‘Impartial’?
No, this is a tribute to a people’s suffering


KUNDA DIXIT is a remarkable journalist and an inspiring communications innovator. He has been one of the visionary writers who have been able to make sense of development journalism and development communication theory and translate this into practice. A decade before this book, his Dateline.Earth: Journalism.as.if.the.planet.mattered (1996) became a sought after classic and should be in every South Pacific newsroom (but is actually in very few).

It should also be widely cited in Australian and New Zealand journalism schools as well. Reading it would contribute to more perceptive reportage of the region by young journalists. Dixit’s prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a normative.

Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. Chapter headings such as ‘Mass media and mass ignorance’, ‘Journalists without borders’ and ‘Development deadlock” were indicators of his underlying message about how to make journalism more relevant to solutions rather than problems.

Although much of his work has been based in Southeast Asia, he has...
This young girl in a village on the outskirts of Kathmandu carried fodder for the family livestock in 2004. She broke down in tears while telling visiting journalists how her classmates were forcibly taken away from school by Maoists to an indoctrination camp two days' walk away.
also had some forays in the South Pacific and has contributed in the past to *Pacific Journalism Review* (1995). As a Nepali journalist he has lived his mission as something of a role model as a ‘new order’ humanitarian journalist.

After working as Asia-Pacific director of the Inter Press Service out of Bangkok and Manila, he returned to his Himalayan kingdom in 1996—just as the Maoist rebels were raiding their first police stations—to establish Panos South Asia, where he was director until 2000. A decade on, Dixit became editor of the *Nepali Times* and produced this book, which is an impressive example of how conflict reporting should be—focused on the people actually affected.

The title is derived from the decade-long war waged in the name of the Nepali people. As Dixit notes, ‘the Maoists called their revolution the “people’s war”, which was appropriate, because it was mostly the people who died and suffered’. Some 15,000 people died in the conflict, mostly non-combatants. Thousands were orphaned, widowed and bereaved. Millions became displaced people. A shocking upheaval for a mountainous nation that had not been caught in the grip of a real war since the Anglo-Nepal wars of 1814-16. Dixit writes in the introduction:

> Since then, Nepalis have been fighting other people’s battles, laying down their lives for countries other than their own. This is the first time in nearly two centuries that we have seen the motherland soaked in blood, our own blood. (p. 3)

It was against a ‘backdrop of democratic disarray in the capital and a spreading insurgency in the countryside that the royal massacre took place’ in Kathmandu on 1 June 2001: ‘In just over five minutes on that bloody Friday, King Birenda’s bloodline was nearly wiped out’ (p. 9).

But the period of authoritarianism, oppression and eventual dictatorship that followed was disastrous. King Gyanendra ‘miscalculated on two fronts’ when he imposed martial law on 1 February 2005. He had expected that the international community would back him for ‘rescuing the country from terrorism’, and that the Nepali people distrusted the main political parties so much that they would join his fight against the Maoists. He was wrong on both counts.

When the royal coup crushed opposition and dissent, ‘peace’ protests escalated into massive demonstrations against the royal regime: ‘Community radio, television stations and a defiant press relayed news and printed pictures of the rallies and the govern-
ment’s crackdowns, keeping Nepalis
fully engaged’ (p. 13).

Thrust into this national crisis, there was no way Dixit was going to
be sucked into ‘parachute’ report-
age and flying out to ‘file a dispatch
with the sterile detached writing we
were trained for in journalism school’
(p. 18). Here was an opportunity to
honour his journalistic ideals and live
and work the example he had so often
written about.

Nepal forced me to relearn journal-
ism. I couldn’t be just an aloof ob-
server, this required the ‘journalism
of attachment’. To try to get inside
the story and live it, not just point out
the problems but present solutions.
Highlight the ordeal of people who
have persevered against all odds to
survive and make things better. The
media doesn’t just hold a mirror to
society, it is the mirror. Traditional
ambulance-chasing body-bag jour-
nalism doesn’t help us to find peace.
A gripping visual or soundbite, or a
juicy quote, may actually distort real-
ity, because by being selective about
the facts we report, we may end up
telling lies. (p. 19)

Dixit’s warns that this does not mean
reporters should be waving the flag
to ‘deliberately take sides, distort
the truth, or deliberately promote a
cause’ (p. 21). He argues that media
needs a set of values to sustain itself.

He adds that in a society cursed with
extreme inequality, this often means
‘to speak for the last and the least
heard’.

For this book’s portrayal of the
‘people war’, journalists and pho-
tographers from across the country
were invited to send their pictures. A
three-member international commit-
tee made the final selection of 179
pictures for *A People War*, whittled
down the choice from some 2561
photographs submitted for the project.
Besides Dixit, on the editing team
were Shahidul Alam, a Bangladeshi
photographer, writer and activist with
a special interest in education, new
media and ICT; and Shyam Tekwani,
assistant professor in photojournal-
ism at the School of Communication
Studies in Nanyang Technological
University in Singapore. Tekwani
was the only correspondent to cover
the fighting in Jaffna from the Tamil
Tigers’ side. The choice of pictures
in *A People War*, was a difficult chal-
lenge:

We have tried to choose the pictures
that contextualise Nepal’s politics,
society and culture to show how they
were affected by the conflict. We tried
to avoid sensationalism and clichés.
War is not pretty, and it is not a
challenge to take pictures of corpses.
The real test is to take pictures that
grab the decisive moment, deliver the
message sharply and without ambiguity, while at the same time being tasteful and subtle. (p. 24)

This evocative and inspirational objective has certainly been achieved. And this war’s iconic imagery has been captured as a lasting tribute to the people’s suffering and the resourcefulness in adversity.

References