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Sharp, Steve. - *Journalism and Conflict in Indonesia: From Reporting Violence to Promoting Peace*, (Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series) [Hardcover] New York, Routledge, 2013. ISBN 9780415531498

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There would be few journalists who deliberately set out to spread fear and create a climate of violence. In this recent book however, Steve Sharp articulates well his concern about the impact of the written word when it is those words are conceived by media workers in the heat of professional duties. His book, *Journalism and Conflict in Indonesia* provides an impassioned argument for reporting which promotes peace, and to that end provides a sustained argument for the need to change journalism practices in conflict zones.

Sharp's seven-chapter book is the 53rd in Routledge's contemporary Southeast Asian series, and is destined to service a specialised market of scholars in both journalism and Asian studies, media and politics. Journalism scholars are most likely to find interest in the earlier chapters which discuss communication and culture, media freedom and journalistic culture. Those who are researching societies where journalists are attempting to break free of coercive political structures should value the chapter on media freedom in "Post New Order Indonesia". While other specialists scholars may find use in the chapters discussing the national disintegration in Indonesia and the country's culture wars. All groups, however, should find value in the chapters on the framing of religious conflict and more generally the final chapter on war and peace journalism.

Sharp uses a case study from the violent conflict in Maluku in 1999-2000 to highlight the inherent dangers in the media framing and simplifying the causes of complex conflicts. He contextualises the conflict in the history of Indonesia and journalistic culture in the 20th century and then outlines the failures of Jakarta's newspapers to appropriately report on the Maluku battle field writing. He observes that:

“ Drained of its immediacy, depth, complexity and personalised human impact, reporters at the centre failed to bring war on the periphery closer to their readers. Falling back on the professional

certainties of 'factual reporting' and 'neutrality', their news reports produced a kind of minimalist writing model that achieved neither.

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(7)

He points out that the reportage of discord and confusion by journalists can “lead to an escalation of conflict where highly politicised symbols (a public slur; a burning flag) implicate media workers and reporters’ news accounts in the trajectory of violence at the grassroots” (18). Sharp further argues that it is important to consider carefully how framing decisions by journalists feed “narratives back to the strife-torn regions about political responses of the elites that influenced the way victims and combatants saw their place in the conflict – and opportunities for resolving it” (35).

In his discussion of the history of journalism in Indonesia, Sharp carefully plots the minefield that many editors and reporter face in Asia, not just those in Indonesia. He quotes Makarim (1978) who said:

“ To refuse an offer of a favour is extremely difficult, it not altogether impossible, if one is committed to remaining within the web of intricate social relationships. The refusal or acceptance of a favour determines one’s identity, one’s extent of cohesion with the prevailing social fabric. The extension of a gift of a favour is first and foremost a token of kindness, affection and respect; its acceptance a matter of courtesy and breeding. ”

(57)

For scholars interested in journalism education more broadly, Sharp also discusses the need to re-think journalistic training, noting that change is pointless if it is not also occurring “naturally in the field where professional ethics emerge not by suppressing personal and social morality, but by extending it” (9). He is at pains however, to recognise the many obstacles faced by media professionals working in Indonesia, and does not disrespect their efforts in often trying circumstances.

For those with an interest in international studies, Sharp cautions against confusing modernisation with 'Westernisation'. He points to the literature which describes how it is possible to modernise a country without abandoning culture and being overtaken by Western values. While he critiques Samuel P. Huntington’s (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, he draws heavily on Huntington, quoting his contention that “democracy is inherently a parochializing not a cosmopolitanizing process” (27). Sharp urges both working journalists and scholars to rethink their professional models to encompass the intersection of new media and democratic practices. “Such models can incorporate these practices in ways that are faithful to democracy’s historical purpose of bring about non-violent political change” (70).

Among the book’s strengths are the illuminating responses to interviews conducted with Malukan editors and reporters. Sharp discusses their responses to a range of issues but the ones around objectivity, balance and lack of bias provide wonderful insights to the difficulties faced on the ground. One editor explained his way of dealing with objectivity like this:

“ To avoid taking sides with one group, we just use the one government version. We are then accused of being a mouthpiece for the government by the Islamic group. In the conflict area, it's possible the only neutral source is the government one. Because they don't take the side of one group or the other, for us government and security forces are still very neutral. ”

(Djalil, 2001: 75)

Sharp's chapter on the framing of religious conflict is based on an interpretative content analysis of stories about the violence in Maluku in 1999 and 2000. He highlights a lack of continuity in news narrative over time.

“ Those readers looking for the latest developments from one edition to the next would often be disappointed to notice themes, actors, ideas emerge in one edition never to be seen again. ”

(157)

In other areas he notes the under-contextualisation of facts in one newspaper and the failure to establish facts in another. What concerns Sharp in the context of this book, is that religious enmity is presented in the media as “natural, inevitable and without end and so lacked explanatory power” (174). He posits that the stories in *Kompas* and *Republika* could not decipher the interactions of rogues, warriors and the Jakarta-based war beneficiaries that prolonged the war. “Unwittingly or not, both newspapers ... produced storylines that reinforced the rhetorical logic of war making” (174).

In his final chapter on war and peace journalism, Sharp discusses the 1990s and how these years produced many wars that were in some way related to the collapse of state power and the mobilisation of people along ethnic lines. He then draws on the views of Malukan journalists who tried to reduce the tension in the way they wrote their stories. “In reality, delaying the time bomb that was already set in motion – by not reporting what we witnessed – was a mistake” (Djalil, 2001: 183).

Sharp concludes that the creation of meaning in news texts is not an autonomous process crafted by news workers, but relies on the interpretive power of audiences (language communities) to read texts in a particular way (203). He argues that if journalists want to avoid encouraging conflicts, they must master conflict analysis and add these skills to their professional repertoire. He argues for a revival of development communication but urges journalists to use a transitional media ethic which acknowledges the material impact of media communication and avoid, what he calls, the “serial excuse of neutrality”. To this end he urges these values to be promoted to provincial leaders, rather than waiting for the inevitable direction from big city political masters.

Journalism and Conflict in Indonesia has obviously been converted from Sharp's doctoral thesis, so it provides an insight into the process to doctoral writing with a clear outline of his methodology and theory. While many readers will find this useful, it is distracting for others looking for a more seamless narrative about peace journalism in Indonesia.

About the reviewer

Alexandra Wake is a lecturer in journalism at Melbourne's RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia and a doctoral candidate at Deakin University. She has worked as a journalist and/or educator in Australia, Ireland, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and the Solomon Islands. She continues to work as a broadcaster, specialising in the Asia Pacific. Her most recent paper,

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