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Review: An important book for young journalism academics

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REVIEWS

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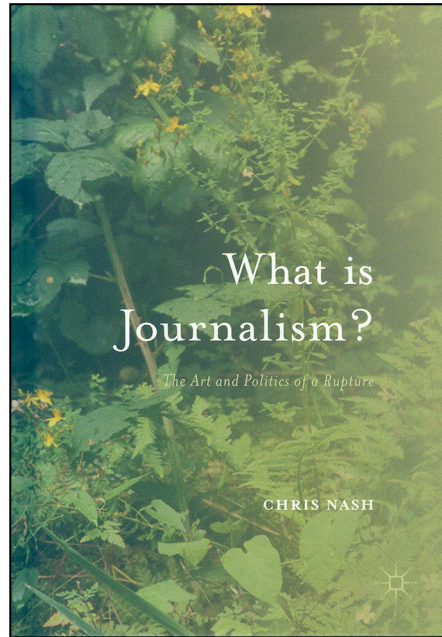
An important book for young journalism academics

What is Journalism: The Art and Politics of a Rupture, by Chris Nash. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 247 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-39933-5

CHRIS NASH wrestles with ideas with rare intensity.

His new book, *What is Journalism*, takes something so familiar to us, journalism, and peels back layer after layer of assumptions about what makes it singular and distinctive and what gives it parity with the other academic disciplines.

More importantly, though, this book is a how-to guide for best-practice journalists and journalism academics looking for a lexicon to describe journalism work in a methodological way. It is a struggle Nash is familiar with, as a pioneer of academic journalism in Australia. The ideas in the book are ideas he has been wrestling with for years, testing them through his research and supervision work, and presenting fragments of them at conferences. The joy of this book is that it gives him space to fully explain them and to present them as a cogent approach to



the current challenge.

Nash is more than a believer in the notion that journalism can be practised as an academic discipline. He is a practitioner and experienced supervisor. His favoured approach is the use of well-chosen tools from the journalistic toolbox of methods and pairing the journalism output with an exegesis that provides a level of rigorous analysis, situational framing and academic context to satisfy the criteria of research as an act of knowledge creation.

While Stephen Lambie (2004) eloquently described the toolbox as a starting point for understanding how journalism can work as an academic methodology, Nash contends that it is not enough on its own, and that the exegesis has work to do.

While many journalism academics are familiar with the skillset required



to create good investigative journalism, exegesis writing is less common and less familiar. It needs to be more than just a log of what was done and how obstacles were overcome. The exegesis needs to locate both the subject of the story and the process of writing (or recording) it in time, space and cultural contexts, with sensitivity to other perspectives.

Chapter one is a summary of recent debates about the role of journalism in the academy in Australia, as informed by events elsewhere. He covers the media wars of the 1990s, the battle for inclusion of journalism outputs in the federal research classification system and the conflicting demands that make life stressful for journalism academics.

Far from being repetitive though, it recapitulates the key points and is a stimulus to continued conversation. He also sets up the rationale for his case studies, positioning them as ruptures to a state of affairs that has historically positioned journalism as a low-status craft-activity. He argues that the work of artist Hans Haacke and journalist I.F. Stone provides evidence that journalism can defy that categorisation, and parse reality with academic rigour, equivalent to that of any of the truth-seeking disciplines.

Haacke is famous for sparking debates about the line between journalism and art. His artworks have included acts of journalism presented in galleries, sometimes exposing awkward realities. Stone practised an unusually rigorous form of journalism, using archival material to cover momentous

events such as the US involvement in the Korean War.

In the next two chapters, Nash explores the rigorous and contentious work of these two extraordinary practitioners. He describes what they did, when and where and the arguments that played out about how their work should be categorised. Is it art, and/or journalism and/or scholarship? In doing so, he illustrates the fragility of the demarcation of disciplines and exposes the politicking and territorial disputes behind it.

In chapters four and five he presents a matrix, derived from the work of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre, that can be used as a systematic guide for the description and analysis of a piece of journalism. The matrix can serve as a kitchen table upon which the piece under investigation can be spread. The nine squares represent questions about space and/or time that can be asked: How does the specimen of work relate to physical space (buildings, countries); how does it relate to 'relational/conceived space' (orthodoxies and politics) and so on?

In chapter six he introduces Bourdieu's theorisation of intuition (*habitus*) and applies it to understanding what is meant by news sense. He bases this connection on Gaye Tuchman's 1978 seminal work *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, a book considered important because it asked why some events are deemed newsworthy and others not and how newsroom staff translate events deemed newsworthy into constructed





realities with public character.

Nash cites Tuchman's description of news production as 'casting a web of facticity in space and time as determined by news sense' (p. 102). He then takes the extra step of connecting this idea of a web with Bourdieu's habitus and Harvey-Lefebvre's space-time matrix, forming a meta-theoretical framework within which the epistemological validity of a piece of journalism can be assessed. He doesn't claim that this is the only or best framework, but it is robust and he has forged its foundations and made it into something that others can use and develop.

As such, this is an important book for young journalism academics struggling to grasp what is meant by scholarly analysis of journalistic methodology. Nash is generous in his patient explanation of how we get from the familiar territory of making news to the state where references to philosophical perspectives, matrices and arguments are just what we need.

However, he is not into theory for its own sake and states as much on page 110, writing: 'Any suggested theory has no role unless it can identify and meet conceptual challenges, clarify thinking and guide research practice to be methodologically robust and revelatory.'

Another reason to recommend this book to anyone considering a higher degree in journalism is that it is not only the content that shines but also the cadence and style. Nash is rigorous and well referenced, but above all, he is an erudite journalist and an experienced

teacher and for such a theory-heavy book, it is a compellingly easy read.

References

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- Tuchman, G. (1978), *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. New York: The Free Press.

