Cafe Pacific and online censorship: Cyberspace media in an island state

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Internet media developments have had a far-reaching impact on journalism education in the South Pacific, particularly Papua New Guinea and Fiji. This is a commentary on how, more than a decade after the military coups, the post-coup 1990 Constitution of Fiji casts a shadow on media and journalism education methodology, in spite of the new “free speech” 1997 Constitution (which became effective in July 1998). The multiracial Fiji Labour Party-led government, elected in May 1999, has promised a more liberal approach to the news media.

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Use of the Internet as a news media resource in the Pacific was pioneered by University of Papua New Guinea in 1996 when it established its first online newspaper and archives website. Activity has since moved to the University of Hawai‘i-East West Centre, with its Pacific Islands Report news site, and the University of the South Pacific’s regional Pacific Journalism Online. Over the past two years, there has been a proliferation of online newspapers in the Pacific, initially in Papua New Guinea, where all three of the country’s English-language papers are now online. The value of news websites was realised by the PNG media which “gained high profiles internationally, especially during the Sandline mercenary crisis and its aftermath” (Robie 1997: 61).

News websites have been developed in many locations in the Pacific including American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Vanuatu, and New Zealand, where an online Tongan newspaper is produced. However, in Fiji – the second major news industry nation of the region – most media have been slow to use the medium due to political pressure in Fiji – even from other news media quarters -- to curb or control independent news and research websites. A controversy in August 1998, described by some as the first “freedom of the Internet” case in the region, surfaced, ironically, just four weeks after the country’s new

This article examines the background of the controversy and the media dilemmas it poses to a country where freedom of speech has remained a sensitive issue ever since the military coups of 1987. It also examines the implications of the controversy for the region in relation to issues of media truth, fairness and balance, and to the future of journalism training and education.

**Truth, Expediency and "Radical Pluralism"**

Online news media services offer many advantages to a region like the South Pacific with vast distances, few news media organisations, limited resources and a high cost of telecommunications. Commenting on the lack of awareness and enthusiasm for the technology by some news media executives and even academics, Australian media academic Stephen Quinn says: “The future of journalism lies in the digital realm. It is vital that journalists in the Pacific be taught how to publish and research on the Internet, and about the design of Web sites. Editors and publishers who are sceptical about the value of such courses need to wake up and, as the American say, ‘smell the coffee’ -- join the late 20th century. Otherwise they risk allowing their staff to be left behind in a form of technological dark ages” (1998).

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), online editors are developing their own writing style and the digital newsroom is evolving its own rules: “That is why the IFJ regards the modernisation of the teaching techniques of journalism as a major challenge in coming years” (Dufflos 1998: 79). This is a challenge that tertiary journalism education in the Pacific has accepted with enthusiasm.

Both online technology and the culture of "virtual communities" encourage individuals to speak out more frequently and to become involved in the public life of their communities. They are likely, as Mike Godwin argues, to engage in what he labels “radical pluralism” -- a kind of public participation which could characterise political life in the new millennium (1998: 54). The power of the Internet, and the alternative views that it enables, has become an international concern for power elites, including those in the Pacific. If the Soviet Union was brought down by the fax machine, argues Robert Hooper, a former Fulbright scholar at the University of the South Pacific, Malaysia’s “transition to new leadership will be driven by the Internet. What we are witnessing is the emergence of a modern nation that has outgrown the leadership of its creator” (Hooper 1998).
But what about truth, reliability, ethics and accountability? Will the new media be any more dependable or equitable for the public? Goldstein in *The News At Any Cost* -- a book about compromised ethics and fabricated or distorted stories in the news media -- tells of his experiences of “pack journalism at its worst. Rather than operate independently, the reporters were cliquish. They could be easily manipulated, and they could also be petty and unreasonable” (1984: 14). He cites many examples of how such pressures produce distorted journalism in the United States.

The Pacific region also has examples. In the mid 1980s, New Zealand’s *Sunday Times* published a major article on the guerrilla struggle in Afghanistan with pictures and text later being found to be a fabrication. In 1994, the Auckland media fraternity was split by a bitter defamation case between two leading journalists. *Metro* magazine was sued by *Sunday Star-Times* columnist Toni McRae for NZ$550,000 over a description of her as being “regularly pissed” in the magazine’s *Felicity Ferret* gossip column. It was apparently a play on the name of her column, *Pssst*. The magazine’s editor, Warwick Roger, one of the country’s leading investigative journalists, admitted that he had invented the drink idea (she didn’t drink) and he knew it was “quite a sin” for a journalist to invent things (*New Zealand Herald* 1994).

Similar slanging matches between prominent journalists in the Pacific are perhaps best represented by the sacking in 1992 of Johnson Honimae by the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) over his freelance reporting on Bougainville for the international media. At the time, he was SIBC’s head of current affairs and a correspondent for Radio New Zealand International.

The affair led to the resignation of Patterson Mae (then general manager of SIBC) as president of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), in the face of protests from Pacific colleagues who accused him of undermining the principles of press freedom (*The Word* 1992). Less than a year earlier, PINA had been at the centre of controversy over an invitation to the 1987 Fiji military coup leader Brigadier-General Sitiveni Rabuka to be guest speaker at its conference in Auckland. The New Zealand venue for the conference was an act of self-censorship as well as a response to the repressive approach to the media by the regime back home in Suva, where PINA’s offices are located.

Contestation therefore exists within the Pacific media, and is likely to increase with the expanded use in the region of cyberspace technology. This is evident in a controversy in Fiji in 1998 over Internet publishing which involved threats to withdraw work permits for foreign media academics. The controversy occurred at a time when Fiji was preparing for its first democratic
election since the coups. Background to the controversy is provided below.

27 August 1998: The Fiji Times published a report by Margaret Wise alleging that the Fiji Government was investigating complaints that two New Zealand journalism academics at the University of the South Pacific had breached their work permit conditions. The inquiry was said to be directed towards revoking these permits. The report was based on a story headlined “Pacific press freedom on the rocks” published by Café Pacific/Asia-Pacific Network. (www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspac/pacmedia.html) The story provided an overview of South Pacific news media and criticised the Fiji Government’s plans to legislate for a Media Council to replace the independent and self-regulating council already in place (Reportage Media Magazine 1998). Complaints were also said to be against television/media law lecturer and lawyer, Ingrid Leary over her weekly Media Watch column in Fiji’s Daily Post and tutorials conducted at the Fiji Institute of Journalism. The Fiji Times’ report claimed that both media academics were “using their positions at the USP to lend authority to their work outside it”.

28 August: Margaret Wise again reported similar claims against myself and Leary. This time her report quoted the Home Affairs Ministry’s Permanent Secretary, Emitai Boladuadua, as saying the Government “would withdraw the work permits [of the two staff] if they were found to have breached the terms under which they were given” (Fiji Times 1998b). The Secretary said some Government departments and some “members of the public” had made “complaints”. Wise never interviewed Ingrid or myself.

The same day an official statement was issued by USP Registrar, Sarojini Pillay, stating that we were not breaching our work permits. She added that our activities were within the normal roles of research and publication carried out by academics. The Head of Department, Professor Subramani, commended us saying we were doing “outstanding” work. This statement was widely published and broadcast in the other Fiji news media, but was not published by Fiji Times. In another statement, the president of the USP Staff Association, Dr Ganeshwar Chand, said journalism lecturers had “perfect freedom” to carry out research and publish in their areas of expertise (Chand 1998).

31 August: Fiji Times published my letter criticising the newspaper for “blatant bias” (Robie 1998b). It published an editorial headlined “A draconian response” in our support on the same day. It also
supported the principle of academic freedom, saying that when academic research involved journalism "anything published takes on a more sensitive aspect as far as officialdom is concerned". The editorial argued that if there had been a breach, "the threat to withdraw their work permits is far too draconian a response" (Fiji Times 1998c).

Jone Dakuvula, former press secretary to Prime Minister Rabuka, stressed in a letter to The Sunday Times that under the new Fiji Constitution [Section 30 (1)]: "Every person has the right to freedom of expression, including: Freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas; and Freedom of the press and other media".

He added: Reading from your report, it appears to me that some local news media employees or journalists were involved in these complaints, which seem to be based mainly on these persons' disagreements with either the views of David Robie and Ingrid Leary, or the fact that they have been lawfully employed by USP. Our new Constitution has been in force for barely one month and here we have some news media people attempting to suppress two well-qualified journalists' freedom of expression, perhaps in the hope that they could be expelled from this country for the "crime" of writing, publishing and teaching journalism. Where is the Fiji journalists' much vaunted Code of Ethics? (Dakuvula 1998).

1 September: In a letter published in Fiji Times and Daily Post, Assistant Information Minister, Ratu Josefa Dimuri, confirmed the Ministry had "received complaints from both local journalists and regional media organisations who were of the view that their interests were being jeopardised by the involvement of these two people in other areas of work not stipulated in their work permits" (Dimuri 1998).

The same day, Information Minister, Senator Filipe Bole, was reported in the Daily Post as having used parliamentary privilege to allege in the Senate that I was serving a "dual role" in the University of the South Pacific. He claimed that I was feeding my own company in Auckland with information from the Internet, adding that "there is a distinct role between being a lecturer and a journalist" (Daily Post 1998).

I wrote to the Minister the same day saying I had never earned any income from websites, that all my work was education-related at the university and that I had no business interests in Fiji. No acknowledgement was received from the Senator.

A Daily Post editorial noted:"The saddest thing is the deafening silence from the Pacific Islands News Association and the Fiji Media Council. By failing to support the rights of journalists, like Mr Robie and Ms Leary, whether they be teachers,
students or whatever, these organisations are helping to destroy the very freedom of expression they have so often said they protect.”

International reaction criticising the pressure flowed in (New Zealand Herald, Evening Post, Tahiti-Pacifique, 1998). Paris-based media freedom group Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) wrote to Senator Bole protesting that we be allowed to work freely, in line with the Fiji Constitution (RSF 1998).

The New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation executive director, Bill Southworth, a former editor of the now closed Fiji Sun, said those in the media who were complaining about the work permit issue should “take time to read Fiji’s new Constitution”. Commonwealth Fellow in Human Rights Education Caren Wickliffe, a Ngati Porou lawyer from Aotearoa/New Zealand, said the promotion and protection of Article 19 “is considered fundamental to achieving participatory democracy”, adding that she supported the program’s “contribution to the development of media and journalism in the Pacific” (Wickliffe 1998).

The New Zealand Association of University Staff also wrote to both Prime Minister Rabuka and Senator Bole, pointing out Fiji’s obligations as a signatory to the Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel adopted by UNESCO in November 1997.

The Pacific Islands News Association clarified its stand after the criticism in the Daily Post editorial, confirming that some of its “members” had complained to the Fiji Government about the work permits. In spite of the international condemnation, PINA president William Parkinson insisted in a statement distributed to editors around the region that many of the “complaints relate to breaches of their work permit conditions with regards to outside work for local media organisations” (PINA 1998). Parkinson also questioned whether the website content of Café Pacific would cover stories in a “fair and balanced manner”.

Parkinson did not contact Ingrid and myself to get our side of the story, nor did he acknowledge the University of the South Pacific’s denial that there had been any breach of work permits. He did not mention that, in April, I had filed a formal complaint with the Fiji Media Council over biased and unethical reporting by the Daily Post and PINA members. This complaint led to an apology for misrepresentation by the Daily Post.

5 September: I reported on the attempts to suppress free expression in Fiji with a commentary on the web titled “The gag attempt on Café Pacific”. <www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspaclgag.html>
8 September: Senator Bole finally clarified that there was no foundation to the allegations against Ingrid and myself when he told reporters no investigation was being carried out (*Daily Post* 1998b). The case was dropped.

Cyberspace media, with its attendant possibility of “radical pluralism”, now give both developed and developing nations the opportunity to achieve the objectives of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Too often in the South Pacific, lip service is paid to these ideals. On the one hand, political leaders, and even some prominent journalists, espouse these goals and declare themselves in support of free expression and free media. But on the other hand, as soon as some aspect of the media becomes challenging, “Western” values are condemned as undermining “traditional” values, or news media freedom is denounced as a “foreign flower”.

Despite the rhetoric about Fiji having a “free media”, and notwithstanding some news media organisations “testing the limits” over selected issues, there is no doubt that the national news media have suffered from a loss of professionalism, an erosion of ethics, and a debilitating parochialism in the years following the military coups. The reporting of the issue of our work permits is a striking example of trial by publicity. In the end, the accusers’ attempt at censorship was dropped.

Media education, both for practitioners and officialdom, is needed, and tertiary journalism courses have an important role to play in raising professional standards and media credibility. Cyberspace news sites such as Café Pacific and Pacific Journalism Online, and the improved research and computer-assisted reporting inquiry techniques they help introduce, are also part of the strategy of using new technology for democratisation and freedom of expression in Pacific media.

NOTES

1. During November-December 1997, the *Daily Post* published five unsigned articles purporting to be “news”. These were actually unsubstantiated and unsourced attacks on my appointment to USP. One article (December 23) claimed that the Prime Minister’s Office was investigating my appointment: “Mr Robie wrote a series of articles

2. Editor-in-chief Russell Hunter told me on August 30 that he had planned to write the editorial before he received the letter of complaint about bias.

3. I have a small publishing company which was established in New Zealand in 1984, but it has no connection with Fiji. Both ministers, Ratu Josefa Dimuri, and Senator Filipe Bole, lost their parliamentary seats in the May 1999 general election.

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