Noted

Human touch, revealing media insights into Speight’s coup


At 10.45am on the morning of 19 May 2000, Fiji’s Parliament was disrupted when six gunmen entered and demanded the government step down. This is how it happened:

Mr Speaker: (Standing up) What is this?
Stranger No. 1: This is a civil coup, hold tight, nobody move!
Mr Speaker: Yes?
Stranger No. 1: This is a civil coup by the people, the taukei people and we ask you to please retire to your Chamber right now, Mr Speaker. Please co-operate so nobody will get hurt. (p. 18)

This is an extract from *Speight of Violence*, a book which recalls the memories of the 2000 coup as seen through the eyes of three people—Dr Tupeni Baba, a Deputy Prime Minister in the hostage government, his wife Unaisi and journalist Michael Field.

Baba recalls how he ended by resigning from his post as a university professor to join politics and ended up being a hostage—twice (previously in 1987). He wrote on scraps of paper about happenings during his 56 days in captivity and these notes form a basis for the book.

Unaisi Nabobo Baba gives the readers the hostage families’ point of view—especially the wives. She recalls how hard it was for her especially since she was pregnant. Field gives his view on the media and the
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crisis reportage. He found much of the international media reported it as a ‘Fijian vs. Indian’ problem, when it was actually a power struggle between two of Fiji’s leaders, Cakobau and Mara. He observes that overseas journalists knew little about Fiji and he gives an example of a New Zealand Herald reporter who was shocked it would take three hours to drive from Nadi to Suva and another who had read stories about the unrest in the Solomon Islands on his way to the Fiji coup. Without knowledge of the cultural system it would be hard to understand the politics.

Field also criticises the New Zealand media for taking little interest in Fiji before the coup. Covering the Pacific successfully needs ‘long-time commitment, anything other than that would be patronising’. He dismisses criticism that reporters were being unethical reporting from Parliament as journalists need to get as close to a story as they can (p. 176). However, he believes that after many of the reporters ‘moved in’ with the hostage-takers by eating and sleeping at Parliament, they started experiencing the Stockholm syndrome.

Speight was a testament to neatness, wearing an ironed sulu or wraparound, topped with a pressed cotton island-style shirt or business shirt, and often a tie. He left many reporters star-struck and he would flatter their egos in one of the oldest cons in the book: using each other’s first name. For many, he quickly became ‘George’ and he would respond with first names in reply, creating solidarity and a media version of the Stockholm syndrome. (p. 175)

Fiji has had three coups yet the local media keep making similar mistakes over and over again. Why? Because many experienced journalists who covered the first coup in 1987 have moved on to other careers. So there is a lack of institutional knowledge to guide journalists on how to report during a crisis. Fiji’s good journalists leave the country for better opportunities and better pay.

An unfortunate omission from this book is the critical role played by non-government organisations in support of human rights and the Constitution. There is little analysis of how they stood up for justice and campaigned for the coupsters to be prosecuted. But overall Speight of Violence is a good combination of the personal accounts by a hostage and his wife, and a perspective on media coverage of the coup from the eyes of a prominent South Pacific journalist.—CHRISTINE GOUNDER, a NiuFM reporter who covered the coup for Wansolwara.
A beacon of light in dark times


IN Freedom Next Time, the renowned investigative journalist and documentary maker John Pilger writes of ‘empire, facades and the enduring struggle of people for their freedom’. These are themes common to his entire body of work, for Pilger has over the last 30 years made a name for himself as a journalist on a mission to unveil the injustices of the world. In doing so, he has become so caught up in his subjects and the unfair politics of the world that it’s hard to imagine him being able to write about anything objectively.

But in the countries examined in *Freedom Next Time*, the under-reported facts speak for themselves with an irony Pilger no longer needs to underline. Pilger writes of the ‘official’ freedoms in places such as South Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan, devoting five long chapters to the stories of people that have struggled for years to win freedom—and, by and large, been denied it.

The fascinating opening chapter, ‘Stealing a nation’, deals with the depopulation by the British of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean. It was a forced evacuation that passed the world by, barely reported in the media, the Chagossians being kicked out of their island home in the 1960s to make way for the US and its military base.

As Pilger points out, it was only 30 years after they lost their nation, when some of these ‘men Friday’ returned from exile to their homes, that the media stumbled upon the story.

Pilger’s analysis of progress in South Africa since the fall of apartheid suggests that despite majority black rule, economic power remains in the hands of the wealthy white elite while black South Africans sink further into poverty. His evaluation of
Nelson Mandela casts at least some of the leader’s glowing legacy in a whole new light. The chapters on Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine are similarly filled with fascinating reading that’s nevertheless pervaded with a flat sense of pessimism.

Still, reality seldom makes comfortable material, and with its enduring focus on the disposed people of these countries, Pilger’s work actually does become the ‘beacon of light in dark times’, as Noam Chomsky has labeled it.—PETER GRIFFIN, journalist and documentary maker

Thoughtful web challenges


ONE of the ironies of the digital media revolution in New Zealand is the limited use of web media and web casting at journalism schools compared with across the Tasman. While many Australian media and communication schools have developed major and varied online publishing such as Queensland University of Technology’s East Timor project (Tickle, 2003) and the Papua New Guinea corruption reporting model (Tanner, 2004), only one NZ journalism course has a fully fledged ‘new media’ paper. Few journalism schools operate their own innovative online news services, preferring to encourage students to file for traditional media, mostly community newspapers.

Although there is a growing range of online media texts on the market, journalism educators are always on the alert for a new good one. Web Journalism is more of a thoughtful critique of online publishing than a ‘how to’ training text. While it tackles the challenges posed by the Daily.Me syndrome, it also questions the ability of journalists to think afresh. Stovall argues that journalists are trained to think lineally and they...
mostly comfortable with the inverted pyramid and other structures: ‘It will take some time to reformulate their thinking’ (p. 196).

The book has useful chapters on the infographics revolution; photojournalism, sound and the web; visual logic; engaging the audience and media law online. Web Journalism explores the so-called five web media characteristics—*immediacy* (the speed of the web provides an incentive to treat information with less care); *capacity* (unlimited but better navigation schemes needed); *flexibility* (the web can handle most forms of storytelling but is sometimes hampered by the state of the technology); *permanence* (while the web need never lose any information, many news sites have not done a good job of archiving); and *interactivity* (the biggest question of all).

The web changes the media-audience-environment relationship. If the audience isn’t satisfied, anybody can start their own news site at relatively little cost. While *Web Journalism* has some challenging insights with useful web resources, its muted design and lack of visual appeal undermine its potential for a course text.—**DAVID ROBIE, associate professor in journalism at AUT University**

**References**


www.apjc.org.au/program5.html