

# Yasmine Ryan

## A sketch of an extraordinary journalist's international career



JASON DORDAY/SCOOP

**Figure 1:** Yasmine Ryan demonstrating her skills at work in Solomon Islands ... she was devoted to human rights.

**Obituary:** There is yet much to learn from journalist Yasmine Ryan's experience, who died tragically in conflicted circumstances in Istanbul, Turkey, on 30 November 2017 after a stellar career reporting in international conflict zones, from the Pacific to the Middle East. One element is relevant to journalism and communications curriculum. We all live in complex times, and for those who choose to exercise their professional craft in regions of conflict, there is a clear need to develop an awareness of how dangerous situations impact on us. The author of this article argues that professional development in this specific area of journalist safety must be designed to provide the individual an ability to self-assess and determine what kind of help is needed and how to access it before a crisis (whether internal or external) erupts.

*Keywords:* Arab Spring, conflict reporting, journalism, independent journalism, international journalism, investigative journalism, journalist safety, New Zealand, obituary, Turkey, war correspondence

**I**FIRST met Yasmine Ryan in the late autumn of 2004, near Princess Street by the University of Auckland's quad. She was with a colleague of hers, Katie Small, and they were to become researchers for a book I was writing on the Ahmed Zaoui case, *I Almost Forgot The Moon*. It was soon apparent that Yasmine and Katie were far more than researchers. And they, in their own right, became co-authors of the 2004 book. While Yasmine completed her postgraduate studies at Auckland University, she worked with me, editing international content for a media organisation I was involved with back then.

Later in 2006, from a hospital bed, I asked Yasmine to report on unrest that was breaking out in Honiara in the Solomon Islands. Without fuss, and with focus, Yasmine and photographer Jason Dorday, arrived in Honiara and set to work, seeking to uncover what was happening and report on it for *Scoop*. It was exceptional work (Ryan, 2006a, 2006b).

Yasmine was an internationalist, in a pure sense. New Zealand is obviously remote from much of the world. Few of us here have the opportunity to digest and understand the causes that underly the effects of cultural and political change on the other side of the world.

Many of us have been aware that Yasmine chose to work in some of the most challenging regions of the world. It is a fact that those challenges are complicated and pose heightened risk for young, independent women.

Yasmine's work was significant. We know this because from this distance we, understandably, often measure the success of a journalist's work by where it is published. Yasmine's work has been published in many of the world's leading outlets: *Al Jazeera*, *Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *International Herald Tribune* and *The Huffington Post*. She also contributed to CNN and to the CBC. Most recently, Yasmine had worked as senior features editor at TRT World in Istanbul.

Yasmine was honoured by numerous international awards for excellence in journalism, and in 2016 she was selected as a World Press Institute Fellow. In October 2016, Yasmine was invited to speak to an audience of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. She spoke on press coverage of sexual harassment, on Libya, and on United States foreign policy - specifically the foreign policy legacy of former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and how US policy had impacted on the people of Libya.

Yasmine's influence was growing. Only four weeks before her death, Yasmine had been elected to the board of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television. And she was highly regarded by the Coalition for Women in Journalism, who were so supportive of Yasmine and continue to be involved in

assisting other brave women who choose this type of work.

Throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, Yasmine was renowned as a journalist who would begin her investigations from the field. She connected with how humble people were affected by huge movements of cultural and political change. Yasmine



**Figure 2: Anonymous and Tunisian activists were calling for an end to government censorship in January 2011 when Yasmine Ryan's article for Al Jazeera English 'broke' the rise of the Arab Spring in Western media.**

documented their accounts, she followed the lines of cause, followed the channels of responsibility right to the top. She documented the responses of the power-elites, and questioned them.

Yasmine was driven by a deep sense of right and wrong. She was sensitive to the wants of humble people, challenged by the inhumanity that she was witness to, and did not judge those who were caught up in crisis.

Yasmine knew that her work was part of the solution, not the problem.

Trust was central to her work, whether it be: families in crisis, people in the streets, members of militia, or those who enjoy the power of authority. Yasmine was trusted to accurately convey their view of their world, within context, to a wider audience.

One of her contacts, a person I had introduced Yasmine to in Europe eight years earlier, wrote to me, saying:

I have in memory Yasmine's love for investigating for the truth, with pertinent analysis... I always read her articles with deep interest... because every time I discovered new information on complex events - particularly when she was covering sensitive areas like Libya and Tunisia... Please convey my sincere condolences to Yasmine's family and friends in New Zealand.

### **Vital information and understanding**

Yasmine's significance throughout the theatre within which she worked, was measured by the vital information that she revealed, and brought an understanding to: those right in the midst of crisis, those seeking justice and common-ground, and those who are part of a great diaspora that divides people from their families and cultures.

Her journalist colleagues that worked alongside her insist Yasmine was not merely respected; she was, and remains, an inspiration. They remain in awe of this independent woman of intelligence and influence from Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Yasmine's wide network of colleagues speak of how she was the first English-speaking Western journalist to report on the significance of a rising movement now known as the Arab Spring. As such, it followed that she was first to write evaluative exposes written from Tunisia, and Libya in the post-Gaddafi period – when armed militia rose up and swept across the North Africa state. Yasmine's investigation 'Tunisia's Bitter Cyberwar', written for Al Jazeera English, was the first feature to appear in any English-language media on what was to become the Arab Spring (Ryan, 2011). The article, under a 'Trouble in Tunisia' logo, began:

Thousands of Tunisians have taken to the streets in recent weeks to call for extensive economic and social change in their country.

Among the fundamental changes the protesters have been demanding is an end to the government's repressive online censorship regime and freedom of expression.

That battle is taking place not just on the country's streets, but in internet forums, blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds.

The Tunisian authorities have allegedly carried out targeted 'phishing' operations: stealing users passwords to spy on them and eradicate online criticism. Websites on both sides have been hacked. (Ryan, 2011)

Her feature investigation, also for Al Jazeera English, titled: 'The Benghazi link to Tunisia's assassinations' in September 2013 demonstrated the depth of Yasmine's understanding of North African conflict, and indeed, how well-positioned her contacts were across the region (Ryan, 2013).

Yasmine's style was thorough, and she always followed up on her investigations. Her report for the United Kingdom's *Independent*, about Tunisian policemen being charged for 'poor reactivity' over the Sousse massacre that left 39 dead, underscores this approach (Ryan, 2016).

Her colleagues speak of how Yasmine empowered aspiring young journalists by showing them that they had a right, as seekers of the truth, to question authority and the power-elites. Yasmine mentored those that sought help, and guided them on how to measure the version of truth that they had discovered.

This is how Yasmine's significance transcended into respect, and into inspiration. Yasmine's legacy will endure. She was writing two books, one on Tunisia and another on Libya with particular focus on Benghazi. Yasmine's identity as a human rights journalist will also endure, and she will continue to be iconic among women journalists who seek to report our world *through their senses*.

As I mentioned earlier, the first time I met Yasmine was in the late autumn of 2004, near Auckland University's quad. The last time I caught up in person with

her, she was in the very same place. I mentioned this to her, and she chuckled in that happy way that all those who know her will recognise.

### **Empowering journalists to cope with risk**

Going forward, there is yet much to learn from Yasmine's experience. One element is relevant to journalism and communications curriculum. We all live in complex times, and for those who chose to exercise their professional craft in regions of conflict, there is a clear need to develop an awareness of how dangerous situations impact on ourselves. Advanced observational human-impact and human-condition skills are vital. Professional development in this specific area must be designed to provide the individual with an ability to self-assess and determine what kind of help is needed and how to access it before a crisis (whether internal or external) erupts (Journalist Jasmine Ryan's death in Istanbul fall shocks colleagues, 2017)

Specifically, it is essential that professionals working within a theatre of conflict are able to detect and recognise the impact that war, crisis, and inhumanity has on ourselves and others.

Of equal importance is the need for the individual to have advanced skills in knowing what to do about an enduring sense of personal and private unease; how to access support and resources that will assist in returning the individual to a state of sustainable holistic health.

Another element that requires a response from educators, and those involved in developing professional development curriculum, is to develop a programme that empowers an awareness among our journalists of the dangers relating to the consequences of their investigative inquiry – that is particularly relevant where the individual's methodology has involved the development of contacts from within disparate, opposing, warring forces within a theatre of conflict.

Often, in an effort to identify truth, the methodology practised involves the triangulation of information. Such information is often gathered from individuals, leaders, representatives and from one's observations. The sources are often unconnected but for a shared experience of war and an effort to destroy an opposing group and all it represents.

Within this theatre, the journalist is often regarded by sources as a powerful yet potentially dangerous individual and as such—particularly in the latter stages of an investigation and/or post-publication—can find themselves in a seriously vulnerable position.

Retaliation against the individual journalist can take many forms. Being aware of, and anticipating, a kickback response is the experience of many journalists. However, within the complexities of regional conflict and geopolitics the methods used by opposing forces can be dangerous, clandestine, and overwhelming when considered from a personal impact standpoint.



In the past decade, situational security has become a common spoke of professional development for conflict journalists. But there is, in my opinion, an absence of resource or information available to the journalist on how to operate normally once they have returned from a field of conflict to a place of perceived safety.

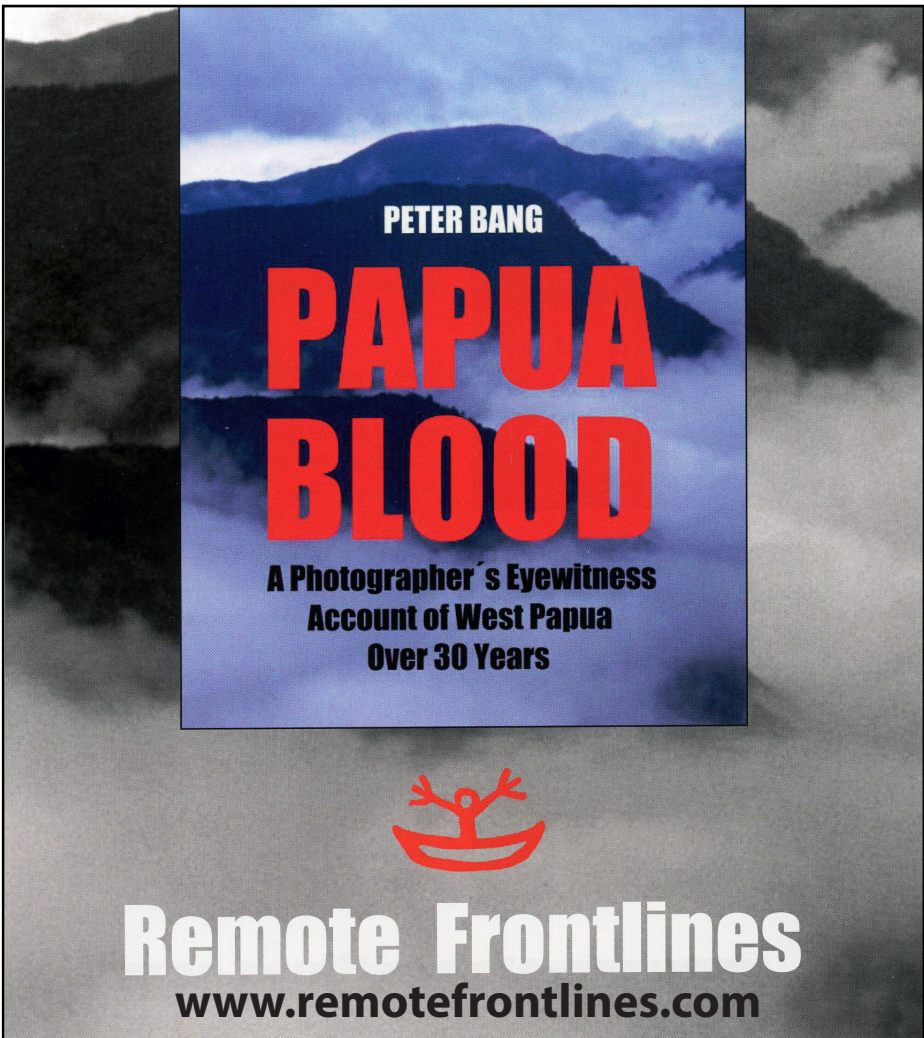
It is there, within the silence of one's home, where a sense of familiarity and comfort, gained from surroundings and conversation, clashes with one's experience of the reality of war. It is there that a personal battle can build by degrees as she or he prepares their investigation for publication. Pressures compound when the journalist becomes preoccupied on how one should cope personally once the work is public—when one is required to face the music.

Impact is a complex part of a journalist's work. It is what most journalists seek as a consequence of their effort. But impact can also cause retaliation. It can cause a separation between one's professional and personal identity. How to manage, balance, and resolve that phenomenon involves a vital skill that, if mastered, would help.

## References

- Journalist Yasmine Ryan's death in Istanbul fall shocks colleagues (2017, December 1). *Asia Pacific Report*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2017/12/01/journalist-yasmine-ryans-death-in-istanbul-fall-shocks-colleagues/>
- Manning, S., Ryan, Y., & Small, K. (2004). *'I almost forgot the moon': The disinformation campaign against Ahmed Zaoui*. Auckland, NZ: Multimedia Investments.
- Ryan, Y. (2006a, April 26). Another day in the Solomon Islands: *Scoop*. Retrieved from [www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00304.htm](http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00304.htm)
- Ryan, Y. (2006b, April 27). Solomon Islands: The tables are turned. *Scoop*. Retrieved from [www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00329/solomon-islands-the-tables-are-turned.htm](http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00329/solomon-islands-the-tables-are-turned.htm)
- Ryan, Y. (2006c, April 28). Solomon Islands: Aftermath. *Scoop*. Retrieved from [www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00353.htm](http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/S00353.htm)
- Ryan, Y. (2011, January 7). Tunisia's bitter cyberwar. *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved from [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/20111614145839362.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/20111614145839362.html)
- Ryan, Y. (2013, September 13). The Benghazi link to Tunisia's assassinations. *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved from [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/2013912123114596685.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/2013912123114596685.html)
- Ryan, Y. (2016, January 9). Tunisian policemen charged for 'poor reactivity' over Sousse massacre that left 39 dead. *Independent*. Retrieved from [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisian-policemen-charged-for-poor-reactivity-over-sousse-massacre-that-left-39-dead-a6803511.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tunisian-policemen-charged-for-poor-reactivity-over-sousse-massacre-that-left-39-dead-a6803511.html)
- Sofuoglu, M. (2017, December 4). Tribute to a NZ media mentor: 'How Yasmine Ryan taught me how to write'. *Asia Pacific Report*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2017/12/04/tribute-to-a-nz-media-mentor-how-yasmine-ryan-taught-me-how-to-write/>


*Selwyn Manning is director of Multimedia Investments Limited and editor of Evening Report. He is also a former chair of the Pacific Media Centre. This article is adapted from a eulogy he delivered at the Service for Yasmine Ryan at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Auckland, on 14 December 2017. selwynmanning@gmail.com*



**PETER BANG**

**PAPUA  
BLOOD**

**A Photographer's Eyewitness  
Account of West Papua  
Over 30 Years**



**Remote Frontlines**  
[www.remotefrontlines.com](http://www.remotefrontlines.com)