

# Ignorance Is Bliss: The Media and East Timor

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**T**HE crisis in East Timor over the past twelve months or so posed a serious challenge not only to Australian policy-makers but also to the media in its coverage of the crisis. While every agency, Australian or otherwise, is subject to analysis by the media, there has been precious little self-analysis of the role and performance of the Australian media.

Before examining what was, at times, a very extensive coverage, it is worth making explicit some assumptions about public expectations of the media—as well as its own expectations—and noting some of the unavoidable limitations on its ability to meet those expectations.

Media consumers generally expect that they will receive full information, competent analysis and entertainment according to their individual desires. Almost every consumer will have an individual diet of requirements and will be satisfied or otherwise according to the way in which that diet is satisfied. Few consumers will even recognize, much less allow for, the inherent limits of today's print and electronic media. These are substantial but rarely admitted by the industry.

The principal limitations are time and space constraints, camera angles, expertise and prejudice. Time and space constraints are self-evident. There is always more news available than space or time for adequate coverage. Judgements must be made by editors and their judgements criticized by consumers whose interests are so diverse. Despite claims that the camera does not lie, it clearly does. Its field of view is narrow and ensures that the viewer misses the context of what he is being shown.

Apart from the limits applied by technology and by the economics of the business, most concerns about the media can be sheeted home to a lack of expertise or the presence of prejudice or both. These elements were much in evidence in the coverage of the East Timor crisis.

## THE IGNORANCE FACTOR

The degree of ignorance displayed by many reporting and analysing events in and around East Timor was little short of staggering. In passing, it is worth noting that the unwarranted air of authority asserted by journalists is one of the reasons for their poor reputation. A few examples of failures of basic research and analysis will illustrate the problem.

The constant repetition of the assertion, most often in the *Letters* pages or on talkback radio, that Australia owed the East Timorese people for their support during the Second World War was accepted quite uncritically and regularly

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rebroadcast. In fact, as any close examination of the official and other histories of the period will quickly show, the claim simply does not stand up to analysis. While assistance was certainly given for a time, the inherent divisions in East Timorese society quickly led to the neutralization of that support so that the small Australian commando unit had to be withdrawn. Subsequently, every Allied intelligence party inserted into East Timor was routinely betrayed. Most of the slaughter of East Timorese was by other East Timorese—as has been the case for centuries.

When Prime Minister Howard and President Habibie agreed in Bali in May 1999 to a process for self-determination (subsequently endorsed by Portugal and the United Nations), none of the mainstream media, as far as I can determine,

questioned the provision that the Indonesians would remain responsible for security. Yet, for some 25 years, the Australian media had been furiously—and justifiably—critical of Indonesian security operations. After the pro-independence vote, the mayhem visited on East Timor by East Timorese against other East Timorese, with the connivance and support of elements of the Indonesian military, was predictable and predicted, but not by the Australian media. If there had been an outcry at that time, a better security system might have eventuated.

The Australian media continually accused the 'Indonesian military' of complicity in the violence of the pro-independence militia but ignored the well-documented fact that the highly factionalized and undisciplined Indonesian military is not typical of military organizations. This does not excuse the leadership of TNI but it does help explain what happened and who caused it to happen.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was established to conduct the ballot and had a civil police component to advise on security. Lavishly staffed and equipped, UNAMET had no security mandate but, by its very presence, conveyed the impression that it could enforce security because it was a UN body acting under a Security Council resolution. Its own propaganda reinforced that view in East Timor and elsewhere. Regrettably, the media accepted UNAMET's own valuation of itself without attempting to analyse whether or not it could achieve its objective.

This failing was made even worse in the period before the ballot when UNAMET was asking for delays but the Security Council finally agreed to the ballot knowing itself that the security situation was unstable. These factors were reported but the implications were all but ignored.

There has been almost no analysis of the East Timorese community—social or political. The inherent assump-

tion of homogeneity is simply not sustainable and the society's diversity contains all the necessary clues to its centuries-old history of internecine violence. Similarly betraying a lack of knowledge and sophistication, there was little reflection of the inherent factionalism of the pro-independence organizations. Even when such East Timorese figures as Ramos Horta referred to the potential for a collapse in the movement's unity, there was almost no recognition of the implications for future violence.

There was almost no scrutiny of Portugal's role in the affair—its history of supplying arms and other resources to sections of the independence movement. Reports of Portuguese intervention at the United Nations, the supply of Portuguese currency through a newly established Portuguese bank and the political significance of the appointment of a Brazilian diplomat, Sergio Vieira de Mello, as head of the UN Temporary Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), drew almost no analysis. Yet UNTAET is, in effect, the only lawful government. Its head is answerable only to the Security Council. All the elements of the administration in East Timor, including the military force, are answerable to him.

When journalists deployed to East Timor before the ballot, their performance was generally unexceptionable.

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Richard Carleton of *60 Minutes* achieved some notoriety with his remarkably crass interrogation of voters on camera despite the well-known risks to the individuals concerned. After the ballot, greeted with unprofessional glee by too many reporters, violence erupted, confining most journalists to their hotel: but their reporting until they were evacuated was as professional as could be expected.

The media returned with Interfet troops in late September. Again, their coverage was mixed but there were some disappointing incidents. Patrolling troops were stalked by journalists, many of whom persisted in pestering soldiers with cameras and attempted interviewing while they were dealing with suspects. No soldiers should be put under such pressure during very tricky operations. By comparison, police back home are simply not harassed in such situations.

The worst example of unprofessional behaviour occurred when two wounded Australian soldiers were being operated on in hospital. Camera crews shot footage of the actual surgery in an incident admittedly orchestrated by one medical officer who was subsequently disciplined. One would have expected that professional journalists would have balked at such intrusiveness whatever the doctor suggested was appropriate. Coincidentally when the two soldiers were wounded, four Victorian police officers were also shot in a confrontation in Bendigo. The difference in the media coverage of the two incidents was stark. The police shootings were given widespread media coverage including details of the officers' names and their injuries but police authorities protected their men from intrusive reporting until they themselves were fit enough to speak to reporters.

There was a sense that much of the media—especially television—coverage of Interfet became a matter of generating entertainment despite the dangers not only for the troops and the East Timorese but even for journalists, one of whom was murdered by militia. With a sort of peace rapidly established, there was no more mayhem to whet the appetite of reporters, cameras and audiences. Such coverage as continued was quickly transformed into some excessively chauvinistic adulation of the troops themselves.

In passing, one wonders whether this was a belated apology for the appalling treatment of Australian soldiers by the Vietnam-era media, some of who are now occupying senior editorial posts. Even so, much of this missed some useful stories that would have been obvious to more experienced reporters assuming that they had not been tasked by their editors to cover just the human interest angle. The coverage missed the point that, apart from the soldiers, there were large elements of the Navy and Air Force involved in the operation. Similarly the immense logistics activity gen-

erated in Darwin was all but ignored once Interfet was deployed.

The coverage verged on the jingoistic with non-Australian contingents being virtually ignored. Nevertheless, the small British detachment, whose commander was noisily critical of the Australians until he left, achieved coverage beyond what was reasonably balanced, possibly because the troops were

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Ghurkhas but more likely because the British officer was critical and sounded like he knew what he was talking about. None of the reporters attempted to analyse the basis of the criticism.

As an aside, journalists covering wars seem to be excessively excitable, even running greater risks than the professional soldiers. One acquaintance stationed in London some years ago was desperate to get to Sarajevo during the bloody Serbian siege because, as she told me, she had never seen a war! This sort of naivety was common throughout the media's Timor operations.

### **EAST TIMOR AND DOMESTIC POLITICS**

Perhaps it was inevitable that domestic politics would intrude when so much of the coverage was handled by political journalists. Much was flavoured by the *de rigueur* detestation of Prime Minister Howard despite the obvious fact that Australia's power was always limited.

The media's uncritical support for the pro-independence factions and, indeed, the determination of the Falantil guerillas to resist the Interfet mandate that they be disarmed was indicative of the tendency of the media always to favour rebels, whatever their cause. Given the centuries-old history of the ease with which rebels become oppressors, this suggests a victory of romanticism over education. In the same way, the constant reference to the 1975 killing of five Australian journalists at Balibo, coupled with interminable reuse of television

footage from the time, became an exercise in media vengeance.

Of course, the ritualistic reference to the Balibo affair may have been a useful peg on which to hang a crudely anti-Indonesian flavour—while condemning the Indonesian media for its hostility to Australia's role. But the anti-Indonesian rhetoric was somewhat at odds with the determination to blame the Howard Government for Indonesia's misdeeds following the ballot. At times, too, before Interfet deployed, many journalists seemed unable to understand that Australia could not unilaterally invade East Timor without actually going to war with Indonesia.

Howard was also blamed for destroying Australia's carefully constructed relations with Asia although an observer might have concluded that the culprit was actually Indonesia with its inability to control the rogue elements in its own military. Given that the alternative would have been an obsequious appeasement and reinforcement of those rogue elements, the criticism was either grossly partisan or was simply indulging in the all-too-common practice of having 'two bob each way'.

Political preferences clearly drove the intense criticism of the defence minister's warning to the Indonesians that Interfet troops would pursue fleeing militia across the West Timor border. By

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any standard of military operations and international law, Moore's warning was measured, timely and important especially in the context of operations against raiding militias protected by elements of the Indonesian military. That

so much of the criticism was couched in domestic political terms also points to a media which cannot accept that the rules might actually change when the troops go in harm's way.

The lack of analysis also showed in the domestic debate over the cost of the Interfet operation. The figure of a billion dollars quoted by the Government was accepted at face value although even the most superficial analysis would cause the mildest sceptic to investigate further. For some reason, the Government failed to make clear that the cost borne by Australia was for some foreign contingents as well as the Australian. There was no United Nations financial support and the usual internal and hostile government and public service leaks failed to point this out to the political journalists they feed.

**THE NATURE OF THE MEDIA**

No one knows better than I do that the media is staffed for the most part by decent hard-working people. If there are problems, they arise from its own culture coupled with a serious lack of knowledge and willingness to analyse the information placed before them. Journalists know only too well how the 'spin doctors' will try to shape what they report by withholding information or by providing attractive but misleading material. That this understanding does not result in a greater scepticism suggests that journalistic responses are shaped by their individual biases, however hotly these may be denied in public. A more worrying element is the degree to which the media reports what some individual or organization has said rather than what is observed after reasonable investigation. This makes the media an unwitting tool for those whose motives may be improper. The general lack of scepticism was an important element in generating a climate of complacency in East Timor both before and after the independence ballot.

Given that, we should be concerned at the degree of superficiality and, indeed, glibness that has become a hallmark of Australian journalism. Other worrying elements include the assertion of special rights without corresponding responsibilities beyond those included in the so-called code of ethics, a semi-secret document drawn up by the journalists' union. The most commonly proclaimed—allegedly on behalf of us their consumers—is the 'right to know'. As the late Sir Paul Hasluck once famously pointed out to a group of hostile journalists, they represent only profit-

making organizations and have no more rights than any other citizen. On the issue of the 'right to know', few consumers would deny that governments, non-government organizations and individuals must necessarily maintain some confidentiality. In any case, the 'right to

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know' on the part of consumers is invariably breached by the media itself every time a decision is taken for whatever reason *not* to publish some piece of information or analysis. *The New York Times* used to proclaim that it published 'all the news fit to print', a fatuously false statement if ever there was one as well as one which begs the question of who decides what is fit to print.

There are some other more technical problems with the Australian media. Television footage is all too often repeated without any indication that it has been used previously. For example, there is one door in a house in East Timor that has been kicked open by the same Australian soldiers on innumerable occasions—unless the Hollywood-style footage has been repeatedly recycled.

To be fair, consumers of the media underestimate the impact on themselves of the *Letters* page or radio talkback contributors. Should the media censor or contest those contributions that are clearly false or do they represent the legitimate views of ordinary people? The latter is the only possible answer and critics of the media need to recognize not only that reality, but also that the media is unfairly blamed for publishing views over which it essentially has no control.

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