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**Manne, Robert (ed.), Do Not Disturb: Is the Media Failing Australia? Black Inc, Melbourne, 2005, ISBN 0 9750 7694 9, 232 pp., A\$29.95.**

This collection of 10 essays documents the role of the media at a time when John Howard has produced the most ideological government in the nation's history. In the absence of a comprehensive account of John Howard's media management techniques, Do Not Disturb offers the next best thing: some of the most thorough minds in the country with considered perspectives on the complicity of the media as Howard radically narrowed the national vision.

While the subtitle is tentative ('Is the media failing Australia?') and the back page blurb polite ('the mainstream media has failed to notice ...'), the text systematically excoriates the Australian media to reveal the active participation of right-wing proprietors and journalists in Howard's agenda and the failure of the rest to insist on rational debate and common decency in our national politics.

The picture these essayists paint is not pretty: right-wing proprietors fund right-wing think-tanks to produce ideas recycled by right-wing journalists. Then there is the downward spiral as even the firmest supporters of the Howard government are criticised by even more extreme right-wingers for being too soft on Labor, the Greens, the ABC and so on.

Do Not Disturb offers five sets of paired essays that come to grips with the enormity of the problem. Eric Beecher on the decline of the quality press and Guy Rundle on the rise of the right set the scene. David McKnight and Robert Manne dissect News Corporation's role in fostering first the 'culture war' in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, and then the very real war in Iraq. Quentin Dempster and Margaret Simons chart the slow destruction of the ABC, and Jack Waterford and Jon Faine review the degradation of political reporting as the influence of the press gallery diminishes just as talkback radio shock jocks are on the rise.

Finally, Dennis Glover and David Marr provide two challenging essays, which are perhaps the best in the book. Glover, a former media advisor to Beazley, Crean and Latham, tests the right-wing

assumption that the media are pro-Labor by analysing major metropolitan newspapers' endorsements before the 2004 federal election: 11 to the coalition, one to Labor and three on the fence. He then gives a detailed personal account of the negativity of the fourth estate towards Labor, and explains that those with leftist tendencies always criticise Labor while right-wingers form a cheer squad for Howard. Marr's short piece elegantly questions the media's failure to confront military PR about the censorship around the 2001 refugee blockade and finds it symptomatic of Australians' predisposition to live with the brutalities of the system by ignoring not only the brutalities but also their own humanity.

Overall, this is a useful contribution to the discussion of the state of Australian media. While there never was a golden age of progressive Australian journalism, this book reminds us how things have changed since Nation Review and the National Times. Work of that standard is not beyond Australia: sometimes you see it in The Monthly or on Crikey.com. The struggle that remains for progressive journalists is the same as it always has been: to battle every day to insist on the importance of stories that hold power accountable and that defend humanity.

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