Book review: The Pacific Journalist: A Practical Guide

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What Tapsall and Varley have done is to highlight the changes affecting the industry.

In the chapter “Journalism: Beyond the Business”, Katrina Mandy Oakham, examines the “insidious nature of the commercial forces driving and redefining journalism.” She makes the point that journalists are “no longer the public’s watchdogs or privileged members of the fourth estate. They are business people producing a product for market.” In the Fairfax group, for example, editors-in-chief are now publishers. In otherwords, they have a foot in both the journalistic and commercial camps.

While essentially an academic work, the collection of essays in “Journalism: Theory and Practice” should be read by all journalists for a critical reflection on the profession.

ROBIE, David (ed) (2001)

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In 1995 I presented a paper at an AMIC conference in Singapore in which I ranted against the creeping globalisation of practical journalism books, meaning that they were increasingly American with American cultural values and American examples and ways of doing things. We needed locally written books on practical journalism to counter the educational encroachment of American books. Preferably in the local languages, but English would do as long as the content was local. I was lecturing in Hong Kong at the time and was specifically thinking of that market, as well as Singapore.

Countries in the developing world need their own books—urgently. What was needed, I said, was a series of books that gave students in countries such as Hong Kong, China and the South Pacific their own books on the practice of journalism, with their own examples, laws and ethics, their own cultural differences highlighted, and, where necessary in their own languages; or at least in English but with local situations and journalistic problems explored and explained.

The Pacific Journalist: A Practical Guide seeks to fill this vacuum in the South Pacific. As Robie says in his acknowledgements, “…to help address this need, I have gathered a group of contributors,
both working journalists and editors and others who have spent years in journalism education and training in the region, to share their insights and experience.”

The book is made up of chapters written by academics and practitioners in the Pacific and Papua New Guinea. Some, like Richard Dinneen, are from countries from out of the South Pacific region, in his case Australia, but are foreign correspondents working within the region. The book present a definable house style with a comprehensive index of topics. It is structured in six parts which attempt to link the theory with practice. The book looks at news and news writing, media law and ethics, court reporting, the print and broadcast media in the region, and online media in the Pacific. The final part is a collection of thoughts about various issues in the media. In this section it is good to see such issues as trauma and health reporting covered as well as the problems of foreign correspondents in a region, from both sides of the coin.

Robie and the other contributors provide a comprehensive representation of journalism students’ views on their training in the text. This can sometimes be very moving and makes us realise the importance of journalism to any democracy. There are many politicians and others in the Pacific who might not be so pleased to see such a book in print, espousing as it does the importance of journalism to the democracy of the region. The Newsgathering section, and others throughout the book, obviously focus on the May 2000 coup attempt and the problems which journalists—and indeed journalism students and Robie himself—found themselves dealing with. It is good to have this on the record. The early section on pressure and ethics for local journalists is a particularly good read.

The practical chapters on how to write and find the news, which have to be included in such a book, are pretty much those taught in any reputable journalism course anywhere, except that the examples are so local, which makes these ‘how-to’ sections interesting for outsiders. Sometimes would-be authors say that it is too difficult to make a book local because it limits the sales. This can of course be true, but if handled properly, it gives it a global interest and importance. Robie’s book achieves this and will be of interest to any journalism educator.