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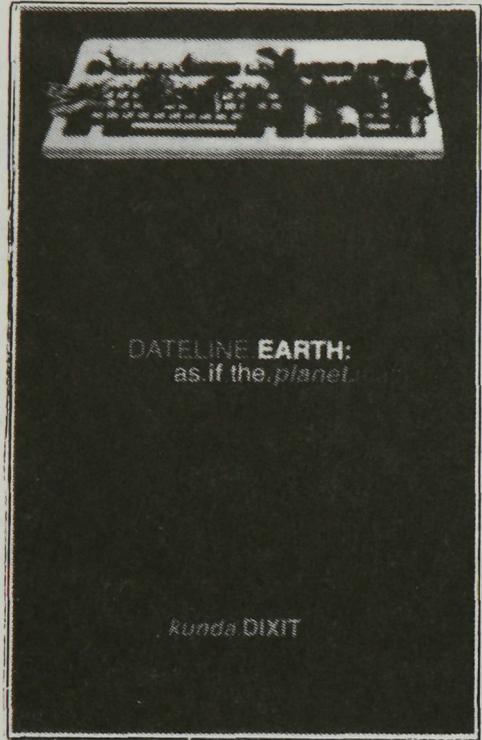
Tackling mass media and mass ignorance

Planet Earth: Journalism As If The Planet Mattered, By Kunda Dixit. Manila: InterPress, 1997. 185 pp. ISBN 971 27 0611 7.

WALDEN BELLO, the perceptive and progressive Filipino economist and author of *Dragons in Distress*, once wrote: 'It is clear that there are environmental costs to [Asia-Pacific's] development. It has been achieved at the cost of tremendous ecological damage, growing inequality, the crisis of agriculture.

'Export-oriented industrialisation telescoped into three decades processes of environmental destruction that took many more years to unfold in earlier industrialising societies.'

At the time, Bello was seen as something of a heretic by orthodox economists and journalists who wrote in glowing terms about Asia's 'tiger economies'. These tigers were regarded as the beast to emulate by some South Pacific nations, notably Papua New Guinea, which shares a frontier with Indonesia, and Fiji.



But in the wake of the Asian stock exchange collapses in October 1997, and the forest environmental devastation in Indonesia and elsewhere, Bello's 'dragons in distress' forecast has proved closer to the mark.

And now with Papua New Guinea coping with its own El Nino drought disaster and it deepening economic chaos, a challenging and entertaining new media book has emerged that should be read by all serious South Pacific journalists.

Former Interpress regional editor Kunda Dixit's provocatively titled book *Dateline Earth: Journalism As If The Planet Mattered*, provides regional journalists with a timely global view that makes a mockery of dry old com-

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panty balance sheets and government policy sheets.

'Development should lead to human progress, but it doesn't always,' says Dixit (p 81). 'Journalists are a crucial link to the feedback loop ensuring that improvements in the quality of life can be sustained and do not permanently damage nature.'

The emphasis of Dixit's book is revealed right from the cover: a computer keyboard invaded by rare butterflies, dolphins and endangered plants — symbolising the challenge of the information superhighway for developing nation news media, and how journalists need to find more holistic and environmentally sound ways of reporting national development.

As radical Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire 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 103) 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 (New Zea-

land, for example, only works for two-thirds of the people, for the other marginalised one third it is a social and economic nightmare) to the detriment of their own people.

Among the issues that Dixit takes a good healthy swipe at is mass media generally (and 'mass ignorance'); development journalism ('the last refuge of mediocre media'); covering Third World wars ('Desert Storm was ultimately an imperial war against the Iraqi people'); balanced reporting ('status quo journalism — in favour of the rich and the 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 the South, 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 90)

This is certainly not new to Papua New Guinea, in the grip of an unpopular World Bank restructuring exercise, or in many other Pacific nations.



Ajit Ninan / InterPressService

'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 91)

The challenge is 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\$1.4 trillion in the South over the past 35 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.

'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 97)

Turning to the unbalanced gender nature of the 'macho media' — even when the 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 102)

Dixit also condemns how economic globalisation 'rides on the backs of women's labour' and threatens to feminise poverty by 'chaining women

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to the global free market where the slogan seems to be "every man for himself".'

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

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

And this assertion would provoke laughter if not editorial anger in Papua New Guinea: 'Domestic media criticism of these logging operations have been muted since the Malaysians bought off the Port Moresby daily, the *Post-Courier*.' (p 108)

Post-Courier is a Murdoch daily; Malaysian-owned *The National* is the paper with the logging connections.

Finally, Dixit appeals to journalists to be part of the developing world's solutions, not its problems. He advises them to rely on a 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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Global networks and news beyond Utopia

Information Technologies for Newspaper Publishing in Asia and the Pacific, Edited by Belinda Hopkinson. Paris: UNESCO, 1997. 198 pp. ISBN 92 310334 4. Unpriced.

FOR MANY in the communications industry, the development of the Internet is seen as a revolutionary creation that ranks with the invention of the printing press more than 500 years ago.

It has already had a dramatic affect, even in the South Pacific where journalists are leapfrogging into this technology. The two largest daily newspapers in the region, *The National* and the *Post-Courier*, have had online editions since last year and Internet media courses have begun in Papua New Guinea.

The days when all a journalist needed to report, especially in societies organised around village life, was a pencil and paper have long since gone.

Today, as more people become interested in what is happening out-