

The South Pacific Media: Politics, Ownership, and Control

by David Robie*

Two transnational media conglomerates own or control all the major circulation newspapers in the South Pacific. Through their subsidiaries Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation Ltd and French media magnate Robert Hersant's group in the French territories own five of the eight dailies in the region. The most recent daily, the *National*, began publishing in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in mid-November 1993. It is owned by a company associated with Malaysian senator Datuk Tiong Hiew King's family timber group, Rimbunan Hijau (RHG). Although the Tiong family is not in the big news media league of the Murdochs and Hersants, it has significant media interests, including the publishing of Malaysia's largest Chinese-language daily newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*.¹

When Prime Minister Paias Wingti launched the K 8 million paper (K=kina, the PNG currency; at the time of writing K1 was the equivalent of U.S. \$1.00) as another step in his "look North" policy, it immediately stirred controversy over the paper's foreign ownership and association with the major commercial player in PNG's booming timber industry. Rimbunan Hijau launched a high-profile campaign in mid-1993 against the Wingti government's policy of tighter reins on timber exports and was criticized for interfering in the country's politics. In spite of the controversy, the company persisted with a remarkable promotional slogan: THE NATIONAL SPEAKS FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA. "The launching," said Datuk Tiong, who is also

chairman of Pacific Star Pty Ltd, "marks a new milestone in the development of newspaper publishing in Papua New Guinea." He could easily have added "in the Pacific."² A high-speed German-built Cromoset web offset press is the most sophisticated in use by any paper in the region.

On launching day both Murdoch's *Post-Courier* and the mainstream churches-owned weekly *Times of PNG* splashed a major story on the front page about the Supreme Court awarding almost K14 million in compensation to two foreign construction companies—Curtain Brothers (Qld) Pty Ltd and Kinhill Kramer Pty Ltd—for breach of contract relating to the aborted Poreporena Freeway. (The planned freeway, from central Port Moresby to Jackson International Airport was scrapped by the Wingti government after having been initiated earlier by the former Namaliu government and then revived again by Wingti). Although covered by both the *National*, this story was relegated to seven paragraphs tucked away on page two.

The *National*'s own "good news" lead story about 5,000 homes being built next year by the government was eclipsed by the *Post-Courier*'s front-page win-a-house competition offer (won by a teenager). An important story on landowners, nongovernment organizations, and environmentalists delivering a petition against changes to the Forestry Act to Forest Minister Tim Neville was covered by both the *Post-Courier* and the *Times* (front page) but ignored by the *National*. In the weeks and months that followed, although the editorial quality of the *National* improved markedly, the paper was generally perceived to be not living up to its promotional ads, which claimed: "The *National* gives you the choice of brighter, more colorful pages; better pages; better in-depth reporting; more news—more information; more to interest everyone." And the

*An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the International Green-Left Conference, University of New South Wales, Australia, 1–4 April 1994. Some of the material in this article appears in David Robie's book *Nius Biong Pasifik: Mass Media in the Pacific* (Port Moresby, PNG: University of PNG Press, 1995). This book is available for A \$19.95 from the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, UTS, Box 123, Sydney 2000, Australia. A number of the ministers mentioned in the article are no longer in office since on 30 August 1994 Sir Julius Chan replaced Paias Wingti as prime minister of Papua New Guinea.

1. Rimbunan Hijau supplement, *Post-Courier*, 18 Aug. 1993, p. 31.

2. See David Robie, "Newspaper Showdown in PNG," the *Review* (Fiji), Dec. 1993, pp 130–31. See also, chapter 1, "Print Media: Ownership and Control in the Pacific," in Robie, *Nius Bilong Pasifik*.

issue of ownership has continued to hang over the paper. While Wingti and some members of his cabinet vigorously oppose "foreign ownership," they do not appear to mind having some influence in a Malaysian-owned newspaper as "part of their propaganda machinery."

Pacific Transnationals

Pacific media ownership trends were highlighted in a February 1989 conference called "News Unlimited: Journalism and Global Ownership," which was organized in Sydney by the International Federation of Journalists.⁴ The conference examined the impact of the concentration of media ownership, and it was highly appropriate that the conference should focus on Murdoch's news group, News Corp, as the model for transnational media conglomerates. News Corp controls more than 70 percent of Australian newspapers, more than 50 percent of New Zealand papers, and 36 percent of British newspapers. Murdoch took his group into Europe with Skychannel. Moreover, he is in book publishing through William Collins and Harper Row, and in film distribution and television in the United States with Fox. He also has a major share in wire service news and screen-based financial data through the Australian Associated Press-Reuters. And he has transnational satellite pay television interests.

While the driving force and chief executive of News Corp, Rupert Murdoch, was educated in Britain and lives in New York, he was born an Australian, and Australia was the springboard for his media empire, initially with the *Adelaide News*. In 1987 he succeeded in a takeover of his father's, Sir Keith Murdoch's, old newspaper group, Herald and Weekly Times Ltd, in spite of complex shareholding. As part of the spoils, he gained through the Herald group's subsidiaries the *Post-Courier*, the *Fiji Times*, and the influential *Pacific Islands Monthly*, at that time based in Sydney.⁵ In fact, the Pacific holdings are so small that Murdoch is said to barely notice them among the 124 newspapers he owns around the world. In a *Bulletin* (Sydney, Australia) interview, for example, he admitted he had never heard of his vernacular papers in Fiji, *Nai Lalakai* and *Shanti Dut*.⁶

Late in 1993 Murdoch outlined plans for the company's future and possible alliances with telecommunications groups. Murdoch told the



Newspaper street sellers in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea in mid-March 1993. On sale from left to right are the *Post-Courier*, owned by Rupert Murdoch's South Pacific Post Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of a transnational media conglomerate, News Corp; the *National*, a controversial new newspaper owned by a Sarawak-based Malaysian logging group, Rimbunan Hijau; and the *Times of PNG*, owned by the country's mainstream churches. A story reflecting poorly on the Wingti government has front-page headlines in the two other newspapers but is only on the second page of the *National*, and an important forestry protest covered by the two other newspapers is totally ignored by the *National*. Small wonder that critics point out that the *National* is too close to the Wingti government (and later the Chan government) and the powerful timber industry lobby to be as independent and impartial as claimed! All the photos accompanying this article are by and courtesy of David Robie.

3. *News Unlimited: Journalism and Global Ownership* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists: Sydney, Australian Journalists Association, Feb. 1989).

4. Sorariba Nash, "A New Trend in the PNG Media: A Free Ride to Propaganda. 'If You can't Beat Them, Join Them!,'" paper presented

at the Journalism Educators Association Conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 1-3 Dec. 1993, p. 1.

5. "The Industry and the Murdoch Empire," *News Unlimited*, pp. 3-4.

6. Cited in the *Review* (Fiji), July 1993, p. 81.

business editor of one of his own papers, in an article that spanned three entire pages of the *Weekend Australian*, that he would take advantage of the high prices of News Corp stocks to make a placement of 20 percent of the company. This would raise between K 2.6 billion and K 3.3 billion (A \$4 billion to A \$5 billion [U.S. 2.6 and U.S. 3.3 billion]) by the placement of 370 million "super" shares.⁷ At the time, News Corp was valued at U.S. \$15 billion. Murdoch gave no specific details of his plans, but speculation centered on News Corp's future role in the so-called electronic super-highways of information prompted by the U.S. telecommunications giant Bell Atlantic Corporation's U.S. \$30 billion attempt to acquire Telecommunications Inc. (TCI) in October 1993.

The Influence of Television

The influence of the Murdoch empire has by far the biggest impact in television broadcasting. Murdoch's purchase of Hong Kong's Star Television in 1993 for K 525 million in cash and stock completed the global arc of his television network. In North America the company owns Fox Broadcasting Corporation, in Europe it half owns British Sky Broadcasting Ltd, and it now has Star in Asia.⁸ Star's five channels, including BBC World News (later shed from the China-directed channel), can reach 45 million people in thirty-eight Asian and Middle Eastern countries. In addition, a Murdoch subsidiary was in the running during 1993 for the franchise to run Fiji's television channel, Fiji One.

While some Pacific regional media organizations purport to be championing freedom of the press, in reality they are often defending the freedom of the ownership of the press, or ensuring the conservative political status quo of the media.

The news media explosion in Europe, particularly electronic media, as a result of the Council of Europe's Convention on Transborder Broadcasting has led to devastating concentration of ownership in the world's media. The European group of the International Federation of Journalists responded to the situation by declaring: "Concentration of media ownership threatens the free flow of information, the independence of broadcasters and the development of broadcasting in the service of democracy and the community by placing effective control of news and information in Europe in the hands of a small number of powerful business interests."⁹

Television has grown rapidly in the South Pacific in the past few years, but in terms of ownership and programming the broadcast

systems of the island nations display little independence. According to a Pacific Regional Television Survey Project (PACTEL) survey being conducted during 1993 by Jim Bentley, regional communications adviser of UNESCO, a major proportion of programs broadcast are provided regularly by foreign television sources, on videotape, or via satellite transmissions:¹⁰ "In all of the region the dependency is large—in some countries as high as 100 percent," he says. "In many cases the volume of transmissions is overwhelming and quite out of character with the scale of most island economies. In addition, the programming offers little relationship to Pacific island lifestyle and culture."

Television broadcasting is widespread in Micronesia and exists in all countries of the region except Kiribati and the states of Chuuk and Kosrae in the Federated States of Micronesia. Introduction of cable television to the state of Yap and its impact on Pacific lifestyle was the subject of Dennis O'Rourke's documentary *Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?* O'Rourke contrasted the island lifestyle with the damaging influence of American junk TV programs and culturally and socially irrelevant advertisements. Belau has twelve cable television networks or channels and one terrestrial transmission channel available to the public. Four of the cable channels provide a twenty-four-hour service and the other eight operate for twenty hours daily. All this for a nation with a population of barely 15,000 people! The channels are all owned by U.S. companies.

In Melanesia TV broadcasting was established in Vanuatu in 1992, has been broadcasting "temporarily" in Fiji since 1991, is being considered for the Solomon Islands, and has been established in New Caledonia since 1965 and PNG since 1987. In Vanuatu the programming is entirely foreign, 50 percent in English provided by Television New Zealand (TVNZ), and 50 percent in French, provided by the French overseas channel RFO, which also provides programming for New Caledonia's two channels. One channel is completely French, the other has 80 percent French programming. Foreign content on Fiji One, Fiji's temporary service, ranges between 80 percent and 84 percent. Local content consists of local sports programs, religious programs, specials, documentaries, and a daily fifteen-to-thirty-minute local news bulletin. This is produced by the Fiji government-owned Fiji National Video Centre. The rest of the programming is provided by TVNZ. In Papua New Guinea, EMTV has by far the highest local program content—including *Kids Kona*, *Mekim Music*, information clips, and a nightly half-hour news bulletin—but even on this station foreign content is at least 75 percent, and much of the locally produced content is advertising.

In Polynesia there are television broadcasting services in American Samoa, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Tonga, Niue, Wallis and Futuna, and Western Samoa. Foreign content ranges from 87.5 percent (Cook Islands) to 98 percent (Tonga).

In mid-1993 a struggle took place for the Fiji TV license. After Television New Zealand and the Pacific Broadcasting Corporation Ltd (Murdoch) were given the go-ahead in May, the Fiji government went back to the drawing board with a sudden change in the shareholding structure.¹¹ Hopes had been high for a permanent TV station when the government invited TVNZ and

7. *Weekend Australian*, 16–17 Oct. 1993.

8. *National Business Review*, 30 July 1993, p. 9.

9. "The Industry and the Murdoch Empire," *News Unlimited*, pp. 3–4.

10. *Pina Nius* (Suva), mid-1993, pp. 6–7.

11. *Review*, Sept. 1993, p. 11.

Table 1: Pacific Media Ownership

	Papua New Guinea		Fiji	
		Foreign Owned		Foreign Owned
Press:				
Daily newspapers	2	2	2	1
Weekly national papers	2		3	2
Monthly news magazines	0		3	1
Monthly business papers	1		0	
Radio:				
Government-owned stations	3		3	
Privately owned stations	1		2	
Television:				
Government-owned stations	0		1	
Privately owned stations	1	1	0	

Source: Robie, *Nius Bilong Pasifik* (1995), p. 27.

PBCL plus local commercial interests to set up a joint venture partnership for a pay TV and permanent free-to-air service. Both companies were given a 5 June deadline to come to an agreement on a proposal for a joint venture plan. But the deadline passed with no word from either party, and there was speculation that they were at odds over how the television service should operate. Finally the government came up with a shareholding format that keeps Fiji One 85 percent locally owned. Fifty-one percent of the shares are to be held by the Fiji Development Bank for the country's fourteen provinces and Rotuma under the bank's window equity scheme, 15 percent goes to TVNZ (which will continue to manage the station), and 14 percent to local company Viti Television with the rest being sold to the public.¹²

Radio Communication Has the Widest Reach

Radio broadcasting is less fluid and less monopolized by foreign interests than television and the press. It is still the form of mass communication that has the widest reach in Pacific countries and the biggest influence. The pattern is for radio broadcasting to be government-run or controlled, although

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Press:

PNG Post-Courier: Daily; 41,000 audited; South Pacific Post Pty Ltd, Australian owned: 62.5 percent Murdoch's News Corp through subsidiary, 10 percent other Australian shareholding, 27.5 percent PNG shareholding.

The *National*: Daily; approx. 11,000 unaudited; Pacific Star Pty Ltd, Malaysian owned: 51 percent Monarch Investments, associated with the Rimbunan Hijau group; up to 49 percent undisclosed PNG shareholding; Monarch to reduce shareholding to 25 percent in three years; Monarch to manage.

Times of PNG: Weekly; 9,000; Word Publishing Ltd, PNG-owned by mainstream churches of PNG.

Saturday Independent: New weekly newspaper that will replace the *Times of PNG* on 27 May 1995; Word Publishing Ltd.

Wantok: Weekly; 13,000; Tok Pisin language; Word Publishing Ltd.

Radio:

National Broadcasting Commission: PNG government owned; three networks, Kundu (provincial), Karai (national), Kalang (commercial) broadcasting in AM/FM in English, Tok Pisin, and other languages.

NauFM: PNG FM Pty Ltd, 80 percent PNG owned, 20 percent Communications Fiji Ltd.

Television:

EM TV: Wholly owned by Channel Nine network of Australia. National coverage via Indonesia's Palabar satellite.

FIJI

Press:

Fiji Times: Daily; circ. 31,000 audited; Fiji Times Ltd, Australian owned: Murdoch's News Corporation.

Daily Post: Daily; 9,000; Fiji owned: Fiji Post Co Ltd.

Nai Lalakai: Weekly; 13,000; Fijian language; Fiji Times Ltd, Murdoch's News Corp.

Shanti Dut: Weekly; 10,500; Hindi language; Fiji Times Ltd; Murdoch's News Corp.

Islands Business Pacific: Monthly news magazine; 8,000; Fiji owned: Islands Business International Ltd.

Pacific Islands Monthly: Monthly news magazine; 10,500; Fiji Times Ltd; Murdoch's News Corp.

The *Review*: Monthly news magazine, Fiji owned: Associated Media Ltd.

Radio:

Fiji Broadcasting Commission: A Fiji government-funded body, broadcasting a fully commercial service on three wavebands: Fiji 1 in English/Fijian, Fiji 2 in English/Hindi, Fiji 3 in English.

FM96 and Navtarang, a commercial radio station, Fiji owned: Communications Fiji Ltd.

Television:

Fiji One: 85 percent Fiji owned: 51 percent of shares held by Fiji Development Bank for country's 14 provinces and Rotuma, 15 percent Television NZ, 14 percent Viti Television, 20 percent sold to public.

Sources: Suzanna Layton, *The Contemporary Pacific Islands Press*, (Brisbane, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1992); Robie, *Nius Bilong Pasifik: Mass Media in the Pacific*.

12. *Review*, Oct. 1993, p. 8.

there are some commercial networks. Ironically the most liberal broadcasting regulations are now in the French territories since the socialists deregulated the state monopoly in the mid-1980s. French Polynesia has ten radio stations, several of them community-based such as the pro-independence Te Reo o Tefana, broadcast by the Faaa municipality. It was the first radio station to broadcast in the Tahitian language, Maohi, a radical departure from the French-language state broadcasting station. New Caledonia has about six radio stations, including the Kanak pro-independence Radio Djiido.

Print Media Foreign Dominated

The major print media in the South Pacific in the four key mass communications countries or territories in the region—Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Papua New Guinea—has been largely dominated by foreign ownership. Murdoch, of course, has been the best-known player. Less known but also very powerful and influential is the French media baron Robert Hersant. Owner of the conservative French national daily *Le Figaro* and several big regional French newspapers, the Hersant group expanded its empire into the French overseas territories and departments: in the Caribbean, first with Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guyana, and then into the Pacific with New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Hersant's California-based Pacific Presse Communication group, which owns television and press interests on the U.S. West Coast, owns all the French-language dailies in the Pacific. The group is also said to have come close to publishing an English-language daily in Fiji after the coups when an associated company made a bid for the publishing press and plant abandoned by the closed *Fiji Sun*.

"In many cases the volume of transmissions is overwhelming and quite out of character with the scale of most island economies. In addition, the programming offers little relationship to Pacific island lifestyle and culture."

Hersant owns *Les Nouvelles Caledoniennes* in New Caledonia, and *La Depeche* and *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* in French Polynesia. At the time of acquiring the papers in the late 1980s there was a "cleansing" of editorial staff—journalists regarded as too liberal were sacked. All three papers have an orthodox conservative French perspective of the region. According to Claude Marere, news editor of the Tahitian radio station Radio Tefana: "As part of the Hersant scenario, Polynesia must stay French, independence is taboo, and silence must be kept about the corruption involved in the main political parties for the reason that they are pro-French."¹³

As for Murdoch, his News Corp subsidiaries own the paper with the biggest circulation daily in the South Pacific, the *Post-Courier* (South Pacific Post Pty Ltd), which sells some 41,000 copies daily. News Corp also owns the *Fiji Times*, the largest selling Fiji daily, and the regional news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* (part of the Fiji Times Ltd group), which it uprooted from Sydney and moved to Suva, Fiji, in 1989. Fiji has the only major independent, locally owned, daily newspaper in the South Pacific, the *Daily Post*. This was founded by a group of small Fijian businessmen after the closure of the *Sun*. A small circulation (1,600) daily, the *Cook Islands News*, is also independent since the Cook Islands privatized its government-owned news media.

As described earlier, a new foreign-owned player is now on the scene in Papua New Guinea. After the closure in 1990 of the ill-fated *Niugini Nius*, foreign-owned for much of its publishing life, a company associated with the Sarawak-based Malaysian logging group, Rimbunan Hijau, has launched the *National*. Pacific Star Pty Ltd was incorporated as its owner on 26 November 1992 under the name of Samnan Pty Ltd. Malaysia's Penandangan Sinar was listed then as a director, having ninety-eight nominal K1 shares. Two PNG residents were also listed as directors with one K1 share each. On 10 May 1993 the company changed its name to Pacific Star Pty Ltd. Majority stockholders (51 percent) are understood to be from Monarch Investments, another company associated with Rimbunan Hijau. The minority PNG shareholding is reportedly being increased over a three-year period.

Politicization of the Media

When launching the *National* on 10 November 1993 Datuk Tiong, the Malaysian senator and timber baron, said that while witnessing the rapid economic growth of PNG he could not help but admire the country's vitality and potential: "Papua New Guinea can be likened to a glittering diamond that has become a new focal point in the Asia-Pacific region."¹⁴ He added that he hoped the *National* as an "independent" paper would play a positive role in PNG society and would serve the people well by being "truthful and impartial" and by "serving as a bridge between the government and the people."

But this is precisely where the controversy has come in. The owners of the new paper are seen by many media critics and opposition politicians as too close to the Wingti government and to the powerful timber industry lobby to be considered genuinely independent. Sir Frederick Reiher, former chairman of PNG's National Airline Commission and now the high commissioner in Canberra, was among the outspoken critics. In his weekly column in the influential *Times of PNG* (circulation 9,000 and owned by the country's mainstream churches), he warned about the *National*'s probable conflict of interest. Sir Frederick wrote:

The policy makers must be wary of other interests that the new media promoters have in the country. Companies are self-inflicted and profit-seeking in the first place. Their prime and foremost concern is the protection of their economic gains, to which end their media interests will certainly be exploited to the full.

13. *Pacific Eyes* 3 (Port Moresby, PNG: Pacific Journalists Association), 1994.

14. Cited by Robie, "Newspaper Showdown in PNG," p. 130.



The National's building in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The publication of this newspaper raises questions about media freedom in Papua New Guinea. Whereas both the Post-Courier and the Times of PNG have indigenous PNG editors, the editor-in-chief of the National is from Singapore's Straits Times, and the deputy editor is a former press secretary for Prime Minister Wingti.

This eventuality will be so much accentuated if the media investor is also a major player in the development of the nation's natural resources. The media will become a powerful tool to influence popular support in favour of the foreign investor against all opposition, be they in the form of government policies or landowners' benefits.¹⁵

In this case the new media investor was the single largest forestry resource development company in Papua New Guinea. One could imagine the outcry if one of the country's largest mining developers, such as Placer or the Australian giant CRA, decided to establish a daily newspaper—not that they would ever consider doing so.

Opposition spokesmen were even more blunt in their criticism. Opposition leader Chris Haiveta's media research officer, Yehiura Angwi Hriehwazi, publicly challenged Prime Minister Wingti to declare any interest in the paper: "The freedom of expression and the freedom of the press are on the verge of becoming things of the past in Papua New Guinea," he complained in a letter to the *Post-Courier*.¹⁶ "Already the Wingti regime's Internal Security Act effectively prohibits freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly and association." He added that this was in conflict with the constitution:

The People's Democratic Movement (PDM) of Mr Wingti must also declare its interests, if any, in the new newspaper. . . . One PDM

executive is a constant visitor to the *National* premises. If the prime minister, his representatives or agents have any interest in the newspaper, then for the purposes of conducting open commercial activities and as a matter of public interest, the prime minister should declare his interests, if any, publicly.¹⁷

Four Malaysians, two Papua New Guineans (business and political associates of the prime minister), and a New Zealand lawyer were reportedly on the board of directors at the time the paper made its debut. Rimbunan Hijau executive officer George Yong said the newspaper venture was consistent with RHG's long-term thinking about Papua New Guinea: "We have been invited to this country by successive governments," he said. "Timber is our mainstream business, but we are also good at publishing."¹⁸ In Sarawak alone, the RHG group employs 15,000 people. The group is involved in copper, gold, plantations, shipping, insurance, heavy machinery, banking, and it owns *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, a Chinese-language newspaper in Kuala Lumpur with a circulation of about 150,000.¹⁹ In PNG, the Rimbunan Hijau (PNG) Pty Ltd group dominates the export log trade, although while the Forests Ministry insists it has an 86 percent share, RHG says it is considerably less than that. It directly employs 3,000 people and its profits in 1992 reportedly earned an after-tax profit of K 350 million. It has one of the world's largest timber concessions at Makapa, Western Province, with

15. Sir Frederick Reiher, "The question of media control," *Times of PNG*, 12 Aug. 1993.

16. Letter to the editor, *PNG Post-Courier*, 28 Oct. 1993.

17. *Ibid.*

18. RHG supplement, *Post-Courier*, p. 31.

19. CAFCA *Watchdog* draft paper, Sept. 1993.

timber rights over seven million cubic meters of exportable logs. In February 1993 the RHG group's chairman, Datuk Tiong, announced that the local company would build a K 150 million integrated wood processing complex near Port Moresby.²⁰

It is difficult to see the newly launched *National* as a venture based on the usual commercial criteria for newspaper publishing. It is perceived to have a political agenda. Certainly some of its unbalanced articles parroting timber industry press statements and paid advertisements without balancing material suggest this is so. Its publication also raises questions about media freedom in Papua New Guinea. Whereas both the *Times of PNG* and the *Post-Courier* have indigenous PNG editors, the editor-in-chief of the *National* is Henry Chang, fifty-two, of the Singapore *Straits Times*. Wingti's press secretary, Frank Senge Kolma, was recruited as deputy editor, and former *Niugini Nius* editor Sinclair Solomon hired as executive editor. Highly regarded in PNG as a leading feature writer and columnist, Kolma had more recently been regarded as a political publicist for the Wingti government. Said Kolma: "The challenge got hold of me and all the others who were approached to be part of the pioneer team."

In Fiji the Murdoch ownership of the *Fiji Times* group was put under the political spotlight in March 1994 when the company sacked a senior journalist who led opposition to the appointment of conservative expatriate Rory Gibson as the newspaper's editor-in-chief.²¹ Deputy editor Moses Velia was dismissed after a news room confrontation with Gibson, whose appointment in January prompted protests to Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka. *Fiji Times* journalists had complained that granting a work permit to Gibson appeared to breach the government's policy of ensuring Fijians received priority in certain jobs. Velia claimed he had been personally victimized by the News Ltd management for personally presenting the protest letter.

In Papua New Guinea the office of the prime minister set up a media unit headed by expatriate businessman Peter Spencer, the owner of the Mt. Hagen-based Tribal Tours chain of hotels. With no news media background, Spencer replaced former press secretary Frank Senge Kolma, who is now deputy editor of the *National*. The objective of this unit is to provide the basis of the Wingti-Chan government's public relations strategy in a bid to "correct what Wingti deems the tarnished image of Papua New Guinea."²²

K 6 million was allocated from the 1994 budget to recruit ten journalists and purchase equipment. The "Australian media"



People buying newspapers in Boroko, Papua New Guinea. With the ownership and control of the South Pacific's electronic mass media increasingly dominated by foreign conglomerates, and the news media now more than ever being manipulated by government media advisors, one wonders what chance these and other residents of the South Pacific have of getting locally responsive and unbiased information. There is a vital need in the South Pacific for an independent and sovereign press and broadcast media.

was cited as a target for influence. According to my colleague Sorariba Nash, the PNG government has "gone for a free ride to promote its propaganda while allowing a foreign company to exploit its natural resources, thereby compromising its position as the caretaker of the people's resources."²³ The Spencer affair surfaced in the national Parliament in late March 1994 with revelations about his media consultancy to the prime minister and a likely lucrative contract involving the refurbishing of the prime minister's offices in Morauta Haus for K 4.1 million.²⁴ Deputy opposition leader John Momis submitted to Parliament a draft consultancy agreement between Spencer and the PNG state costing taxpayers K 301,688 a year in salary, allowances, and gratuity.²⁵ On top of this, the press secretary was said to be given five first-class air fares a year to Victoria, and his water, gas, electricity, telephone, and National Capital District Commission bills were paid by the government.

Yet in his role as press secretary, Spencer has managed to alienate many people in the media and is said to have placed

23. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

24. Peter Spencer was said in Parliament to be the "principal" of Commercial Development Corporation of Mt. Hagen, consultant for the prime minister over the planned K4.1 million Morauta House renovations. Spencer later denied he was the company principal and rejected the claims against him as "expatriate bashing."

25 "Contract under fire," *National*, 24 Mar. 1994.

20. RHG supplement, *Post-Courier*, p. 31.

21. *PNG Post-Courier*, 7 Mar. 1994.

22. Nash, "A New Trend in the PNG Media," p. 7.

some prominent journalists on an information "black list." His role in the abortive National Press Club set up by the national political and business elite in early 1994 was severely criticized. After public condemnation, the club was revamped and became more journalist-driven, although it still has a far higher business profile than is traditionally the case with most overseas press clubs.

Conclusion

The ownership and control, particularly the bulk of programming, of the South Pacific's electronic mass media is increasingly dominated by foreign conglomerates, and the news media is being manipulated by government media advisers on a scale far higher than in the past. There is a vital need for an independent and sovereign press and broadcast media.

An irony about publication of the *National* is that in the competition for PNG's modest advertising market the big loser could be the *Times of PNG*, the only genuine PNG-owned newspaper group. This would be a tragedy for a paper that has contributed an important independent voice in the nation's news media. Word Publishing, owned by the mainstream churches, has also played a vital development information role.

Radio broadcasting is less fluid and less monopolized by foreign interests than television and the press. It is still the form of mass communication that has the widest reach in Pacific countries and the biggest influence. The pattern is for radio broadcasting to be government-run or controlled, although there are some commercial networks.

Elsewhere in the Pacific the handful of independent papers have been under growing pressure. Fiji's *Daily Post* was threatened over reports on the Post and Telecommunications affair. Tonga's pro-democracy movement editor (of the investigative newsletter *Kele'a*) and parliamentarian Akilisi Pohiva has lost defamation cases totaling T\$60,000 in damages over the past year.²⁶ Although he remains defiant, he believes the Tongan establishment is trying to destroy him by bankrupting him. In the Cook Islands, the publisher, editor, and journalist/cartoonist of the *Cook Islands News* were summoned before the parliamentary privileges committee in October 1993 over restrictions on a mild cartoon poking fun at freedom of speech. Parliament forced the newspaper to apologize.

While some Pacific regional media organizations purport to be championing freedom of the press, in reality they are often defending the freedom of the ownership of the press, or ensuring

the conservative political status quo of the media. Small, independent news media or individual journalists have usually faced bitter opposition from these same media organizations. A media climate of conformity and conservatism has prevailed.

The dramatic restructuring of Western media in recent years and the emergence of the huge impersonal multimedia conglomerates have caused uncertainty about the future of modern journalism. The tremendous pace of technological change is one of the greatest challenges to democratic and pluralistic societies. An independent, diverse, and sovereign national press in the Pacific employing challenging, questioning journalists with an indigenous perspective can, and should, make a vital contribution to democratic pluralism in island nations.

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STUDIES IN HISTORY

Editor: S GOPAL

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