

## REVIEWS

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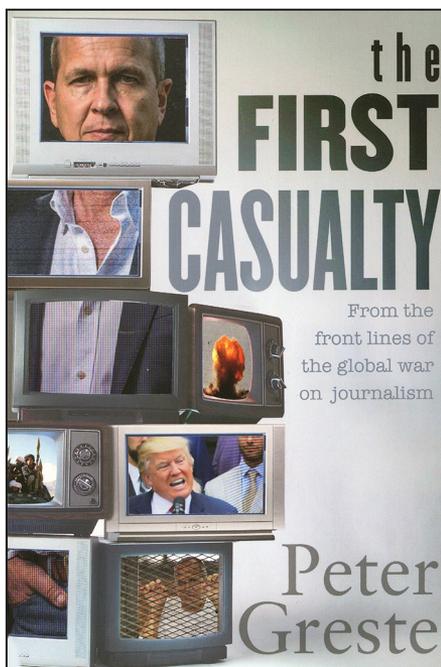
# A crusade for media truth and justice

***The First Casualty: From the Front Lines of the Global War on Journalism***, by Peter Greste. Sydney: Viking. 2017. 335 pages. ISBN 9780670079261.

PETER GRESTE, the Australian journalist who became a thorn in the side of the harsh Egyptian authorities from the inside of prison cells and in a courtroom cage for 400 days, hasn't wasted opportunities since he became the UNESCO chair of journalism and communication at the University of Queensland earlier this year. He chose World Press Freedom Day as the moment to launch a new independent body dedicated to campaigning for reporters whose 'voices have been stifled' by regimes around the world.

Greste's new advocacy group, the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom, was established with a mission to campaign for press freedom in Australia, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region. He launched it while being awarded the Australian Press Council's 2018 Press Freedom Medal. He said:

If we want to be taken seriously as a country that defends human rights and the principles of a liberal democracy,



then we need to make sure that we publicly restate those positions and make sure that those people, those governments who we're close to, follow the same principles. (Journalists' free alliance advocate calls, 2018)

Although he was referring to Myanmar's jailing of two local Reuters journalists who had been arrested in 2017 after investigating an alleged act of genocide against a group of persecuted Rohingya people, Greste's 'watchdog' message didn't just end there. He was equally scathing about Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte who has been accused of ordering the deaths of journalists among the 7500 plus people who have been killed in his so-called 'war on drugs.' He also backed international campaigns to free 120 journalists being imprisoned

in a harsh crackdown in Turkey.

Greste's unjust imprisonment in Egypt for reporting news 'damaging to national security' inspired his personal crusade to fight back against what he perceives to be a growing 'global war on journalism'. He argues that global press freedom is at its worst ebb for the past 13 years. This book is both a narrative of his ordeal and a documentation of the killings of journalists.

'The First Casualty', as a title marking wartime abolition of 'truth', is hardly original. It follows the lead of Philip Knightley and his original 1975 work of the same name revealing how governments have manipulated the media during wars from Crimea to Iraq; and Ricky Phillips' 2016 *exposé* on what really happened in the Falklands invasion by Argentina in 1982, a story hidden from the public for more than three decades.

The phrase has even featured as the title of a historical novel, Ben Elton's 2006 equally conflict-inspired book about the murder of a British aristocratic officer by a shell-shocked soldier on a Flanders battlefield in World War I. However, it is still a compelling title for this inspirational media freedom book.

Grest, a journalist with extensive experience of war reporting in the battlefields of Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan, was imprisoned in Cairo by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime following the 3 July 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired government which was popularly elected after the Arab Spring upheaval of 2011.

He arrived in Egypt just six months after the military coup from his base in Kenya. 'Pro-Brotherhood protesters were still on the streets, while the authorities were rounding up MC officials and supporters, accusing them of supporting terrorism,' recalls Greste (p. 7),

This provided the background to his arrest, along with an Egyptian, Baher Mohamed and a Canadian-Egyptian, Mohammed Fahmy. They were thrust into a Kafkaesque world of 'obscure conflict between journalism and belligerents on both sides' in the so-called War on Terror.

Critically for me, Qatar and its government-funded news network, Al Jazeera, had been accused of working to undermine national security. The already-bleak political environment had turned toxic. (p. 8)

Greste arrived in the country without press accreditation, a process which usually takes a couple of weeks, because he planned to be there for only three weeks. However, the network's relationship with the regime had become so strained that it was increasingly difficult, even dangerous, to turn up at official events. Instead, they used freelance cameramen to gather footage.

While Al Jazeera English was supposed to be 'fully licensed to operate from and broadcast into Egypt', the network's Egyptian affiliate had had its licence cancelled by the regime— 'but our bosses have insisted that we don't need to worry about our legal status'. Their equipment, such as standard video cameras, lights, microphones

and laptops, did not need any special permission.

We have no military equipment beyond bulletproof vests that have become standard issue for journalists working in places with bullets flying around. We are not using any special satellite equipment or banned communications gear. We are sending our material to Doha over the hotel's high-speed internet service. (p. 9)

Although Greste had studied the Australian legal system as part of his university degree, he found the Egyptian legal system baffling, an 'awkward blend of British common law, Islamic sharia law and Napoleonic codes that reflects the country's history of occupation' (p. 39). For most of the hearings, the three faced a prosecutor acting within the 'Napoleonic, inquisitorial' code. It was also not encouraging to know that

political activists and suspected MB members are still disappearing off the streets, often for months at a time, and emerging with stories of torture and abuse, with nobody seeming sure of just what laws the authorities are using to detain them. If any. (p. 40)

By the time Greste and his colleagues were arrested, human rights organisations had estimated 20,000 people had been 'thrown in prison'. Conditions were dire too, especially in the holding cells during the early weeks of their detention.

In one tiny cell, a concrete holding block in the middle of a courtyard that

Greste estimated had been built to hold two or three prisoners, there were 16 detainees jam-packed within the walls at one stage.

One of the intriguing aspects of this book are Greste's revelations about how he survived the boredom, uncertainty, harshness, cruelty and depression of the incarceration—the early optimism for freedom rapidly gave way to the fear of spending years in lockdown. He points to the Islamic world expression 'inshallah' or 'God willing', meaning accept what fate brings, as one helpful approach.

Routines of meditation, memory games (books—later, when they were allowed in), physical exercise—35 daily laps in the Mulhaq Prison compound—smuggling out toilet paper letters about prison experience information, and hearing about the global 'zipped lips' campaign all played a role (p. 77).

The book is structured around two parallel narratives, one around his arrest and repercussions with chapter titles such as 'Interrogation', 'Tora Limen Prison, Mulhaq Prison' and 'The case for the prosecution'. The other narrative tracing his 25 years of war reporting with alternating titles such as 'Afghanistan 1995', 'Afghanistan, 2001', 'Somalia', 'The renegade network', 'Syrian hellhole', 'Press freedom in the land of the free' and 'Charlie Hebdo'.

The problem for journalists, when the War on Terror began after the Twin Towers outrage in September 2001, was that this was a war about ideas and

the battlefield extended ‘to the place where ideas themselves are tested—the media’ (p. 54).

The assault on journalism began with the US assault on Al Jazeera on 13 November 2011. Prior to 9/11, Al Jazeera Arabic had been broadcasting largely unnoticed by the West since 1996. However, the channel then began broadcasting messages from Al Qaeda and the Taliban in an attempt at balancing reporting from all sides. After the US failed in its bid to persuade the Qatari government to ‘rein in’ Al Jazeera, an American bombing mission blasted the ‘renegade’ network’s bureau in Kabul, destroying its offices and equipment and also damaging the BBC bureau next door and the nearby Associated Press office.

Just six days later, the Taliban ambushed a convoy including four journalists, Julio Fuentes of the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, Maria Grazia Cutulli from the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, and two Reuters staff, Australian cameraman Harry Burton and Afghan photojournalist Aziz Ullah Haidari, at Jalalabad on the road to Kabul (p. 58). They were stoned to near death and then sprayed with bullets.

On 23 January 2002, *Wall Street Journal’s* Islamabad correspondent Daniel Pearl, who had been writing about the Islamic world ‘with intelligence and nuance’, was kidnapped by radical activists and handed over to Al Qaeda. Weeks later, after being forced to denounce American foreign policy in a video, he was gruesomely beheaded.

The Pearl kidnap and murder made it clear that journalists were being specifically targeted and then used as tools of propaganda. And with its bombing of the Al Jazeera bureau in Kabul, there was a chilling suggestion that the US government’s tolerance for independent reporting had reached its limits. (p. 63)

Ever since, journalists worldwide have been forced to confront the truth – that since 9/11 the world had become a vastly more dangerous place for the media (p. 324).

Greste was eventually freed by Egyptian judicial authorities on 1 February 2015 (after being convicted and sentenced to seven years on the trumped up charges) and Fahmy and Baher were pardoned more than seven months later on September 24. But there are many hard lessons from their ordeal, admits the author, including how vitally important it is ‘hold the line on standards’ in newsrooms and journalism schools, especially with trust in the media at an all-time low.

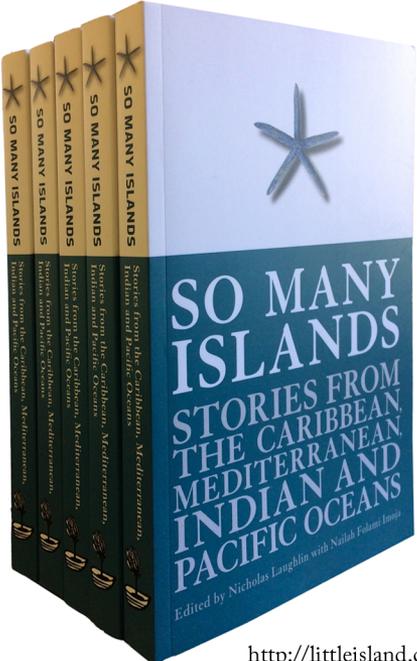
A final lesson is the need for global solidarity and to defend attacks on media freedom.

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