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# Editorial Reinventing muckraking

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**J**OURNALISTS need to be highly committed and determined when pursuing an issue in an investigative way because they inevitably will be confronted with considerable pressures. These pressures include resistance from publishers and editors due to time and resource constraints, threats from those under scrutiny and legal and contractual complications after publication or broadcast. Investigative journalists, particularly in New Zealand and the Pacific where investigative journalism is in decline, risk being isolated when attempting vigorous Fourth Estate-styled reportage.

Investigative journalism is costly to produce at a time when most publishers are seeking to cut costs, which places it under substantial threat. But it is a form of journalism that creates considerable benefits: it creates public transparency of powerful institutions and strengthens a publication's brand, arguably establishing a foundation where solutions to public interest issues can be explored. It also identifies relevance and purpose for the Fourth Estate as a profession.

In December 2010, the Pacific Media Centre at AUT University, Auckland, hosted New Zealand's first Media, Investigative Journalism and Technology (MIJT) conference. The objective was to provide a mix of presentations by acclaimed investigative journalists and academics, and also to provide a platform for new players who are adopting investigative style reporting methods or have developed innovative research strategies. The idea was to provide a catalyst for strengthening investigative journalism support networks. Some of the presentations were based on documentaries or photojournalism. More than 100 people from nine countries attended the highly successful conference and some of the peer-reviewed presentations were published on the PMC website in January.

The second such conference is due to be hosted by the University of Technology, Sydney, in August 2011. One of the organisers, Professor **Wendy Bacon**, herself a journalist with an impressive track record as an investigator and a keynote speaker at MIJT, argues that this is a 'sign that universities in the Pacific region are growing as sites for innovation, discussion and production of investigative reporting as journalists and the public struggle to respond to a decline in old business models of journalism' (see p. 46).

*Nepali Times* publisher **Kunda Dixit**, the PMC's 2010 Asian

Journalism Fellow and opening keynote speaker at the conference, posed a series of challenges for journalists, noting that ‘intelligent in-depth reporting is not easy, it needs investigative skills and the tenacity to dive deep’. In his opening commentary in this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, he also says that journalists need an ability to be ‘good at selling [the story] to their bosses and the public: ‘All journalism needs to be investigative; it is the only real journalism in a virtual world’. He added:

In some countries, it may be important to investigate corruption. To even go undercover, or use hidden cameras to expose dishonest officials and elected leaders who lack accountability. But what do you do when corruption is endemic? In a society like that, using entrapment techniques to expose a cop taking a payoff will not be as relevant. Much more important may be to train reporters to show the light on the media’s blind spots, train them to go to terrain which reporters are traditionally trained to ignore. (p.13)

Another keynote speaker, New Zealand independent author and investigative journalist **Nicky Hager**, argues journalism needs to be redefined if it is to survive and prosper. The days of inspirational investigations of ‘Watergate-type’ stories, such as the celebrated *Washington Post* expose which ultimately forced the resignation of US President Richard Nixon in August 1974, are over. Investigative journalism ‘needs to be detached from the news media’ to ensure its survival, he says. But while many in the conference audience agreed with Hager’s message, they pointed out they were already employing several strategies to do precisely this.

Leading Australian investigative journalist turned media educator **Bill Birnbauer**, believes the ‘absence of corporate interference, government control, daily deadline pressures or the need to attract advertising’ puts universities in a strong position to produce quality investigative journalism. This favourable condition is ‘enhanced by the fact that many journalism schools have academic staff with significant experience’ in investigative journalism and media production.

Birnbauer proposes in an article in this edition of *PJR* that an Australian-New Zealand-Pacific network of postgraduate and senior university students be established to collaborate on producing multimedia stories for a collective website. Tentatively called ‘UniMuckraker’, the project envisages national or regional perspectives on a ‘significant issue’.



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**Figure 1: Keynote speaker Kunda Dixit with his *Frames of War* investigative photojournalism images in Auckland.**

Teaching with the ‘live ammunition’ of real world journalism would provide an authentic, contextual and team-oriented approach to higher education learning while offering a broader audience a new outlet for quality journalism with concurrent additional opportunities for publication in mainstream media. (p. 32)

Monash University’s Birnbauer has already produced an investigative website, which probes the Environment Protection Agency’s ‘toxic legacy’ in Melbourne. The website—[epadangerousground.com](http://epadangerousground.com)—could be a model for the UniMuckraker concept.

Like Birnbauer and Hager, Bacon argues investigative journalism can, and will be, produced outside the major media organisations. She also argues that the less competitive non-profit nature of universities opens up possibilities for collaborative investigations across time and space. Bacon draws on examples from her three-year Global Environmental Journalism Initiative programme, which launched the *Pure Plastiky* project about the global

bottled water industry in April: [www.gejiplasticbottles.com](http://www.gejiplasticbottles.com) The GEJI project is a partnership of eight institutions—including UTS, Monash, Murdoch (Perth), and the University of Tasmania in Australia, and Danish School of Media and Journalism and Helsinki, Thessaloniki and City University, London, in Europe—and has carried out a range of projects such as the reporting of COP 15, renewable energy issues and in-depth video documentaries. In 2009, students at Hong Kong Baptist University, City University in London and UTS conducting a global investigation into the use of plastic bags.

‘We lack the wealthy European and North American foundations that have funded much inspiring public interest journalism over recent decades. Nevertheless, we can experiment and innovate within an academic context,’ Bacon told the conference.

In Birnbauer’s article, he explores the non-profit investigative reporting centres in the United States, many of them located at universities, and draws useful parallels with Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. **James Hollings** examines some high-profile New Zealand investigative journalism case studies based on whistleblowing by ‘vulnerable and reluctant sources’. In the process, he has developed what he calls an ‘Informed Commitment’ model for best practice. Professor **Mark Pearson** probes mental illness, journalism investigation and the law in Australia and New Zealand and concludes this health field is ripe for further research and ‘overdue for legislative reform’.

Security analyst **Paul G. Buchanan** traces the origins, rationale and some of the dilemmas that have emerged in the practice of ‘embedded journalism’ in war correspondence. In contrast, **Rukhsana Aslam** provides a case for a ‘peace journalism paradigm shift in traditional media approach’ to journalism education. Her earlier paper and chapter in the recent book *Peace Journalism, War and Conflict Resolution* (Keeble et al., 2010) provided a cornerstone for a parallel peace journalism seminar at MIJT.

**Lee Duffield** deconstructs the design of a new postgraduate journalism programme providing ‘media skills for daily life’ while **Kayt Davies** critiques university ethics approval policy and journalism as research, citing her own online publication *Journalism Research* as a strategic way forward.

The final article in the themed section is a case study photoessay by Ngapuhi photojournalist **John Miller** investigating the media coverage of the Ngatihine Forestry Block legal dispute in 1976-8, which paralleled the famous Bastion Point Māori land rights protests.

South Pacific investigative journalism was a strong feature of the MIJT

conference with Television New Zealand Pacific affairs correspondent **Barbara Dreaver**, Solomon Islands Television One's **Koroi Hawkins**, Taimi Media Network chief executive **Kalafi Moala**, **Shailendra Singh** of the University of the South Pacific and **Patrick Matbob** of Divine Word University providing presentations, thanks to donor support from the Asia New Zealand Foundation, UNESCO, the US Embassy in Fiji and NZ. But while their slide show highlights and notes are posted on the website, only Moala's commentary is published in this current edition of *PJR*.

Two unthemed articles published include an inquiry into new media and the Burmese diaspora in New Zealand by an ethnic Karen journalist, **Violet Cho**, who was the PMC's Asian Journalism Fellow 2009. She makes use of an indigenous research methodology, *tapoetethakot*. **Philip Cass** profiles the work of Papua New Guinean priest and publisher Fr Frank Mihalic and the iconic Tok Pisin newspaper *Wantok* that he founded in 1970.

The legacy of the MIJT conference and this edition of *PJR* will grow through the forthcoming investigative journalism conference in Australia, the UniMuckraker project and a decision at the final two-day conference's session to give more support for this potentially 'lonely and isolated work' in New Zealand. A network of investigative journalists was set up in Auckland, convened by Simon Collins, and an informal network will continue in Wellington, convened by Nicky Hager and James Hollings. The Bruce Jesson Foundation (p. 118) may also be reconfigured to take on even more of an investigative journalism support role.

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**MIJT10 website papers:** [tinyurl.com/65cl8yl](http://tinyurl.com/65cl8yl)

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### **Reference**

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