

***Kastom* vs the fourth estate: An ethnographic study of journalism in Papua New Guinea**

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mia**Stephanie Sageo-Tapungu¹, Helen Sissons² , and Petra Theunissen²**

Abstract

The term *kastom* broadly refers to the traditional systems of beliefs and values found across the islands of Melanesia, encompassing indigenous knowledge passed informally between generations through oral traditions. While these systems vary between communities, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the region's largest and most linguistically diverse nation, *kastom* continues to inform professional life, including the practice of journalism. This article explores the relationship between *kastom* and news reporting in PNG through a combination of video ethnography and semi-structured interviews. Drawing on Melanesian research methodology, the study shows how journalists themselves understand their profession and examines whether existing Western-style journalism training adequately prepares journalists for practice in PNG. The discussion highlights the difficulties and negotiations journalists encounter as they balance professional expectations with social and cultural obligations. The paper outlines core principles of *kastom*, as expressed through the *wantok* system, a network of kinship and reciprocal obligation, and illustrates how these norms inform the everyday experiences of journalists. While the study is interpretative rather than normative, the authors propose the concept of 'polite watchdog' as a culturally grounded framework that describes how journalists critically engage with powerful sources while maintaining respect for *kastom*. This model suggests that democratic accountability can be pursued in ways consistent with local epistemologies, offering insights for other postcolonial contexts where Western journalism frameworks intersect with indigenous practices, such as in Fiji, Vanuatu or parts of the Caribbean.

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Introduction

The professional lives of journalists in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are influenced at every level by the *wantok* system of kinship and, at its core, *kastom*. In Melanesian scholarship, *kastom* refers to locally grounded systems of beliefs, values and practices through which social life is organised. Rather than a fixed or uniform tradition, it is understood as a flexible and historically situated moral framework, continually reinterpreted in response to colonialism, Christianity and modern institutions (Dobrin and Golub, 2020; Kabutaulaka, 1998; Keesing, 1982; Narokobi, 1983).

PNG, located just north of Australia, is a geographically dispersed Pacific nation with low urbanisation and limited infrastructure; only around a fifth of households have access to electricity (World Bank, 2024). These structural conditions influence media work in interaction with local norms.

The *wantok* system is a central feature of Melanesian social life, derived from Tok Pisin, meaning ‘one talk’, referring to people who speak the same language and, by extension, share kinship, obligations and mutual support (Huettmann, 2023; Walton and Jackson, 2020), although it has evolved to encompass broader regional identities (Kabutaulaka, 1998). In PNG, *wantoks* are bound by expectations of reciprocity that extend into public and professional contexts, influencing how people understand trust and responsibility.

Kastom provides the moral framework through which these *wantok* obligations are understood and negotiated in everyday practice. Here, *kastom* is treated as an interpretative framework informing how journalists understand respect, responsibility and accountability in practice. While *kastom* reinforces cohesion, it can conflict with Western journalistic ideals of independence and holding power to account (M’Balla-Ndi, 2015). Walton (2023) notes that in government settings, *wantok* obligations can influence decisions and accountability. In journalism, the same expectations can lead reporters to hold back or avoid criticism of their own *wantoks*.

This study combines video ethnography (Middleton, 2020) and semi-structured interviews to consider the interplay of news reporting and *kastom* in PNG. Led by a Papua New Guinean researcher, and drawing on ethnographic communication analysis (Sissons, 2015; Theunissen and Sissons, 2018) and Melanesian research methodology (MRM) (Vallance, 2007, 2012), it examines how journalists negotiate the relationship between Western-derived journalism education and *kastom*-based expectations of respect and reciprocity. It approaches *kastom* and journalism as co-existing, rather than as oppositional, avoiding hierarchical distinctions between traditional and modern. From this perspective, the study reflects a commitment to decolonising knowledge production.

The article first outlines how key principles of *kastom* influence journalism, using interview extracts to demonstrate journalists’ lived experiences, before drawing on video ethnographic data from a media conference. It concludes by considering the recent ‘polite watchdog’ model, which may help PNG journalists stay within *kastom* while still carrying out democratic scrutiny.

Kastom and the ‘big man’ concept: an overview

PNG hosts the largest media industry in the Pacific, with two daily and two weekly newspapers, two television stations, a national radio system and other commercial and religious radio stations (for

more see Watson, 2022: 227–231). Its media system was established along Western principles during Australian administration. Since gaining independence in the 1970s, Papua New Guineans have accepted the ‘watchdog’ approach to journalism, which emphasises holding power to account and giving prominence to negative events and issues (Rooney et al., 2004).

This style is reinforced in the journalism programmes at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and Divine Word University, which draw on the English trade school model (Rooney, 2003). Students are trained to prioritise official sources: the government, police, members of parliament and the courts, but Rooney (2003: 78) critiques this approach, noting several misunderstandings:

The first was that a programme of journalism training suitable for the needs of the mainly local press in England could be transported to the Pacific. Second, the reliance on leisure reporting, cinema, television and telephone interviewing all reveal a lack of knowledge of the reality of life in PNG. Third, the heavy reliance on official sources ignored the ordinary people in PNG.

Rooney’s observations also highlight structural factors. Prodnik and Vobič (2023) state sourcing habits are tied to the political economy of journalism. Limited resources, the demand for continual content and the need to attract audiences influence what counts as news. Reliance on official or elite sources thus becomes a practical response, providing ready-made information that aligns with market-driven news values such as ‘prominence’ and ‘timeliness’. Hertzum’s (2022) review of 90 studies similarly found that accessibility, speed and perceived credibility often outweigh source diversity.

These pressures take on a distinct character in the Pacific. The *State of the Media: Pacific Region* report (ABC International Development, 2025) contends that small market size and limited advertising revenue restrict newsroom capacity, making media dependent on government or donor funding. These conditions constrain editorial independence and can reinforce self-censorship in societies where journalists are closely connected to political and community networks. In smaller nations, media often avoid topics that could offend community or family members, a pattern evident in PNG. Here, these pressures are amplified by what Watson (2022: 235) identifies as a ‘culture of deference’ making scrutiny difficult when access depends on maintaining relational harmony.

Drawing on these arguments, this study examines current PNG journalism and communication practices through 16 interviews with practicing journalists and an ethnographic multimodal analysis (Sissons, 2015; Theunissen and Sissons, 2017) of videos filmed during observational fieldwork.

Culture is ‘in every aspect of the society, from interpersonal communication to the political system’ (Jo and Kim, 2004: 293). As Solomon Islands researcher Kabutaulaka (1998: 17) puts it, it comprises a ‘body of shared understandings’ that governs how people interact. In PNG, *kastom* influences socialisation and communication (Vallance, 2007), extending into journalists’ professional practice. These foundations were evident in the interview data and are reflected in the identified themes, beginning with the influence of the ‘big men’.

Lederman (2015: 567) describes ‘big man’ as the:

Anglicization of a descriptive phrase *bikpela* man (and variants)—meaning “prominent man”... to refer to male leaders whose political influence is achieved by means of public oratory, informal persuasion, and the skilful conduct of both private and public wealth exchange.

Unlike Polynesian chiefs (e.g. Samoa, Tonga and Cook Islands), the Melanesian big man (e.g. PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) is not an inherited position and lacks a formal council. According to Sahlins (1963: 289), the important feature of a big man is his ‘personal power’:

Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men.

Bablis (2020) shows how figures like lawyer, philosopher and politician Bernard Narokobi exemplify a modern synthesis, a 'road man' bridging village and nation. Contemporary big men are often formally educated and hold prominent public or private sector roles (Goddard, 2005), yet their authority still lies in social relationships. As Goddard (2005: 86) notes, Rural Highlands big men exhibit 'industry, generosity, grandiloquence and cunning', accumulating wealth primarily to give it away, thereby consolidating influence. Strathern's (1971) account of the *moka* system illustrates prestige is gained by outgiving others. The model persists even in urban centres like Port Moresby, where material wealth is leveraged for prestige and loyalty (Goddard, 2005; Lederman, 2015).

This system has direct implications for journalism practice. Big men welcome media attention, but they are unaccustomed to being questioned. In a society where *kastom* prescribes respect for elders and authority, journalists navigate expectations of harmony that make public critique culturally sensitive (Goddard, 2005). As a result, applying Western adversarial journalism can clash with local norms.

Shaligram (2019) outlines the dichotomy between fourth estate journalism and the big man:

The watchdog ideal of a journalism as a "fourth estate" would hold politicians and policymakers to account when it comes to natural disasters, crumbling city infrastructures, and poverty-stricken streets—and there is plenty of such reporting in PNG. Yet... there is also a cultural context, a deep-rooted fear of disrespecting "the big man". The big man mentality...is a culture which restricts the ability of journalists to challenge or ask tough questions of people in power or respectable positions in society. The regular silence at the end of news conferences and the reliance on curated press releases in daily news broadcasts is seen as one of the biggest hurdles in the PNG news industry. (Shaligram, 2019)

The International Federation of Journalists in its 2021 report also attributes the 'big man mentality' as causing 'reluctance to challenge or ask tough questions of high-status individuals. This results in de facto self-censorship' (2021, p. 4).

Western-derived journalism – the basis for journalism training in PNG – relies on confronting power and verifying statements, but it also depends heavily on elite sources (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Gans, 1979; Thomson et al., 2025; Tuchman, 1978). In PNG, journalists may have physical access to ministers or departmental heads, but *kastom* discourages confrontation. Thus, even when journalists are physically present at media conferences or in interviews, the power imbalance remains intact, not only structurally but culturally, resulting in reporting that reflects official narratives – not due to weak professionalism but because of relational obligations (Shaligram, 2019).

In response to comparable constraints on confrontation and access, Wijayanto and Masduki (2023), drawing on ethnographic research at Indonesia's *Kompas* newspaper, developed the concept of the 'polite watchdog'. While formulated in the Indonesian context, the model offers a useful comparative lens for PNG. It conceptualises watchdog journalism as a form of accountability that monitors power while avoiding public confrontation that would risk losing face or relational rupture.

Rather than taking the form of public accusation, polite watchdog journalism works through more indirect means, including by implication, selective emphasis and contextual framing. In this way, scrutiny can be signalled while access and social harmony are maintained. The model

emerged from the intersection of cultural norms of deference and political–economic vulnerability, conditions that resonate with the PNG media environment. One illustrative example is *Kompas*’s headline ‘Boediono’s name mentioned 67 times’, referring to repeated mentions of the vice president in a court verdict on a corruption case, which prompted scrutiny without overt accusation (Wijayanto and Masduki, 2023: 9–10).

This approach may offer a productive alternative to adversarial journalism in contexts like PNG, where *kastom* imposes expectations of deference. Paired with Steensen et al.’s (2022) ‘source criticism’ framework, which encourages journalists to be transparent about their own values and source biases, the polite watchdog model offers a culturally congruent alternative to adversarial reporting. Together, these models support practices that honour *kastom* while strengthening democratic accountability in postcolonial, collectivist societies.

Methodology

This study is grounded in a Melanesian worldview and follows the principles of MRM, which centres the lived experiences, relational ethics and epistemologies of Melanesian peoples (Vallance, 2007, 2012). Narokobi’s (1983) concept of the Melanesian Way provides its philosophical foundation. Both draw on a relational worldview in which knowledge, ethics and social life are grounded in reciprocity, collective responsibility and respect for *kastom*. Where Narokobi envisioned *The Melanesian Way* as a moral and cultural philosophy guiding engagement with modern institutions, Vallance extended it to research practice. He argues that research in Melanesia should reflect *wan-tok* values, prioritising relationships, accountability and harmony between researcher and community. He describes a worldview in which reality is holistic and culturally embedded, and knowledge is created through dialogue rather than detached observation. MRM is thus closely aligned with the cultural context of PNG (Bashkow, 2020; Vallance, 2012).

The study was led by a Papua New Guinean academic whose cultural and professional expertise ensured that the study emerged from within PNG worldviews rather than being externally imposed. The lead author’s insider status – linguistically, culturally and professionally (Ely et al., 1991) – and the use of MRM grounded the project in indigenous epistemologies and reflexive practice, consistent with decolonising approaches to communication research in the Pacific. Her positionality was central to the study’s design and interpretation, ensuring that meaning-making occurred *within*, rather than about, Melanesian cultural frameworks. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 58) note, such insider status often facilitates ‘more rapid and more complete acceptance’ by participants and enables greater openness, resulting in deeper data.

This culturally grounded methodology also informs the polite watchdog framework proposed here. Unlike the Western watchdog ideal, which emphasises exposure and confrontation as mechanisms for accountability (Norris, 2014), the polite watchdog recognises that in Melanesian contexts, responsibility is often pursued through respect, consensus and relational negotiation. Distinct from ‘lapdog journalism’, which refers to uncritical reporting that serves rather than questions authority, it still seeks accountability through culturally appropriate, non-confrontational means (Wijayanto and Masduki, 2023).

Combining video ethnography and interviews, this study gathered data from video recordings of five journalist participants at work, alongside semi-structured interviews with 16 journalists across two major media organisations. One print and one broadcast were selected through purposeful and convenience sampling to capture contrasting newsroom contexts while ensuring access and feasibility. The study employed participant observation drawing on classic newsroom ethnographies (Ericson et al., 1989; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), to explore how journalists in PNG practice

and negotiate their roles and how structural and cultural forces influence news production from within the field.

Footage was captured at three media conferences though this article focuses on one event for close analysis (Sissons, 2016; Theunissen and Sissons, 2018). Communicative modes such as speech (Schiffrin, 1988), posture (Goffman, 1964) and gaze (Goffman, 1964; Kendon, 1967) were analysed using ethnographic communication analysis (Sissons, 2015), which shows how verbal and non-verbal practices co-construct meaning. In this approach, participants review transcripts and provide feedback on interpretations to ensure cultural accuracy.

This combined method offered insights into how *kastom* operates in professional media practice in PNG. The study received ethics approval (AUTEC Reference Number: 17/18) and all participants provided written informed consent.

Findings and discussion

Showing respect for big men

The Western watchdog approach positions journalists as adversarial (Norris, 2014; Wijayanto and Masduki, 2023), creating challenges for PNG journalists when interacting with elite sources because it conflicts with *kastom*'s emphasis on harmonious relationships (Keesing, 1982).

In this research, interviewees frequently described 'respect' as central to journalistic conduct, especially when dealing with elite figures. LT, a senior radio journalist, explained:

Customs [kastom] are [a] very important part even in this modern day and age. The respect for the elders is another thing that keeps us back. I feel like [interviewing] a boss of a company and there's like a pressing thing that you really want to ask them, but you can't because he is a big man. – LT, Port Moresby.

AR, a former journalist, recalled inviting a prominent politician onto his television programme. The politician's office accepted on condition that someone else conduct the interview, citing AR's assertive interview style.

Such refusals are not unusual. Mason (2007) maintains that dependence on elite sources reinforces power asymmetries, allowing those in authority to define the limits of inquiry. Across the Pacific, kinship ties foster trust but complicate persistent questioning by blurring social closeness and professional distance (Leonhardt et al., 2026). These restrictions are further compounded by limited preparation and editorial support in under-resourced newsrooms (Rowlands and Khosla, 2014) and by reliance on young, relatively inexperienced reporters (Singh and Hanusch, 2021). Seneviratne (2024) situates these dynamics within wider structural pressures, including commercially driven news cultures and geopolitical framing, and calls for rethinking the watchdog model in favour of dialogue and relational accountability.

Read through the lens of polite watchdog journalism, these practices should not be understood simply as professional timidity or failure. As Wijayanto and Masduki (2023) show, politeness operates as a strategic mode of critique where overt confrontation risks sanction, even as it constrains more adversarial watchdogging. In PNG, *kastom* plays a comparable role to politeness in the Indonesian context by structuring what counts as legitimate public accountability.

Importantly, this reframing does more than describe existing constraints; it clarifies how journalists currently work within them and where change is needed. The polite watchdog model distinguishes between silence that reproduces authority and culturally situated strategies that signal scrutiny without public confrontation. When used deliberately, practices already evident in PNG

newswork, such as indirect questioning, contextual framing and off-camera exchanges, become professional resources that may be strengthened through training, editorial support and ethical reflection.

Complications of the kinship system

Besides requiring respect for elders, *kastom* also produces close relations. Throughout PNG, the most fundamental social group is the family, often including extended family (Kabutaulaka, 1998).

The next most important social group is the clan, a ‘cohesive social group...has a name that is recognised and used by its members’ (Franklin, 2007: 29). Narokobi extended this sense of belonging to the village, which he described as the moral and social heart of *The Melanesian Way* (1983), where reciprocity, respect and care were learned.

Papua New Guinean villages were places with real faces and souls. In these, people mattered. The laughs and the cries of our neighbours were shared and we cared for each other. (Narokobi, 1983: 59)

As Narokobi (1983: 13) observes, ‘In a Melanesian village, everyone is related to everyone else’, and cooperation is central. These reciprocal ties remain today, requiring loyalty to family, clan and *wantoks*. Yet pressures such as urban migration and cultural change place these relationships under strain. In these interconnected societies, journalists can find themselves reporting on someone they have ties to, putting them in a difficult and potentially dangerous position. As JS, a junior print journalist, explained:

For example, because my uncle is the boss of this company, and he is misappropriating money and police arrested him...why should I report it? That’s my uncle. I should not report. I should not spoil his name. It won’t look good to my parents and family. In addition, many of us reporters fear our own safety first of all because in PNG society, if you report something about me, my people are all watching so they might attack or harass you when they see you somewhere in the city. Journalists are famous people in PNG so our readers, listeners or viewers know who we are so in whatever we do, the last thing we want to do is upset someone we may be related to or know. – JS, Port Moresby

TS, a senior radio journalist, added:

It’s hard when it comes to culture. I mean, we have relationships with our families, friends, church affiliations, school mates, which affects our jobs. We may report on somebody who has some kind of relationships with some of those people we know. – TS, Port Moresby

These comments highlight the complexity of social relationships. Combined with the notoriety of journalists in PNG, they create real barriers to the watchdog ideal of reporting without ‘fear or favour’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

Kastom fundamentals and their impact on Papua New Guinea journalists

The third theme involved *kastom* fundamentals, that is principles underlying PNG culture, including self-effacement, taboos, safety concerns and gender inequality.

Self-effacement. The value of self-effacement, commonly emphasised in Melanesian social life (M’Balla-Ndi, 2015), influences how journalists approach questioning, often privileging relational

respect over confrontation. Much public criticism of PNG journalists centres on their reluctance to ask important questions at media conferences and in interviews, reflecting a double standard: the public expects journalists to challenge big men yet also uphold *kastom*.

During the study, journalists were observed having opportunities to ask questions but did not probe further or challenge answers, a practice linked to self-effacement and the *kastom* protocol of accepting what is said without criticising authority.

The penalties for falling foul of *kastom* can be harsh and have led to journalists being suspended (RSF, 2022). Under proposed legislation, journalists would be required to apply for a government-issued license that could be revoked for breaching government-defined standards. Critics warn this could be used to silence criticism and undermine press freedom (Harriman, 2023). Despite widespread public and international opposition, the government has continued to advance controversial media regulation proposals (RNZ News, 2025). These concerns intensified in March 2025 when the PNG government temporarily blocked Facebook in what was described as a ‘test’, prompting widespread criticism and a surge in VPN downloads as citizens sought to stay connected (Waide, 2025).

However, when no probing questions are asked, the elites – specifically big men – can disseminate propaganda unchallenged. Senior journalist Titi Gabi has called out local media for becoming ‘a public relations entity for the powers that be’ (Vaka’uta, 2018, para. 5). AR, a former journalist, and public relations practitioner reasoned:

...there have been instances where journalists were accused of being propaganda machines for the government...spin doctors. The only way a journalist can avoid that criticism is he/she must have balance in their contents. Once they have balance, people won’t find a loophole to criticise or accuse them of being spin doctors. A lot of the times, our reporters don’t have balance in their copies and their stories get run without the other side being given the opportunity to comment on the story – AR, Port Moresby.

Taboos. Reporting issues such as revenge killings, tribal conflict, domestic violence and sorcery is often frowned upon (Harriman, 2023). Journalist PM explained:

PNG’s culture is unique that there are some practices that challenge the journalists in their roles and sometimes leave them confused as to how to report some of the issues. For example, domestic violence is seen by the people as a private matter... In addition, how does a journalist and even a public relations practitioner explain some cultural practices such as a person died because of sorcery or development cannot take place in a particular area because the landowners put a stop to it by tying a *gorgor* (leaves of the turmeric plant that has cultural symbolism attached to it)? – PM, Madang.

Despite this, most interviewees agreed that such issues needed to be reported, notwithstanding the obstacles and real risks involved, as they affected the livelihoods of ordinary people. They also recognised some members of the public wanted these acts highlighted to bring them to the attention of politicians:

Such harassments and violence disturb the peace of the ordinary people in the communities, and my job is to report it so that these people...the victims know that the relevant authorities are doing something about these issues. If I don’t report it the public might be thinking that the authorities are not doing anything about it. Also, I mean, how else can the relevant authorities such as the police or the members of parliament, know about what is going on in the communities? It’s my job to tell them about it, so they are aware of the issues.

Only then, policies and parliament acts can be drawn up to protect the lives of all the citizens. – JS, Port Moresby.

Safety and security concerns. PNG is one of the most dangerous places for females, with more than two-thirds experiencing domestic violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021, 2024). Female journalists face added risks, including discrimination, limited professional opportunities and threats to their safety. At the 2024 Australian Women in Media Conference, PNG journalists raised concerns about cyberbullying and online harassment (Lavari, 2024). In a two-part ABC International Development series, ABC PNG reporter Belinda Kora described the abuse and threats she experienced after reporting a verified quote from the Foreign Minister, whose comments later led to his suspension (Perry, 2025). The backlash targeted both her professional integrity and personal life, highlighting the gendered nature of online violence against female journalists. While male journalists also reported physical assaults (Tlozek, 2016), female participants most frequently cited safety concerns. RA, a senior female radio journalist, recalled being caught in a 2016 UPNG student protest when police opened fire.

I was one of the journalists who was beaten up that day. I was caught in between the police shooting the students and me in the middle, so I decided to run towards the police. But unfortunately, I was attacked by the people that I placed my trust and confidence in. That was the worst part, and I am still traumatised by the experience. This experience changed my perception about the PNG police. I see them not as people I can trust. It also threw what I learnt in journalism school out the window. During my training at university, we were taught that whenever we're in a battlefield or in a crisis situation as this one, we must run towards the police or the military. We must not follow the crowd. I did that and was assaulted by the very people who would protect me. – RA, Port Moresby

This occurred a week after three female journalists were assaulted by a police officer while covering a story about high school students taken into custody for alleged drinking alcohol (Kora, 2016). Such incidents show the risks of reporting on sensitive issues such as violence, corruption or misconduct by powerful individuals. These risks are not merely context-driven but culturally mediated, as journalists interpret threats and the likelihood of reprisal through *kastom*-based expectations of respect while still holding to professional ideals derived from Western-style journalism.

Gender inequality. PNG is predominantly patriarchal, with women traditionally seen as caregivers rather than decision-makers. This extends into the workplace, constraining female journalists' participation at media events where women are expected to listen rather than question or seek confirmation rather than probe further.

These gendered expectations reflect broader Pacific norms of respect and social harmony (Leonhardt et al., 2026; Rowlands and Khosla, 2014) and shape how authority is negotiated in journalistic encounters. Intersecting with *kastom*, they further constrain who can speak, challenge or press issues in public forums. Research on women journalists in PNG and the wider Pacific shows that limited authority, heightened exposure to harassment and strong expectations of respectability make open confrontation difficult, particularly with senior male sources (Perry, 2025; Rowlands and Khosla, 2014; Media for Development Initiative, 2018).

Yet women continue to navigate these constraints. At the 2024 Women in Media Conference, PNG reporter Priscilla Waikaidi described learning how to interview 'people with power' to secure information and called for stronger support for investigative work and protection from harassment (Lavari, 2024, para. 16). Perry (2025) similarly documents the online abuse faced by women who

challenge authority. Despite these efforts, structural barriers persist in male-dominated newsrooms, where most senior roles remain held by men (Australian High Commission Papua New Guinea, 2023). CP, a senior leader, recounted:

Most people are shocked to find that the other editors and the editor-in-chief are females the first time they hear about it. They give us a second look and it's typical of them to wonder whether we can do the job and all that. It's one of the challenges that I have to overcome and that's to make them realise that we females are also capable of doing this job. – CP.

Such reactions indicate that PNG is still adjusting to women in leadership roles. Even so, by 2024, Women in Media PNG had become an active initiative supported by the Media Council, providing a support network for female journalists (Lavari, 2024).

Read through the polite watchdog framework, these gendered dynamics help explain why indirect, relational or off-camera scrutiny is often a protective and pragmatic strategy rather than a cultural preference. Gendered power relations shape who can enact polite watchdog journalism, how visibly and at what cost.

This is not to suggest that the polite watchdog resolves gender inequality. Rather, it highlights how accountability work is unevenly distributed and risky, underscoring the need for newsroom-level support, collective strategies and institutional protection if the model is to expand rather than entrench existing inequalities.

Interactions between journalists and a big man

To illustrate the cultural influence of the big man at a media event, this section analyses two interactions recorded during fieldwork at the launch of Phase 2 of the Phones against Corruption (PaC) initiative in 2018, held at the Stanley Hotel in Port Moresby. The event was organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the PNG Department of Finance (DoF).

While externally appearing to follow a conventional media conference format, the ethnographic communication analysis reveals contextual cues shaped by *kastom*, which influenced both the staging of the event and journalistic behaviour.

The two selected interactions, one during a speech by the Department of Finance Secretary and the other during a brief Q&A session, were chosen because they exemplify moments where journalistic practice intersects with *kastom*. These interactions highlight how *kastom*-based values such as deference to rank, diplomatic silence and respect for elders governed the performances of journalists and officials.

Setting and context of the interactions. The PaC initiative – developed by the UNDP and the DoF in partnership with Digicel, one of PNG's two telecommunication companies – enabled citizens to report corruption anonymously via text message. In Phase 1, over 500 cases were reported (Walton, 2023).

Invitations to the media to attend the launch of Phase 2, which would expand the initiative, were issued by email and text message the day prior. Attendees included government representatives, anti-corruption bodies and civil society. Three officials delivered speeches: the DoF Secretary (the subject of this interaction), a UNDP representative and the Deputy Secretary to the Prime Minister's office.

Although outwardly structured like a conventional Western media event, the interactions bore the hallmarks of what Boorstin (1992) termed a 'pseudo-event', a staged occurrence designed for media

dissemination rather than scrutiny. Unlike Western pseudo-events with rapid-fire questioning or confrontation (Boorstin, 1992), this event, governed by *kastom*, had limited – if any – adversarial engagement.

Seating arrangements, spatial symbolism, and verbal and non-verbal cues reflected a social order where deference to authority remained integral. Journalists did not pursue clarifications or follow-ups. In Boorstin's (1992) terms, the event's success lay not in *what* information it revealed but in its *performative reinforcement of institutional legitimacy*.

Interaction 1: performing authority

The DoF Secretary's address exemplified what Goffman (1959) termed a 'frontstage' performance, delivered with an awareness of audience scrutiny and aimed at reinforcing institutional legitimacy. His delivery was marked by long pauses, disfluencies and repetition (see Figure 1). In describing the initiative's purpose, he stated: 'uh the (0.3) the uh (0.9) initiative should also be used (0.2) to make sure that uh (1.0) the-the those acts of bad behaviour do not take place...' (Figure 1). This kind of disfluency, including fillers ('uh'), significant pauses marked by bracketed numbers of up to a second, and self-repair ('the-the those'), is consistent with spontaneous speech under pressure (Clark and Wasow, 1998; Dufour et al., 2014; Schiffrin, 1988). Yet the audience responded with quiet attentiveness, engaging in Goffman's 'tactful inattention' to protect the speaker's face or standing in the community (Goffman, 1955, 1967). This reflects *kastom*, which dictates that big men are afforded respect, especially in formal public settings.

Although the Secretary's delivery lacked fluency, the audience's deference suggests oratorical polish was secondary to social authority. The journalists present did not interject, seek clarification or challenge; they were there to listen. The physical setup further reinforced this power dynamic: the Secretary stood centrally, facing the television cameras and rows of big men behind them, while journalists were seated to the side.

This interaction illustrates how authority in PNG journalism is not only *performed* by officials but *co-produced* by journalists and audiences through silence, gaze, spatial alignment and restraint. It highlights the limits of adversarial questioning in environments where *kastom* demands respect over confrontation.

Interaction 2: non-confrontational information-seeking

Following the speeches, a short Q&A session was announced, limited by UNDP staff to two questions (although, ultimately, three were asked). All questions were factual and non-confrontational, underscoring the tone of deference that permeated the event.



Figure 1. Launching the expansion of the phones against corruption initiative.

The first question came from a radio journalist who stood up, took the microphone and asked how many complaints had been received since the PaC initiative's inception, and whether any had led to investigations. This two-part question was specific and direct but framed neutrally. The Secretary responded by reading from printed materials provided by UNDP. His response followed typical spontaneous speech patterns: he began with averted gaze while reading, then looked up at the end, consistent with Kendon's (1967) model of turn-taking. Notably, the journalist did not return his gaze while taking notes, signalling task-oriented attentiveness rather than direct challenge.

The second question, from a television journalist, asked how many audit committees had been set up. Like the first, this question was fact-based and delivered without challenge. The Secretary answered promptly, again drawing from prepared material. The third question, from another radio journalist, asked what specific corruption reports had been received to date. This was the only question that hinted at deeper scrutiny, but the Secretary answered without elaboration, noting only the number of cases referred and general categories of misconduct.

None of the journalists pursued follow-up questions or pressed for clarification. While each question served a legitimate journalistic purpose, their delivery and reception suggest the limitations of adversarial inquiry in a setting governed by *kastom*.

Importantly, this event occurred against a backdrop of critical questions about the PaC initiative's reach and effectiveness (Watson and Wiltshire, 2016). Fieldwork by Walton (2023) found that most Papua New Guineans interviewed had never heard of the programme, and none had used it. While promoted as a technological innovation enabling free, anonymous reporting of corruption, it remained largely invisible to rural communities (Walton, 2023). Additionally, concerns were raised about whistleblowers' safety and the investigators who followed up on reports, particularly in remote areas where outsiders could be perceived as threatening. Doubts were raised over whether the DoF had the institutional capacity to act on the potentially high volume of complaints the system might generate (Walton, 2023).

These shortcomings warranted deeper journalistic scrutiny, yet such scrutiny failed to materialise. The PaC media conference illustrates the limits of polite watchdog practice as currently enacted. While journalists adhered to *kastom*-consistent norms of respect, they did not deploy the indirect signalling, implication or strategic framing that Wijayanto and Masduki (2023) identify as central to effective polite watchdog journalism. The absence of follow-up questions or contextual cues allowed politeness to slide into deference, leaving institutional claims unscrutinised. This distinction is analytically important: polite watchdog journalism requires active interpretive labour, not silence.

This restrained questioning mirrored the broader silence surrounding the initiative's limitations. Although journalists were physically present and nominally fulfilling their role, they did not challenge the claims or probe effectiveness. As a result, the expansion of the PaC initiative became a public performance of progress rather than an object of scrutiny, muting the watchdog function and leaving institutional narratives intact.

The resulting news stories (e.g. *Papua New Guinea Today*, 2018) showed faithful reporting of the event, accepting uncritically the proposition that the initiative was a success, providing no alternative sources or source material.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that *kastom* is a powerful cultural influence on journalistic practice in PNG. It informs relations between journalists and sources and constrains how journalists enact their roles, particularly the critical, adversarial stance expected in Western 'watchdog' models.

When public interest obligations collide with *kastom*, journalists tend to pursue accountability in ways that avoid public embarrassment for big men and maintain social harmony, often through indirect or private questioning formalised in the polite watchdog model.

As Pacific and postcolonial scholars note, Western adversarial frameworks often align poorly with relational and communal media cultures. Seneviratne (2024) calls for accountability without Western-style confrontation, while Leonhardt et al. (2026) highlight that Pacific journalists prioritise harmony, respect and social cohesion – values that sustain trust but limit overt challenge. Drawing on foundational ethnographic journalism studies (Ericson et al., 1989; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), this research shows that the English trade school model adopted in PNG carries assumptions that do not fit local journalistic realities, reinforcing reliance on elite sources, institutional gatekeeping and coverage of pseudo-events, as seen in the PaC media conference. Journalists voiced frustration at this mismatch, especially given the risks of reprisals for breaching *kastom*.

Read alongside Wijayanto and Masduki (2023), the polite watchdog emerges as a potentially transferable analytical model rather than a context-specific journalistic style. In both Indonesia and PNG, accountability is pursued within dense relational fields informed by hierarchy, reciprocity and vulnerability, although through different cultural grammars: In Indonesia, often inflected by Javanese *rasa* and related norms of harmony; In PNG *kastom* and *wantok* relational obligations, through which politeness is enacted. This comparison strengthens the argument that watchdog journalism is culturally mediated rather than universal.

For PNG, Wijayanto and Masduki's (2023) model offers a culturally grounded way to reconcile conflicting expectations, enabling scrutiny while maintaining *kastom*-based respect. Evidence suggests PNG journalists already practice elements of this model by asking hard questions in private rather than public forums. We argue the polite watchdog model reflects existing practice and aligns with Narokobi's (1983) and Vallance's (2007, 2012) philosophies of relational ethics and collective responsibility, offering a language to legitimise practices marginalised within Western journalism education.

Applied to journalistic practice and training, the findings suggest that accountability is more likely to be effective when pursued through culturally legible forms of scrutiny rather than public confrontation. This includes follow-up questioning, contextual framing and indirect signalling of inconsistencies, as well as strategic use of private or off-camera exchanges to elicit information. Training that foregrounds these skills, alongside ethical reflection, collective newsroom strategies and editorial support, would better equip journalists to work within *kastom* while still challenging power. Rather than framing politeness only as a professional limitation, the polite watchdog recasts it as a learnable practice that can be strengthened through collaborative decision-making.

The polite watchdog model can be enriched by Steensen et al.'s (2022) source criticism model, which encourages journalists to reflect on how truth claims are assessed and produced. Its emphasis on epistemological positioning and contextual interpretation – including 'modesty in truth claims' (Steensen et al., : 2129) – aligns closely with the deference and careful negotiation required in *kastom*-oriented environments.

The PaC interaction is not presented as an example of polite watchdog journalism, but as evidence of its necessity. Applied to the PaC case, combining polite watchdog practices with Steensen et al.'s source criticism model would support more probing yet culturally appropriate questioning, including gentle but direct follow-up questions.

Together, these models offer a vision of journalism that maintains public interest scrutiny while remaining culturally appropriate in postcolonial contexts. They deviate from Western-style adversarial journalism towards a form that is simultaneously critical and relational, thereby suiting media systems that are shaped by strong communal or hierarchical traditions, such as those in PNG. This

distinction is not intended to contrast Western and Melanesian journalism hierarchically, but to illustrate how imported professional ideals are locally adapted and reinterpreted through *kastom*.

Although limited in scope and scale, this study offers rare insight into the dilemmas faced by journalists trained in models misaligned with everyday practice. While the ethnographic approach enables in-depth insights, the study's focus on a single media event and two media organisations limits generalisability, particularly across rural and provincial contexts. As media conditions continue to evolve, especially amidst proposed reforms, further research is needed into how *kastom* affects journalism across PNG and how culturally grounded models such as the polite watchdog, combined with source criticism, can support accountable journalism in postcolonial societies.

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Author's note

Stephanie Sageo-Tapungu is deceased. The article was prepared and submitted by her co-authors with her family's support and permission.

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