

1 Development issues and challenges for media in the Pacific

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Introduction

The image of the Pacific as an idyllic, pristine and trouble-free paradise has taken a battering in recent years. The latest grim assessment, widely reported by the regional media, came from New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters.

Speaking at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations at The Hague, he said that political unrest and violence remained significant features of the Pacific landscape, as witnessed by the fourth coup in two decades in Fiji on December 2006, and riots in the Solomon Islands and Tonga.

Peters added that in parts of the Pacific, pockets of absolute poverty were growing:

The socio-economic indicators of some Melanesian countries are almost on a par with those of sub-Saharan Africa. Internal volatility, land conflicts, population pressures, and ethnic tensions are driving down living standards (Peters, 2007).

Being compared to sub-Saharan Africa would rate as a new low for the region. But some island leaders continue to be in denial, and steadfastly cling to a romanticised, tourist version of the Pacific. They bristle at any suggestion that all may not be well.

Often, it falls upon Pacific Island journalists to tell the people that the emperor is naked, putting them on a collision course with the establishment. As veteran Fiji journalist Seona Smiles says, journalists, as whistleblowers, are often seen in the same light as troublemakers who stir up situations unnecessarily. Smiles adds:

There are deep-rooted beliefs in South Pacific societies about respect for authority that can translate into a lack of accountability and transparency, coupled with a strongly disapproving attitude towards those who question, probe and publish. The Pacific is littered with publishers and journalists being chastised and chased (2001: ix).

The environment may be hostile, with much of the work that journalists perform often going unappreciated. But the media cannot afford to let such attitudes get in its way. Contrary to what some leaders believe, journalists do have a crucial role to play in the development of their nations, particularly in a region such as the Pacific, where bad governance, graft and corruption are taking a heavy toll.

In the face of all the criticisms and put-downs, and caught up as they are meeting the daily demands of the newsroom, it is not uncommon for journalists, who are often poorly paid, to become disillusioned sometimes, or lose sight of the huge responsibility they carry on their shoulders.

One of the things that this book seeks to do is to re-emphasise that journalism is a noble calling, and that journalists have a critical developmental role to play in the region. The work that the news media carries out is vitally important, and journalists should never let their critics pull them down.

Conley and Lamble, in likening journalists to historians recording a community's best and worst moments, also outline their greater role:

(Journalists) give a town, city, state, nation—sometimes humanity—a sense of self. Journalism is society's rendezvous with expression, marshalling community debate and creating its forum. It asks, analyses, explains, and ponders. Sometimes it is provocative. Often it is irreverent—prodding and poking the soft underbellies of the pompous and self-important. Collectively the media represents a metaphoric package of alarm bells. It is a forum for ideas and opinions. Most importantly—and despite mistakes, excesses and weaknesses—the media generally promotes, protects and fosters democracy. Dictatorships and totalitarian regimes struggle to survive if their citizens are well informed and politically aware (2006: ix).

In all fairness, not all criticism directed at journalists comes from those with vested interests, hidden agendas or with axes to grind. The growing public disillusionment with the media is a well-known fact. An often heard criticism, and one that cannot be dismissed easily, is that the news media practitioners in Pacific countries are poorly edu-

cated, lack professional and ethical standards, and lack knowledge of the political and social institutions.

Unlike Pacific Island leaders who are too often averse to criticism, journalists need to have thicker skins. They have to adopt an open and positive attitude when their work or profession comes under public scrutiny. If there are any faults, the necessary measures need to be taken to correct them.

One shortcoming of the media often highlighted is the inadequate coverage and prominence given to the issues that really matter. While the rapid technological developments that have taken place in recent years have made it easier and cheaper to disseminate messages almost anywhere in the world, there is a downside.

The Pacific is now more prone to being bombarded by ‘infotainment’, or soft journalism. Beamed in from overseas channels, the cheaply-packaged programmes offer sensationalism, celebrity, and crime as news. Foreign celebrity news, lifestyle stories and entertainment also occupy a significant amount of space in the print media, often at the expense of locally produced educational and informational content. This undermines local cultures and languages.

Keeping in mind the fact that the media’s principal responsibility is to the people, journalists are duty-bound to educate themselves about the real problems that the local population faces. Only then can they report about these issues in an in-depth and compelling fashion, thereby helping bring about some relief.

While there is no denying that development in this part of the world is hampered by a lack of resources, and by its isolation and vulnerability to natural disasters, manmade problems such as bad governance and corruption, misguided policies, lopsided development and wasteful and fraudulent use of natural resources are, cumulatively, also taking a heavy toll. So much so that despite taking the lion’s share of developmental aid, the region has little to show for it, and is often accused of suffering from aid dependency.

Clear signs that the long-neglected problems are coming to a head can be seen in the breakdown of infrastructure, diminishing natural resources, decline in health, education and other social services, and a burgeoning, restless youth population that is turning to crime. While leaders could once blithely dismiss the various reports and studies that highlighted the problems facing the region as ‘culturally insensitive propaganda’, and actually get away with it, things are not so

simple nowadays.

Ordinary citizens experiencing an inexorable decline in living standards can no longer be mollified by soothing words, diversionary tactics, or an appeal to culture and tradition. This was seen in Tonga and the Solomon Islands where angry civilians vented their frustrations by taking to the streets and engaging in unprecedented acts of looting and burning.

In true journalistic tradition, this book tries to lay bare some of the developmental problems troubling the region. The articles give background and context about issues such as poorly performing economies, causes of poverty, poor governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights, gender imbalances and the environment. It shows how these issues impact on development, and suggests angles journalists can explore to make their reporting more effective.

The concept of development journalism, largely unknown in this region, is also explored, with contributions from journalists and researchers engaged in reporting development issues in the Asia-Pacific region. By focusing on development issues in a sustained and systematic manner, the media in some Asian countries has achieved tangible gains for the people.

While the Western media has shunned the concept of development journalism because of a perception of government influence and control, our Asian contributors argue and demonstrate compellingly that development journalism can be constructive and effective, and that claims of government infiltration may have been exaggerated.

In fact, a widely held belief among proponents of development journalism is that in discarding the concept, the Western media barons may have been motivated more by market considerations rather than any notions of government control.

The contributors to this book were selected from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. While not all of them work in the media, the majority work with the media in that they either write articles or regularly comment on various issues of public interest.

Most importantly, the authors share a firm belief that the media has the power to effect change. Also, they have a common cause with journalists in that they want to help improve the quality of life in the Pacific Islands. This makes them valuable allies of journalism.

Media & Development: Issues and Challenges in the Pacific Islands

David Robie (chapter 2) opens Part 1 by defining development journalism and its relevance to the Pacific. He argues that development journalism is still important and not a relic of the past. Development journalism, as he points out, has to provide a critical view of the institutions of governance which can lead to improvements in efficiency and better service delivery to the people. **Evangelia Papoutsaki** (chapter 3) argues that for reporting to move beyond the superficial and urban-based, journalists need to understand the value of research and also approaches to conducting research to produce better standards in their stories. She argues that research should be reflective of local communities and their values, and involve perspectives and paradigms that are not always seen in mainstream research.

Julie Middleton (chapter 4) looks at the connection between gender and media, and pleads for a serious inclusion of women's voices in reporting. She provides an update of issues affecting women such as gender-based discrimination, violence and rape, health issues, lack of representation in politics, and how all this affects development in general. In addition, she makes a strong case for why journalists should pay attention to gender equality. **Jaap Jasperse** (chapter 5) gives an overview of the environmental challenges facing the Pacific region and highlights the journalist's role in bringing these issues to public attention. He provides a useful discussion of how threats to biodiversity, the problem of solid waste and the devastating impact of climate change can seriously affect development and threaten the future sustainability of the region.

Health and the spread of HIV and AIDS in the Pacific region are serious development problems. **Nicole Gooch and Lisa Williams-Lahari** (chapter 6) provide a rationale for linking media, health and development. They point out that health journalism 'simply put is less about pills and press releases, doctors and deaths and more about people and priorities, lifestyles and healthy communities'. Their article gives some useful tips on health reporting for Pacific Island journalists. **Trevor Cullen** (chapter 7), explains the scale of the problem of HIV and AIDS in the Pacific, and what it means for development in the region. He outlines the extent to which HIV and AIDS are affecting development in Papua New Guinea, and gives stark reminder of why the region needs to tackle the problem as a matter of urgency.

Kevin Barr (chapter 8) explores poverty and emphasises the need for journalists to understand this issue when reporting on human development problems. In most Pacific Island countries, increased poverty has been due to low levels of economic growth. The inability of governments to drive economic and social policies that not only enhance growth but also help create employment has been a serious failure of the leadership in the region.

Media, Governance, Rule of Law and the Economy

The five chapters in Part II all explore the link between media, governance, rule of law and the economy. **Ron Duncan** (chapter 9) defines governance and why the efficient operation of institutions, whether formal or informal, is important for a well-functioning market economy. He provides evidence of bad governance in different sectors in the Pacific Islands, such as in state-owned enterprises, and discusses transactional politics, democracy and governance.

Nazhat Shameem (chapter 10) explains the importance of the rule of law and its relationship to development. Shameem argues that if the concept of the rule of law and its relevance to the developing countries of the region is not well-understood by our people, then it is a most important role of the media to ensure that it is understood. **Shahista Shameem** (chapter 11) surveys relevant issues regarding human rights and development. She provides recommendations in the form of a checklist to give journalists with a range of research and reporting strategies to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities to the public.

Biman Prasad and **Paresh Narayan** (chapters 12 and 13 respectively) argue that journalists need to understand the basic economic issues affecting the region. Prasad provides an overview of these issues, and explains how the special characteristics of the Pacific Islands, such as vulnerability to natural disasters, dependence on aid, remoteness and increasing trade integration are affecting development. He argues that journalists' understanding of these issues will lead to better reporting, and in turn influence development policies. Narayan takes on the specific subject of national budgets. Apart from providing revenue and expenditure for sectoral allocations, budgets also provide policy signals and directions for the future. How national budgets are formulated and what they mean for development should be the focus of reporting, says Narayan.

Millennium Development Goals, ICT and Language Issues

Carol Flore-Smrecznik (chapter 14) assesses the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) in the Pacific. The timetable of 2015 set by the United Nations for achieving these goals could prove to be too ambitious for some countries. For example, a summary of the progress made by each Pacific country shows that on Goal 8—reducing child mortality—most Pacific Island countries are not only off track but show a negative trend. Flore-Smrecznik's analysis also shows that poverty is increasing in many Pacific Island countries. The media role here is to identify and question government policies that may or may not be helping nations reach the specified targets stipulated by the UN.

Charmaine Rodrigues (chapter 15) argues for participatory development through freedom of information. She explains how the right to information is valuable for development journalism, and identifies 10 ways in which media could help in participatory development. These include uncovering poor implementation of social policies, opening up the development design process to beneficiaries and exposing poor targeting of government subsidies.

Mark Borg (chapter 16) deals with the impact of technological advancements on development and argues that the digital divide between countries and within countries in the Pacific region is a serious concern, which could impede development in many sectors. He then identifies some obstacles to the development and delivery of ICT services to the people. He points out the exorbitant prices/rates, the lack of infrastructure, the lack of literacy—both language and computer—and the lack of local content in the products from ICT.

Rajni Chand (chapter 17) provides a discussion of the development of different forms of media in the Pacific region. She explains the language difficulties, and the importance of adopting the vernacular languages in some reporting. She points out what should be obvious—that the education of communities also depends on the role of the media and the appropriateness of the language used in disseminating educational information.

Some Lessons from Asia

Kalinga Seneviratne, Pragtip Daorueng and Red Batario (chapters 18, 19 and 20) further clarify and define development jour-

nalism. They provide useful references and experiences from Asia. By focusing on development issues in a sustained and systematic manner, the media in some Asian countries has achieved tangible gains for the people, despite the Western media's shunning of the concept because of a belief that it would give governments an avenue to influence and control news. Our Asian contributors argue compellingly and demonstrate convincingly that development journalism can be constructive and effective, and that claims of government infiltration may have been premature.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Pramila Devi and **Ganesh Chand** (chapter 21) discuss how development journalism can act as a tool for progress. They argue that the coverage of development issues shows a clear pattern of the reporting reflecting the ethos of the dominant social and political groupings. In calling for a wider cross-section of views in the media, they contend that 'whatever name it goes by—plain journalism, development journalism or investigative journalism—what is required is good journalism and good journalists'.