



Peace journalism, media objectivity and Western news values in fragile Pacific island states:

*Reflections from Pacific island journo*s

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Abstract

The news media's role in Pacific Island societies, its handling of conflicts, peace journalism and notions of media objectivity are some issues and concepts explored in this paper. Given the political upheavals, coups and civilian uprisings seen in some island countries recently, the applicability of conflict-driven Western media values in a fragile region is at the heart of discussions. Seven senior journalists, a media academic and a PhD in Media responded to questions on topical issues surrounding media's role in conflict-prone societies



Introduction

This paper examines the role of the news media in reporting conflict in the Pacific. Questions were sent to 20 senior Pacific island media personnel. Nine offered their views on issues such as conflict-reporting in politically-tense Pacific island countries, media objectivity and peace journalism. The respondents include seven senior journalists, a media academic/journalist, and a PhD Scholar. They are based in six countries, namely the Cook Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga. Conflict reporting is coming under increased scrutiny with the Pacific becoming increasingly volatile in recent decades. In Fiji and other island countries, tensions suppressed during colonial rule surfaced gradually after independence in the 1970s and 1980s, with the last two decades marked by a rash of military and civilian coups, police and army rebellions, ethnic violence, “people power” uprisings and tribal warfare. Recurring problems in the Pacific have given rise to tags such as ‘arc of instability’ and ‘failed states’ (Dibb 2007; Dobell 2003).

Conflict is a major source of news and journalists covering an upheaval of any sort inevitably get caught in the “crossfire”, facing accusations that they aggravate situations through their reporting. Because the media is seen as integral to national development, its reporting of conflict is considered a critical issue. Tongan newspaper publisher Kalafi Moala believes that media is a powerful tool that can effect social change either negatively or positively (Moala 2010) while award-winning Fijian journalist Stanley Simpson warns that media can ‘make or break’ a country (‘Simpson warns power of media can “make or break” a nation’ 2009).

The context

Pacific Island governments cite the media’s alleged shortcomings as justification for introducing tougher media laws. Fiji’s military government, which came to power in a coup in December 2006, decreed strict media laws on 28 June 2010 to curb, among other things, ‘irresponsible’ reporting of racial and political issues. Weeks after Fiji promulgated its media law, Tonga indicated its intention to follow suit. This raised concerns about copy-cat media laws in other Pacific countries, although the Tongan plan was eventually scrapped (Singh 2010).

The media in the Pacific has been praised for exposing corruption and upholding human rights, but there are concerns about its handling of conflict, especially when it comes to politics, race, religion and land issues. Governments often claim that tougher media laws are needed for public protection but critics suspect sinister motives (e.g., Foster 2007; Laumaea 2010; Narsey 2010; Singh 2010). Aside from governments, ‘neutral’ observers such as civil society organisations, academics and members of the public have expressed unease about how the media sometimes frames potentially volatile topics. In Papua New Guinea recently, the media was accused of fuelling anti-Asian sentiments during rioting and looting of Asian-owned stores in the major provincial centres (‘Papua New Guinea vow to burn all Asian shops’ 2010). In Tonga, the media’s alleged role in inciting the Nuku‘alofa riots in November 2006 has been highlighted by Moala (2008). Tongan journalist Josephine Latu examined the validity of such claims in her Master’s thesis (Latu 2010). In the Solomon Islands the media was criticised for misreporting during the ethnic conflict between the people of Malaita and Guadalcanal between 1998 and 2003 (Iroga 2008), while in Fiji, mistakes made by journalists in relation to the four coups since 1987 have been analysed by several researchers (e.g., Cass 2002; Field 2002; Gounder 2004, 2006; Kiran 2005; Mason 2007; Parkinson 2002; Robie 2002, 2004).

In the above studies, reporters were found to be ill-prepared to handle the complex events and episodes they were confronted with. Stories often lacked background and context. The disproportionate focus on race and ethnicity overshadowed the other dynamics at play. Shortcomings of the coverage include the invisibility of the poor and marginalized and the prominence given to conflict while downplaying, if not ignoring, racial harmony, reconciliation and inspirational achievements in education and others fields. As Howard (2009) observes, 'in today's increasingly changed environment of conflict, more and more journalists find themselves ill-equipped to address the issue which demands so much of their attention and is devastating their community. Too much, the news media is accused of being part of the problem of conflict' (Howard 2009:3). Such assertions are part of the debate in this paper.

Conflicts in the Pacific

An Australian Government senate report covering the island states of the southwest Pacific, including Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu, identifies multiple causes of conflicts in these countries. The causes range from unemployment, inter-ethnic tension, land use and tenure, access to weapons, gender inequality and political instability. These factors often interact to bring about rapid deterioration in law and order (Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2010). The report also identifies how much justice systems, constrained in their ability to prosecute and deter criminal activity, are overstretched (Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2010:x). Another study on the Solomon Islands describes the conflict there as deeply rooted in the poor policies of successive governments. The report says that corruption, regional disparities in resources and incomes, the poor fit between indigenous and introduced institutions and land exploitation have taken their toll on society. Unresolved historical grievances, longstanding dissatisfaction with the centralisation of political power in Honiara and neglect of the island provinces and rural areas where most Solomon Islanders live add to the potent mix (Morgan & McLeod 2006, cited in Dinnen 2008).

The mainstream media is fixated on the fighting, and rarely highlights the root causes of conflict. Deadline pressures, reporters' heavy workloads, lack of depth in the newsrooms and lack of resources are significant among the causes of superficial and inadequate coverage. Frohardt and Jonathan (2003) recommend several types of structural intervention to address such shortcomings:

- strengthening independent media
- developing journalist competence
- working with the legislature and judiciary
- promoting diversity in the journalist corps and media ownership
- licensing and regulation of media outlets
- strengthening domestic and international networks
- media monitoring.

According to Howard (2009) the media's approach to reporting conflict has not changed much. He describes conflict as a 'curious blind spot' in journalism education and training. Furthermore, he claims that traditional journalism skills development has not included study of how best to cover violent conflict, and has ignored any understanding of violent conflict as a social process:

Other subjects demand that journalists have knowledge and expertise and experience, such as reporting on business and economics, public health, music, sports, or other topics. But the dynamics of violent conflict – its instigation, development and resolution – are not much understood by most journalists nor proficiently reported on. In today's increasingly changed environment of conflict more and more journalists find themselves ill-equipped to address the issue which demands so much of their attention and is devastating their community. (Howard 2009:3)

Media and conflict

According to Bonde (2007), most violent conflicts are rooted in resource or land disputes, but fought with strong references to ethnic, cultural and religious identities. The mass media, on its part, has played an increasing role in mobilising population groups behind their leadership in violent conflicts. In the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and other countries, the local media turned a blind eye to societal inadequacies and inequities, and the political or economic root causes of conflicts, asserts Bonde. During conflict escalation, the media contributed: its use of ethnic, religious or cultural identities as rallying cries perpetuated prejudices, stereotypes and hate speech, thus contributing to the escalating state of moral panic (Bonde 2007:11; 2005:7). In conflict reporting, too little information can indeed be a dangerous thing. The media, by focusing on the manifestations rather than the causes of conflict, does not tell the full story. Such forms of misreporting give rise to misconceptions that only add fuel to the fire.

Selective reporting of this nature are characterised by the publication of political rhetoric and propaganda without enough, or even any, checking or challenging of the authenticity of the author, and his or her script. When the media cedes centre stage to actors with vested interests and transmits their messages without critically analysing content, the inevitable result is distortion. If the purpose of spreading such falsehoods is to exacerbate and exploit conflicts for political gain, it can have the desired effect. As Howard (2009) points out, the news media needs to be on guard. With new technologies and wider reach, the media is an ever more attractive target for misinformation, manipulation or suppression by interests seeking to profit from the violent conflict (Howard 2009:3). Politicians, by virtue of their prominence, get the lion's share of media coverage. In a country like Fiji, where voting is held along racial lines, dubious politicians often use the race card to appeal to voters. Just about every issue becomes racialised when so much more is involved. The media should be strong and clever enough not allow itself to be manipulated in such a manner.

After independence in 1970, communal voting was deemed as the best system for Fiji to ensure that the two major races - indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijians - received fair representation in Parliament. But there was a major disadvantage – the politics of race thrived under this system. Indeed, Fiji has a history of attempts by politicians to drive the wedge more firmly between Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians in order to win seats under the country's racially-based constitution (Singh & Prakash 2008). The media are accustomed to frame the Fiji and Solomon Islands conflicts as ethnic

conflicts without reference to land ownership systems and uneven distribution of state resources as the probable root causes. Framing these conflicts in racial terms overshadows these other dynamics that are at play. It further polarises people along racial lines, hardening attitudes and making conflict resolution, reconstruction and recovery all the more difficult. All the players in the conflict, including the media, become trapped in a vicious cycle. The media, in framing and reporting conflict, must be acutely sensitive to the 'smorgasbord of issues and inter-linkages' that inform and shape the dynamics of a conflict (Hattotuwa 2002). It should focus on the root causes of tensions, which, as Collins (2005) attests, are often rooted in land and resource use, cultural identity, and traditional and formal leadership. Had, for instance, democratic rights in Fiji, equitable distribution of the benefits of resource extraction in Papua New Guinea, and employment opportunities in Solomon Islands been assured, key sources of tension would have been addressed and violence could well have been averted (Collins 2005:18). While Collins' message is primarily addressed to policy makers, the same lesson applies to journalists when covering conflicts: get to the heart of the problem.

Vulnerable societies

As developing countries with multiethnic societies often at odds with each other, Fiji and the Solomon Islands show characteristics of 'vulnerable' societies (Frohardt & Temin 2003). Such societies almost always include among their number developing countries and multiethnic societies that over the past decades have proven more likely to fall victim to conflict than societies with greater ethnic homogeneity. Vulnerable societies are highly susceptible to movement towards civil conflict and/or repressive rule. Media can be manipulated in an effort to move a society toward conflict or toward nondemocratic rule (Frohardt & Temin, 2003:2). Tensions in such countries embody long-term, low-intensity conflicts involving multiple actors (Howard 2003).

Such dormant tensions invariably gain momentum and start to surface during events such as elections, when politicians campaign through the media (Howard 2003:6). This scenario is evident in Fiji just prior to, during and after elections. The atmosphere is often toxic and racial tension is at its peak. Fiji, with four coups to its name between 1987 and 2006, has been dubbed 'coup-coup land'. For the media in Fiji or the Solomon Islands, the challenge is coming to terms with the complexities of their societies, which are different from societies in mature, well-established and politically stable Western democracies. Populations in developed countries are generally better educated and more prosperous. Because most citizens have a direct stake in the country's formal economy, they are less likely to resort to damaging their towns and cities, as this would inconvenience them, and put their personal welfare at risk. The situation in Pacific island countries is starkly different: weak economies, political instability, high youth unemployment, urban drift and poverty are characteristic of the region. Most of the population is rural-based and follow a subsistence lifestyle. The benefits of economic growth may not have filtered down to the common people though the costs that accompany it are certainly pinching them. With the wealth often concentrated in the hands of a few, sections of the population feel marginalised and alienated. They may harbour grievances or feelings of resentment against the business or political elite, whom they often regard as corrupt. If significant numbers of people become dislocated or feel disaffected, the country faces a security threat, as the upheavals and popular uprisings in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Tonga in recent years have shown.

This was alluded to in an issues paper derived from a seminar on insecurity and conflicts in the Pacific. The paper concluded that unequal distribution of benefits from natural resources,

modernisation of traditional societies and the change of traditional social structures, including the detachment of the state from society, had created a perception of injustice among citizens (Pacific Issues Paper No. 7–2003:4). Given the conditions, and what is at stake, Pacific Island journalists, on their part, need to be circumspect so as not to inflame the situation. Hying up conflict may not result in a coup or riots in well-entrenched democracies with homogenous societies. But it can have devastating effects in conflict-prone, multiethnic societies such as in Fiji (Singh 2010:150). Conflicts in Fiji, Tonga and the Solomon Islands damaged economies and severely divided the people, with the countries still struggling to pick up the pieces.

Peace journalism argument

At its heart the peace journalism argument holds that because conflicts exact such a heavy toll on a country and its citizens, a careful, considered and educated journalistic approach is warranted, especially in politically and ethnically fragile societies. The media is the primary vehicle for sending political messages to the people, and as such it is a honey pot for those who wish to reach out to and influence the public. When Sitiveni Rabuka staged his coups in Fiji in May and September 1987, he clamped down hard on the media, whereas the May 2000 coup front-man, George Speight, tried to use his charm. Former Fiji Media Council chairman Daryl Tarte believes Speight knew the media was the best channel through which he could propagate his ‘crazy logic’, and used it to garner Fijian support. He projected a personality that had media appeal (‘Media Councils in an unstable political environment’ 2004). The Bainimarama military government favoured a more direct approach. After snatching power in December 2006, it imposed media censorship before promulgating a media decree that prescribes stiff fines and jail terms for ‘errant’ journalists.

With four coups in 20 years to contemplate about, Fijian society has undergone a lot of soul-searching, and nor has the media escaped scrutiny. But while the alleged mistakes made by Fiji’s journalists have received much attention, the media’s potential as an instrument of peace building has yet to be fully considered. One of the questions put to the newsroom leaders in the survey reported in this paper is, ‘How can media be used to build social stability and promote peace?’ This can be considered a complex question with no easy answers. Under the libertarian model inherited by the mainstream media in Fiji and the Pacific, journalists adhere to the rules of objectivity and neutrality. This requires them to be professionally disengaged from the outcome of their work, so they would not see their role as that of peace builders. However, some mainstream media practitioners deployed to conflict zones had a change of mind and heart about the role of journalism after their experiences. By the turn of the 20th century, additional journalists, academics and conflict analysts had begun seriously revisiting the question of whether the news media should consciously seek to have a positive or peace building effect on conflict through its reporting (Howard, 2009). These considerations reached wider circulation following assertions from some returning Western journalists from reporting on widespread ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia that professional disengagement was ill-serving humanity. As a consequence of the atrocities they witnessed some journalists felt it would be irresponsible not to use the influence they might possess [through their reporting] to secure a particular outcome for the war (Puddephatt 2008, cited in Howard 2009). Such experiences and thinking reinforced the peace journalism approach. The term was first coined by one of the founders of Peace and Conflict Studies, Professor Johan Galtung, in the 1960s. In the hands of others, including two BBC journalists, Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, peace journalism has developed into what is now a well-established field. Peace journalism is when:

Editors and reporters make choices of what stories to report and how to report them that create opportunities for societies at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict. (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005)

Peace journalism uses conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting. It applies an awareness of non-violence and creativity to the practical job of everyday reporting (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005). Like any reformist movement, peace journalism has drawn followers and detractors. Purists dismiss it as journalism of ‘attachment’ and claim it tarnishes the hallowed journalistic principles of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’. Well-known foreign correspondent David Loyn denounces peace journalism as the most serious threat to media standards and claims he ‘worshipped at the altar of objectivity’ (cited in Keeble 2006). Hanitzsch (2004) describes peace journalism ‘as old wine in new bottles’. He believes the concept overestimates the influence media and journalists have on political decisions and it often understands the audience in terms of a passive mass that needs to be enlightened by virtue of peace reporting (Hanitzsch 2004:1).

Peace journalism is a new concept in the Pacific, where the ‘free-press’ tradition using the inverted pyramid and 5 W’s and H lead-writing style prevails, with an emphasis on ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutral’ observation; letting ‘facts’ speak for themselves. Objectivity, the sacred cow of conventional journalism, is the principle embraced by practitioners in both developed and developing countries. The argument against abandoning objectivity is that it will open a Pandora’s Box that will compromise journalism and endanger journalists, both physically and in terms of their credibility. Many journalists are adamant that the best way to serve the public interest is by being objective. But critics believe this is easier said than done. According to Davis (1990) the traditional definition of objectivity focuses on the idea of impartiality – keeping one’s own beliefs, opinions or feelings separate from the story. Davis describes this definition as ‘more textbook than honest’ and asserts that most journalists would agree that true impartiality is impossible, and even the most evenhanded reporter is subject to personal bias (Davis 1990). By the same token, the profit-driven private media in the Pacific cannot be said to be entirely neutral or objective. Like its counterparts abroad, the commercial media in the Pacific has to compete to survive in the market place. This has seen it evolve into a highly efficient business model beholden to a market controlled by corporate interests. In this context, the social responsibility function of the media is all too easily subordinated to the profit motive. For instance, cost-cutting is an endless and essential market process. In the journalistic sense, this process can comprise quality, with multi-skilling and tight deadlines the order of the day, no matter what. This setup, designed to save time and money, leaves little room for research or reflection, particularly in Pacific island newsrooms, which are under-resourced to begin with. Commentators have questioned whether replicas of Western media models—which are urban-based, describe events with little analysis, historical context or background, and shut out the grass roots—serve the best interests of the complex Asia–Pacific societies. Robie (2008) believes that for developing countries, notions of ‘collective agitator’ and ‘nation-building’ are more important than objectivity, the dominant ideal for first world media. Gupta (1996) is another who emphasises media’s nation-building role in developing countries. He points out that many of Asia’s nations have ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse populations. Clashes between these groups are part of Asia’s past and present. Preserving communal harmony becomes a cornerstone of preserving national unity, and helping keep the communal peace is an Asian press responsibility (Gupta 1996). As former colonies, the Asia

and Pacific regions share some historical similarities and face comparable challenges. As developing countries with multiethnic societies they share more commonalities with each other than with the Western countries whose news values they follow.

Aims and Methodology

Between June and July 2010, email questionnaires were sent to 20 senior journalists in the region to seek their views on peace journalism and the appropriateness of applying conventional journalism values in politically-volatile Pacific island countries. The aim of the survey was to gauge newsroom leaders' and journalists' understanding of and openness to new concepts (such as peace journalism). Questions were restricted to senior practising journalists and media scholars with maturity and extensive real-world experience. The survey attracted nine out of 20 responses; a 45 per cent return rate.

The 11 survey questions were developed from research conducted on the internet and formulated to make them applicable to the region. The aim was to get news media practitioners' insight into current debates about the state of the media in the Pacific. An internet search will show that other countries and societies in both the developed and developing worlds have been debating similar issues for years. Some of the issues covered by the questionnaire were also tackled in two peace journalism seminars held at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, and at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, in December 2010. While peace studies (encompassing peace journalism) has become an important contemporary field in many parts of the world, it remains a largely unexplored area in the Pacific. However, debate and discussions are gaining momentum. The Suva-based NGO, Citizens Constitutional Forum, hosted a workshop on 'Media techniques for peace building in civil society' in November 2010, with peace journalism researcher Professor Jake Lynch from the University of Sydney as a resource person. This paper is part of attempts to keep the momentum going by engaging academics and media practitioners in such discussions. Those who responded to the questions expressed appreciation for having been given the opportunity to reflect on these matters as this is a 'luxury' working journalists do not have time for in their deadline-driven schedules.

Excerpts of the discussions follow. The full responses are published in the appendices .

The discussion

Is it justifiable for news media to take a stand on issues or should it remain neutral at all times?

Most respondents believe media should and does take a stand on occasion, but should still report impartially. PNG journalist Titi Gabi said she had to think deep and hard about the question. She said that neutrality was not applicable across the board, but if media must take a stand, it should be based on correct and reliable information:

Taking you back to the PNG example, many a time we took a stand without really understanding the facts!

Associate Professor in journalism at AUT University in Auckland Dr David Robie points out that it is common tradition for news media take on 'crusading' or 'advocacy roles':

In the Pacific, the *Post-Courier* has campaigned against both illegal guns and corruption. But there has to be a clear distinction between the editorial crusade and the news columns of the newspaper, and this interest has to be declared by the editorial management so that the public knows how to view editorial content.

Cook Islands News publisher John Woods believes media should report impartially but it can take a stand on important issues as a way of providing leadership, but be clear and open about its position. Samoan journalist Cherelle Jackson believes media can take a stand on human rights and the environment since 'the passion behind the conviction makes a better story'. For Fiji-based magazine editor Ricardo Morris, 'there are instances when it is unquestionably justifiable to take a stand on issues; we do it all the time without much thought'. The then *Fiji Times* editor-in-chief¹ Netani Rika believes neutrality is essential in news coverage but media can take stand in the opinion sections, with opposing views also covered. Former Fiji magazine editor Richard Naidu took a stronger stand in favour of neutrality:

Neutrality is non-negotiable where the news media is concerned. Anything that deviates from this position has the potential to create a seriously misguided tool that in the wrong hands can cause much damage, especially to the complex yet often vulnerable societies of the Pacific.

Naidu feels a 'largely sensationalistic and irresponsible' Fiji news media through its reporting of 'exponentially abrasive exchanges' between key public figures bears some responsibility for the December 2006 coup, and an issues-based approach to reporting could have fostered a different outcome.

The responses show that while journalists take neutrality seriously, they are not averse to taking a position on certain issues. Journalists like Loyn may claim to 'worship at the altar of objectivity' but our respondents concede that in the real world, adhering to the textbook definition of neutrality is impractical.

Is objectivity a realistic or attainable goal?

Five respondents agreed with the question while three disagreed. One respondent described objectivity as an 'inherent goal'. Cook Islands journalist Jason Brown, Tongan media researcher Dr Sione Vakalahi, Gabi, Woods and Rika were in the affirmative while Robie, Morris and Jackson were in the negative. Brown said 'objectivity is realistic and attainable despite current fashion among journalism commentators. Objectivity is not a 'value neutral' goal'. For Vakalahi objectivity is attainable, even in the Pacific, with all its cultural taboos and restrictions. Rika, on his part, believes objectivity is a realistic goal but there will always be people who do not accept your objectivity. For Woods objectivity is 'most definitely a realistic and attainable goal' and it should be the 'underlying aspiration in all professional reporting, and the tenor of all news stories'. For Naidu objectivity is a professional goal 'inherent' to the practice of sound journalism. To think otherwise is to begin the path towards dangerous ground because as soon as room for compromise is seen, compromise will be made. Jackson, on the other hand, believes objectivity is not possible because journalists are humans and have opinions about the stories they write. For Morris, pure objectivity is unattainable

because people have their own values and judgments. But journalists should strive to be as objective as humanly possible. Robie described objectivity as a 'fraught term' that is 'not sufficiently defined in a news media context to be helpful':

Objective in whose terms? In reality, objectivity is a way of maintaining a status quo within a news media organisation's news values. Many western media, for example, claim to be objective but in fact are built on a system of institutional bias and exclusion. Most mainstream media in New Zealand have an inherent and unrecognised bias against minority and ethnic communities yet proclaim themselves to be objective. The term 'fairness and balance' is a far better guide and something that is definitely attainable.

Can/should media remain objective in all situations?

Three respondents stated that media cannot and should not remain objective in all situations. One respondent felt objectivity was important under all circumstances. The other five responses were ambiguous. Brown said media should not be objective 'if it meant celebrating symptoms more than causes'. For Jackson objectivity under all circumstances is not appropriate because it is important to portray some sort of emotion in certain situations. Robie believes objectivity in all situations is unrealistic. In his 40 years working for the news media, he did not feel that any single organisation was truly objective in all respects, although many did seek to be objective. He believes 'fairness and balance' is a far more attainable goal. Vakalahi indicated that media should remain objective at all times, but did not say whether this was realistic or possible. For Woods, media can and should remain objective at all times, even when under pressure:

When we lose our ability to be rational, usually through emotion and/or ignorance, we lose the edge that is the difference between ho-hum or ordinary reporting and great reporting. A senior or experienced journalist ought to develop the skills of self-control to remain open-minded and ready to hear conflicting views, even when under pressure.

Rika said it is possible to remain objective at all times, although not everyone will agree that you have remained objective. He cited the example of media censors in Fiji newsrooms who did not allow the *Fiji Times* to run articles critical of the Bainimarama government's policies:

The censors do not allow us to run articles critical of the interim government's policies. They do not allow us to quote certain people – particularly former MPs or trade unionists. In many situations we cannot balance a report because one side is not allowed the right to express its views. How do we provide objectivity in such a situation? How can we offer analysis or critical assessment of proposed legislation?

Is objectivity the best and only way for the media to serve the public interest?

Brown, Robie and Jackson did not think objectivity was the best and only way for the media to serve the public interest. Brown believes 'advocacy must step into any gaps'; Jackson believes it does 'not serve the public interest to be strictly objective' while Robie believes 'fairness and balance' should

be the benchmark phrase. According to Woods, objectivity is the best way but not the only way to serve the public interest:

On matters of morality, there comes a time when journalists and media must stand against wrongdoing, against corruption, against tyranny, and if necessary mount a concerted campaign that is designed to resist the wrong, and to change opinion. In such cases, the journalist may have a preconceived position that is not objective, but is justified because it is deliberate and is designed to oppose or to change a situation/person/regime.

Morris believes a 'journalist can be fair without being purely objective and still do justice to a story' whereas Naidu believes objectivity is the best and only way to serve the public interest.

The responses are mixed, even confused. Objectivity is held dear, and seen as sacred. But there is an admission it is not the only way to serve the public interest. The responses are interesting because one of the major reasons the mainstream media rejects peace journalism is because it is regarded as subjective, or 'journalism of attachment'. But subjectivity is part and parcel of mainstream journalism, as shown by some of the responses. Subjectivity is flimsy grounds on which to reject peace journalism.

Partisanship by news media in politics is the norm in some places. By the same token, can/should news media have a 'peace agenda' or should it remain impartial and objective in conflict situations?

The responses to this question balanced out. Gabi stated that media can have a peace agenda if that is what the people want, and this would signal a shift from the 'lazy style' of reporting objectively to finding stories that are 'worth telling'. For Gabi this equates to 'reporting solutions instead of just events'. For Robie, partisanship can be problematic, even if acceptable in a sophisticated media society with a critical reading of all media, and plurality and diversity in choices:

For example, even though the rampant bigotry, distortion and xenophobia of Fox News in the United States are dominant, there are strong countervailing media voices that balance this to a degree. But in a community or society where social relations are fragile and when the news media can fuel the fires of antagonism and conflict, then the media has to be far more sensitive and careful. The old age of 'publish and be damned' is no longer enough. News media should be contributing to solutions, not just fanning conflict.

Woods believes circumstances are different in all countries and communities, and media sometimes takes sides because of the need to resist or challenge censorship, juntas, dictators, military intervention, corrupt party politics, and so forth. Woods does not state whether media should have a peace agenda just as it sometimes takes on a political agenda or cause. But he emphasised that the principles of impartiality and objectivity are paramount, and will in the end become the measure of value by which reliable, accurate and informative news is counted and treated. Morris believes media can have a peace agenda, and conflict-resolution journalism can play a powerful role in places historically affected by unrest. The traditional elements of journalism—objectivity, fairness, balance—can work alongside elements of peace journalism. For Vakalahi, the media should be impartial but in the case of conflicts, media has an 'ever-important' role in mediating or helping to avoid the conflict from escalating:

The media should not act as a stream for news only, but also provide a forum, or have some kind of peace agenda as you suggested where nation building is more important than being impartial and objective, especially in conflicts.

For Rika the media must cover all aspects of a conflict while remaining neutral. But media can encourage peace through editorial columns and columnists.

Most respondents are fairly open to the idea of promoting peace and minimising conflict if this will serve the public interest. Forsaking objectivity and taking a position for the betterment of society does not seem to greatly trouble most of those surveyed.

Are Western media values and code of ethics serving the Pacific region well? Should these ethics/values be the sole guide for Pacific media?

Most respondents agreed that Western media values and ethics had served the Pacific reasonably well, but should not serve as the sole guide for Pacific media. Gabi said Western media ethics and values provide the basis for PNG's own code but island countries need to adjust the code to suit their own needs. Morris believes the codes apply universally so they have a place in the Pacific. Local sensitivities need to be considered but not to the extent that they hamper reporters' watchdog function. For Vakalahi, there is no such thing as 'one size fits all' and the code of ethics should serve as a guide only. Woods believes that Western media values and ethics serve the Pacific well to the extent that they are based on strong morality and universally accepted human rights, but often they clash with traditional leadership styles, cultural practices and values, and social systems. For Rika, the 'so-called' Western values transcend geographical boundaries. While the particular nuances present in any country must be taken into consideration, it should be to the extent that media is constrained by cultural restrictions:

During the time of the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara [former Fijian Prime Minister and President] reporters were told it was disrespectful to ask him tough questions. Pacific leaders must realise that when they become elected members of the (Western) legislature they must live by the rules of that institution. This includes being questioned by the media.

Robie and Jackson felt Western media values and code of ethics had not served the Pacific well. Jackson said Western media values lacked the human touch and disregarded cultural practices while Robie asserted that such values 'ride roughshod over any other models'.

Are Western media values, which emphasise a free and vigorous press, appropriate for Pacific Island countries that value social cohesion?

Six respondents said Western media values were not a threat to social cohesion in the Pacific; one said they were a threat, while two respondents gave mixed answers. Gabi felt that corruption rather than Western media values were a threat to social cohesion in PNG:

Look at where corruption has left us. Traditionally, no one questions chiefs, elders, pastors, etc.

Naidu believes a vibrant media can play a helpful role in building a well-developed society without necessarily negating cohesion in any way. Rika views a free and vigorous press as important in any emerging democracy. He poses the following question:

Should we become blind to corruption, the rape of democracy or poor governance in order to maintain social cohesion? It is only through the free press that much of the corruption in small developing states has been revealed to the public. There is no doubt that the media must recognise and respect cultural leadership and institutions. But that respect must never be used to allow corruption or bad governance to go unreported.

Woods is of the view that a free and vigorous press is vital in any country in order to inform and empower all people, to achieve democratic equity, and to prevent corruption and the resulting denial of human rights. Robie feels a free and vigorous press can be compatible with greater recognition of social cohesion. He defines this as 'responsible' journalism. But the notion of 'responsible journalism' has been maligned in the Pacific to mean 'self-censorship' when this is not the case.

Is the emphasis placed on conflict as a news value detrimental when applied in politically and ethnically fragile Pacific Island societies?

Seven respondents felt that the emphasis on conflict was detrimental, while two thought otherwise. Gabi said the media emphasis on conflict was mostly detrimental while Brown said the effect is detrimental if the conflict is reported without context and/or without local authentication. Jackson described conflict as a 'charged news value' which is risky when applied in politically and ethnically fragile Pacific societies. But it is still a big part of news that should be reported. Morris believes that a focus on conflict can magnify the issues and worsen them while Naidu says 'sensationalism' and 'trigger happy' journalism aimed at growing the bottom line had reduced news to political boxing matches. For Robie, the media's emphasis on conflict is harmful. He feels Australian and New Zealand insistence on a one-size 'media freedom' box fits all Pacific neighbours, especially Fiji, is counterproductive. Robie feels cultural arrogance is at play when journalists from afar can lecture Pacific news people on how they should behave when under pressure from military or authoritarian authorities. Rika believes conflict must be covered to empower the people. In politically and ethnically fragile nations it is vital that all people have a full understanding of the issues of all parties in the conflict. It is ultimately for the people to make a choice and decide whether to seek peace. Woods said the focus on conflict may be detrimental to political rulers and vested interests, but conflict, and the reporting of it, is vital for change. The media's job is to provide readers and audiences with information so that they can make informed judgments.

How can media be used to build social stability and promote peace?

Brown felt media could promote peace and stability by 'exposing corruption, foremost'; Gabi mooted a more proactive approach to conflict reporting, including reporting the solutions, while Morris pointed to a growing movement towards peace journalism in countries affected by political and ethnic unrest. For Robie, journalists need to advance 'social responsibility journalism' by thinking outside the square. Media should not have this imposed on them by regulation or harsh decrees at the point of a gun but allowed to evolve at its own pace. Any society with no free press is more at

risk than one that has some 'irresponsible' press. But in such fraught situations, it *does* mean that journalists need to act and think more *collectively*. Vakalahi supports development journalism with a focus on nation-building over negative news and conflict. Woods did not like the question because it smacks of a PR approach; as if the news media can be 'used' and ought to have a mission to 'promote' something:

Social stability is not our responsibility, and peace is not our overarching objective. We wish for all these noble things, but our job is more basically to inform, educate, enlighten and hopefully inspire or influence people to take actions that achieve social stability, peace, etc.

What would you like to see change in the media to make it more suited for Pacific Island societies?

Brown and Gabi would like to see greater use of indigenous *lingua franca* in the news media. Morris would like a Pacific media that is brave, focused on excellence, unafraid to tell it as it is, able to give praise where due, and staying true to the values of journalism. Naidu feels the media can do better by being more professional and objective, being more vigilant about the issues at home and seeking to find ways to inform their people better, especially the younger population. Rika feels it is important for the media to take its message to the people. He believes Pacific island societies must be taught the value of a free media in a democracy and how to use the media to highlight issues that affect individuals or the community. This message must also go to politicians and leaders. The media must become involved in such campaigns through public seminars and discussions. Journalists must be willing to talk in schools about the media's role in development.

Robie believes Pacific news media has to find its own way, define its own values and priorities and not simply mimic what Western news media or journalists say it must do. That does not mean that Pacific media should simply kowtow to authoritarian rule. There are many ways to be independent and to have a genuinely Pacific voice without necessarily being confrontational all the time. Robie would like a far stronger focus on development issues and success stories in education, health and social justice. Woods would like to see more coverage and dedication to Pacific island community events and festivals, and more Pacific island journalists coming through the ranks to senior editorial roles and management. He would like to see more journalists capable of writing in their mother tongue and in English.

Conclusion

With the Pacific region becoming more volatile in recent decades, the role of the media in reporting conflicts, especially in terms of the disproportionate focus on race and ethnicity, needs to be discussed, with the aim of identifying approaches that are more appropriate for the region, its cultures, societies and politics.

When the other dynamics at the heart of a conflict, such as land ownership laws and lopsided development policies are overlooked in media reports, the full story is hidden from the public eye, which can be damaging. Concepts such as peace journalism deserve to be given a chance rather than dismissed out of hand for being subjective. While some leading lights of the news media in six

Pacific island countries surveyed for this paper regard objectivity and neutrality as crucial to their work, they admit that it is not always possible to practice these ideals in the real sense. The majority of respondents have a flexible attitude about going beyond being a detached observer of events to proactively contributing to efforts to build a better society.

Notes

The interviewees:

1. B, Jason., emailed interview, 8 September 2010.
 2. Gabi, T., emailed interview, 8 September 2010.
 3. Jackson, C., emailed interview, 11 September 2010.
 4. Morris, R., emailed interview, 1 September 2010.
 5. Naidu, R., emailed interview, 31 August 2010.
 6. Rika, N., emailed interview, 9 August 2010.
 7. Robie, D., emailed interview, 1 September 2010.
 8. Vikilani, S., emailed interview, 31 August 2010.
 9. Woods, J., emailed interview, 27 August 2010
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