised' (p. 10), non-professional (p. 14) (see also pp. 50 and 123) and as outsiders, as Nick Couldry writes: 'Outside mainstream UK media institutions' (p. 138). Look here, old chap, I appointed myself as a journalist in 1981 when I decided (on my own as an impetuous young upstart) to enter this profession and began to sell my work on commission, and then my labour for a steady salary. I undertook university studies in reporting and editing (among other subjects). I worked as an ordinary journalist, moving from business to business when I felt like it. Everyone I know in journalism is a self-appointed journalist!

Thank goodness for Chapter 11, the final chapter, by Rodney Benson, who was commissioned by the other authors to critique their work in plain sight. Benson, from New York

University, is the only contributor not from Goldsmiths College at the University of London, and the only contributor who takes a determinedly non-UK viewpoint. His is a more important chapter than most, especially for readers of *PJR*, because it raises the 'other' questions not considered by the Goldsmiths team. He openly and positively addresses the book's deep deficiencies by writing 'to what extent does this portrait of the UK also hold for the US, the rest of Western Europe, and indeed, the rest of the world?' (p. 187).

Benson ends his chapter looking forward, seeking connections between institutional media and alternative media. He also notes—he agrees with the other contributors—that while investment represents an answer to media issues, 'an open mind may be just as important as money' (p. 199).

Note

1. <http://blogpulse.com/>. Retrieved on 2 February 2011.

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Adequate China media overview but little that challenges

New Media for a New China, edited
by James F. Scotton and William A. Hachten.
Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010, 244 pp.
ISBN 978-1-405187-97-8

THIS BOOK argues that 'China today enjoys complex and highly advanced media through its newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasting, and cinema accompanied by the necessary ancillary services of advertising and public relations' (p. 207). It has the largest television market in the world with an audience of one billion people watching about 176 minutes a day (p. 85/p. 90), and in June 2008 China overtook the United States to boast the largest number of internet users on the planet at 253 million.

The country also has 550 million cell phone users (p. 96). *New Media for a New China* has 15 chapters written by different media scholars



and a central theme is the tension with a media caught between concern with 'satisfying their audiences and satisfying (or at least placating or not antagonising) government officials' (p. 9).

In China the government is described as owning and retaining firm, if sometimes erratic, control of all media from the most obscure journal to most popular national television network. The Chinese government is said to appoint all editors and managers (p. 24) and they constantly monitor central and local government rivalries to find out which issues can be presented safely.

The surveillance by state officials is extensive and pervasive. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 monitors watch the web looking for pornography or references to such taboo subjects for the regime as democracy, freedom or Falun Gong (p. 29). The Chinese government can block access to outside sites rather easily since all international traffic must pass through a small number of state-controlled backbone networks.

New media are of particular concern for the government. President Hu Jintao has identified an uncontrolled internet as a serious threat. He told Communist Party officials in 2007: 'Whether or not we can actively use and effectively manage the internet ... will affect national cultural information, security and the long-term stability of the state' (p. 39).

With older media, such as the press, their role has been clearly established since 1949 as organs to disseminate the Communist Party's political messages. Television news clearly cannot directly criticise the government or established government policies and Chinese leaders require advance notice of any news with worldwide impact about to be broadcast by the national CCTV (p. 99).

However, since the 'market reforms' of the Chinese economy were introduced by leader Deng Xiaoping

in the 1970s, the country's media have been under the imperative to make a profit. The post-Tiananmen era from 1989 witnessed what one contributor portrays as a dramatic turn toward economic incentives allowing media commercialisation to flourish while further restricting freedom of political coverage.

'This produced a mix of Party logic and market logic that is the defining feature of media in China today' (p. 21). The ending of government subsidies has been a particular challenge for Chinese media and like their Western counterparts they have turned to entertainment content to attract viewers, listeners and readers.

One of the most successful commercial programmes that screened, on a provincial television station was a 'reality show' rather wonderfully entitled 'The Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Girl Contest', while a 'cultural journal' which lost its government subsidy attracted a new paying audience with photos of semi-nude models and celebrity interviews.

In some chapters these market developments, which appear to mirror competitive commercial developments in the West, are put forward as promoting greater media freedom in China. The chapter on the impact of new media claims that they may well be developing into the 'public sphere' that Jurgen Habermas says is essential

to any democracy (p. 40). However, no evidence is presented to support this claim. The book fails to make a sustained and proven case that the 'market system' has fundamentally changed the relationship between the media and government in China.

Although the book provides an overview of the media in China it appears to most appropriately serve as an introductory text for students and there is little depth to any of the chapters. Coordinating the diverse chapters into a coherent and themed whole also is a problem with this book. In the preface, the editors state that three events of 2008—the revolt in Tibet, the earthquake in Sichuan and the Olympic Games in Beijing—'provide the prism through which we have in part studied China's vast media system and how it relates to authority and society' (p.ix). But this does not appear to have been conveyed very effectively to the contributors and these events do not provide a linked theme to the chapters covering the various media.

As an introduction to the media in China today this book provides an adequate overview for undergraduate students. However, for those looking for insight on the future of the Chinese media and its vexed relationship with its government there is little here for the serious scholar.

BEING THE FIRST SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE



EDITED BY
ALICE ARUHE'ETA POLLARD AND
MARILYN J. WARING

THIS IS THE FIRST BOOK PUBLISHED
ABOUT SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN BY
SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN.

ISBN 978-1-877314-76-6.
PUBLISHED BY THE REGIONAL ASSISTANCE
MISSION TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS (RAMSI),
AUT INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC POLICY AND THE
PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE.

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DR DAVID ROBIE is editor of Pacific Journalism Review.

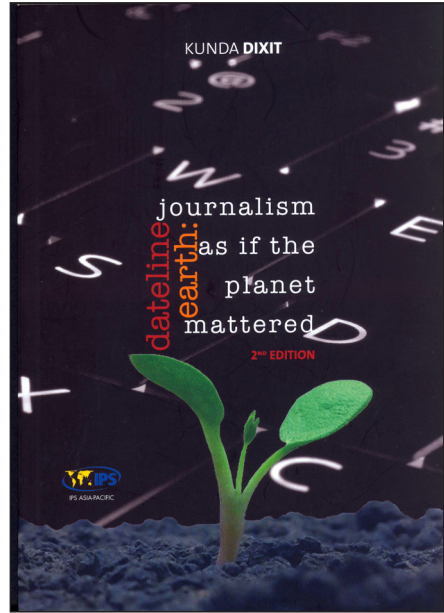
Globalisation ghosts and the gatekeepers

Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the Planet Mattered (2nd Ed.), by Kunda Dixit. Bangkok: IPS Asia-Pacific Centre Foundation Inc. 2010, 257 pp. ISBN 978-6-169022-72-5.

WHEN Kunda Dixit's inaugural edition of *Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the Planet Mattered* was published in the Philippines 14 years ago, it was an inspiring, if also daunting and prophetic, insight into global journalism. It still is, and in fact is even more of a wake-up call in this long-awaited second edition.

Much of the message is as persuasive now as it was then. The problem is that too few in the journalism fraternity have listened and the global corporate mainstream media landscape has become far worse.

At the time this book was released in Manila (Robie, 1997), as Dixit himself notes in his introduction to this new edition, 'climate change was not yet taken very seriously by



the mainstream media. Forest fires in Kalimantan were just beginning to be seen as a regional problem. The world's depleted fish stocks weren't seen as an issue. 9/11 hadn't yet happened.'

While journalists were indeed covering development and environment issues, they were failing to link their stories to the 'larger economic and political realities' (p. 9). Reporters were so focused on being 'objective' that they forgot that they needed to be an 'early warning system about impending crises' and seek solutions.

Communications have sped up at a breathtaking pace and media technologies now are so much more

flexible, but still there are many ‘blind spots’—the untold stories. Dixit wrote in the foreword to his first edition that ‘this book is inspired by the ghosts of those untold stories’. The same vision generates the sequel.

But, as the author admits, it is even more difficult today to get the ‘other news past media gatekeepers’.

Dixit argues that his provocatively titled book encourages global journalists to be ‘more attached’ to the story on conflict, environment, development, poverty, deprivation or disaster. He believes they need to examine the roots of global crises and to seek changes in the world for the better.

The emphasis of this book is revealed right from the front cover: a vibrant green shoot breaks free from barren black earth and braves a down-pour of mindless letters—symbolising the challenge of the information super highway for developing national news media, and how journalists need to find more holistic and environmentally sound ways of reporting national and global development.

As Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1970) wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: ‘In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no

exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.’

Although some might see Freire’s theory on oppression as being passé for today’s ‘development experts’, as Dixit correctly notes (p. 138), the concept goes back to the roots of ignorance and poverty. This is food for thought for many journalists in the Pacific who are smugly unaware of political and economic realities in a global context and how their politicians blindly follow failed examples of the market economy to the detriment of their own people. (New Zealand, for example, arguably only works for two-thirds of the people, for the rest it is more of a social and economic nightmare.)

Among the issues that Dixit takes a good healthy swipe at is mass media generally (and ‘mass ignorance’); covering Third World wars (‘hysterical reporting of a coming civilisation conflict between the West and the Rest—Islam, Iran and China’); balanced reporting (‘status quo journalism—in favour of the rich and powerful’); gender imbalance in the news (‘macho media’); measuring GNP and GDP (‘gross national pollution’ and ‘grossly distorted picture’); and global warming (‘reckless abuse of nature’) and economic globalisation and ‘free trade’ (‘the age of gobble-isation’).

In fact, much of the book is devoted to unjust social and economic systems and imbalances between the North and South (even this global definition is problematic and he argues for a redefinition based simply on high and low consumption countries) and the failure of journalism to adequately face the challenge.

Debating the 'poverty trap' into which global free trade has snared most developing nations, Dixit says: National policies generally have skewed priorities and reflect mainly the needs and concerns of the urban elite which also siphons off most foreign aid' (p. 124). This is certainly not new to Papua New Guinea, which was in the grip of an unpopular World Bank restructuring exercise when the book was first published, or in most other Pacific nations.

'Even if, by some miracle, national governments in the South suddenly transformed themselves overnight into efficient, accountable and far-sighted models, they would not get far,' laments Dixit. 'The reason is that the North and newly industrialising countries still have an unfair advantage' (p. 124). The challenge is, he argues, for journalists of the South (and the Pacific) not to allow themselves to be trapped into using Western filters for their reporting.

As Dixit points out, overseas

development assistance donor countries say they have spent more than US\$2 trillion in the South over the past 45 years. 'This may sound like a lot of money, but it is a tiny fraction of the losses the South suffers due to depressed commodity prices for its exports, debt repayment, capital flight and imports.' He attacks what he brands the 'development sahibs' and 'murky brown colonialism' as much as the wealthy white elites over aid policies.

Then, too, a lot of that aid never really reached the poorest in the poor countries. Much of it went to subsidise imports of technology or know-how from the donor nation or to pay the salaries of the aid bureaucracy. And most of what was left ended up in the pockets of the rich in poor countries. (p. 131)

Turning to the unbalanced gender nature of the 'macho media'—even when reporters are women, Dixit offers another challenge to news staff:

One place journalists can start is to have a gender balance in sourcing, in many cases it makes the story itself more professional because women are closer to the crises and suffer their consequences. (p. 137)

Dixit also condemns how economic globalisation 'rides on the backs of women's labour' and threatens

to feminise poverty by ‘chaining women to the global free market where the slogan seems to be “every man for himself”.’

Such a wide-ranging book inevitably risks spreading itself unconvincingly thin on some issues. Pacific journalists would be disappointed in the superficiality and errors in a section dealing with the rapacious logging industry.

For example, Dixit refers to ‘one Sarawak-based timber giant’ that now controls 90 percent of Papua New Guinea’s log exports. Why be so coy about naming Rimbunan Hijau when he happily names the many culprits among European and North American transnational corporations? (Actually, he finally does name the company but in a different context).

And this assertion would provoke amusement if not editorial indignation in Papua New Guinea: ‘Domestic media criticism of these logging operations has been muted since the Malaysians bought off the Port Moresby daily, the *Post-Courier*’ (p. 149).

The *Post-Courier* is actually a Murdoch daily, the only one left in the Pacific after the sale of the *Fiji Times*; Malaysian-owned *The National* is the newspaper with the logging connections (Rimbunan Hijau) and ironically that has now replaced its Australian-owned rival as the highest

circulation PNG daily. This error was actually perpetrated in the first edition and it is disappointing to see it still uncorrected.

While some other errors and statistics have also gone uncorrected or not updated, these are minor quibbles over what is essentially an excellent and important media book—although there is also no index in this new edition. Dixit has nevertheless freshened up the text with a range of fascinating new case studies, notably in the chapter on the Asian dilemma which highlights some of the challenges from China facing the Pacific.

Finally, Dixit appeals to journalists to be part of the developing world’s solutions, not its problems. He advises them to rely on a personal code of ethics, a moral framework, as a guidepost.

And, unsurprisingly, he agrees with the message of Filipino media educator and editor Vergel Santos who argues: ‘Forget objectivity, focus on fairness.’

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Noted

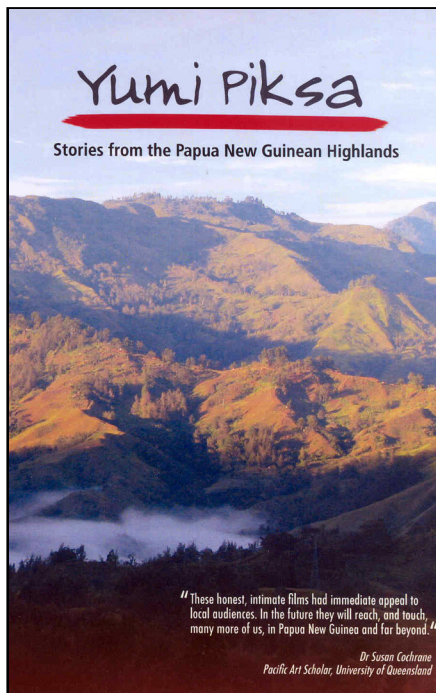
DR PHILIP CASS is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at UNITEC, Auckland.

Highlanders hold on to culture and survival

Yumi Piksa: Stories from the Papua New Guinean Highlands, directed by Verena Thomas. Yumi Piksa. 2009, 35 min.
www.yumipiksa.org

THE TRILOGY of short films on this DVD records the lives of three Highlanders and their struggle to survive, support their families and keep a hold on their culture. Produced by a group of students from the University of Goroka who worked with German filmmaker Verena Thomas, these films are, on the surface, about the fear of losing culture and a future in which their descendants become *kulturlos*, that is, people who have lost their culture and become culturally lost.

However, that is merely the surface gloss, for while the films



certainly depict people struggling to cope with changes on a personal, cultural and artistic level, they are more deeply about adaptation, change for survival and, in the first film of the trilogy, about immense courage.

In *Mama Bilong Down Under*, Mama Lucindo looks after her children and grandchildren in a camp outside the fence surrounding the university. Hers is a typical story of the *grassroots* who live on the fringes of PNG's towns and cities. In many ways her story is universal; she could be living in a Brazilian *favela* and her problems would be the same.

She is eager to establish her right to live where she is, and whether she really has any traditional right to the land is immaterial. Time and usage have made it her own.

Like strong women the world over she worries about her children. She tries to send her grandchildren to school whenever she has enough money to pay some of their fees, sells home cooked food to passers-by and washes her clothes in the water from a broken outlet pipe. Hers is a struggle common to many: An education system that seems permanently closed off by the demand for fees she can rarely pay, no electricity or clean water and a life circumscribed by poverty.

Hers is also the story of strong women everywhere, women who cope and keep coping without husbands, woman who cope for the sake of their children and who cope because they have to give the next generation a chance. If this is a story about poverty and struggle it is also a story about courage.

Nokondi's Morning Call and *Levekuka Clay* can also be seen as stories about change, but not perhaps in a way the protagonists would recognise. In *Nokondi's Morning Call* local artist George Sari paints pictures of the mythical Nokondi. Sari is concerned about the problems of climate change and about the fact that people

no longer honour the ancient gods and mythical figures.

However, it is fair to ask which version of Nokondi he is talking about. Sari, who has co-authored one book, *Land of Nokondi*, emphasises Nokondi's role as an environmental guardian. In Simbu myth, however, Nokondi is not exactly a green role model. He keeps his wife and child locked up in a rock and fights battles on behalf of his clan. In the film Sari worries that young people ignore Nokondi and blames the problems caused by global warming on this rejection of the old ways. A young man interviewed for the film says his church (we are never told which one) has told him not to believe in Nokondi. The question which is not answered is which version of Nokondi is being rejected. Is it the oppressive, patriarchal big man or is it Sari's environmental demi-God, the transfigured Nokondi? *Nokondi's Morning Call* offers fragments of a larger story and poses more questions than its nine minutes can answer.

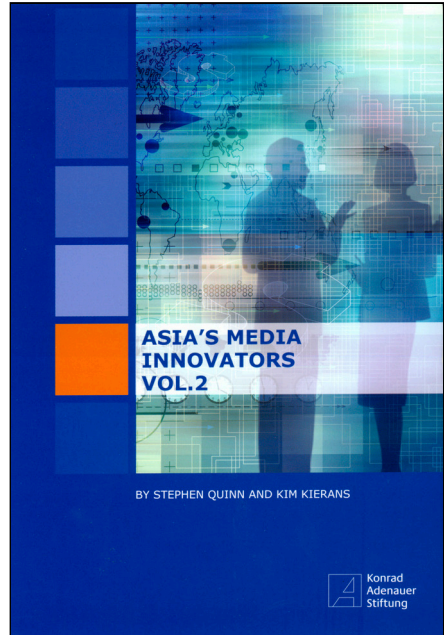
A consumer-driven approach

Asia's Media Innovators Vol 2, edited by Stephen Quinn and Kim Kierans. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. 2010. 137 pp. No ISBN. www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_21583-1522-2-30.pdf?110126051529 (free download)

THIS BOOK is a second volume of studies of innovations at selected media companies in the Asia-Pacific region. The earlier edition dealt with an account of the some of the key players in the Asian media landscape and their dynamics; this volume engages more with the social factors, trends and consumer practices that become the driving force for these players.

Most Asian countries are less developed than the North America and Europe and face several economic and political problems. Yet they are one of the fastest growing markets for the new media technologies and their people are potentially the biggest users of social media and social networking.

How do social media in Asia cope with economic and political challenges? What makes the Philippines 'the social networking capital of the world'? How does twittering and micro-blogging promote 'citizen journalism'? What consumers' behavioural changes makes Facebook,



MySpace and YouTube so successful? And what are the future challenges of Asia's media companies as innovative providers? Co-authors Quinn and Kierans examine all these issues.

The book is divided into ten chapters, covering a range of new media innovations in various countries of the region. Each chapter focuses on the trends and usage of a particular form of media in each country starting from the Citizen-aided news in the Philippines, blogging in Vietnam, internet usage in Singapore and Phuket and continuing with tweeting in Australia, digital media in Malaysia and mobile phone penetration in India and China. It concludes with the possible trends

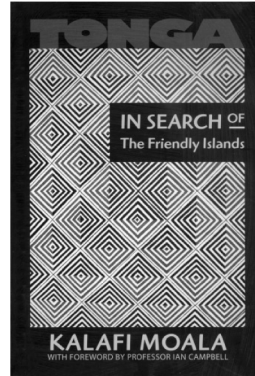
and growth of new media predicting future trends in these countries.

The authors give a detailed account of the new media developments in each country, providing facts and figures in the form of tables, graphs and charts to explain situations in several Asian markets. Surprisingly, they have ignored Pakistan as one of the biggest markets of the mobile phone industry. The use of mobile phones is flourishing in Pakistan, not only as a tool for social networking. It has offered new opportunities in the traditional media to fight state censorship.

Newspapers and television channels are using mobile phones to provide news that cannot be published or broadcast. In 2009, GEO TV channel used mobile phone networks to air two of its weekly political talk shows as 'citizen broadcasts' that were banned from being aired by the former President Musharaf due to political reasons. It might be worthwhile for the authors to include a chapter on such innovations to demonstrate the element of 'social empowerment' in their next edition. — *Rukhsana Aslam is a media educator and a doctoral candidate at AUT University.*

IN SEARCH OF THE FRIENDLY ISLANDS

TONGA AND THE MEDIA



BY KALAFI MOALA

THIS IS A SOUL-SEARCHING BOOK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE PACIFIC KINGDOM AS IT PURSUES DEMOCRATIC CHANGES IN THE WAKE OF THE NOVEMBER 2006 URBAN RIOT AND HOW THE MEDIA IS FACING UP TO THE CHANGES.

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