Pacific Region

Report to the Board of Directors – September 2019

(a) The regional communications landscape

From the outset, the reference to Pacific Island region is limited to Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) and excludes Australia and New Zealand due to geo-political diversities.

The Pacific Island media and communications is complex which needs to be understood in terms of the dvrsity within Pacific Island countries themselves - some with large media organisations in particular Fiji and Papua New Guinea with smaller and less diverse media landscapes for smaller countries like Tonga and Samoa as highlighted in the State of Pacific Media Report (Pacific Media Assistance Scheme - PACMAS, 2017):

The Pacific region has a rich and complex media and communication environment. Some of the largest media industries are present in Fiji, Png, Samoa and tonga and many media industries have undergone privatisation over the last decade. overall radio remains an extremely important broadcast media platform for communication across vast distances and audiences, with most radio consumption occurring on public transport and in other communal spaces. television retains its importance (especially in urban areas) but the practice of television viewing and infrastructure of television continues to change. For example, there is a growing trend towards watching television via satellite and cable, a shift that often provides greater access to foreign content but lesser access to local content. Many Pacific countries are also responding to the global switch from analogue to digital, although cost and logistics are mentioned as barriers to full transition. the availability of dVd players and recordable dVds has also transformed the experience of television viewing. Finally, many newspapers and newsletters are published, and have taken on a new life as they are uploaded and shared online to be read by members of the various Pacific diasporas.

Access to media is widening, particularly in Melanesia where individuals in the community and community media are training to use radio, internet and mobile. Provisioning High Frequency (HF) radios in small and isolated communities in PNG has been a core focus of the NGO Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship (CRMF). In Solomon Islands, NGOs have focused on the use of ICTs for education in rural areas. FemLINKpacific, based in Fiji, focuses upon training women to use mobile suitcase transmitters that transmit up to 100 watts over a 10 kilometre radius.

The access to and diversity of media sources in the Pacific is affected by geography. For example Intermedia

Europe conducted a survey on media and information access patterns in PNG. The results show that the levels of accessibility are mainly associated with geography rather than demographics such as age, gender, education. They describe geographic regions in terms of whether they are

'media-rich' or 'media dark'. In PNG, media dark areas are predominantly located in the islands. Further, TV and newspapers are mainly accessed in urban areas, so that radio and word of mouth remains a significant source of information, especially via family members and friends who travel between provinces. This situation is repeated in slightly different ways in other Pacific countries, such as Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Palau, and Kiribati, where isolation means that outer islands receive only government radio, or no access to mass media. Face-to-face communication remains highly valued across all Pacific countries.

Studies of media in the Pacific from as little as five years ago considered access to new digital infrastructure less relevant than access to traditional media, especially radio. Issues such as power supply, unsuitable climate, and lack of maintenance and repair capacity in the region were noted. While radio remains important, more recent studies find ICTs are becoming more relevant, and indeed are underutilised for development despite presenting significant potential.3 In places such as PNG, where radio has been a dominant and effective platform, recent studies suggest that more households now have access to mobile phones than to radio . In fact, this research and others5, suggests that people are increasingly using their mobile devices to access radio programs. Intermedia Europe found that in PNG, mobiles are amongst the most common ways to access the internet, with Facebook one of the most accessed sites . Alongside traditional broadcast media, information and communication technologies have entered the media and communication landscape.

The most ubiquitous of these technologies is the mobile phone; according to ITU statistics, around 60 per cent of Pacific Islanders in 2012 had access to a mobile, compared to just 10 per cent in 2006. Mobile phones are now used for a variety of services ranging from voice communication and SMS (text) to accessing the internet and social media. In a number of Pacific countries (e.g. Fiji, PNG, Samoa and Tonga), mobiles are being used for banking tasks such as payments and the circulation of transnational remittances. Mobile phones are also 'converging' with other media by providing access to camera, video and Bluetooth functions that enable people to share and transfer images and other files between mobile phones. Prepaid phone cards (which facilitate the ability to control costs) and purchasing a Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) card that can be transferred between different devices represent just a few of the possibilities that emerge through the increased access to mobile phones and mobile communication.

Like other parts of the world, access to and use of ICTs (particularly internet-enabled mobile phones) is often credited with bringing about social change . While we have yet to understand the full impact and influence of mobile phones in the lives of Pacific Islanders, early evidence suggests that the new mobile infrastructure in parts of the region is addressing some of the barriers – remoteness, financial cost and availability – that have to date hindered the circulation of information and communication.

Yet, as the media and communication environment becomes more complex, questions remain about the appropriateness of ICTs for specific purposes, such as for use during emergencies and disasters. The ability of broadcasters and technicians to keep up-to-date with the latest equipment and software is sometimes an issue. There is also a greater need for understanding the possibilities of integrating ICTs like mobile phones into media and communication plans for disaster response technologies like broadcast radio.

Despite the growth in mobile phones and internet access, and the convergence of broadcast and ICTs, barriers to the use of and participation in local, national and transnational media persists. In the baseline research we found that the internet in Tuvalu (provided by the government) was often down for days at a time and, when available, had serious connection problems. Even with the mobile phone across the region, the quality and availability of signals varies, and sometimes people have to walk to "bush phone booths" where the signal is stronger (....) online and social media may be providing a way to critique the political regime in Fiji, or expand public participation and discourse in Papua New Guinea for many young people, but there are serious concerns about the quality of information and consequences of postings as people turn to blogs and social media for information. Cost, speed, signal strength and a range of other access factors can both limit and present opportunities for participation in the region.

The diversity of the Pacific Island media and communication landscape is also influenced by geographic and population factors. This reflects the importance of considering geographic and population factors when thinking about media and communication across the region. Populations range from 1,538 in Niue to over 7 million in PNG. Nauru is made up of one island of 21 square kilometers, while Kiribati consists of 33 low-lying coral atoll islands, across 3.5 million square kilometers of ocean. Each country has its own unique challenges and opportunities related to media and communication.

The status of women and youth in general in the region further influences access to and use of traditional and new media, with only a few women led community media networks. The PACMAS report only covers independent member states of the region and therefore does not take into account the non-indepedent francophone countries.

(b) Membership challenges with key recommendations

1. Membership within WACC Pacific has been limited to several church led communications programmes and a few individual members. There has not been a WACC Pacific regional meeting for several years and this further limits regional collaboration. However, now that the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) is a member of WACC Pacific there is strategic opportunity for WACC to play a key role in supporting gender and youth inclusive communications and media initiatives linked to one of the biggest priority issues for the region - Climate Change, Peace and Security. With the large youth population, a priority focus should be support artivism initiatives
2. While there have been project based connections with women led community media organisations like FemLINK and indirectly with AMARC Asia Pacific and the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has been the most consistent WACC activities in the Pacific, which has been able to facilitate fundraising from within the region to support pre GMMP training. Greater attention is needed to invest in the follow up and promotion of the findings and developing strategic actions and messages through a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework for both the GMMP and WACC Pacific is key.
3. Lack of capacity to coordinate membership as well as enable visibiity to the network requires attention. Lessons can be learnt from network development modalities used by GPPAC Pacific and the Shifting the Power Coalition to engage annually with members and support regional

learning with funds allocated for national level roll-out.

(c) Three key proposals for the future direction of WACC (to feed into our 2022 - 2017 strategic Plan)

1. Network Development: Alongside mainstream news media networks like the Pacific Islands News Association and Journalism/networks that focus on gender, youth and other development priorities, including sports, WACC Pacific should focus on developing a core group of communications officers from within the Pacific Conference of Churches network. In addition to media skills training, the WACC Pacific Communications Network can be supported over a 2 to 3 year time period to not only be upskilled with media and communications skills through attachments with a national or regional media organisation, but also be supported to produce at least 3 well researched multimedia features linked to the regional priority theme. The features will demonstrate practical linkages between public theology and people centred communications

2. Youth Led Artivism Campaigns: Linked to an annual training and enables young people aged 18 - 30 years

3. Follow up action on GMMP

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