

DAVID ROBIE

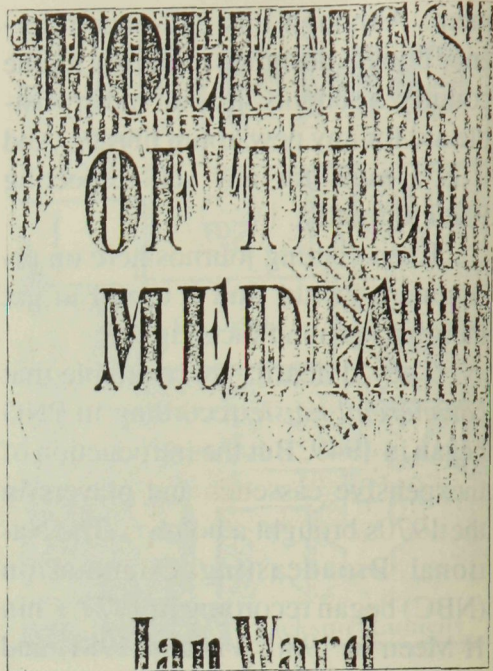
Among the many people Rannells acknowledges for their help in preparing this fact book is his wife, Eve. At the time of the first edition she was PNG Collection Librarian at the National Library and now she is Law Collection Librarian at the University of PNG.

The *Times of Papua New Guinea* and its successor, the *Saturday Independent*, have been quick to recognise this book's value by running a series of double-page educational fact spreads' on the country's system of government and the provinces.

What does the book say about the now deceased and lamented *Times*? 'Another weekly [in addition to *Wantok*] published by Word. Founded in 1980, it analyses PNG and world political and economic news.'

Disappointing. Rannells could have been more informative than that. In fact, the whole 27-line section on newspapers needs to be extensively expanded with more detail in the next edition.

Still, this is a small blemish on what is generally a fine reference volume.



DAVID ROBIE

Lecturer in Journalism,
University of Papua New Guinea

The blurring of the lines between PR and journalism

Politics of the Media, Ian Ward, Melbourne: Macmillan Educational Publishers, 1995, 322 pp. ISBN 0-7329-2789-7. Price: Not supplied.

LIKE MANY countries, the pressure of 'fax journalism' is a problem in South Pacific nations. Fax or hacks journalism?

Enterprising public relations offices in mining or petroleum companies, chambers of commerce, and Government departments and ministries know that they can easily get their

message across in the news media with well-timed and professional press releases. Under-staffed newsrooms and inexperienced journalists, thankful for the 'gem', are quick to recycle the 'story'.

Some journalists are so lacking in self-respect that they change a couple of words here and there and rerun the press release under their own byline. The chances are that they get away with it time and again.

The lines between public relations and journalism have become blurred, particularly in the Pacific where advertising and promotional supplements posing as genuine editorial are commonplace. One major daily has even taken to selling its front and back pages and advertising wraparounds..

It is timely then for publication of this new book on the dilemmas of public relations, politics and the mass media in our region by Ian Ward, senior lecturer in the Department of Government at the University of Queensland.

As Ward notes, 'the modern face of public relations presents itself as a fully-fledged profession whose members have particular expertise in assisting organisations communicate with their "publics". The industry resents any suggestion that public relations has to do with media manipulation, propaganda, or "political whitewash jobs".'

Yet, as Ward points out, the beginnings of the public relations industry sit uncomfortably alongside recent attempts to turn it into a 'profession'.

The man who pioneered PR in Australia, George FitzPatrick, advertised himself as a 'registered practitioner of public persuasion, propaganda [and] publicity'.

These days PR people reject any connection between their industry and propaganda. But in contrast to the principles of truth that govern the ethical codes of journalists, PR practitioners' practices are left wanting.

And journalists around the Pacific should be wary about becoming captive to the PR people and their fax machines — or even their video press releases which are becoming more commonplace.

Take for example, some of the media hoaxes carried out by PR practitioners. One of the infamous cases was the 'incubator babies' human rights atrocity stories fed about the Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait in October 1990. The lurid tales about soldiers snatching babies out of incubators in neo-natal hospitals after their occupation was exposed after the 1991 Gulf War as a gigantic lie — it was the creation of a \$11 million publicity campaign by the American-based PR firm Hill and Knowlton on behalf of an oil-rich Kuwaiti lobby group.

Another example, is how Pacific and Western journalists were duped by the pro-coup publicists in Fiji that the late Dr Timoci Bavadra's democratic Government was Indian-dominated. This is still reported by the region's wire services and journalists.

The fact is that it was a 'racially

DAVID ROBIE

balanced' Government with 15 cabinet members — seven Fijian, including the Prime Minister, seven Indo-Fijian, and one mixed-race. The 1970 constitution maintained a racially balanced Parliament by a complicated system of cross-voting.

Yet another example is how the Ok Tedi and BHP publicists have portrayed the Australian lawyers (specialists in class actions) acting for the landowners seeking compensation over environmental devastation are 'gold digging' at the expense of PNG. Hence the misguided draconian draft legislation designed to outlaw any legal action seeking compensation against Ok Tedi Mining Ltd.

The founder of PR in the United States described the industry as the 'engineering of consent'. However, access to PR, says Ward, is not equally distributed. Its critics often depict it as a means of mobilising public consent to which only the 'already powerful' have ready recourse.

The tension between public relations, politics and the news is just one of the many topics examined by Ward. Some of his other wide-ranging and evocative chapters have provocative titles such as 'Bullets, bad guys, propaganda and powerful effects', 'Manufacturing the news', 'Ownership and control: media mates and moguls' and 'Hero turtles, union bullies and other villains'.

Ward's final chapter, on a changing media and changing society, is particularly informative and challeng-

ing. This discusses the rise of interactive information technologies and poses the question: how has the marriage of microprocessors and telecommunications transformed mass communication?

Also, does Internet mean greater sharing of information?

Contrary to the view of those who believe that the new communication technologies will increase democracy, Ward finds that they will widen the information gap. For example, those corporations which already can afford access to the electronic communication of news such as AAP's Newstrack can already intercept a damaging news story and circumvent it or downplay it with a strategic PR response before the story has even been broadcast or published in the daily news media. Individuals and small community groups have no such 'democratic' interactive access to the news media.

Ward's most pessimistic conclusion is that information technology can be easily turned to the surveillance of citizens and thus also provide governments with 'better means of suppression'. 'Surveillance,' he says, 'is an inevitable part of interactive technology.'

Journalists should make it their business to be informed about these issues and developments. Without that knowledge and the existence of vigilant professional journalist unions and lobby groups in the Pacific, the democratic notion of freedom of information will increasingly become a farce.