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Editorial Free media rhetoric

The press must be a vital participant in public affairs, and an open and bold participant ... unashamed of the fact that it is accepting a responsibility for playing such a role ... and it must not depend on the safe and stifling rules of some false objectivity, but depend upon the talent, the knowledge, the experience, the courage, and above all, the individuality of the people who work in the press. — **Tom Wicker**, in the *The Quill*

AT THIS time of the year, there are the usual platitudes and rhetoric about “media freedom” in the Pacific. *The Fiji Times*, for example, complained in an editorial about politicians with a “misguided theory” that Fiji was not ready for a critical and aggressive media because of the traditional system of values and its developing nation status.

Quite rightly, the paper cited “countless examples of politicians in this country using the shoot-the-messenger tactic to soften the impact of their blunders or lies.” However, in the next breath it reminded the public that Information Minister Josefa Vosanibola had dusted off plans to introduce new media legislation based on a report by two British media consultants in 1996.

“Thankfully, the report is an independent outside view of the Fiji media, which argues against curbing media independence.”

Unconvincing. Any journalists worth their salt should be resisting any attempt by government to hinder the media. The consultants’ report was merely a blatant attempt by the Fiji Media Council to save its own vested interest.

In fact, one could argue that the industry itself opened up the thin edge of the wedge by collaborating in the first place with government attempts to control media.

Media freedom as an issue in the Pacific has been defined in far too narrow terms, as if Big Brother governments are the only problem. Of course, they’re not. There are many other issues that are vitally important in the region that impinge on media freedom that are rarely mentioned — such as self-censorship, media ownership and convergence, and shockingly poor qualifications and salaries for many journalists (which make them potentially open to undue influence and bribery).

EDITORIAL

It was a refreshing change from the usual back-slapping and we-can-do-no-wrong rhetoric by media owners to hear comments from people such as Fiji Human Rights Commission director, Dr Shaista Shameem, and media and politics lecturer Tarcisius Kabutaulaka at a University of the South Pacific seminar marking UNESCO's World Press Freedom Day on May 3.

Dr Shameem wants a higher educational standard for Pacific journalists. In her book the region's journalists need to know far more about history, politics, sociology, philosophy and the sciences.

"Anyone can learn the technical skills of journalism — that's the easy part," she says. "The hard part is to understand the world that you are writing about. My definition of a good journalist is someone with such in-depth understanding of the issues that the words, though simply written, virtually leap out from the page"

Solomon Islander Kabutaulaka, who has written widely as a columnist as well as critically examining the profession of journalism, raises the issue of media monopolies.

"This raises the questions such as: who control or owns the media? Whose interests do they represent?" he asks. "In the world of globalisation and with the advent of the internet we must realise that a variety of medium does not always mean a variety of source."

Kabutaulaka also wonders whether Pacific media provide "adequate information that will enhance democracy": "It is not an impartial medium. Rather, many [in the media] also have vested interests."

Clearly the Pacific media needs to get its house in order if it wants to seriously claim public sympathy over media freedom (which is in fact only held in trust on behalf of the people). The problem is that there is little media accountability in Fiji — nothing comparable to ABC Television's *MediaWatch* or Radio New Zealand's programme by independent journalist Russell Brown with the same name that vigorously scrutinise the media and name names. Forget about the Media Council, it has little to offer beyond rhetoric. But there is a lot of media dirty linen in Fiji, for example, that is not aired. Issues such as:

□ The conduct of journalists such as *Fiji Times* chief-of-staff Margaret Wise whose paternity suit against former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka reflected badly on the integrity of journalists and on her newspaper in particular. I cannot imagine any news organisation that I have ever worked with closing a blind eye to such a blatant challenge over basic media ethics — a public



Treason sentence: Fiji Television shows coup frontman and media manipulator George Speight after being sentenced to death for treason (commuted to life imprisonment within hours), 18 February 2002. Questions remain over the role of Jo Nata, who is also charged with treason.

admission of how partisan she was during deposed Labour Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's rule.

❑ Internet piracy with some local news organisations routinely downloading and publishing foreign copyright news and pictures. One regional “online” news service regularly takes stories from newspapers such as the *New Zealand Herald* and *Jakarta Post*, then onpasses them to its commercial newspaper members. Some papers raid broadcast websites such as the BBC and ABC.

❑ The increasingly strident xenophobic tone of writers such as *Pacific* magazine's Laisa Taga, perhaps a reflection of the entrenched racism that characterises post-Speight Fiji.

❑ The role of former Fiji Journalism Institute training coordinator Jo Nata, currently on Nukulau prison isle facing treason charges over his public relations “spin” for coup front man George Speight.

EDITORIAL

❑ The cloud over the FJI itself, founded with Fiji media industry support in 1994, the same year that the USP journalism degree programme got under way. The lack of accountability over US\$45,000 from UNESCO (and a lot more as well, if the critics are to be believed) is shocking to say the least.

❑ The Fiji media industry has failed dismally in efforts to develop sustainable media training in this country. And some overseas aid donors are complicit in the charade.

Elsewhere in the world, journalists themselves take responsibility for their collective organisation and training, not wait around for donor handouts. Why not in the Pacific?

Issues such as these are barely raised in public, let alone discussed. In fact, the only serious post-Speight workshop on media reporting and accountability was never conducted by the industry itself. It was left to the community standards lobby group Fiji Media Watch — which hosted a workshop run by *The Australian's* respected Honiara-based correspondent Mary-Louise O'Callaghan in May 2001 — to make an attempt.

What is needed are strong and independent journalist unions. Some media industry people argue that Pacific journalists shouldn't belong to unions. This is a con designed to distract journalists from taking responsibility for their own professional status and destiny. If it is good enough for Pacific doctors, nurses, teachers, academics and many others to belong to unions and professional bodies, then it is also good enough for journalists.

Personally, I have been a journalist for more than 37 years and have always been an active member of journalist unions. Currently I hold a press card from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). With more than 500,000 members it is the largest world body concerned with the welfare of journalists. Its code of ethics says: "The journalist recognises, in professional matters, the jurisdiction of colleagues only — he/she excludes any kind of interference by governments or *others*." (My emphasis).

Until ordinary Fiji and Pacific journalists band together in their collegial interest and independent of aid agency agendas, and the media itself can deal with its own skeletons, then many in the region will not take their professed role in good governance and transparency seriously.

THIS EDITION of *Pacific Journalism Review* is the fourth to be produced in association with the University of the South Pacific journalism programme. The

next publication is expected to be produced in association with Auckland University of Technology's school of communication studies, but will still retain a link with USP. **Lynda Duncan** opens with a research analysis of *Fiji Times* and *Fiji Daily Post* editorials during the Speight crisis. **Pat Craddock** provides some satire that he wrote at the peak of the putsch. **Philip Cass** gives a personal message to journalists in the Pacific that "nobody in a democracy has the right to be ignorant".

Ian Stuart follows up on an earlier article that he wrote about "Maori and Taiwi media" to provide a strategy towards bicultural reporting. **Bill Rosenberg** provides a comprehensive account of how the New Zealand media is foreign dominated. In two keynote papers at the inaugural Pacific Islands Media Association (PIMA) conference in Auckland, **S 'Akilisi Pohiva** describes sustained moves by the Tongan Government to gag him while **David Robie** profiles the issue of a media clique and self-censorship in the Pacific.

In the Media Freedom Day opening speech at USP, Fiji Human Rights Commission director **Dr Shaista Shameem** spells out some of the challenges for the Fiji and Pacific media. **Matt Loney** provides some insights into Pacific rural publishing based on his experience with Papua New Guinea's *Eastern Star*, a decade old this year. A final-year student journalist at USP, **Joe Yaya**, has been investigating salary scales and working conditions in the Fiji news media and files a report on the issue. **Nic Maclellan's** timely article about how Australia is dumping its asylum seekers problem on the Pacific reminds us that Canberra's so-called Pacific "solution" is no solution at all.

Finally, USP journalists Talei Tora and Tamarisi Digitaki profile Fiji Television's **Netani Rika** and former FM96 news director **Virisila Buadromo**, while Joe Yaya features *The Australian's* Honiara correspondent **Mary-Louise O'Callaghan** and Ashwini Prabha adds a profile of *Fiji Times* chief photographer **Asaeli Lave**.

David Robie