



Pacific solutions

MEDIA STUDENTS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC ARE BEING TAUGHT HOW TO RESPOND TO PHYSICAL THREATS AND ATTEMPTS AT BRIBERY, AS WELL AS JOURNALISM, SAYS DAVID ROBIE. ILLUSTRATION BY ROD EMMERSON.

One of Fiji's best investigative journalists and media trainers ended up as a spin doctor and henchman for coup frontman George Speight. He is now languishing in jail for treason.

Some newshounds in Papua New Guinea have pursued political careers thanks to their media training, but most have failed to make the cut in national politics.

A leading publisher in Tonga was forced to put his newspaper on the line in a dramatic attempt to overturn a constitutional gag on the media. He won – probably hastening the pro-democracy trend in the royal fiefdom's recent election.

Media intersects with the raw edge of politics in the South Pacific, as countries are plunged into turbulent times and face the spectre of terrorism. A decade-long civil war on Bougainville, three coups in Fiji (if the faltered George Speight putsch is counted), ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands, factional feuding in Vanuatu and political assassinations in New Caledonia and Samoa are all part of the volatile mix.

At the University of Papua New Guinea in the mid-1990s, trainee reporters covered five campus-related murders over two years as part of their assignments, including the slaying of a lecturer by off-duty police officers.

While teaching journalism in Australia and New Zealand involves telling students how to report on local council and law courts free of the perils of defamation and contempt, in Pacific media schools you focus on a range of other testy issues – such as reporting sedition, treason and how to deal with physical threats and bribery.

At times it takes raw courage to be a neophyte journalist. At the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), two senior reporters were ambushed and beaten by a war party after the local training newspaper, *Uni Tauru*, featured the campus warriors' home province in an unflattering front-page report. On another occasion, a student journalist slipped into hiding when ominous 'wanted' posters with his name and picture were plastered around campus because of his report exposing corruption over an annual Miss UPNG contest.

Also at the University of Papua New Guinea in the mid-1990s, trainee reporters covered five campus-related murders over two years as part of their assignments, including the slaying of a lecturer by off-duty police officers. In July 2001, four students were shot dead in protests against the PNG government over

World Bank structural adjustment policies. Two young women, *Uni Tauru* reporters Wanita Wakus and Estella Cheung, wrote moving accounts of the shootings and gave evidence at a subsequent commission of inquiry.

At the University of the South Pacific (USP) – a unique institution owned by a dozen Pacific nations – a team of student journalists covered the Speight rebellion in 2000 for three months for their newspaper, *Wansohawa*, and the website at www.usp.ac.fj/journ/. Nervous campus administrators closed the website after martial law was declared. But students carried on filing reports for a special coup website established by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism in Sydney, <http://journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html>

The USP students scooped that year's Ossie Awards, the student media awards named after the late foreign correspondent Osmar 'Ossie' White and open to entrants from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

Although three good journalism schools exist in the Pacific – UPNG and Divine Word University (DWU) at Madang in Papua New Guinea, and USP in Fiji – most journalists in the region have no solid training (apart from PNG where 81 per cent have formal qualifications). The few journalists who have been trained are lucky if they have had the odd week-long short course or so. In Fiji, 49 per cent of journalists are school leavers who have had no training at all.

Two newsroom surveys in Fiji and PNG in 1998/9 and 2001 make grim reading. While journalists believe strongly in the watchdog role of Pacific media, lack of training, very poor wages and political and cultural pressures undermine their efforts.

The typical journalist in Fiji is most likely to be (by a small margin) male, single and under the age of 25 with less than four years' experience. And he is likely to be a native Fijian speaker working for English-language media. He is a school leaver with little

or no formal training or higher education.

On the other hand, a typical Papua New Guinea journalist is most likely to be female (also by a small margin), single, aged under 29, with five years' experience, and a Tok Pisin speaker. She is working on English-language media and most likely she has a university diploma or degree in journalism from either UPNG or DWU.

The appalling pay is a major concern. In Fiji, a newly trained graduate nurse begins on about F\$13,000 (AUD\$10,050) a year, but a graduate journalist usually starts on \$6500 (AUD\$5025) – the same as a school leaver with no training. The median wage for journalists in Fiji is \$13,000 a year. Pay is worse in Papua New Guinea and many other Pacific nations.

During my ten years teaching journalism in Fiji and PNG, I found many bright young graduates will work for a year or so as journalists then leave for other, more highly paid media-related jobs using the double major degrees they gained to get into journalism. This continual loss of staff makes it very difficult to achieve stable and consistent editorial standards and policies.

Poorly paid journalists are potentially more readily tempted by 'envelope' journalism – the bribery and other inducements used by unscrupulous politicians and other powerful figures. Financial hardships and lack of training are an unhealthy mix for media in a democracy.

Media organisations themselves are dependent on donors in the region for the limited training that does go on, and many observers believe this makes them captive to the donors' agendas. For example, under the mantra of 'good governance', Ausaid has financed a Pacific Media Initiative (PMI) project and a successor, the Pacific Media and Communication Facility (PMCF). Many view both as band-aid projects out of step with journalism training and education in Australia and New Zealand. Ausaid has contributed little to the main journalism schools – the best hope for sustainable media training in the region.

Attempts to establish journalist unions have been largely unsuccessful, except

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for a brief period of support and training by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in the early 1990s. Once funding ended, the energy of local organisers dissipated. No Pacific nation currently has a journalist union affiliated to the IFJ.

A major change is needed to alter the mind-set among those Pacific news media companies that are reluctant to invest in training or recognise the importance of education.

At a seminar in mid-2004 in Fiji on industry self-regulation, prominent publicist Matt Wilson called for the establishment of a media wages council and better investment in training. Pointing out that the majority of working journalists in Fiji had little or no training, the former *Fiji Times* journalist added: "I can see standards slipping inexorably – I can see no improvements."

Nevertheless, Pacific journalists will continue tackling the political and cultural perils of their craft with guts and gusto.

Dr David Robie is a journalist and media educator with Auckland University of Technology and formerly journalism coordinator of the University of the South Pacific. His new book is *Mekim Niis: South Pacific media, politics and education* (University of the South Pacific Book Centre), RRP \$35 (plus postage), available through the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, <http://acj.uts.edu.au>. **Rod Emmerson** is a cartoonist with *The New Zealand Herald*.

OVERSEAS PLACEMENT

The Asia Alliance Program: building bridges between Australian and Asian journalists

Interested in working in a Sri Lankan or Nepalese press freedom NGO for between three and six months?

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, in conjunction with the International Federation of Journalists and the Walkley Foundation for Excellence in Journalism, and supported by the Myer Foundation, is seeking expressions of interest from Australian journalists interested in undertaking a three- to six-month placement in one of the IFJ's affiliates in Nepal or Sri Lanka.

The placement is part of the Asia Alliance program which is designed to build long-lasting links and share experiences between Australian journalists and their colleagues in Asia, as well as between journalists' organisations in these regions. The program also aims to improve Australian and Asia-Pacific region journalists' understanding of media issues in these regions and build the capacity of journalists' organisations in the Asia-Pacific.

The work will involve working on media and capacity-building projects within the selected organisation. Projects could include: promoting journalists' ethics and public service media, trade union development, improving gender equity in media, improving reporting of conflict, improving reporting of HIV/AIDS and children's issues, and promoting tolerance and diversity through media. In addition, the successful applicant will be required to submit articles for publication for

The Walkley Magazine and website, plus regular news pieces for the Media Alliance weekly e-bulletin.

The placement will occur between July and December 2005, in either Kathmandu or Colombo.

Applicants should possess:

- At least three years' experience as a working journalist in Australia
- A demonstrated interest in international human rights and press freedom
- A commitment to the principles of trade unionism
- Proficiency in Sinhala, Tamil or Nepali will be highly regarded.

Return airfares from Australia, travel insurance and small monthly stipend (AUD\$600 per month) will be provided. Applicants must be able to cover expenses beyond this. Applicants must be able to undertake the placement of three to six months between July and December 2005.

Please provide your CV plus a one-page letter explaining why you are interested in the placement and particularly, how you will use the placement upon your return to Australia.

Please send applications to Emma Walters at emma.walters@alliance.org.au by June 29, 2005

Placements may soon be available in Indonesia, Hong Kong and Korea.



The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

The IFJ is the global voice of journalists, representing over 500,000 journalists in more than 110 countries. IFJ Asia is the IFJ's Sydney-based regional office in the Asia-Pacific region and facilitates contact between journalists' organisations in Asia and the Pacific as well as the rest of the world. www.ifj-asia.org www.ifj.org



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