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Book review: Foreign Devils and Other journalists

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Australians are coming to understand what many Asians have long recognised: negative and stereotypical reporting is not only inaccurate and ethically wrong, it can have a direct impact on national economies and international relations.

On the second page of this collection’s opening essay, Alan Knight reminds us of (some) Australian journalists’ insensitivities to non-Western cultures and their ignorance of ‘other’ media procedures. Australia’s news media coverage of its Southeast Asian neighbours remains wanting. This criticism comes from regional political leaders as well as domestic media scholars and other commentators. Our reporters, often armed with cultural arrogance and democratic superiority and operating from a position of imagined intellectual power, are sent ‘there’ to tell ‘us’ about ‘them’.

This new offering from the Monash Asia Institute is a meaningful collection of thoughtful research on a very important aspect of the formulation of the Australian world view; in particular, how we view our regional neighbours (and they us), and how those views are formed through the news media prism. As the editors note in their introduction, this collection explores some of the more prominent media issues concerning both the news media in Southeast Asia and media-mediated relations between Australia and the regional states.

A baker’s dozen of contributors, writing from Australia, the UK, Hong Kong and Mexico, explore the collision of journalism values between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the challenges of ‘knowledge broking’ among the information byways of our geographical neighbourhood, how the Australian news media ‘constructs’ Asia and presents regional news for Australians, regional criticism of the Australian news media, and the media-foreign policy nexus.

As Damien Kingsbury (p. 17) points out, Australian journalism has been claimed by our neighbours as “a considerable source of friction” between our governments. In the case of Indonesia, it has been cited as the “primary bilateral difficulty”.

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Such criticism, he contends, is often self-serving on the part of regional political leaders, more often reflecting political than cultural difference.

But as Adam Schofield (p. 235) notes, the Australian news media’s promotion of its own ‘culture’ of Western liberalism makes unhelpful contributions to relations with our neighbours. It is not merely our racial, cultural and historical differences that have set us apart, Schofield says, but the dichotomy between our disparate media cultures.

Eric Loo’s chapter enlightens us to the structure and function of Malaysian news media and the modus operandi of Malaysian journalism. Such contributions assist to iron out the wrinkles of mutual misunderstanding, especially as diplomatic ‘incidents’ between Australian and Malaysia in recent years have been notable for their “public airing” in the news media (Schofield, 233).

Barry Lowe outlines how the Australian media ‘constructs’ Asia, for the most part through negative coverage. Tracking major story categories in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1993, he found the ‘recalcitrant’ affair and Gillespie case outweighed APEC or domestic politics in Malaysian coverage; “natural disasters” and “insurgency and terrorism” topped even the Marcos family in coverage of the Philippines; while in terms of Indonesia, reports of East Timor and military matters were more frequent than relations with Australia. Of a list of 17 most-reported nations in the SMH, Cambodia (at number 10) is the only Southeast Asian nation on the list (China 5; Japan 7). “The Australian news media’s negative and even hostile portrayal of our northern neighbours does not seem to be in step with Australia’s much proclaimed efforts to enmesh with the Southeast Asian region by adopting friendlier attitudes towards the nations and societies of that region” (Lowe, p. 129).

With increasing interest in Indonesia in the wake of Suharto’s resignation from the presidency and the East Timorese independence struggle, the contributions of Angela Romano and Rodney Tiffen are particularly welcome. Tiffen outlines the pivotal role the Australian media have played in Australia’s relations with Indonesia, while Romano identifies the pitfalls and leg-traps of negotiating the information maze of Jakarta. The impact of political change on media activity in post-Suharto Indonesia heralded a new openness, which is still unfolding.

Patricia Payne revisits the first “reporters’ war”, Vietnam, reflecting on Australia’s coverage of our involvement in that conflict. John Tebbutt provides an account of how the Philippines was reported to Australian readers following the ‘people’s power’ uprising of February 1986; Glen Lewis recounts how One Nation was reported in the English-language press of Thailand; and John
Marston provides a detailed account of the transformation of the Cambodian news media in the 1990s. This is varied fare with thematic integrity.

The closing chapter by William Atkins hits head-on with the clash between tradition and modernity, outlining the effects of satellite television and the Internet on ‘Asian values’ and the ‘information sensitivity’ of regional governments.

The overarching message of this collection is clear: the Australian news media has played, and will continue to play, an integral role in the development and maintenance of our regional relationships. This book provides a welcome contribution to a continuing debate, and the editors should be congratulated for their foresight. With both scholarly and practical application, Foreign Devils and Other Journalists ought to have broad appeal as a valuable resource for scholars, teachers, researchers, practitioners and observers of Asian media, comparative media systems and regional relationships.

As Patricia Payne (p. 166) points out: “The slow, tenuous attempts to realise an Australian nation, to recognise its regional influence and the balance between national interests and those of our neighbours, appear to have a very long way to go.”

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