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Book review: Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics & Education

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Book Review

Robie, David (2004)

Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics & Education

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Reviewed by Murray Masterton

Mahendra Chaudhry, in his turbulent year as Fiji's pre-coup Prime Minister lamented his and the public's waning faith in media credibility in Fiji and elsewhere in the Islands. He told the media the answer lay in their hands; they had to look to their ethics, professionalism and training standards to preserve their integrity.

In *Mekim Nius* David Robie has done much of that looking at the Islands' media. and he is in a unique position to do so. Across nine years he guided the region's two major journalism schools, first at the University of Papua New Guinea, then at the University of the South Pacific.

Mekim Nius, as the name suggests, is more than a history of Pacific Island journalism from the time that planned training for journalists was first considered by the Islands' media bosses -- government and private. It follows in detail the world-wide 'newsroom or classroom' debate about journalism training in the South Pacific.

New York Times columnist Russell Baker extended his criticism of American newspapers to much of the world media when he regretted that "journalists have discovered that their prime duty is no longer to maintain the republic in well-informed condition - or to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, as the old gospel has it - but to serve the stock market with a good earnings report every three months or, in plainer English, to comfort the comfortable".

The problem in both Robie's teaching posts was that the 'comfortable' were the establishment and whose wealth or position rose from the endemic social culture. He had to persuade those people, even many within the education system, that better trained journalists would mean a better community, not a threatening or antagonistic one.

New Zealand aid helped set up the region's first journalism school at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby in 1975. It was a brave step, even in a country already dedicated to university education.

Robie, who was at UPNG for five years from 1993, is full of praise for those who built the programme before he arrived: Peter Henshall, David Ingram, Ross Stevens (who founded the student newspaper *Uni Tavur*), and those in both the university and government who helped turn back the critics. He is equally admiring of the journalism programme organised by Father Frank Mihalic at the church-run Divine Word University, where he founded the well-regarded *Wantok* newspaper. Journalism

at DWU never rivalled UPNG's programme in size or academic level, but provided dozens of competent journalists for regional Tok Pisin media.

Frequent anecdotal re-tellings, such as that of the Topul Rali affair, enliven Robie's meticulously detailed history. This tells of the troubles following the murder of lecturer Janet Kisau, the second staff member murdered within seven months. Then there's the saga of UPNG's cost-cutting exercise, in Robie's departing days, that came close to shutting down the successful journalism school because new Vice-Chancellor, Dr Rodney Hills, thought journalism an unfit university subject.

Robie's move from Port Moresby to Suva caused a furore of its own. When his appointment as head of USP's journalism programme was announced in late 1997, Suva's media and the Pacific Island media associations railed against it, mainly because of what he had published and said in the past. Counter protests settled the matter by proving it was an organised smear campaign because Robie opposed Rabuka's coup. He finally took up his post in early 1998.

Robie inherited a programme with a disjointed record, a story he tells with understanding, including my part in inaugurating the two-year certificate curriculum that began journalism education at USP in 1987. That certificate programme lived through the tension of the times, especially Rabuka's second coup and its curfews and many successful journalists who have since built their careers in the Pacific began at USP in that time.

When the programme lapsed after four years, the Francophile head of its controlling department persuaded Paris to fund a larger degree-level programme. With the francs came Francois Turmel, a well qualified journalist from the BBC World Service in London, to head a three-member teaching team. Their tenancy in Suva saw the birth of the student newspaper *Wansolwara* in 1996, but a continuing struggle to maintain funding - tactfully explained by Robie's research.

The Robie period which followed saw continuing opposition from some media owners but also of steady, and at times, spectacular growth. Mekim Nius is supported by a wealth of detailed but easy-to-find references. It is much more than an annotated history of two journalism programmes. It is a source of informative background for anyone interested in our island neighbours and their attitudes to their media, to us and to the outside world.

MURRAY MASTERTON for more than 30 years has been 'doing' journalism, editing a daily and establishing two television news operations, before he began another 19 years 'teaching' it. He was setting up Deakin University's broadcast journalism programme and already immersed in research for his doctrate on international news values when the call came for him to set up a new journalism curriculum at USP. He 'retired' to New Zealand, his homeland, but still writes, edits and explores new fields. Email: mediaptr@ihug.co.nz