

Shooting the messenger, Pacific-style

David Robie

Media freedom as an issue in the Pacific has been defined in far too narrow terms, as if Big Brother governments and politicians ignorant about the role of media are the only problem. Of course, they're not. There are many other issues that are vitally important in the region that impinge on media freedom yet are rarely mentioned – such as self-censorship, media ownership and convergence, poor qualifications and salaries for many journalists (which make them potentially open to undue influence and bribery) and lack of education.

A former news magazine editor turned media educator at the University of the South Pacific, Shailendra Singh, has cautioned about not taking many of these issues more seriously. As he notes, criticisms of media standards in Fiji, for example, ought to be taken more constructively in a quest for improved standards and strengthening media freedom:

“The litany of complaints against the media cannot always be dismissed out of hand,” he says. “Concerns about unbalanced and unethical reporting, sensationalism, insensitivity, lack of depth and research in articles and a poor understanding of the issues are too frequent and too numerous. Another common complaint is that the media is loath to make retractions or correct mistakes. It has even been accused of bringing down a government or two.”¹

While the 1987 coups were a “watershed year” for the Fiji media (with one of the two daily newspapers closing, never to reopen because of censorship, and the other temporarily adopting self-censorship to survive), the media learned to be cautious in its reporting.² By the time the George Speight attempted coup happened in May 2000, many of the experienced journalists who had reported the 1987 political upheaval had left the country:

“A new generation of reporters found themselves in the frontline of another history-making episode. Again there are examples of courageous reporting, along with allegations that the media had fallen for the photogenic and quotable Speight, and his nationalistic message.”³

By the time of the 2006 coup by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, the nationalist and indigenous paramountcy rhetoric had vanished. Instead, this coup was claimed to be a “clean up’ campaign against corruption and racism” that the military commander alleged had become entrenched under the leadership of elected Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, a former banker who rose to political power after the Speight putsch due to Bainimarama’s patronage.⁴

The Bainimarama regime was just as critical of the media as the ousted democratic governments. Self-censorship by the media was replaced by the longest sustained censorship regime of any Pacific country, imposed when the 1997 Constitution was abrogated at Easter 2009. Failure by the Fiji Media Council to get its own house in order led first to a deeply flawed media “review” by Hawai’i-based former Fiji academic Dr Jim Anthony commissioned by the Fiji Human Rights Commission amid controversy, and then the imposition of the notorious *Fiji Media Development Decree 2010*.⁵ Two *Fiji Times* publishers (Evan Hannah in 2008 and Rex Gardner in January 2009) and the *Fiji Sun’s* Russell Hunter (in 2008) were deported.

Although the Bainimarama regime never succeeded in closing *The Fiji Times* in a cat-and-mouse game, as it undoubtedly wished, the government did manage to force the Australian-based owner News Limited (a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation) to sell the newspaper to the local Motibhai Group in 2010. Chief editor Netani Rika, long a thorn in the side of the regime, and deputy editor Sophie Foster were also ousted and replaced with a more compliant editorship by Fred Wesley.

A change of direction

It was a refreshing change from the usual back-slapping and we-can-do-no-wrong rhetoric by media owners to hear comments from people such as the then Fiji Human Rights Commission director, Dr Shaista Shameem, and media and politics lecturer Dr Tarcisius Kabutaulaka at a University of the South Pacific seminar marking World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD) on 3 May 2002.

Shameem wants a higher educational standard for Pacific journalists. In her view the region’s journalists need to know far more about history, politics, sociology, philosophy and the sciences.⁶

“Anyone can learn the technical skills of journalism – that’s the easy part,” she says. “The hard part is to understand the worlds that you are writing about. My definition of a good journalist is someone with such in-depth understanding of the issues that the words, though simply written, virtually leap out from the page.”

Solomon Islander Kabutaulaka, who has written widely as a columnist as well as critically examining the profession of journalism, raises the issue of media monopolies: “This raises the questions such as: Who controls or owns the media? Whose interests do they represent?” he asks. “In the world of globalisation and with the advent of the internet we must realise that a variety of media does not always mean a variety of sources.”

Kabutaulaka also wonders whether Pacific media provide “adequate information that will enhance democracy”. As he points out, “it is not an impartial medium. Rather, many [in the media] also have vested interests.”

One of the problems in the region is that there is virtually no in-depth reportage of the media itself. While some sections of the media attempt valiantly to ensure power is accountable, there is little reflection about the power of the media. In fact, there is little media accountability to the public – nothing comparable to ABC Television’s *Media Watch* in

Australia, or TVNZ7's *Media7* (later TV3's *Media3*) in New Zealand, and Radio New Zealand's *Mediawatch* to keep news organisations on their toes. Most media councils are rubber stamps for their media members with little proactive action.

Most are "struggling for relevance" to the rapidly changing digital industry, according to a PACMAS-funded review of national media councils in 2013.⁷ "They are politically and financially challenged to continue to uphold their advocacy role for a plural, independent and professional media ... A new generation of graduates and younger media practitioners ... is challenging the ineffectiveness of media associations in several countries."⁸

Call for an independent Pacific Islands journalists' network

Many challenges lie ahead in "navigating the future" of Pacific Islands media. In my experience, while there are a number of Pacific Islands media organisations and workshops around the region, rarely do they acknowledge the remarkable growth in the past few years of New Zealand-based Pacific media, both vernacular and English-language. Quality and informative programmes such as *Tagata Pasifika* on Television New Zealand and the Pacific Radio Network, the magazine *Spasifik*, and newspapers such as *Taimi 'o Tonga*, which is now based back in Tonga, are just some examples.

There is a need for an independent Pacific Islands journalists' network which nurtures and develops their needs and there is a need for more Pacific Islands journalists working in the mainstream media in Australia and New Zealand. This is especially so in this age of globalisation. The large attendance at the inaugural Pacific Islands Media Association (PIMA) conference at AUT University in Auckland in October 2001, and subsequent conferences, was testimony to this. The establishment of the Apia-based Pasifika Media Association (PASIMA) resource website in 2010 is another example.⁹

However, more than a decade on, PIMA is now struggling to retain this leadership role in New Zealand and also needs to be more involved in the region in support of its sister and brother journalists. There is a vital need for a greater plurality of media voices and education if freedom of speech and the press are to flourish in the Pacific.

The late New Zealand High Commissioner to Fiji, Tia Barrett, made an important statement about indigenous issues and journalism at the University of the South Pacific journalism awards presentation in Suva during November 2000, which riled the military-installed regime:

"What is difficult to accept in this dialogue on indigenous rights is the underlying assumption that those rights are pre-eminent over other more fundamental human rights. This just cannot be so, not in today's world ... Nowhere is it written in any holy scripture that because you are indigenous you have first rights over others in their daily rights. You should be respected and highly regarded as an indigenous person, but respect is earned not obtained on demand."¹⁰

As Tia Barrett said, information would make the difference in the process of cultural change for Pacific Islanders in the face of globalisation to improve people's lives. This is

where the journalist plays a vitally important role, always bearing in mind the needs of the people and their thirst for knowledge.

Since the fourth coup on 5 December 2006 by Commodore (now Rear Admiral) Voreqe Bainimarama, press freedom has been on a downhill slide in Fiji culminating in the draconian *Fiji Media Industry Development Decree 2010*. Although formal military censorship virtually ended later at the start of 2012, Freedom House's annual media freedom report in 2013 said the harsh penalties under the decree – such as FJ\$1000 fines or up to two years in jail for journalists and up to FJ\$100,000 for organisations breaching the law – had “deterred most media from criticising the regime”.

Defenders of the regime claim there is “freedom of the press” and it is the media editors who are failing to take advantage of the freedom that they have. New director of the Fiji Media Development Authority (MIDA), Matai Akauola, former general manager of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), said in a Radio Australia *Pacific Beat* interview: “In the last few years, we haven't taken anyone to task, so that speaks for itself ... We even have clauses in the new Constitution that have provisions for free media in Fiji. So for us everything is open to the media ...”¹¹

But in February 2013, *The Fiji Times* was fined FJ\$300,000 and the editor given a suspended jail term for contempt of court for a news report critical of the Fiji judiciary published by the New Zealand *Sunday Star-Times* in 2011.¹² While this was not related to the decree, the harsh penalty added to a “chilling” climate for media, echoed by the experience of commentators on the ground such as US journalism professor Robert Hooper who ran an investigative journalism course for Fiji Television during 2012:

“I stressed the coverage of controversial stories on issues of national importance that, if produced, would be banned under Fiji's *Public Emergency Regulations* (PER) – an edict issued in April 2009 that placed censors in newsrooms – and the *Media Industry Development Decree 2010*, a vaguely worded law that criminalises anything government deems is “against the public interest or order”. Under *PER*, overt censorship as well as self-censorship became routine at Fiji Television in 2009, in stark contrast to the openness and independence of the newly launched Fiji TV whose reporters I trained in the 1990s. Until *PER* was lifted in January 2012, military censors arrived at Fiji TV's newsroom daily at 2pm and 5pm to suppress stories deemed “political” or “critical of government”. The arrest of reporters and confiscation of videotapes led swiftly to self-censorship in a demoralised newsroom.”¹³

In October 2013, the regime banned foreign journalists, media trainers and freelancers, and aid donors offering training from Fiji unless they were registered and sought approval from the state-run MIDA.¹⁴ The self-censorship climate also impacted on academic freedom. At the University of the South Pacific in 2011, one of its most eminent professors, economist and former National Federation Party MP Dr Wadan Narsey, was gagged and ultimately forced out of the academy.¹⁵

Lamenting in one of his prolific columns that the Fiji media was no longer a genuine watchdog, Narsey added: “The real weakness in Fiji's media industry currently is that Fiji's

media owners are not 'dedicated independent media companies', but corporate entities with much wider business interests which are far more valuable to the media owners than their profits from their media assets."¹⁶ He was later gagged¹⁷ from giving an address to journalism students on the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day event in 2013.¹⁸

In the inaugural UNESCO World Press Freedom Day lecture at AUT University on 3 May 2013, Professor Mark Pearson said that like teaching and nursing, a journalism career based on "truth-seeking and truth-telling in our societies had an element of a 'mission' " about it. "All societies need their 'Tusitalas' – their storytellers," he added.¹⁹

But he also warned that social media and blogging seemed to have "spawned an era of new super-pamphleteer – the ordinary citizen with the power to disseminate news and commentary" immediately. This raises the stakes for media accuracy, credibility and freedom. "It would be an historic irony and a monumental shame," Pearson said, "if press freedom met its demise through the sheer pace of irresponsible truth-seeking and truth-telling today."²⁰

An extract from David Robie's new media freedom book Don't Spoil my Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific (Little Island Press, Auckland, 2014). Professor Robie is director of the Pacific Media Centre at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand and convenor of the Pacific Media Watch freedom project.

Little Island Press link: <http://littleisland.co.nz/books/dont-spoil-my-beautiful-face>

Notes

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