

NOTED:

Dreaded word
culture ‘like
a newsroom
hand grenade’

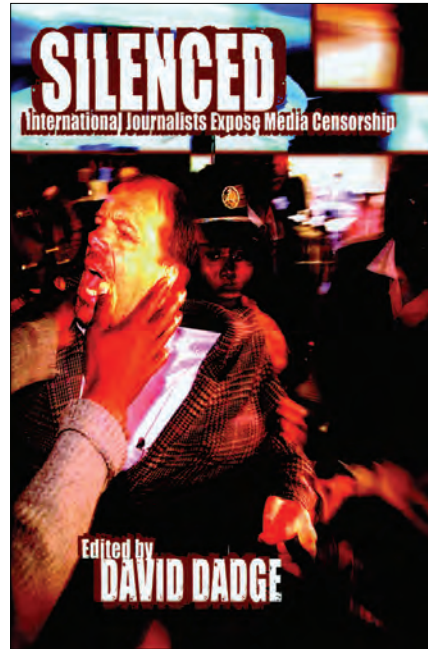
Silenced: International Journalists Expose Media Censorship, edited by David Dadge. New York: Prometheus Books, 2005, 295 pp. ISBN 1 59102 305 X.

THEY TRY everything, to gnaw at us, to bury us, to electrocute us, to drown us, to drain us,’ said Haitian broadcast journalist Jean Dominique. He was an enormously popular ‘Mr Truth’ to his grassroots listeners. ‘It’s been going on for 50 years, and why should it stop?’

‘They can still try to crush us; to machinegun us; to ignore, slander, bully and seduce us; to deflate, empty and distort us.’

On 3 April 2000, ‘they’ finally silenced Dominique.

He had arrived for work at his Radio Haiti Inter office at 6am that morning—as usual. His daily news programme *Inter-Actualités*, which he jointly hosted with his wife,



Michèle Montas, was due to go on air in barely an hour. As he left his parked car, a gunman walked up and shot him in the head and chest. A watchman was also gunned down (p. 274).

The assassination shook Haitians and became a global cause célèbre for media freedom groups protesting against this brutal execution intended to intimidate outspoken journalists. A police and judicial investigation was launched into the killings but was half-hearted. ‘They’ were too powerful.

On the first anniversary of the assassination, widow Michèle

Montas broadcast an 'open letter' to her husband, lambasting the 'greedy' politicians behind the killings and demanding an end to corruption (p. 291).

On Christmas Day 2002, gunmen tried to assassinate her too and shot her security guard instead. Two months later, she was forced to close Radio Haiti Inter, saying she had received one death threat too many.

The couple's extraordinary and tragic story, recounted with a graphic portrayal by Caribbean politics and media specialist Charles Arthur of sinister political intrigue and corruption in Haiti, is one of 14 chilling contributions in *Silenced*, an exposé of global media censorship.

This book is a reminder of how harsh and dangerous reality often is for journalists who challenge the status quo in oppressive developing countries. Frequently there is no justice for the news people's survivors.

The stories range from Jasper Becker, former Beijing bureau chief of the Hong Kong daily *South China Morning Post*, who fought—and lost—a battle against the paper's owners trying to soften coverage of China to protect their mainland interests (p. 173), to *The Guardian's* Andrew Meldrum, forcibly tossed out of Zimbabwe for daring to criticise sadistic dictator President Robert Mugabe (p. 101).

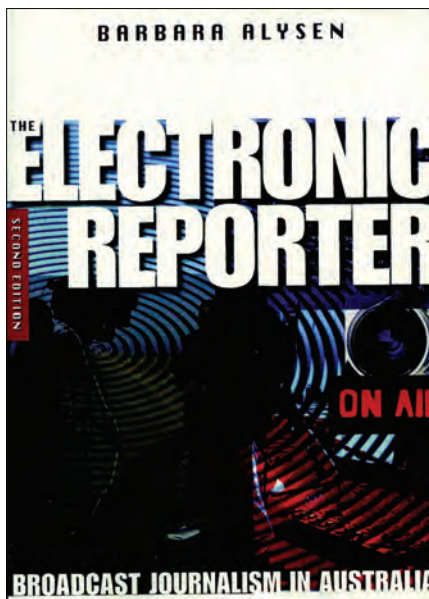
Even established democracies such as the US come under attack as *Texas City Sun* city editor Tom Gutting, sacked over a column criticising President George W. Bush, and KOMU-TV news director Stacey Woelfel, who challenged blind patriotism, critique the rampant post-September 11 self-censorship. Surprising though that there are no contributions dealing with Iraq (86 journalists killed in three years) and the Philippines (seven murdered last year alone, mostly investigating corruption)—the two countries currently with the highest death rates of journalists.

All this media murder and mayhem may seem rather remote from the South Pacific, but Auckland-based former Agence France-Presse correspondent Michael Field provides a poignant chapter about being 'clueless in coup coup land'—Fiji and other island suspects.

While admitting that the region has been spared the excesses of the worst journalist oppression, Field notes that the region has its own brand of intimidation. Although some reporters have been roughed up and deported, 'death and injury have yet to be a consequence' of a story.

Still, the dreaded word *culture* sometimes feels like a hand grenade in a newsroom and creates tension among journalists themselves (p. 255).

And with a backdrop of coups, ethnic conflict and riots, that relatively safe record is now seriously at risk. —**DAVID ROBIE**, an associate professor at AUT University.



A valuable industry resource

The Electronic Reporter, by Barbara Alysen (2nd edn.). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press. 2006, 293 pp. ISBN 0 86840 495 0.

THE ELECTRONIC REPORTER gives the reader valuable insight into the medium that has moved on significantly since the good old days of 16mm mute film and sound cartridges.

Electronic news is about delivering facts in a way that is easy for its viewing audience to digest. *The Electronic Reporter* explains how this can be achieved. However, this is not a book on 'how to be a reporter'. Rather, it assumes journalism is your craft, and introduces you to the application of that craft to an electronic, visual medium. This is achieved in a friendly and informed style which gives a comprehensive account of everything you need to know from day one in the job, but were afraid to ask.

Author Barbara Alysen, broadcast journalism lecturer at the University of Western Sydney, acknowledges there have been difficulties drawing boundaries around the vast topic of electronic journalism. And because of this, it has value beyond the obvious mantle of news and current affairs, and into the realms of the non-fiction and documentary genre.

We are reminded the electronic media is not just radio and television; it also encompasses the internet. Yes, 'television journalist' is gone; 'video journalist' is the term we should now all live by. A chapter dedicated to 'online news' no doubt will be tagged for expansion in future editions.

The Electronic Reporter is a valuable Australasian industry resource, both as a teaching tool and a worth-

while reference book in the library of any electronic newsroom.— **DANNI MULRENNAN**, *lecturer in television journalism, AUT University.*



Scandals at *The NY Times*

Hard News: The Scandals at The New York Times and their Meaning for American Media, by Seth Mnookin. New York: Random House. 2005, 340 pp. ISBN 0 8129 7251 1

THE JAYSON BLAIR debacle at *The New York Times* in May 2003 is often portrayed in the media as a brave experiment in affirmative

action gone sour. That Blair was some kind of ethical rotten apple that had tainted what is arguably the world's finest newspaper. That Blair was a bizarre aberration, hardly reflective of journalism at large and certainly not of the 152-year-old newspaper.

In fact, he was the tip of an iceberg. A catalyst for a stunning meltdown in a newsroom that had become dysfunctional and whose checks and balances had failed.

It was the collapse of an ill-fated and short-lived dynasty founded by the brilliant but flawed leadership of the imperious executive editor Howell Raines whose team had won a record six Pulitzer prizes for their coverage of September 11 less than two years earlier.

The gripping intrigue and institutional politics of the *Times* are superbly unravelled by former *Newsweek* senior writer Seth Mnookin. In this newer paperback edition, Mnookin adds an afterword tracing the two years since the resignations of Raines and his deputy Gerald Boyd. The author notes that they have been difficult years for the mainstream media, 'which has seen its reputation go from occasionally dodgy and unreliable to fundamentally untrustworthy by an even larger (or more vocal, anyway) segment of the American population'.

Less than a year after Blair's serial deceptions at the *Times*, *USA Today* was forced to admit that its top foreign correspondent, Jack Kelley, had apparently been fabricating his reports for years, on everything from Cuban refugees to Palestinian suicide bombers! (p. 261).

In 2004, there were revelations of the failure of the press in its coverage of the hunt for the non-existent weapons of mass destruction—the pretext for the invasion of Iraq. Another *Times* reporter, Judith Miller, was unmasked over the deception.

And then Dan Rather's CBS career ended abruptly after he broadcast a report about President Bush's Vietnam-era war record based, unwittingly, on forged documents.

But one bright sign amid the gloom has been the media industry's willingness to 'come clean' in the end. *The Times*' investigative story on Jayson Blair's journalistic fraud was devastating—7102 words (or two full pages) in the Sunday edition of 11 May 2003. Plus another couple of pages detailing Blair's errors and fabrications.

It is hard to imagine a New Zealand newspaper being so upfront and detailed about its shortcomings. In fact, the *Herald on Sunday*'s handling of the John Manukia serial fabrication case in 2005 was remarkably

opaque by comparison. The only reasonably detailed and insightful report on the findings of both the *Herald on Sunday* and Fairfax 'audits' on the affair appeared in an industry publication on the other side of the Tasman, *Panpa Bulletin* (Page, 2006). And even this was rather under-reported.

Long-term media credibility has suffered as a result. However, in spite of the damage suffered by the *New York Times* in the wake of the Blair and other disinformation debacles, Mnookin insists the paper is 'unquestionably the gold standard in American journalism'. And in a world where the Fox News model of 'fair and balanced' propaganda is rampant, this old-fashioned value of a vigorous and free press is essential for democracy.—**DAVID ROBIE**

Reference

Page, W. (2006, April). NZ publishers react to Manukia scandal, *Panpa Bulletin*, p. 6.