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Cyberspace news on campus: The South Pacific experience

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Since 1998, Pacific Journalism Online training website at the University of the South Pacific provided an innovative and problem-based approach to internet news gathering and production based on real and major media assignments. Among events used as integrated journalism training assignments for student journalists from the twelve member countries of the regional university have been George Speight's putsch (May 2000), the Fiji barracks mutiny (November 2000), Fiji General Election (August 2001), treason trials and court martial (2002) and several international conferences based at Nadi and Suva. In addition, the students have covered key events on campus such as investigating alleged corruption by the student administration. In this article, the author outlines the "reality" course methodology and strategies in providing news training from a campus-based newsroom.

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MARTIAL LAW DECLARED: PJO NOW OFFLINE
Further updates:
UTS Journalism Department hosting USP students

A Wansolwara reporter was threatened at Parliament this afternoon and ordered out of the parliamentary complex. He described the scene as tense. A 48-hour military curfew was imposed from 6pm tonight. This was followed by a declaration of martial law. The Pacific Journalism Online website communications have been temporarily suspended by university authorities. (*Pacific Journalism Online*, 2000)

Arguments over whether journalism education should be more theory based with the ideal of "reflective practitioners" (Reese, 1999: 13) or grounded mostly in sound practice have long been a feature of contemporary professional pedagogy debates. The contrasting views are not necessarily contradictory. According to Deuze (2000: 8), debate on journalism education goals should "not

be informed by a dichotomy between theory and practice, but by the need for self-critical reflection and excellent didactics and teaching methodology." Deuze, who has also argued for "open sourced" media (2001), says the internet "blurs the boundaries of what we may see as journalism — but one can argue that this would be a top-down definition of journalism." A case for a more practice-based journalism education in the United States was persuasively presented by the Freedom Forum's *Winds of Change* report advocating more commitment to producing "cutting edge" journalists, graduates "ready to infuse new energy and new ideas into the newsrooms" (Medsger, 1996: 68; Hirst, 1997).

Most vocation-based journalism courses in Australia produce in-house newspapers, magazines and e-zines on the internet (Patching, 2001: 129). In the case of the South Pacific, there is still an acute shortage of trained and educated journalists (Masterton, 1989; Layton, 1993; Robie, 1999) and there is little or no community or second tier newspaper, television, online or radio "cushion" before fledgling reporters are plunged into the tough challenges of national newsrooms. Online and print publications at Pacific university journalism schools have thus been vital training tools.

Ironically, six copies of Betty Medsger's *Winds of Change* report bound for the University of the South Pacific (USP) [1] Journalism Programme were hijacked by rebel gunmen at the height of the political upheaval in the Fiji Islands in May 2000 (Robie, 2002a:147) while student journalists were involved in an intense cyberspace training project covering rogue businessman George Speight's attempted coup. The books were later recovered by police investigators after the rebels abandoned their occupation of Parliament.

The "baptism of fire" challenge for Pacific journalists presents the region's three university based journalism schools — USP, University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and Divine Word University (Madang, PNG) — with unique and difficult problems. While seeking to produce critically reflective journalists, they must all ensure that graduates can be effective political, police and economic reporters and analysts from day one of their careers.

Following earlier development by UPNG, one university, USP, adopted online journalism and media convergence as a major educational tool and strategy comparable to some Australian journalism schools. Convergence (or multimedia) journalism involves reshaping news material "so that one piece on content appears in several forms" (Quinn, 2002: 84).

Since 1998, *Pacific Journalism Online* training website at USP has provided a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to internet news gathering and production based on real and major media assignments (Sheridan-Burns, 1997). Among events used as

integrated journalism training exercises for student journalists from the twelve member countries of the regional university have been Speight's putsch, the barracks mutiny (November 2000), Fiji general election (August 2001), treason trials and a court martial (2002) and several international conferences based at Nadi and Suva. In addition, students have covered major events on campus such as investigating alleged corruption by the student administration over several years. This paper will outline the 'reality' course methodology and strategies in providing news training from a Pacific campus-based newsroom.

Australian And NZ Regional Context

New Zealand has been rather under-represented in online journalism training development. Auckland University of Technology's School of Communication Studies has developed a course in this area, *New Media Journalism,* aimed at a balance between analysis of internet media issues and professional practice, but it has not so far developed its own actual publication online (although a specialist *Science Site* <www.thesciencesite.info/> was established by the university administration in 2002 with journalism students filing some content). Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki also developed an online training news service at Taranaki New Zealand <www.taranakinz.com/news/> by students the same year (Tucker, 2002). However, several Australian university journalism schools have used internet-based publications as a major training tool for several years — notably University of Technology Sydney's *Reportage Online* and Queensland University of Technology's *Communiqué Online.*

According to Nisar Keshvani (2000), *Communique Online* <www.communique.qut.edu.au> was developed from 1996 to address the "growing importance" of the online medium: "A 'real-world' online newsroom was set up to provide students with a practical, hands-on working environment, equipping them with necessary skills to function and operate an online newsroom." The publication objective was two-fold: to develop a web presence, and to give students an opportunity to work on an online newspaper.

The online publication was introduced as part of an existing course, *News Production* for third-year students. Students filed reports for Queensland University of Technology's (QUT's) in-house programmes on the multi-cultural radio broadcaster, *4EB, QUT News* on community television station, *Bris31,* and in-house publications *Communiqué* and *Communiqué Online.* Pioneered by lecturers Suellen Tapsall and Carolyn Varley with a group of students and support staff, the website used a masthead, template design and content from the print edition of *Communiqué.* It won the Journalism Education Association's Best Publication (Any

Medium) Ossie Award that year. In 1998, it was redeveloped by a student and staff group coordinated by Keshvani, a Singaporean student, and online audio and video streaming were introduced. Four editions with about 40 percent original content were produced with the team winning the inaugural Dr Charles Stuart Ossie Award for Best Student Publication. In 1999, *Communiqué Online* was formally incorporated into the course structure as a fourth medium with staff contact time and workshops. Keshvani (2002) explains:

"With *Communiqué Online*, the students are given a quick refresher with HTML-ing and how to adapt their journalism skills to online. That is the individual component. The group component to assessment is basically the cohesiveness and skills as a team to put the online edition to bed ... [Also] their news judgement as a team, subbing each other's sections [is assessed]."

Reportage Online <www.reportage.uts.edu.au> evolved out of a quarterly investigative and media news magazine, *Reportage*, and is dedicated to high quality independent journalism. According to editor Sue Joseph (2002), the online edition has a "broader agenda" than its predecessor. Like the ACIJ [the host, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism], *Reportage Online* is committed to the idea that the media can play a role in making those in power accountable to the public. No topic or question is beyond the boundaries of *Reportage Online.* Those with power include media companies, which should also be critiqued and questioned.

Reportage Online publishes features, news items, in-depth analysis, photojournalism, essays and ongoing reportage of issues. The editorial team believes the website tries to involve the public in open forums and encourages feedback, saying it "aim[s] to fill some gaps in the media agenda and to give a voice to groups who struggle to be heard" in the mainstream media: *Reportage Online* is primarily produced by University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) journalism students (some of whom are professional journalists), with two masters level online producers, and staff. However, the website also welcomes contributions from outside UTS, including journalists, academics and other journalism students.

The Department of Writing, Journalism and Social Inquiry at UTS also offers two online journalism courses, *Online Journalism 1* and *Online Journalism 2,* with the second semester's more advanced module including audio streaming (video streaming is being introduced in 2003). All students undertake major investigative style reports and then publish them on the internet as online design packages <www.journalism.uts.edu.au/subjects/oj1/index.html>.

Uni Tavur (UPNG)

The South Pacific Experience

The University of Papua New Guinea's training publication *Uni Tavur* played an important role in the formation of Pacific journalists for more than two decades. *Tavur* means "conch shell" in the Tolai language of the Gazelle peninsula. The shell was the paper's masthead logo and the original version was designed by journalism student Robert Elowo, who died in a tragic car accident in 1976 while working for NBC's *Radio Kundiawa*. Uni is derived from the university.

Uni Tavur was launched on 24 July 1975 by the late New Zealand journalist and educator Ross Stevens. The first edition carried news items, including social and sports events. It comprised four A4 size pages and had a circulation of 200 copies. Over the following years, *Uni Tavur* was witness to many political and social changes (see Robie, 1995; Waibauru, 1994). Student reporters were assigned rounds and they covered anything of news value for their readers. Recalls former Vice-Chancellor Joseph Sukwianomb (2001):

"*Uni Tavur* came […] to play a significant role in the university scene in terms of changing ideas […] generally about that period from independence […] the campus was very vibrant, very active. The students were well aware of what was happening. This was the time of student demonstrations and strikes. They were all reported from student angles by student journalists."

The newspaper characterised the integrated learning journalism approach adopted over three decades at UPNG. The "liberal-professional" philosophy underpinning the school included a core programme, which supported a balance between theoretical and practical (Robie, 1997: 122). In February 1995, with support from a national daily newspaper, the *Post-Courier, Uni Tavur* made a transition to publishing as a tabloid. Twelve editions were produced that year using four-colour with half-webs on the *Post-Courier's* Goss Urbanite press. *Uni Tavur* won the 1995 Ossie Award for Best Overall Newspaper, the first time a South Pacific publication had won such an award. Student journalists working on *Uni Tavur* covered several major news stories, including the 1997 Sandline mercenary crisis, many national political protests and riots (including one clash on campus that left several students wounded from tear gas canisters), five campus-based murder cases, a bank robbery in which a security guard was shot and wounded, environmental crises and corruption.

In 1996-97, *Uni Tavur's* emphasis shifted to producing an online newspaper as well as the print edition. In January 1996, it became the first newspaper in the South Pacific to produce a web edition, *Uni Tavur Online*, hosted by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at UTS <www.journalism.uts.edu.au/acij/

old_acij/JOURNUPNG/UniTavur/UniT_index.html>. UPNG
Journalism Studies also began publishing an interactive email
listserve news service, *Papua Niugini Nius* <www.pactok.net/docs/
nius/> in cooperation with *Pactok,* a Pacific non-government and
educational cooperative that encouraged low-cost
communications. It was routine practice for all UPNG first, second
and third-year students to cover daily news for print or online as
part of their training for the two-year Diploma of Media Studies
(DIMS) and four-year Bachelor of Journalism (BJourn) degree.

Wansolwara and Pacific Journalism Online (USP)

Fiji has a highly developed media industry compared with
most other Pacific countries, rivalled only by Papua New Guinea.
Until 2000, it possessed four major monthly or bimonthly news
magazine groups, *Islands Business International*, *Pacific Islands
Monthly* (Murdoch-owned), *The Review* and *Fiji First* (both locally
owned). Although both *PIM*, the region's oldest and most
influential magazine, and *Fiji First* closed that year, in 2002 there
were three national daily newspapers — *The Fiji Times* (Murdoch)
and locally owned *Daily Post* and *Fiji Sun*. Broadcasters are Fiji
Television Ltd, which has one free-to-air channel and two pay
channels; the private Communications Fiji Ltd (FM96) radio group;
and the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Ltd. *The Daily
Post* and *The Review* news magazine share a website,
<www.FijiLive.com>, while *The Fiji Times* is hosted at *FM96's*
<www.FijiVillage.com> website. Two military coups staged in 1987
by the third-ranked military officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni
Rabuka, followed by Speight's putsch in May 2000 have caused
serious political pressure on the media already weakened by
limited training and experience.

The regional Pacific Journalism Programme was founded at
the University of the South Pacific in 1994 in the post-coup era.[2] It
was initially funded by the French Government as an aid project
for four years, including the funding of a coordinator (a former
head of the French-language BBC service, François Turmel) and a
print lecturer, Philip Cass. The USP flagship training publication
Wansolwara was created by first-year students with the
encouragement of Wewak-born Cass because there was "no real
outlet for journalism students' work or any way for them to show
what they could do, short of actually working for the media or
finding a rare work experience slot" (2001). The Solomons pidgin
title *Wansolwara* — "one ocean, one people" — was adopted,
expressing the idea that all those who were born in or live in the

Pacific were bound together by the ocean (Cass, 1999). Cass found that publishing the first edition was not easy. But by 1997 *Wansolwara* was on a stronger financial footing and it was starting to gain a reputation for breaking stories.

The USP programme, as at UPNG, was always under-resourced. At the time that French Government funding ended by the close of 1997, the programme had produced its first six graduates, all double major degree holders. However, only two of these graduates entered the news media. Since then, with core funding by USP's School of Humanities, the programme produced fifty-three graduates by 2001 — forty-five double major three-year BA degree holders and eight with the new two-year Diploma in Pacific Journalism (DipPJ). Most work in the media. The programme has steadily moved toward media convergence with equal weight given on courses to print/online, radio and television journalism.

Developing cohesiveness and a sense of media identity for Pacific Islands students is a challenge and essential as they are drawn from a wide variety of language, cultural and educational backgrounds, mostly from member countries of USP. Some, as in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, come from countries with well-established concepts of the role of the media in democracies while others are from nations where the political elite and the establishment see journalists as a threat.

In the first semester, 2002, only one student out of some 45 students, an exchange environmental media exchange scholar from Australia, used English as a first language. Two other non-Pacific Islander students — from Germany and from Nigeria — speak and write English as a second language. This creates challenging difficulties as students wrestle with grammar and syntax to work for a predominantly English language media when English is rarely a mother tongue. (One journalism academic, who coined the term "PiNGlish", once asked whether "Correct English is the best language for teaching journalism in Papua New Guinea," where Tok Pisin and Motu are the main tongues (Moore, 1995: 71)).

The university provided little or no funding for actual journalism news production so this meant pressure on the programme staff to develop creative ways of funding for *Wansolwara;* its companion daily newspaper, *Spicol Daily* (see Robie, 2000) published annually for a week each September; and *Pacific Journalism Online's* internet training news <www.usp.ac.fj/journ>.

Radio Pasifik, the *FM88.8* station owned and run on campus in Suva by the USP Students' Association since 1996, which relied heavily on the journalism programme for daily news and current affairs and was threatened with closure on several occasions, and a new television news magazine programme, *WansolVisin* (started in 2002), also depended on funding initiatives.

Wansolwara (Print)

Wansolwara is a 16 to 24 page newspaper published twice a semester in both online and 80 gm bond paper editions with four-colour editorial and advertising on the wrap around cover pages. Since it was founded, it has relied on advertising revenue (raised by the students) to fund production costs. As this provided the springboard for the online news role of *Pacific Journalism Online,* the operation of this paper will be analysed first. At the start of 1998, after the author arrived at USP, the paper was reorganised from a voluntary unassessed publication by the students to a structured compulsory component of the journalism courses to address student demands for assessment. As the newspaper was in the red at the time, a formal rate card and financial structure was set up for selling advertising space. A special purpose account was set up for the newspaper within the university bursar's office. A US$10,000 seeding grant for one year was also provided in 1998 by the British Government aid agency DFID, which included the purchase of a laser printer with A3 printing capacity for page proofs. The grant also paid for four editions of the paper in 1998/9, enabling it to become sustainable.

Currently the newspaper involves elements from seven of the programme's nine dedicated journalism courses (in a 20-module BA degree or 10-module diploma). The print edition is integrated with the programme website, *Pacific Journalism Online. PJO* was founded by the author in 1998, with both an online edition and archive and a parallel *Wansolwara Online* publication, <www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/index.html>, with separate news and current affairs stories filed daily. UNESCO provided a small seed grant to fund software and to establish the website.

First year students in *Introduction to Journalism* and *Media Law and Ethics* become the reporters for both the newspaper and online daily news, filing 20 news stories each semester for 20 percent of their course assessment. Second year students in the *Print and Online Journalism* course become the subeditors, photographers and cartoonists (and often the key reporters for splash and lead stories) for 40 percent assessment , while the editor is usually drawn from specialist final year courses, *Journalism Production* (equivalent to QUT's *News Production*) or *Special Topics in Journalism: Advanced Print and Online Media*. A liftout *'Insight Report'* thematic in-depth section is produced by the *International Journalism* and *Journalism Research* courses (40 percent assessment for two 1500-word news features).

Teaching is based on "three instructional formats": formal lectures, practical workshops and current affairs news forums and tests for a total of seven contact hours a week (in real time, it

actually involves evenings and some weekend work totalling about twenty hours a week). Topics include desktop publishing and layout; photography, photo-editing and captioning, internet publishing; and work on publication projects. Lecture topics include texts and images, the history and development of press photography, photography as information, composing and cropping the photograph, image, computing, internet publishing, media and government, media and public trust, propaganda and the media, press councils and trade unions, and subediting work on *Wansolwara* and *PJO.* (USP Calendar, 2002: 174)

Journalism production students working on the newspaper and online hold a weekly main editorial planning conference every Monday morning and develop editorial strategies. While they have clearly defined staff job descriptions and course outline objectives to fulfill, the editorial teams have a large degree of project autonomy and flexibility (characteristic of the campus press) while also maintaining their independence from both the student representative body and university authorities, providing they meet assessment criteria. The objective is to publish a newspaper to professional standards but with a news agenda clearly independent of mainstream media.

During briefings with students, conducted in the first week of the semester, the newsroom production process, the news-gathering roster, and newsroom task roles are explained and assigned. This follows the advertising of the key posts such as *Wansolwara* editor, *Wansolwara Online/Pacific Journalism Online* editor, *Spicol Daily* editor and *Radio Pasifik* news director, and newsroom lab assistant (a part-time paid position comparable to other university labs operated by IT Services). All students are assessed for the newspaper production component of the course *Print and Online Journalism* against formal job descriptions (such as editor, chief-of-staff, chief-subeditor) listed in the Online Classroom web resource. Assessed work on each edition of the newspaper counts for 20 per cent of the semester assessment.

Pacific Journalism Online and Wansolwara Online

PJO was created in May 1998 and developed by the author to provide an Internet publishing training arena and to provide interactive teaching resources (*Online Classroom*) for Pacific students. Three years later *Online Classroom* included course outlines for all nine journalism courses and core teaching materials. The idea of the website was to provide daily news under continual deadline pressure (not provided by the newspaper) and a lasting news archive (not provided by the campus radio). The *PJO* home page was treated as a news front page with links to *Online Classroom*

sections such as Ethics and Media Law and student websites. Understandable, given that few Pacific students have home computers, *PJO* rapidly became a popular and well-used site by most students at the university. The "open house" interactive sections such as *Talanoa* (external) and Journalism Workshop (internal) message boards were especially popular.

PJO is used as a tool to teach students the benefits of news media convergence in island states. An online editor is selected at the same time as the print editor, usually a student enrolled in JN303 Journalism Production. Both editor's roles are given equal weighting, but the online editor often finds it more demanding because there is usually no team to support him or her in coverage, except during major news event coverage such as the Speight coup or the Fiji general election when students are rostered. In the first three years of *PJO*, the online editor's main role was to also upload the online edition of the *Wansolwara* newspaper and to upload almost daily news updates filed by student reporters. The editing and uploading is supervised by journalism staff.

The saga of a controversial two-month-long temporary shutdown of PJO website has been well documented (Cass, 2002; Revington, 2000; Robie, 2001b, 2001c; Rose, 2000). *PJO* covered the 2000 Fiji coup intensely for ten days until it was closed by USP administrators on 29 May 2000, the day of declaration of martial law, after Speight supporters had trashed Fiji Television offices the night before. What emerged during this controversy was a surprise expectation expressed by then Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa (2000) that journalism students should be doing "simulated" journalism instead of USP's traditional training through "real" journalism. The real approach was endorsed by New Zealand High Commissioner Tia Barrett when he remarked at the 2000 USP Journalism awards presentation:

"The past six months have seen a major upheaval in Fiji, twice in fact, and of such stuff are the dreams of journalists made. What an opportunity to practise the theory and exercise the training from the classroom! You students will no doubt have stories of what you did during the crisis, and that was perhaps the best training possible" (Barrett, 2000).

Almost two months following the closure, on July 25, the forty-strong academic staff of the School of Humanities' Board of Studies passed a unanimous resolution condemning the administration over the shutdown of the website. One important justification given by the academics was that the journalism website provided important information for staff and student security. A statement also said academic staff considered the closure "unsound pedagogically" and the journalism website "provided outstanding and excellent training for the students in that it involved reporting

and commenting on real issues" (cited by Robie, 2001b: 54).

When *PJO* was closed by USP, the ACIJ in Sydney established a temporary USP journalism coup report <journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html> online and posted stories there until August in a partnership between students at both universities (ibid.: 51). As a result of the closure, the website policy was modified to provide clearer separation between the news training functions of *PJO* and the *Online Classroom* curriculum resource. This development was taken a stage further in July 2001 when the website was relaunched with a redesigned home page, and *Wansolwara Online* became the main news section with *Online Classroom* displaying a new logo separating out the curricular resources. These changes were made in preparation for coverage of the Fiji general election. Editorial independence was pledged.

The Pacific News 'Reality' Experience

PJO's vigorous coverage of major news events has been well-rewarded by the annual Journalism Education Association (JEA) Ossie Awards. It began regular news coverage more than a year before Fiji had its first major print news website, *FijiLive.com* in the lead-up to the May 1999 General Election, then followed with well-regarded and insightful coverage of the Speight putsch, the post-coup election in August 2001. *PJO* won the Dr Charles Stuart Prize for best overall publication for the coup coverage after winning the Ossie for best occasional publication the previous year. Print edition of *Wansolwara* was highly recommended for best regular publication in both 1999 and 2000 (PANPA Bulletin, 2001), and won it in 2002. Over a four-year period (1999-2001), the students won a total of ten JEA awards or highly commended citations.

Wansolwara and *Wansolwara Online* have more clearly defined editorial policies than the mainstream news media. For example, they were the only South Pacific print newspapers or websites that actually had an editorial charter (adopted in 1998). The charter, displayed publicly online, and the United Nations student journalist code are used as the newspaper's ethical framework (*Wansolwara*, 1998). Some charter objectives parallel those of *City Voice*, a now defunct New Zealand community newspaper that has spearheaded local public journalism (Venables, 2001).

As a free campus-based and Pacific regional community newspaper with an online edition published by the USP journalism programme, *Wansolwara* declared that it was "committed to freedom of information and expression" through quality independent news reports, feature articles and analysis in the South Pacific region. It also seeks to "promote good governance", "ensure coverage of the activities and concerns of the relatively poor", and to contribute to "debate of ethical and media issues." The United Nations Student

Press Rights Charter declares that the student press "should be free from regulations by any organ of the government, or by university authorities" and "free from regulations by other student organizations" (Ramirez, 1989; Robie, 1998: 22).

To cover the 2001 Fiji General Election, *Wansolwara* and *Wansolwara Online* adapted a code used for East Timor's post-independence General Election, which included such universal values as "USP student journalists shall not be part of any political party structure" and "shall report in a balanced manner — without fear or favour for any political party" (Robie, 2002c: 8).

The Speight Scoop 2000

Within minutes of the news of the hostage taking by attempted coup front man George Speight being flashed on *Radio Fiji* news on the 10am bulletin on 19 May 2000 — scooped by Tamani Nair, one of the final-year students on *Journalism Production* attachment — the USP journalism programme began its coverage of the political crisis.

"We already had a team of reporters down at the protest march in downtown Suva that morning (which later erupted into rioting); the news editors set up our radio and television monitors; reporters were dispatched to Parliament; the television class was cancelled and a crew sent downtown to Suva where they filmed footage of the riots and arson in the capital" (Robie, 2001b: 48).

As reporters returned with their stories and digital pictures, the journalism programme posted their edited files onto *Pacific Journalism Online* <http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/coup74.html> [coup archive] By the time martial law was declared ten days later, on 29 May, the students had posted 109 stories, dozens of soundbites and scores of digital photographs. In addition, journalism staff and other academics, such as in the History/Politics Department, wrote analytical pieces.

But for the first day, the team "stumbled through the hours, in some cases overcome with shock and the trauma" over the crisis.

"One talented 20-year-old student was so traumatised that he couldn't write about what he saw. He went home shaking. However, he recovered by the next day and took a leading role in the coverage for the next three months, finally winning an award for his coup efforts" (Robie 2001b: 50).

The university eventually closed and sent its five thousand students home. But a small core group of journalism students managed to see through the first weekend of political mayhem. On Monday morning, 22 May, three rostered shifts were organised among the student reporters and editors to cope with the curfew

— morning and afternoon blocks, and an overnighter comprising students who actually lived on campus. Sometimes reporters slept in the newsroom while covering the crisis.

Fiji General Election 2001

Forty-five students were involved in coverage of the Fiji General Election, representing eight countries, at least a dozen languages, and three main religions — Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Naturally, the largest group of student journalists was from Fiji, twenty-five, or almost half. The next largest group was from Samoa, seven; five came from the Solomon Islands, three from Tuvalu, two from Tonga, and one each from Kiribati, Marshall Islands and the Indian Ocean republic of the Maldives — the latter being the only international student from outside the regional country members. (Robie, 2002c: 6)

The students were organised into three rostered shifts with two overall online chief editors. One student editor, from Fiji, was responsible for the overall news selection and emphasis on *Wansolwara Online,* and the other, from Samoa, was primarily responsible for the electorate candidates and election updates for all seventy one seats. They were assisted by five student subeditors. The chief-of-staff was a 29-year-old former radio sports journalist from Fiji who had never covered news previously. The shifts were in groups of five or six students working seven days a week in three time slots. One experienced student acted as a rewrite "anchor" while three were assigned for *Wansolwara Online's* own coverage. Daily news conferences were held at 12 noon and 5.45pm for post mortems on the previous day's coverage and to discuss the handling of the day's developing stories. Between 21 July and 12 September (local time — the day of the Twin Towers terrorism attack in the United States), *Wansolwara Online* published 178 news stories and features on the election.

Other coverage

Treason trials and a military court martial during 2002, and several international conferences based at Nadi and Suva, were also used as training venues for the students on both online and print assignments. Usually this sort of coverage involves short bursts of three or four days of intensive reporting and editing with multiple deadlines and updates during each day. Among events covered that year were a symposium on land conflict in the Pacific and a media freedom conference at USP in Suva, and a UNICEF international youth conference in the tourist town of Nadi, a three-hour drive

from Suva. The last conference coverage involved eleven students supervised by a senior student (who had previously been deputy chief-of-staff of a local daily newspaper) and the filing of stories and pictures by email.

Conclusion

Pacific student journalists at USP have been frequently assigned to multimedia cover of national and regional news events as part of their training, sometimes arguably before they are at a "prepared" stage in terms of their journalism education. However, the reality in the South Pacific is that once students graduate they are expected to take their place in the newsroom, often reporting on big stories from the first week. A 1999 survey of fifty-nine journalists in Fiji's newsrooms showed that 47 percent (mostly school leavers) have no formal training and thus graduates face a far higher expectation of their abilities than they would usually face immediately in countries such as Australia or New Zealand (Robie, 1999: 181). For example, while on attachment in their final-year, student journalists often cover Parliament and the courts, and their stories may be carried as headline reports on that night's *Fiji One* television news So it is essential that they learn in a challenging "pressure cooker" training context, facing the reality of deadlines and news production stresses from semester one and starting with their very first journalism module. They also experience public accountability and ethical dilemmas at an early stage.

The USP journalism students filing online news stories produce them routinely in a context where Fiji's three national dailies do not have hands-on news websites, as the Papua New Guinean newspapers have (Although selected print stories are carried on hosted sites at other webservers). [3] Only the USP students work in a totally multimedia news format environment; no other Pacific journalism school offers such a programme.

Most students respond to these challenges in creative and engaging ways. While the pedagogy of South Pacific journalism programmes, especially at USP, has developed uniquely, there are important parallels with the praxis displayed with some Australian university journalism schools, notably Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS).

The value of this "real world" approach to teaching, as Keshvani describes it, was observed by Professor Mark Pearson in his review of the USP programme (2002). He noted that journalism was one of the first programmes (along with the Law School) to pioneer online teaching at USP — in fact, throughout the Pacific region. Pearson also found that the extent to which the programme

had developed an online journalism teaching resource, including extensive curriculum materials and interactive teaching devices, was "admirable":

> "The publications and productions created by the students in the online and print fields are of a world standard ... Staff and students are to be commended for this marvellous performance. Clearly, the mix of theory and practice is paying dividends" (Pearson, 2002: 6). ∎

NOTES

1. The University of the South Pacific is one of just two regional universities in the world (the other is the University of the West Indies). Member countries are: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.
2. An earlier extension studies based Certificate in Journalism programme during the 1980s funded by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) at USP is sometimes confused with the later degree programme (initiated as a French Government aid programme in 1994). There was no connection between the programmes, or any link in courses, although both have been situated in the university's Department of Literature and Language.
3. *Daily Post* stories are published on *www.fijilive.com (*Associated Media) while the *Fiji Sun* and *Fiji Times* have some stories published at the *www.fijivillage.com* (Communications Fiji Ltd — *FM96* radio).

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