

Panel Discussion: The Media as an intermediary between politicians and ordinary citizens.

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Part One

- We could start by addressing an imbalance: the reporting framework we use is elitist to begin with.
- Prominence and impact are strong news values – so politicians largely have greater say than ordinary citizens.
- Politicians are hard news, whereas ordinary citizens are human interest or soft news – so not really worthy of the headline.
- This is a form of bias and discrimination we in journalism perpetuate.
- On the most, we empower elites, and disempower non-elites.
- We tend to portray elites as our saviors all the time – how healthy is this?
- And how good a job are we doing, as intermediaries, if we put certain people on a pedestal all the time?
- The question is: are we intermediaries, or are we just a mouthpiece?

Part Two

- An intermediary is a go-between, facilitator or mediator. A mouthpiece is a spokesperson, representative, ambassador, or worse, puppet.
- Too often the line between intermediary and mouthpiece becomes blurred – in favour of politicians – and this is something to be careful of.
- Partly because of our culture, and partly because of the reporting framework we follow, we pay too much respect to politicians; perhaps not enough to the citizen.
- On the most it's one-way, top-down traffic - politicians talk, we dutifully report – with citizens on the bottom receiving-end of the barrage.
- Politicians are newsworthy due to decision-making power. They need to be covered. But if we focus only on speechmaking – we are not just a mouthpiece?
- How to address the situation and bring about a semblance of balance?
- Stop following the script set by politicians; start understanding better what the problems and issues are.
- We can take the initiative to bring peoples' problems directly to the politician – i.e., grill politicians about the issues at hand. We can also get people's reactions to a speech.
- Part of the reason people become politicians is to grandstand and make speeches. Do not get too caught up in this hype – focus on policies, not personalities.
- Fiji has a lot of colourful politicians, so it's easy to get distracted sometimes.
- At my newspaper, parliament speeches were seen as page fillers.
- According to my reckoning, only 25% of a long-winded speech might be useful - and that's being generous.
- Instead of reproducing large chunks of parliamentary speeches, whittle it down to the bare substance, and get reactions. The idea is to foster debate.
- So two deceptively basic points that need reminding and reinforcing:
 1. Do not merely parrot a speech – critically analyze it
 2. Let ordinary people have more of a say
- In a nutshell, I am calling for a healthy dose of skepticism, more respect for the views of ordinary people, and to treat news space as a precious commodity, not to be filled with junk.