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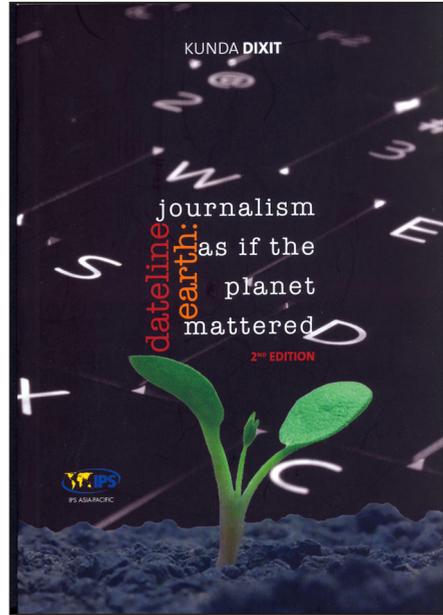
Globalisation ghosts and the gatekeepers

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.’

References

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