Journalists and media scholars working in a developing world context have known for decades that the Western model of journalism has not served people in non-Western societies particularly well. The Western news paradigm typically highlights conflict and elite sources rather than a common ground and a diversity of voices. Alternative journalism models such as development journalism, peace journalism and, recently, Buddhist-inspired ‘mindful’ journalism have been proposed by communication scholars, and practised by journalists in the Global South.

This book puts a similar spotlight on media practice in the Pacific Islands. David Robie, who has worked as a journalist and media educator in the region, has been a strong proponent of a different journalism model for the Pacific. His discussion centres around ‘deliberative journalism’, a concept he borrows from Angela Romano, which he states ‘involves providing information that enables people to make choices for change. Deliberative models include notions such as public journalism, development journalism, peace journalism and even ‘human rights’ journalism’ (p. 327). The predominant themes of the book are the power of the media; the attempts of the powerful to control the fourth estate’s capacity to influence society; and how this impacts on the less powerful. Robie observes (pp. 32–33):

But unlike many accounts of the challenges of the Pacific – from the viewpoint of bureaucrats representing power elites or disinterested academics – this is an ongoing narration with other ‘voice of the Pacific: they are frequently the activists, campaigners and writers who have been in the vanguard of social and political change in the Pacific. The advocates for human rights and for the less privileged.

Pacific Island nations are persistently under-reported in global news media. When stories of the Pacific do make it onto the international news agenda, they are invariably framed either as exotic, according to romantic notions of the South Seas, or as disaster prone. The Australian media, despite their proximity to the Pacific Islands, neglect any substantive coverage of the region except when there is a natural calamity, political upheaval or visits by Australian political leaders; in these cases, stories tend to be reduced to the customary 30-second shot of the politician dancing awkwardly with ‘grass skirted islanders’, which detracts from any serious reportage of issues facing the region. This book fills the important gap of covering the region from an insider’s perspective.

Each chapter documents the political upheavals, media battles, indigenous struggles and human rights abuses that have taken place in the region over the past 30 years through the eyes of a journalist who has put the struggles of the Pacific peoples in the world’s press. Robie is able to bring the reader into the social and political milieu by drawing on a collection of his own
news reports, published in newspapers and magazines, while his reflections provide the necessary background. The collection addresses issues and events such as the Kanaky struggle for independence in New Caledonia, French nuclear testing on Mururoa, the sinking of Greenpeace’s *Rainbow Warrior* by French secret agents, coups in Fiji and wars in Bougainville, the Philippines and Timor-Leste.

The reader is treated to Robie’s journalistic endeavours, spanning 50 years covering Africa, Europe and the Pacific. Along the way, he has met freedom fighters, coup leaders, corrupt officials and, significantly, champions of free press who have influenced him to develop a passion for crusading journalism. Robie’s long association with the Pacific, not only as an observer but as a journalist, an activist and a media educator, has won him both admirers and enemies in the region. His brand of journalism has put him in direct confrontation with political leaders, media organisations and publishers alike.

Robie covers the many challenges faced by Pacific media, emanating from colonial legacies, political interference in information flows and a lack of strong professional representation for journalists. The practice of journalism in the region has been made more complex because of the traditional system of hierarchy, cultural allegiance and powerful political elites, leading to censorship, self-censorship and Draconian media licensing laws. Robie highlights the perils of practising journalism in countries that are in the grip of elite power struggles and entrenched corruption, both within the media industry and the political arena. He highlights the tension between democratic ideals and the reality of practising journalism in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands – where journalists have suffered brutality for reporting on certain issues – and the Philippines – where more than 200 journalists were killed between 1986 and 2013 (p. 309).

Based on his own experience, he explains that media educators not only bear the responsibility of teaching news reporting skills to journalism students, but should also protect them against physical threat and teach them to deal with cultural and political pressures when covering a crisis (p. 293). A long-standing issue in the region has been the lack of training, proper qualifications and low salaries for journalists, leading to an exodus of better qualified media practitioners to the private sector or overseas (p. 322). The unsustainable turnover in journalists and the lack of seniority mean that there is limited in-depth reporting of issues and ‘virtually no in-depth reportage of the media itself’ (p. 283). The proliferation of digital media and the internet has created greater dependency on foreign media content, with limited training available for media workers in the new digital environment.

From the perspective of alternative media scholars, the final section of this book, with its focus on media education, alternative journalism models and the revised four worlds news values, is possibly the most relevant. The book is written in an accessible narrative style that provides a good entry point for anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of contemporary events in the Pacific. It will make good supplementary reading for journalism students, not so much for its theoretical discussions, but for its discussion of journalistic practices and challenges in the developing world context told through specific case study scenarios.