

Media self-regulation in the Pacific Islands: A survey of media professionals

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Abstract

Common concerns exist across the Pacific Islands' region over the quality of media reporting, absence of common media standards and enforcement mechanisms with regard to journalism ethics and implementation of increasingly tighter government regulations. This study surveyed working media professionals in the Pacific Islands on the feasibility of establishing a regional self-regulatory media system. It uses an internationally accepted analytical best practice framework and evaluative criteria for establishing media self-regulatory systems. A total of eight key findings, five recommendations and three implications for establishing a regional self-regulatory media system, were derived from the analysis of the survey data.

Keywords

Ethics, media standards, Pacific Islands, self-regulation

Introduction

Pacific Island countries embrace significantly different policy and legislative environments for media regulation. However, common concerns across the Pacific Islands' region exist in relation to the quality of media reporting, absence of common media standards and enforcement mechanisms with regard to journalism ethics and challenges to journalism and media freedoms (Singh, 2012). Regional media representatives themselves largely share these concerns, as well as governments and the general public (Perrottet and Robie, 2011).

National self-regulation mechanisms to enforce media standards and ethics have been established in Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands (see Pacific Media Assistance Scheme

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(PACMAS), 2012; Perrottet and Robie, 2011), as well as Fiji's current attempt to re-establish a national body as it negotiates ongoing government influence and factional instability. However, the PACMAS (2012) reported that National Media Associations (NMAs) in most Pacific countries were 'struggling for relevance, dysfunctional and fractured. Many had stopped meeting and existed only in name; they had become "dis-associated"'.

Other professional representative bodies have also attempted to establish a regional self-regulatory presence with varying degrees of success. The Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) (2013) is a regional organisation representing the interests of media professionals. However, the organisation has lost considerable support in recent years because of its perceived failure to take the lead in representing regional media interests, including self-regulation, training and education. Pacifica Media Association (PasiMA) is a professional association of regional independent media owners, operators and principals. At a more practical level, the PACMAS, an Australian government-funded project (2008–2018), is tasked to support better media governance in the Pacific Islands' region.

Despite such supporting bodies, media in the Pacific Islands have come under immense pressure from governments to attain a higher level of professional journalistic standards and ethics in its practices and responsibilities. For example, in Tonga, the country's Parliament initiated training for journalists in parliamentary ethics as a way to improve journalistic practices and conduct (Weber and Johnson, 2014). In 2013, the Fiji government-backed Media Information Development Authority (MIDA) called for the media to improve standards of reporting, with proposed training workshops scheduled on the controversial Media Decree, Parliamentary practices and ethics, and new Constitution (Drageset, 2013). However, many independent observers viewed MIDA as part of a 'further clamp down on media freedom in Fiji less than 12 months out from the country's first elections' in 8 years (Sovaraki, 2013). Following the election, MIDA continues to struggle to establish itself as an effective, independent body (Robie, 2015).

As these examples illustrate, media in Pacific Island countries face an increasing degree of control over media freedoms, impacting democratic reform and sustainability in the region. Against this backdrop, there exists an urgent need to assess the feasibility of establishing a media self-regulation system for the Pacific Islands. As such, this study takes the first step in this process by evaluating media professionals' perceptions of establishing a regional media self-regulatory system in the Pacific Islands that meets stakeholder concerns and needs at both regional and national levels.

Media regulation and the Pacific Islands' context

Media regulation has moved beyond traditional ways of thinking in relation to regulatory frameworks to focus on the regulatory tools that can be deployed within a *regulatory space*. As Hitchens (2011) suggests, media policy and regulation that enable and govern media operations and functions must be considered across the entire environment; otherwise, there is the risk of a regulatory imbalance and pressure points that would undermine key objectives.

This regulatory space recognises that regulatory power and authority cannot be held within a single formal body (i.e. government), but dispersed between any number of entities – both private and public – with a shared and mutually beneficial raft of responsibilities. Such a system can accommodate a variety of regulatory tools from the market through to self-regulation to centralised command regulation, enabling different jurisdictional responses to similar policy objectives. However, there exist a range of challenges to regulatory frameworks, including regulatory effectiveness or 'bite'; the scope of the regulation in relation to the range of media operators and funding; difficulties in establishing an identity for, and thus credibility of, the scheme among diverse

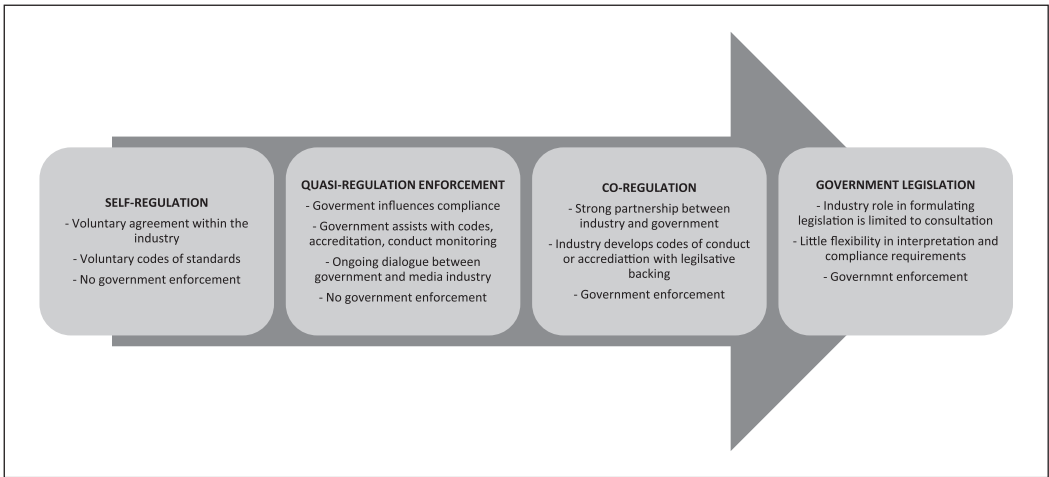


Figure 1. The regulatory continuum.

Source: Australian Communications and Media Authority (2011).

stakeholders; and developing a simple, acceptable code of ethical conduct and professional standards (Hitchens, 2011).

To address such issues, several governments worldwide have endorsed principles of regulatory process – including Australia (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2011), New Zealand (Barker and Evans, 2007), United Kingdom (Office of Communications (OfCom), 2008) and Europe (Richter, 2005) – to inform the development and choice of regulatory and non-regulatory tools. The key approaches are market-based self-regulation, co-regulatory structures and direct government or statutory regulation (see Figure 1).

Since the 1990s, international and government organisations have promoted self- and co-regulatory mechanisms as alternatives to direct legislation. Examples include Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, which have all undertaken ongoing reviews of media regulatory systems over the past 5 years. Self-regulation has been traditionally described as a viable option whereby the industry voluntarily develops, administers and enforces its own solution to address particular issues facing the media with no formal oversight by the regulator (i.e. government-appointed authority). Self-regulatory approaches are characterised by the lack of a legal backstop to act as the guarantor of enforcement of the codes of professional practice and ethical conduct (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2011).

In practice, self-regulation without any form of government or statutory involvement is rare. Most often, self-regulation has become embedded in the regulatory framework, reflected by a range of ‘joint arrangements’ between the regulator and the regulated. Such regulatory approaches are enclosed within the accepted term of co-regulation, which can be understood as a combination of non-government (industry) regulation and government regulation (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2011). Co-regulation can mean that the media industry or a professional body representing the media develops the regulatory arrangements, such as a code of professional practice or standards, in coordination with government. This could pose important challenges for establishing a regional media self-regulatory arrangement, which reflects a diversity of linguistic, geographic, political, regulatory, cultural, social and media delivery issues and challenges.

Co-regulatory mechanisms can include legislation that (1) delegates power to industry to regulate and enforce codes of professional conduct and practice; (2) enforces undertakings to maintain

compliance to such codes; (3) prescribes a code as a regulation, but the code only applies to those who subscribe to it, thus relying on voluntary compliance; (4) does not require a code of professional practice or standards, but has reserve power to make the code mandatory; (5) requires industry to have a code and, in its absence, government will impose a code or standard, thus reflecting situations currently experienced by the media in the Pacific Islands; and (6) prescribes a code as a regulation applied to all industry members, in effect implementing mandatory codes (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2011).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009), when used in the right circumstances, self-regulation and co-regulation can offer a number of advantages over traditional command and control regulation. These advantages include greater flexibility and adaptability, potentially lower compliance and administrative costs, an ability to harness industry knowledge and expertise to address industry-specific and consumer issues directly, and quick and low-cost complaints-handling and dispute resolution mechanisms. However, there are several drawbacks to self- and co-regulation, which include the possibility of raising barriers to entry within segments of the media industry, unintended monopoly power gained by participants that could restrict competition, danger of regulatory capture and potential to increase government compliance and enforcement costs (OECD, 2009).

Research by the OfCom, the United Kingdom regulatory body that governs the communication industry, including the media, initiated an extensive process of consultation with relevant communication industry stakeholders as part of its ongoing review of regulatory structures. Based on these consultations, OfCom concluded that self-regulation is most likely to work where the following conditions are present when the industry (1) collectively has an interest in solving the issue of regulation, (2) is able to establish clear objectives for a potential scheme and (3) solutions match the legitimate needs of citizens and consumers. On the other hand, empirical evidence indicates a regulatory scheme is unlikely to work if incentives for individual companies not to participate and incentives for participating organisations not to comply with agreed industry and professional codes existed (OfCom, 2008).

To achieve optimal conditions, OfCom's consultations identified 11 best practice criteria for establishing self- and co-regulatory schemes within the communication industry, inclusive of the media. These criteria are public awareness, transparency, significant industry participation, adequate resources (financial and human), clarity of processes and structures, ability to enforce codes, audits of performance, system of redress in place, involvement of independent members in decision-making, regular review of objectives and non-collusive behaviour. Of the 11 best practice criteria, OfCom's analysis indicates that adequate and proportionate resource commitments (e.g. suitable funding and human resource allocation), involvement of independent members in decision-making (e.g. respect from non-media stakeholders) and transparency (e.g. openness and public accountability in relation to performance) are critical to ensure effectiveness of all regulatory schemes (OfCom, 2008).

To assess the success of a regional media self-regulatory system in the Pacific Islands, it is necessary to understand the context of the Pacific Islands' media landscape (see Table 1). Two studies provide insight into the complexity of this mediascape. A 2006 study, titled 'Informing Citizens: Opportunities for Media and Communications in the Pacific' (Molnar, 2008), focused on media, governance and journalism standards. One of the central issues was the need for independent regulatory bodies to ensure that broadcast licensing and media regulation processes were as fair and apolitical as possible. In the Cook Islands, Niue, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Tuvalu, Tonga and Vanuatu, broadcasting is the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office. In other countries, such as the Solomon Islands, the Prime Minister is responsible for public broadcasting, while commercial broadcasting is the responsibility of the minister who oversees telecommunications. A second finding focused on journalistic standards and professional practices, revealing an

Table 1. Pacific Islands' profile.

Country	Television	Radio	Print	Telecom
Cook Islands	2 commercial; 7 community on outer islands	4 commercial, only 1 with almost national coverage; 1 community	2 commercial newspapers (1 daily and 1 weekly)	Telecoms monopoly, private company; 66% mobile penetration; Internet 'expensive and slow' – 10% access
Federated States of Micronesia	4 commercial (1 in each state)	4 government; 2 commercial; 1 church; 1 community	1 community (bi-weekly)	Telecoms monopoly, public corporation; 25% mobile penetration, 20% Internet access
Fiji Islands	4 commercial companies offering 20 channels; 1 church network	2 government; 10 commercial; 2 church; 2 community (1 campus)	12 commercial (3 daily, 4 weekly, 4 monthly, 1 quarterly); 1 student; 2 community	Telecoms competitive environment; 84% mobile penetration; 28% Internet access (in 2011)
Kiribati	1 government currently not operating	2 government 1 commercial	1 government 2 commercial 1 church all weekly or less frequent	Telecoms monopoly, government-owned; 14% mobile penetration, 10% Internet access
Nauru	1 government	1 government	1 government, monthly	Telecoms competitive environment; 65% mobile penetration, 6% Internet access
Niue	1 government	1 government; 1 hobby	1 commercial (every 3 weeks)	Telecoms government monopoly but free public Wi-Fi; 38% mobile phone penetration; 83% Internet access
Palau	1 part government-owned; 2 commercial	1 government; 3 commercial; 2 church	1 government, irregular 3 commercial, 2 published irregularly and 1 twice weekly 3 commercial; 1 church	Telecoms near government monopoly. 80% mobile phone penetration, 6% Internet access
Papua New Guinea (PNG)	1 commercial; 1 public 1 commercial (satellite)	3 government; 7 commercial; 2 community; 5 church		Telecoms competitive environment; 38% mobile phone penetration; 2% Internet access
Republic of the Marshall Islands	2 commercial with limited coverage; 1 US armed forces	1 government; 1 commercial; 2 church 1 US armed forces	1 commercial (weekly)	Telecoms monopoly, privately owned but government controlled; 7% mobile penetration; 3.5% Internet access
Samoa	2 commercial; 1 church; 1 commercial (foreign-owned)	1 government; 5 commercial; 4 church; 1 community	2 government; 3 commercial; 3 commercial (foreign-owned); 1 community	Telecoms competitive environment; 91% mobile penetration; 7% Internet access
Solomon Islands	2 commercial; 1 government; (international); 1 church (international)	4 government; 2 commercial; 1 church; 1 community	4 commercial	Telecoms competitive environment; 50% mobile phone penetration; 6% Internet access
Tuvalu	No service	1 government	1 government	Telecoms government monopoly; 20% mobile phone penetration; 40% Internet access
Vanuatu	1 government 2 foreign government 2 church (international)	2 government; 1 commercial; 1 community; 1 church	2 government; 1 commercial; 1 community; 1 church	Telecoms competitive environment; 76% mobile phone penetration; 8% Internet access

overwhelming reliance on government-sourced information; single-source news stories, which failed the test of fair and balanced reporting; basic errors of detail; ignorance of the law; failure to confirm facts; failure to observe the rules of journalistic confidence; and poor editing of articles or broadcasts (Molnar, 2008). A second report, the 'Pacific Media Freedom 2011: A Status Report', published by the New Zealand-based Pacific Media Centre, examines trends in the Pacific Island region from 1 July to 31 August 2010. The report concludes that Pacific media freedom is 'fragile in the wake of serious setbacks, notably in Fiji, with sustained pressure from a military backed regime, and in Vanuatu, where blatant intimidation has continued with near impunity'.

Method

Given that industry-led solutions are the most likely to succeed, this study empirically documents media professionals' perspectives on self-regulation in a way that matches the needs of the citizens and consumers. The study also provided media organisations with an opportunity to participate in the solution seeking process, assist in the establishment of industry objectives and set major priorities for a future regulatory system.

A survey method was used to gather information from media professionals (industry, academic and non-government representatives). The survey instrument was developed and pre-tested by a research team with significant statistical experience, using OfCom's best practice criteria benchmark (outlined above). A 12th criterion of 'Training/Education' was added to address government and industry criticism that journalists lack skills in legal and ethical training, reinforcing the need for a professional code of conduct. The criteria were employed to understand media industry perceptions of their relative importance to establishing a regional media self-regulatory system for the Pacific Islands. We recognise that not all the criteria may be relevant or required for the Pacific context. As such, each criterion, once measured, will be weighted in relation to the objectives of the scheme and the importance placed on it by media professionals within their context.

Survey instrument structure and phases of implementation

The survey comprised three parts (19 questions). Part A consisted of General and Demographic Information (gender, age, occupation, media type, country of residence). Part B focused on Best Practice Criteria using a Likert scale to measure individual perceptions of the 12 best practice criteria. Part C provided Open-Ended Questions to allow respondents to provide in-depth responses on the benefits of and challenges in establishing a regional media self-regulatory system in the Pacific Islands. Survey participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

A three-phase strategy was used to distribute the survey to increase the response rate. Phase 1, the initial mail out, was conducted via email to a database of 250 contacts derived from several professional media contact lists. The email provided a short explanation of the feasibility study and a URL link to the survey on SurveyMonkey. In phase 2 of the survey, a telephone call was made to each media contact 48–72 hours after the link was emailed to check whether the email had been received and whether the survey had been completed. In phase 3, potential survey respondents were identified via the LinkedIn database of business contacts, resulting in a further 201 media professionals being sent the survey link – these contacts were cross-referenced with the original contact list to avoid double-up contact.

From the combined contact list and LinkedIn database, a total of 451 surveys were distributed to individual media professionals and media academics. Survey data were collected in two stages,

from 1 December 2013 to 15 January 2014 (204 surveys) and then from 16 January to 1 March 2014 (27 surveys). The data collected from 1 December to 15 January were collated and analysed to produce a preliminary report, which were presented to media professionals for feedback at the PINA 2014 Third Pacific Media Summit workshop in New Caledonia in February 2014. Results of the surveys collected in the second data collection period were then added to those collected in the first data collection period.

Survey analysis processes and procedures

Analysis of the data was undertaken in a two-step process. First, a number of analyses were conducted to determine Regional, National and Media-Type perceptions of the most important criteria. These analyses determined the extent to which relevant perceptions of a media self-regulatory scheme align with established benchmarks that define effectiveness of such systems, inclusive of the three most critical – adequate and proportionate resource commitments (e.g. suitable funding and human resource allocation), involvement of independent members in decision-making (e.g. gaining respect from non-media stakeholders) and transparency (e.g. openness and public accountability in relation to performance). Furthermore, the findings also indicate what priorities should be given to specific criteria within a national context to enhance the future ownership and thus support of the recommended system at a localised level.

The response items were converted to a 5-point Likert scale (1=Very Important, 2=Important, 3=Moderately Important, 4=Of little importance, 5=Unimportant). Thus, lower scores demonstrate greater perceived importance. The exact statistical analysis involved a number of single-factor analyses of variance (ANOVAs). An ANOVA assesses whether perceptions of importance among the 12 criteria statements are statistically different. Three main analyses were conducted in this phase of examining the data. The nature of these analyses is listed below:

1. *Pacific Region Analysis.* This analysis involves all responses to the survey. The ANOVA directly compares the perceived importance of all of the criteria statements. Specifically, this analysis reveals the relative perceived importance of criteria statements.
2. *National Analysis.* This analysis involves an individual examination of the responses from each of the relevant countries in the Pacific Region. The ANOVA directly compares the perceived importance of all of the criteria statements for each of the countries. Specifically, this analysis reveals whether there are differences between responses at the national level in their perceived importance of criteria statements.
3. *Media-Type Analysis.* This analysis involves an examination of the perceived importance of each individual media type at the regional and national level. The perceived importance of all criteria statements will be directly compared for each media type. A single ANOVA was performed for each media type. This analysis reveals whether there are differences across the various media types in their perceived importance of the criteria statements.

Several limitations in the adopted approach need to be acknowledged. Research participants, while large in number, present their particular perspectives, experience and knowledge that relate to the establishment of a regional media self-regulatory scheme and the benefits and challenges emerging out of such an initiative. Nevertheless, not all of the people we wanted to include were available, and the views gathered will always, as in every case, present only a partial though relevant view on the defined issues.

Results

A total of 231 surveys were received during the data collection periods with 209 surveys completed in full, constituting a response rate of 46.34%. Of these, 157 responses were gathered directly from Pacific Islands' media professionals based in 11 of the 14 nominated countries (see Table 2). The remaining 74 responses were drawn from media professionals, academics and diasporic Pacific Island media observers reporting or commenting on Pacific Islands' political, economic and social issues. Given that response rates for online surveys can range from 10% or lower (Cohen et al., 2011: 286) to 25% (Nulty, 2008: 304), our response rate of 46.34% is fairly significant and most likely represents a valid and representative sample of the total surveys distributed. Although there are no accurate figures of the number of media professionals employed at any one time in the Pacific Region, the broad and representative nature of our survey techniques suggests that a substantial and representative sample of media professionals in the Pacific was accessed in this study.

General and demographic information

As far as the *gender* of the participants is concerned, the sample included 85 females and 124 males. The *age* varied considerably with the majority of the participants from the 25- to 34-year-old bracket. The actual responses sorted by age were 18–24 (28), 25–34 (80), 35–44 (53), 45–54 (32) and 55+ (16). All four major *Types of Media* were represented with the greatest number of participants coming from the print media (85); the other participants were distributed among radio (31), television (46) and online forms of media (47).

Media industry employees and media academics from 22 countries, including 11 Pacific Islands (Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Republic of the Marshall Islands – see Table 1), completed the survey. A significant portion of the participants was from Fiji (80) and a lesser proportion from Non-Pacific Island countries (52). The significant number of responses, we believe, shows the importance placed by media professionals, both regionally and internationally, on the role of the media industry in sustainable development within the Pacific Islands' region.

Assessment of perceived importance of initiatives

Participants gave ratings of their perceptions of the importance of each of the 12 best practice criteria. Findings from all the countries related to media professionals' perception of 'importance' of the criteria have been combined (i.e. *Assessment of General Responses*), which will be followed by an examination of variations of perceptions of 'importance' between each country (i.e. *Assessment of Nation-based Responses and Assessment by Media Types*).

Assessment of the general responses

An examination of the responses by survey participants revealed that three initiatives were perceived as significantly more important than the other nine criteria. Specifically, the following three initiatives were perceived as most important: (1) a self-regulatory scheme must engage in *public awareness* to ensure citizens and media consumers know their rights in relation to the media (i.e. *Public Awareness*), (2) a self-regulatory scheme must provide journalists with access to training in legal and ethical issues to improve professional journalism standards (i.e. *Training/Education*) and (3) a self-regulatory scheme must establish clear processes and structures – agreement of terms of reference, institutional structures, funding arrangements and time limits (i.e. *Processes/Structures*).

Table 2. Perceived importance^a of the criteria from all respondents^b and as a function of Pacific Island countries.^{c,d}

Criteria	Total	Federated States of Micronesia ^e	Fiji	Kiribati	Palau ^e	Papua New Guinea	Samoa	Solomon Islands	Tonga	Tuvalu ^e	Vanuatu	Republic of Marshall Islands ^e
Public awareness	1.31	1.00	1.32	1.20	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.50	1.40	1.00	1.20	2.00
Transparency	1.64	1.33	1.63	1.60	1.25	2.25	1.90	1.50	1.40	1.00	1.70	2.00
Representation	1.64	1.33	1.63	1.60	1.25	2.25	1.90	1.50	1.40	1.00	1.70	1.00
Resources	1.57	1.33	1.63	1.80	1.00	1.42	1.44	1.10	1.60	1.50	1.62	2.00
Enforcement	1.74	2.00	1.85	1.40	1.25	1.37	1.60	1.20	1.60	1.00	1.79	3.00
Processes/structures	1.43	1.33	1.34	1.80	1.25	1.25	1.40	1.30	1.20	1.00	1.41	3.00
Governance	1.54	1.00	1.56	1.60	1.00	1.87	1.40	1.50	1.20	1.00	1.20	4.00
Complaints/redress	1.52	1.00	1.45	1.60	1.25	1.57	1.40	1.50	1.20	1.00	1.75	2.00
Respect	1.69	1.33	1.76	1.80	1.25	2.12	1.80	1.20	1.40	1.00	1.54	2.00
Monitor	1.65	1.00	1.64	1.20	2.00	1.75	1.55	1.30	1.60	1.00	1.70	3.00
Compliance	1.55	1.33	1.58	1.00	1.50	1.62	1.67	1.30	1.40	1.00	1.45	4.00
Training/education	1.25	1.00	1.16	1.20	1.25	1.00	1.40	1.20	1.20	1.00	1.12	3.00
Number surveyed	209 ^b	3	80	5	4	8	12	10	7	2	25	1

^aLower scores denote greater perceived importance – Likert Scale rating of 1 (Very Important) to 5 (Unimportant).

^bNumber indicates total number of completed responses from all countries ($n=209$).

^cNumbers listed under each country indicate total completed responses from Pacific Islands' countries ($n=157$).

^dCountries were included when respondents completed all sections of the survey ($n=11$ of 14).

^eContributing factors to low responses from these countries are the relatively small media operations and subsequent low number of media professionals employed in these countries.

Assessment of nation-based responses

Given that the bulk of the respondents were from Fiji, examination of their responses seems particularly important. Consistent with the general population of participants, the Fijians perceived Public Awareness, Training/Education and Processes/Structures criteria to be the most important. Interestingly, the analysis demonstrated that Public Awareness and Training/Education initiatives were perceived as the most important three initiatives for five other Pacific Islands countries (i.e. Kiribati, Palau, Samoa, Vanuatu and FSM).

There was some degree of variation in the three most important initiatives among the other countries: (1) PNG (Training/Education, Resources, Processes/Structures), (2) Solomon Islands (Training/Education, Resources, Compliance) and (3) Tonga (Training/Education, Governance, Processes/Structures).

Assessment of media-type responses as a function of region

There was a fairly consistent pattern of perceptions across the various media groups. The analysis revealed that each group included the Training/Education and Public Awareness criteria in their perceptions of the three most important initiatives. However, there was a significant degree of variation on the choice of the third important criteria. The third choices were (1) governance for those in print and radio, (2) complaints/redress for those in television and (3) compliance for those in online media.

Assessment of media-type responses as a function of nation

For print media, Fiji, Palau, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu perceived Training/Education, Public Awareness and Processes/Structures as the most important initiatives; Kiribati and Tonga rated Training/Education, Governance and Complaints/Redress as most important; meanwhile, Vanuatu found Training/Education, Public Awareness and Governance to be most important.

For radio, Fiji, PNG and Vanuatu perceived the Training/Education, Public Awareness and Processes/Structures as the most important initiatives, while Kiribati perceived Training/Education, Public Awareness and Compliance as the most important.

For television, Fiji and Vanuatu perceived Training/Education, Public Awareness and Processes/Structures as the most important criteria; FSM perceived Training/Education, Public Awareness and Governance as the most important criteria; Palau perceived Resources, Public Awareness and Processes/Structures as the most important; PNG perceived Training/Education, Complaints/Redress and Processes/Structures as the most important; and Samoa viewed Training/Education, Public Awareness and Complaints/Redress as the most important criteria.

For online media, Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and FSM perceived Training/Education, Public Awareness and Processes/Structures as the most important criteria; Vanuatu viewed Training/Education, Public Awareness and Resources as the most important criteria; Samoa rated the Public Awareness, Transparency and Complaints/Redress criteria as most important; and PNG viewed Resources, Complaints/Redress and Training/Education as the most important criteria.

Discussion

Results of the study revealed eight key findings that have implications for the implementation of a regional media self-regulatory system. These aspects need to be accounted for in the planning, design and implementation of a future regional media self-regulatory system for the Pacific Islands.

First, the number of responses exceeded expectations given the short implementation time period (46.34%). Such a response suggests that media professionals are committed to exploring the establishment of a self-regulatory system as an important step for the industry to take more responsibility for their professional conduct. Second, the majority of survey responses to the 12 best practice criteria range from Very Important to Important, thus supporting the best practice criteria as a benchmark for the implementation of a media self-regulatory system. Third, survey responses consistently indicate that *Training/Education* in law and ethics should be prioritised by a media self-regulatory scheme. Recognising this criterion as important suggests that the media industry wants to address the criticism levelled at it by its own members and governments in relation to the quality of journalism in the Pacific Islands. Fourth, survey responses indicated a second consistent trend in relation to prioritising *Public Awareness*. This result supports the need for a strong presence of the scheme at the national level so that key stakeholders – media industry, citizens and governments – understand not only the specific objectives and functions of the self-regulatory mechanism but also the media's general roles and responsibilities to increase the freedom and vibrancy of media and thus contribute to sustainable development within the region. Fifth, survey responses indicate, when identified within national contexts, a distinct diversity of opinions on what criteria should be prioritised. This result supports the central role of strong NMAs in developing a self-regulatory framework that addresses specific localised needs of media professionals. Sixth, while an independent regional self-regulatory system is an important goal for the development of media in the Pacific Islands, it still has to function within a regulatory space in which governments control regulatory structure, thus focusing a potential system on the relationship between self- and co-regulatory systems. Seventh, survey results indicate that respondents did not consider the three critical factors, as defined by OfCom, of adequate and proportionate resource commitments, involvement of independent members in decision-making and transparency, as critical criteria within their specific context. This finding demonstrates the importance of context when developing a self-regulatory system. Eighth, consultation processes on a self-regulatory system need to be broadened to include the opportunity for people from all 14 countries to have formal input into the ongoing process of moving the self-regulatory concept forward.

Given the significant number of responses from media professionals to the survey, there is clear and strong support for establishing a regional self-regulatory system to improve professional journalism standards in the Pacific Islands. Furthermore, the overwhelming positive response to the benchmark criteria used in this study indicates that such a framework provides an effective and consistent evaluative framework for development partners, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to undertake a future capacity building assessment at the national level.

The study's findings support a range of specific recommendations to enhance the feasibility of establishing a media self-regulatory system in the Pacific Islands: first, that the UNDP Pacific Office be engaged to undertake a capacity building assessment of the current established NMAs in Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands and Fiji; second, that the 12 best practice criteria be adopted as an evaluative framework for UNDP to assess the capacity of the already established national media self-regulatory systems to identify the needs of media professionals within each specific context; third, an ongoing funding stream be secured from relevant interest groups, such as the United Nations; this funding stream should support the initial capacity building assessment phase of NMAs with the view to accessing key consultancies and advisory representatives to move the establishment of a regional-national media self-/co-regulatory framework forward; fourth, that broader community consultation be undertaken, inclusive of media, governments and citizens, and consumers across the 14 nominated Pacific Island countries, with a view to providing an appointed advisory committee with appropriate level of knowledge to enhance the sustainability of the system, specifically during the critical start-up phase of capacity assessment and implementation;

finally, that a representative advisory body of advisors be established to oversee the assessment of NMAs and to drive the development of a regional-national self-/co-regulatory system with membership of the body drawing from respected journalists and editors, eminent citizens (including legal, academic and public figures) and journalists and media practitioners.

Implications of adopting a self-regulatory media system are significant. First, such a system would contribute to improvement in the quality of media reporting in the region through establishing common media standards and enforcement mechanisms. Second, it would raise the public perception of journalism as an ethical profession contributing to the betterment of social, economic and political development. Third, the system would enhance media freedoms and thus contribute to sustainable democratic reforms in the region.

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