

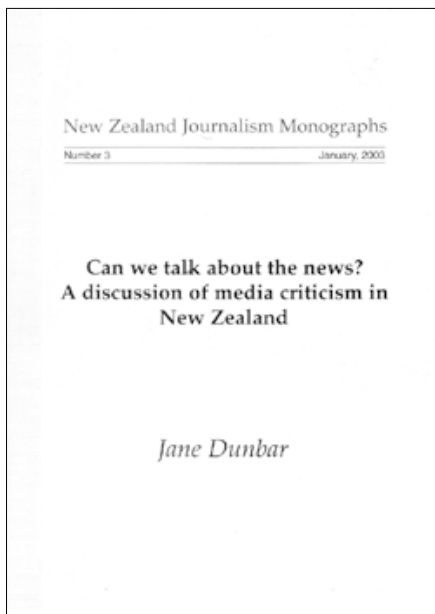
DR WAYNE HOPE

Principal lecturer in communication studies at Auckland University of Technology

Little light shed on a dark and restrictive era of media criticism

***Can we talk about the news? A discussion of media criticism in New Zealand*, by Jane Dunbar. NZ Journalism Monographs, No 3, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Canterbury, 2003. 57 pp. ISBN 982 366 009 3**

IN THIS monograph, Jane Dunbar interviews news journalists and media commentators about the quality of media criticism in New Zealand. This is certainly a pertinent theme for research. Of late, news media performance has become a focus of public debate. Examples include John Campbell's 'corngate' interview with the Prime Minister, reportage of the Iraq war/invasion, Fairfax's takeover of INL print holdings and implementation of the Television New Zealand charter.



Overall, Dunbar's interviewees point out that local scrutiny of the news media is difficult to sustain. Thus, journalists within corporate media are unlikely to comment upon ownership patterns, within all media organisations ubiquitous advertising contracts available news space. Tight news budgets throughout print and broadcasting precludes critical media commentary. Many news providers are acutely sensitive to criticism especially from academics. Monocultural news frames inherently marginalize Maori critiques of mainstream journalism. In general, the small and intimate nature of New Zealand society leads to self-censorship and a reluc-

tance to offend one's colleagues. All of these cited observations are listed rather than evaluated. The author never develops any kind of interpretive argument. And, there is no contextual picture of the New Zealand news media from which evaluations and arguments might be derived. One cannot assess the quality of media criticism without a general understanding of the prevailing media landscape.

The monograph also contains assertions and allegations that lack specificity. Such is evident in the overview of available media criticism. In this regard, Dunbar cites a number of news professionals who have been critical of Radio New Zealand's *Mediawatch* coverage. They include Susan Chetwin from the *Sunday Star-Times*, Tim Pankhurst from *The Dominion Post*, Finlay McDonald from the *Listener*, Al Morrison, formerly of *Morning Report*, and Gavin Ellis from *The New Zealand Herald*. But there is no substantive analysis of their concerns and no case studies which might exemplify *Mediawatch's* shortcomings.

Dunbar concludes that 'not without its limitations and flaws, *Mediawatch* is nevertheless the most wide-ranging and well-recognised source of media criticism New Zealand has' (p 6). Yet she never specifies these limitations and flaws and does not substantiate her positive summa-

tion of *Mediawatch's* performance (how wide-ranging is the programme; what themes does it cover?).

Overall, the monograph resorts to a 'he says, she says' style of exposition without authorial interpretation. So, what is the author's perspective? In my view, it is shaped by misconceptions about the relationship between news professionals and media academics. Dunbar states in the introduction that she will

focus on news providers' views in the hope that it might stimulate some to actually read this report — to at least read it out of curiosity for what competitors have to say. I do this because of indications that people in the news business have a profound suspicion of anything written about the media within academia. So while this report has been put together through a university grant, it is deliberately more like an extended feature article than a piece of academic research. It aims to talk about the news industry in a journalist-friendly way, and it will be distributed to news organisations (p 3).

Now, it is simplistic to say that news professionals have a profound suspicion of academic commentary. Over the last decade, many news professionals have taught journalism courses on university degrees. As a communication studies lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology, I have

worked alongside a well-known television interviewer, a former *Listener* editor, a former editor of a major daily newspaper and media practitioners who combined their professional work with university teaching. As the author herself acknowledges, Judy McGregor, former editor of the *Sunday News*, is a major figure in media studies research and journalism education. Furthermore, news providers often ask media academics to write or comment on media issues.

Whatever the case, I am not convinced that a sharp division exists between 'an extended feature article' and a piece of academic research. Both should contain intellectual rigour and accessible prose. Unfortunately, Dunbar eschews analysis in favour of a supposed 'journalist-friendly' style which serves only to demean the craft of feature writing.

The general lack of context and specificity means that the monograph does not make any assessment about the issues under review. The concluding sentence illustrates the problem:

So it may take time but there is hope that fears of negative consequences for raising independent and critical voices from both within and outside media circles will eventually be nothing more than relics of a dark and restrictive past (p 52).

Where does this hope about the likely future of media criticism in New Zealand come from? What counts as a critical rather than a conservative or conformist voice? Do we still inhabit a dark and restrictive era? Or is darkness and restriction already consigned to the past? Readers looking for answers to these questions should be advised to look elsewhere.