

**PANDEMEDIA: HOW COVID CHANGED JOURNALISM, TRACEY KIRKLAND, GAVIN FANG (EDS) (2023)**

Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 320 pp., ISBN 978-1-922633-81-1, p/bk, \$34.99

*Reviewed by Catriona Bonfiglioli, University of Technology Sydney*

*Pandemedia: How COVID Changed Journalism* is a masterclass in a book. Edited by leading ABC journalists Tracey Kirkland and Gavin Fang, it features pandemic reflections from leading Australian journalists. Stan Grant, Michelle Grattan, Alan Kohler, Lisa Millar, David Speers, and Norman Swan are among 38 contributors. Such an expansive text is challenging to review without cataloguing its highlights, of which there are many.

In Part I, *More than the Headlines*, Kirkland, ABC's national news gathering editor during the pandemic, documents how COVID rose rapidly up the news agenda but reporting was hampered by economic constraints and misinformation. Eminent political journalist Michelle Grattan discusses trust, responsibility, and experts, while Andrew Lund critiques the state premiers' daily press conferences. Safety, hygiene, and distancing measures are detailed by Lisa Millar, as are the challenges of working from home, audience solidarity and the need to provide light relief.

*Part II The Changing Newsroom* opens with Nine executive editor Tory Maguire noting the limits of answers provided in government press conferences and the harsh audience critiques of reporters. Grant Sherlock, managing editor of ABC News Digital Brisbane, provides a counterpoint in highlighting the mammoth project, involving journalists such as Neryssa Azlan and Widia Jalal, dedicated to answering more than 300,000 audience questions. Seven News' Brisbane presenter Max Futcher focuses on staff and source safety while ABC News finance presenter, Alan Kohler offers a charming tale of domesticating his finance report, aided by his wife Deb who suggested the now-famous 'book stack'.

*Part III The Trust Equation* opens with ABC Insiders' David Speers on resisting political pressure to cull a panellist. *The Australian's* Victorian political reporter Rachel Baxendale reveals the cost of asking provocative questions as she reflects on the impact of being targeted by trolls. UNSW professor and epidemiologist Raina MacIntyre argues media coverage had key weaknesses, such as the use of experts of varying competence, propagandising, under-playing mask utility and airborne transmission risk, and losing interest in COVID in 2022. Other Part III highlights include *The West Australian* political reporters Peter Law and Josh Zimmerman examination of how quarantine breakdown exposed government secrecy and data access issues.

Key testimonies in *Part IV The Journalist Experience* reveal some of the personal costs and professional challenges during the pandemic. ABC investigative reporter Anne Connolly discusses the barriers to reporting, secrecy, unresponsive ministers, and National Cabinet exemptions from FOI. Fang, who led the ABC's news teams during the pandemic, reflects on how journalists, as first responders, need to understand their purpose to survive. According to Fang, and Law and Zimmerman, reporting on Astra Zeneca vaccine side effects generated debate and unleashed significant flak on reporters. Abuse of journalists, along with endless bad news and long hours, prompted former 7News journalist Emily Arnold to switch to public relations. *The Australian's* Jess Malcolm contrasts the limits of reporting from home with the opportunities for young journalists to cover big stories. The Dart Centre Asia Pacific's Dr Kimina Lyall and Dr Erin Smith explain the risks of moral injury facing journalists.

*Part V Innovation and New Media* leads into how the pandemic provoked dramatic changes in journalism practice and technology. Innovations included ABC data journalist Casey Briggs's touchscreen COVID data for television news; a UNICEF Australia-linked COVID-19 hub for TikTok users, the ABC's highly popular

*Coronacast* with Dr Norman Swan and Tegan Taylor; the weekly show *The Virus* with ABC News Sydney presenter Jeremy Fernandez.

*Part VI A Place in the Community* focuses on strengthening ties between journalists and communities. SBS News and Current Affairs director Mandi Wicks relates SBS's heroic endeavour to provide COVID news to the 5.5 million Australians who speak a language other than English. ABC News senior reporters Sarah Curnow and Ben Knight detail their outreach endeavours to capture the views and experiences of Australian youth. SBS Director of Indigenous Content Tanya Denning-Orman said they focused on taking a calm, community focused approach to avoid escalating fears and ensure Indigenous voices and issues were aired.

In *Part VII Going Global* correspondents take us to Malaysia, India, Hong Kong and China. ABC North Asia correspondent James Oaten tells a tale of tragedy and terror from the pandemic frontline in India. Oaten's moving personal story brings home the impossibility of reporters escaping the pandemic. Al Jazeera international correspondent Drew Ambrose relates how he reported the traumatic and shocking COVID experiences of seven million foreign workers in Malaysia. Hong Kong-based Aaron Busch found his Twitter persona @tripperhead pivoting to COVID journalism in Hong Kong in ways that exemplify the compelling force of the inner journalist. The volume closes with Stan Grant's essay on the chilling events in Wuhan and Xinjiang and the global spread of authoritarianism.

This significant collection offers insights and examples to researchers who analyse crisis journalism, the role of media in health, professional role perception, trauma, ethics, reflective practice, and journalism history. It deserves a place on journalism school reading lists and bookshelves across Australia and beyond, in part due to being a well-written and accessible text. Its value to journalism education comes from the many real-world examples that unpack what journalists face in reporting a global crisis, including adapting to high pressure working conditions, holding politicians to account, extending compassion to vulnerable sources, navigating ethical quandaries, and managing job safety. These first-hand accounts are complemented by a helpful introduction, poignant cartoons from Warren Brown, piercing Instagram posts from satirists, *The Betoota Advocate*, a five-page pandemic timeline, author biographies, and notes. Weaknesses are few: it would have been good to have the light relief dispersed throughout and an index.

#### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Catriona Bonfiglioli is a senior lecturer in media studies in the School of Communication discipline of Journalism and Writing at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research focuses of the role of the news media in health, particularly the ethical aspects.

University of Technology Sydney, NSW 2097, Australia

Email: [catriona.bonfiglioli@uts.edu.au](mailto:catriona.bonfiglioli@uts.edu.au)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9634-7302