

Freedom of speech

In spite of the hot air about governments pressuring the media in Pacific countries — and this does happen all too frequently — I believe a greater threat to press freedom comes from a small clique of media veterans, many of whom are of *palagi* origin, who have disproportionate influence.

By DAVID ROBIE

WHEN I arrived at my office at the University of the South Pacific on the morning of 12 September 2001 (Fiji time), I was oblivious to reality. I had dragged myself home to bed a few hours earlier at 2am as usual, after another long day working on our students' *Wansolwara Online* website coverage of the Fiji general election. One day after being sworn in as the country's fifth real prime minister, it seemed that Laisenia Qarase was playing another dirty trick on Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party, which had earned the constitutional right to be included in the multi-party government supposed to lead the country back to democracy.

Stepping into my office, I encountered a colleague. He looked wild-eyed, and said: "It's the end of the world."

Naively, I replied, "Yes, how can legality and constitutionality be cast aside so blatantly yet again?"

He said: "No, no, not Fiji politics. That's nothing. I mean New York. Terrorists have destroyed the financial heart of the Western world."

It was a chilling moment, comparable to how I felt as a 17-year-old forestry science trainee in a logging camp at Kaingaroa Forest the day President John F Kennedy was assassinated.

Over the next few hours, it seemed that half the Laucala campus descended on our newsroom to watch the latest BBC, TVNZ One and Fiji TV One coverage of the shocking and devastating tragedy.

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While a handful of student journalists struggled to provide coverage of local angles such as the tightening of security around the US Embassy in Suva and shock among the Laucala intelligentsia, most students remained glued to the TV, stunned into immobility by the suicide jetliner terrorists.

Inevitably, global jingoism and xenophobia followed, the assaults on Sikhs merely because they had an Arabic look, the attacks on mosques — in Fiji, copies of the *Koran* were burned — and the abuse directed towards Afghan refugees were par for the course.

Freedom of speech in the United States has also quickly become a casualty of this new “war on terrorism”. Columnists were fired for their critical views, television host Bill Maher has been denounced by the White House, *Doonesbury* cartoonist Gary Trudeau dropped his “featherweight Bush” cartoons and so-called “unpatriotic” songs have been dropped from radio playlists. Wrote Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* (Diebel, 2001):

Even as the White House preaches tolerance toward Muslims and Sikhs, it is practising intolerance, signalling that anyone who challenges the leaders of embattled America is cynical, political and — isn’t this the subtext? — unpatriotic.

But while much of the West lined up as political parrots alongside the United States, ready to exact a terrible vengeance, contrasting perspectives were apparent in many developing nations.

In the Pacific, for example, while people empathised with the survivors of the terrible toll of 5600 lives in New York and Washington, there was often a more critical view of the consequences of American foreign policy and a sense of dread about the future. Less than a week later, I asked my final-year students to compile some notes recalling the circumstances of when they heard the news and their responses.

One, a mature age student from Fiji who had worked for several years as a radio journalist, said:

I was in bed and woke up about 2.30am. I have a habit of having the BBC running on radio and, half-asleep, I caught the news being broadcast. I pulled myself out of bed and tuned top BBC on Sky TV. The second plane had just hit the second tower, and I ended up staying up the rest of the night to watch the unfolding events. (AC).



On his impressions, he warned about scapegoats and the media:

The relevance to us here in the Pacific is that terrorists can strike anywhere to get revenge. This conflict could evolve into war, and wars affect everyone. Americans already think Osama bin Laden is the terrorist. Where is the evidence? Americans are looking to get someone quickly, and the media is leading the way (AC).

Another student wrote:

Good, they [US] paid dearly for trying to intervene in Muslim countries ... Bin Laden is portrayed as the culprit even though it is not clear who did it. The media is portraying the whole Muslim world as responsible, but actually this is not the case (OP).

Recalled one:

I was sleeping and my mother woke me up at 6.30am to tell me the news. I was shocked, and still sleepy, I thought my mother was doing one of her practical jokes to get me out of bed. ... If there is World War III, it will

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have a big impact on the Pacific.

America still has some form of control over various Pacific Island countries, and once again it will recruit Pacific Islanders. Pacific Islands are relatively weak and still trying to be developed. Another hiccup could send our economies to the dogs (AW).

Yet another:

I was at home having breakfast, listening to the news on Bula 100FM. My first reaction was disbelief, horror... Ethically, there is a need to remember the people involved and the amount of bloodshed and death. It would be necessary to censor material that would be emotionally upsetting.

One student was

really surprised to see TVNZ instead of the usual Chinese CCTV. The sound was mute so I couldn't really get what was being said. I was about to turn it off when they showed the South tower of the World Trade Centre collapse. I thought it was a short piece from the movie *Independence Day*. Sad it may seem, but the first thing I thought about as a journalist was that reporters will have a field day. ... Phrases such as "historical day the world over" and "America under siege" popped up in my head as possible headlines. I got out my notebook and began writing down the number of people estimated to have died, the extent of the damage, and excerpts from President Bush's speech. Practically anything that involves the US also affects many people throughout the world (LE).

Inevitably, some commentators began drawing parallels between the terrorism in New York in mid-September at one end of the continuum of hate and rogue businessman George Speight's brief terrorist rule in Fiji during 2000 at the other end. Politics Associate Professor Scott MacWilliam, for example, highlighted how terrorism becomes a political tool employed by a nation state to support its foreign and domestic policy objectives. He pointed out that many of the fundamentalist Muslim groups which now carry out terrorism were "nurtured, trained, financed and incorporated" into the Western security apparatus (MacWilliam, 2001). The media reported stories about how Taliban soldiers were trained in Scotland, and how terrorist pilots frequently gained advanced training at the most prestigious US flying schools. And also how the very suicide terrorists in the New York operation were in contact with US

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intelligence agents until just two weeks before the savagery was released on the Big Apple.

One might ask what has this terrible urban graveyard created by fanaticism got to do with the South Pacific. In a sense, there is a disturbing relationship. Politics in the region is increasingly being determined by terrorism, particularly in Melanesia, such as in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. And with this situation comes a greater demand on the region's media and journalists for more training and professionalism. Most journalists are young, relatively inexperienced and lowly paid.

Since George Speight's takeover of Parliament in May 2000, politics in Fiji have remained under the spectre of terrorism. While the Speight upheaval cost a relatively modest fifteen lives — all Fijian — the fear of it happening again, and next time being even bloodier, made a mockery of the notion that there were "free and fair elections" in August 2001, as trumpeted by Commonwealth and United Nations observers.

Fiji politics today are driven by fear and a continuing threat to reinvoke terrorism if governments do not pursue a narrow particular direction — defined as ensuring "indigenous paramountcy". It would have been very interesting to see what would have happened if the country's first — and some say last — Indo-Fijian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry had actually regained government in the election in spite of the \$25 million (agricultural scam) vote-buying and scare-mongering tactics of the Laisenia Qarase regime. As independent freelance journalist, Ben Bohane, remarked in an article questioning the loyalty of the military to the constitution on the eve of the election and a court-martial:

Some weeks ago Chaudhry said that if he returned to power he would "purge" the army of any rebels within its ranks. In such a confrontational atmosphere, the fruits of reconciliation seem some way off yet and there is real apprehension about the election outcome. As the army band trooped off the parade ground with all the pomp of a colonial era brass band in full swing, many of those watching hope it can keep playing the old anthems — rather than the *Last Post* for any more soldiers killed by their own (Bohane, 2001).

Bohane, of course, was referring to the special forces killed when a mutiny on 2 November 2000 was ruthlessly crushed by the military, including the alleged beating to death of five rebels taken prisoner. This was an extraordinarily sinister outcome given the proud reputation the Fiji military has enjoyed as

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a peacemaker force.

Fiji is already a country prone to having coups and risks becoming consigned to a fate of economic, political and legal instability — a “banana republic”, as Chaudhry called it during the election campaign. The political and judicial response to a group of usurpers trying to seize control is crucial in determining whether or not a country becomes a coup prone nation.

Yet the options are simple. The coup cycle can be broken by a refusal to recognise any unlawful regime by the courts established by the coup, and by punishing the usurpers for treason. Sadly, this did not happen after Speight’s botched coup — key judges were alleged to have collaborated with the military and the illegal abrogation of the Constitution.

Instead, Fiji now tends toward rewarding the usurpers and this will ultimately destroy the social fabric and rule of law in the country. Thank goodness a judge had the gumption to bar Speight from taking his seat in Parliament when it convened this week for the first time since the putsch.

When a prominent Indo-Fijian lawyer, feminist activist and onetime *Fiji Times* columnist, Imrana Jalal, spoke out at a recent public seminar on the future of Fiji after the polarised election on strategies to break the coup cycle, she talked of a need for anti-coup provisions in the constitution. But she also called for visionary younger leaders for a new Fiji who were not locked into the communal thinking, and she urged Indo-Fijians to change more than indigenous Fijians, saying “multiracial schools are one key (not the only key) to multiracialism and integration”. Fijian should be compulsory in schools and with Hindi as an optional subject (Jalal, 2001).

Some of her suggestions were perhaps worth closer consideration. However, she was attacked in vitriolic terms by other Indo-Fijian community leaders and politicians on radio and in the newspapers over the next few days. In one typical letter to the editor she was accused of “blaming the victim”. The writer went on to say:

She belongs to a class and circulates in a social circle that insulates her from the dehumanising experience of ordinary Indo-Fijians every time racism raises its ugly head in Fiji — and that is fairly frequently in recent times in case she hasn’t noticed (Devi, 2001).

The Fiji Times sprang to her defence. In an editorial, Imrana Jala was described as a “welcome yet lonely voice in the wilderness of race relations”

The editorial headline DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER highlighted the hypocrisy over a paper only ten months earlier that I presented at a JEA conference in which I was critical of some reporting on Speight's coup.

(*Fiji Times*, 2001). The newspaper described the attacks on her as a pitiful indictment of her own community leaders and quite rightly pointed out that she had also called on the indigenous community to be more understanding of the views and needs of others.

However, the editorial headline DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER highlighted the hypocrisy over a paper only ten months earlier that I presented at the annual Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference in Mooloolaba, Queensland, in which I was critical of some of the reporting of Speight's coup. In the paper, titled "Coup Coup Land: The Press and the Putsch in Fiji," I also questioned the role of some elements of the media in the coverage of the year of the Labour-led People's Coalition government leading up to the coup, suggesting that this was a factor in the climate of destabilisation climaxing with Speight and his military henchman storming Parliament (Robie, 2000).

I believe my paper makes a very compelling case about issues of ethics, fairness and balance in reporting a conflict situation in the Pacific and it should have been debated. Instead, there was a howl of outrage by the very media executives who claim to be champions of a free press in the Pacific.

Clumsy attempts were made to gag me, or at least deflect public opinion. Nasty and abusive attacks were made against me on Commonwealth media email listservers, and an editorial deputation went from one foreign-owned newspaper to my university in a bullying and futile attempt to have me ousted.

Undoubtedly, in the Middle Ages I would have been burnt at the stake, or hung, drawn and quartered for daring to criticise the vested interests in Pacific media.

In spite of the hot air about governments pressuring the media in Pacific countries — and this does happen all too frequently — I believe a greater threat to press freedom comes from a small clique of media veterans, many of whom

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are of *palagi* origin, who have disproportionate influence, and who routinely practise self-censorship and manipulative control.

As award-winning documentary maker Senator 'Atu Emberson-Bain said recently after Fiji Television declined to show her excellent documentary, *In the Name of Growth*, exposing the appalling exploitation of indigenous women workers by an indigenous owned PAFCO (Pacific Fishing Company) tuna canning plant on Ovalau Island:

So much for the free (television) media in this country — the debate always focuses on freedom from government interference. What about freedom from the big (private sector) boys on the block with their vested interests? (Emberson-Bain, 2001)

While Fiji TV turned down 'Atu's programme on spurious grounds, SBS TV has broadcast it in Australia and bought exclusive broadcast rights for four years. It was also nominated in the best documentary category at the 21st Annual Hawai'i International Film Festival.

After more than two decades reporting and teaching journalism in the region, unlike my colleague Michael Field, I have never been barred from any Pacific country (although this happened to me with two African nations — Zaire, in 1973, and apartheid South Africa., 1972).

Nevertheless, I was twice arrested in 1987 by French military forces in New Caledonia, once at gunpoint near the east coast village of Canala. At the time I was covering the militarisation of indigenous Kanak villages in an attempt to suppress the struggle for independence. One of the problems was my book on the 1985 *Rainbow Warrior* bombing, *Eyes of Fire*, which was not popular with French colonial authorities.

But the real problem that I have encountered as a journalist and journalism educator are organisational attempts to censor or gag. One unfortunate example of this, was in May 2000 during the Fiji crisis. This was the temporary 30-day closure of our *Pacific Journalism Online* news and training website <www.usp.ac.fj/journ/> without warning and initially without explanation by university authorities on May 29 (Robie, 2001b). This happened the day after a mob of Speight's supporters attacked Fiji Television studios and put the station off air for two days.

The final story posted on our website before we were suddenly pulled offline was a transcript of a controversial Fiji TV *Close-Up* programme

discussing Speight and the media coverage of the crisis at that point. Political columnist Jone Dakuvula remarked:

George Speight is a two-day wonder who has just decided to champion indigenous rights for his own personal reasons in a matter of two days ... he has no real track record of fighting for indigenous rights (*Pacific Journalism Review*, 2001a).

Two days later, the then Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa said in a media conference with our student reporters that the decision was made for “security reasons”, but added the shut-down would be temporary. When I finally did get a meeting with university administrators to discuss reopening the website, they were more interested in censoring our newspaper, *Wansolwara*, which had just gone to press.

But the University of Technology, Sydney, came to our rescue by hosting a website for our journalism students’ Fiji coverage on their homepage. This continued until August. <www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html>

Several international media freedom organisations and other journalism schools protested to the USP administration over our closure, with Associate Professor Chris Nash at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism saying:

The suggestion that journalism staff and students, and indeed any academics, might somehow desist from reporting, commenting and publishing on the current situation is akin to suggesting that doctors and nurses should turn their backs on wounded people in a conflict. It’s unconscionable (ACIJ, 2000).

However, my efforts at restoring the website and defending the student journalists’ right to carry on their coverage of the coup was not popular with the administration. I received a letter from then Vice-Chancellor Solofa, saying

The [Journalism] Programme “publications” — *Wansolwara* and the website [*Pacific Journalism Online*] — can be justified on one purpose only: to support a training function. That is, they provide a trial medium for practical skills training and for simulation work. They should not be regarded as a media outlet for students (Solofa, 2000).

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Covering the Fiji coup and the three months of intensive trauma that followed has been the toughest call faced by the seven-year-old USP journalism programme (*CPU News*, 2001). But the delightful irony for me is that although we were chastised by our own senior administration for doing *real* instead of *simulated* journalism, Australian media judges awarded us the Dr Charles Stuart Prize at the JEA's Ossie Awards for our coup coverage.

The Fiji crisis highlighted many dilemmas about culture and conflict. Customary obligations can be a burden on journalists. "Under pressure they can succumb to the demands of traditional loyalties," says former *Fiji Daily Post* editor Jale Moala. He wrote about the putsch:

The problem that arose here was not so much one of reporters taking sides, as it may have seemed at the time, but the inability of many reporters to function objectively under the pressures of the crisis. A lack of leadership in newsrooms was one reason. One media organisation that came under early criticism was the state-owned Radio Fiji, which seemed to suffer from a combination of confusion over who was in power or who was going to end up in power, and lack of newsroom discipline and leadership — especially in the first two days of the hostage crisis (Moala, 2001).

According to Michael Field — who has had the biggest share of bannings of any journalist in the Pacific, having being shut out of Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and even Fiji at one stage — the region is going through something of an unprecedented crackdown against journalists. For one of the most travelled and most aware journalists to be arbitrarily banned like this is an indictment of the region's politicians.

Journalists with long-standing experience and commitment to the Pacific should be encouraged not gagged. Field, who is the most experienced journalist covering the South Pacific Forum, told one of our student reporters:

What worries me, more than anything else, is that this is a signal against all journalists who work in the Pacific, that this degree of oppression and control and manipulation is now politically acceptable. It is important that we stop this kind of outrage, or the craft of journalism will be crushed in the Pacific (Ali, 2001).

Our student journalists have also faced victimisation over their reporting.

The 'shooting the messenger' syndrome always had more serious consequences in PNG. Two UPNG student journalists recently gave testimony before a commission of inquiry into the causes of shooting of four protesters.

After publication of our last edition of *Wansolwara*, one of our Samoan journalists, Vicky Lepou, was subjected to a whispering campaign because of her front page lead story about a joint Samoa and New Zealand probe into a sudden high failure rate among first year students at USP (*Wansolwara*, 2001). Among reasons cited were uncertainty in the wake of the attempted coup. But some Samoan students fingered the reporter for having written the report, and the Samoan students' association patron denounced publication of the story.

The "shooting the messenger" syndrome always had more serious consequences in Papua New Guinea. Two University of Papua New Guinea student journalists recently gave testimony before a commission of inquiry examining the causes of the shooting to death of four young Papua New Guineans during the protests over structural adjustment (*Pacific Journalism Review*, 2001b).

While I was at UPNG, the chief-of-staff, Kevin Pamba, and political reporter Jameson Bere of our training newspaper *Uni Tavur* were beaten up at night because of their front page report on a political dispute between two national student leaders, both from the province of Enga. (Kevin is now a journalism lecturer in the Communication Arts Department at Divine Word University after working as business editor of *The National*).

On another occasion, a student journalist had to go into hiding after he reported a funding scandal involving the then Miss UPNG. Her wantoks led an angry protest on the newspaper office trying to track down the reporter.

Rarely do Australian or New Zealand journalism schools encounter this degree of direct action over stories. For many Pacific Islands journalists, it is a baptism of fire. Not only does truth hurt, it can sometimes lead to a brutal act of retribution. It often takes raw courage to be a journalist in the Pacific.

Another issue is allegations over bribes of journalists. Although such allegations rarely surface publicly, salaries for journalists in the Pacific are

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frequently so poor that it would be naïve not to accept that is likely to be a more serious problem than generally acknowledged.

In November 2000, our student journalists completed a salaries survey of the seven major news media organisations in Fiji and several were reluctant to cooperate. But nowhere was the starting salary, even for a graduate, higher than F\$10,000 a year. Mostly, it is a lot lower. This compares with about \$15,000 for a secondary schoolteacher.

According to one senior editor, the starting salary for journalists at some major news media organisations in Fiji have not increased for more than a decade.

Reporters work long hours for little pay. In fact, pay at *The Fiji Times* is still the same for cadet reporters as 12 years ago when I joined — \$5500. No wonder staff turnover is so high in the industry. The enthusiasm evaporates very quickly because of the low pay, long hours (SS, cited in Robie, 2001b).

In September 2001, it was reported that journalists were handed envelopes with cash inside at the end of a recent news conference in Port Moresby. It was not disclosed how much and, according to the PNG Media Council, the journalists had handed the envelopes, with cash intact, to their editors. Council president Peter Aitsi revealed the episode while warning that news employees should not accept any benefits that might be seen as personal gain (*Pacific Islands Report*, 2001).

Back in 1997, the PNG Media Council expressed concern at reports of political bribes being paid to “media collaborators” by politicians. The allegations arose out of a series of secretly taped videos allegedly showing politicians receiving bribe money from a former adviser to Prime Minister Bill Skate.

The videos were screened on ABC TV national news in Australia. Council chairperson Anna Solomon confirmed she had received a number of calls from concerned editors and media proprietors after the story broke. She said at the time:

The Media Council would be extremely disappointed if these allegations are found to be true. The media in PNG prides itself on its integrity, courage and determination to root out corruption and to expose crooked politicians and business people. We are often called on to play the role of

a de facto political opposition to protect the interests of the grassroots people — a role we accept with deep conviction (*Pacific Media Watch*, 1997).

Although Solomon called for a full inquiry into the allegations so the “rotten apples” — if they existed — could be removed, there was little progress. In the context of these issues, it is very timely that the organisers have arranged this conference, the first of its kind in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Many challenges lie ahead in “navigating the future” of Pacific Islands media. In my experience, while there are a number of Pacific Islands media organisations and workshops around the region, rarely do they acknowledge the remarkable growth in the past few years of New Zealand-based Pacific media, both vernacular and English-language. High-quality and informative programmes such as *Tagata Pasifika* on Television New Zealand and newspapers such as *Taimi 'o Tonga*, just to single out a couple of examples.

As the conference organisers have said, there is a need for a formal Pacific Islands journalists’ network which nurtures and develops their needs and there is a need for more Pacific Islands journalists working in the mainstream media. This is especially so in this age of globalisation. And the attendance at this conference is testimony to this.

I wish the Pacific Islands Media Association well for its future endeavours, and also make a plea for it to be involved in the region on behalf of its sister and brother journalists. There is a vital need for a plurality of media voices and education if freedom of speech and the press are to flourish in the Pacific.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a quote from the former New Zealand High Commissioner to Fiji, Tia Barrett, who made an important statement about indigenous issues and journalism at our USP journalism awards presentation last November which riled the military-installed régime:

What is difficult to accept in this dialogue on indigenous rights is the underlying assumption that those rights are pre-eminent over other more fundamental human rights. This just cannot be so, not in today’s world ... Nowhere is it written in any holy scripture that because you are indigenous you have first rights over others in their daily rights. You should be respected and highly regarded as an indigenous person, but respect is earned not obtained on demand (Barrett, 2000).

As Tia Barrett said, information will make the difference in the process of
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cultural change for Pacific Islanders in the face of globalisation to improve people's lives. This is where the journalist plays a vitally important role, always bearing in mind the needs of the people and their thirst for knowledge.

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□ *David Robie is senior lecturer and journalism coordinator at the University of the South Pacific. This was his keynote speech at the inaugural Pacific Islands Media Association (PIMA) conference, “Navigating the Future”, at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand, 5-6 October 2001.*

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