

# Conflict, Custom & Conscience

## Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre

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A group of Melanesian women march behind an anti-mining 'No BCL No Mining' banner, across a small field in the now-autonomous region of Bougainville. Their protest is ostensibly unseen by the rest of the world. Their protest efforts are local, gender-specific, indigenous, and part of a wider movement to stop any production on the Panguna copper mine. This conflict claimed an estimated 10,000 lives in the 1990s civil war. This photograph is one of the many that we have selected to mark the 10th anniversary of the Pacific Media Centre in Auckland University of Technology's School of Communication Studies.

The photographers and the images collected in this volume all have connections to the Pacific Media Centre. The process of finding photographs for the book involved exploring a large image archive and revisiting a wide variety of journalistic work, photo essays, and images collected during documentary projects. Giving further context to this was work from those associated with the PMC that extended back to the 1970s (John Miller) and to Pacific conflicts and demonstrations in the 1980s (David Robie and Gil Hanly). Thematic strands emerged as we looked through the archive. The overarching theme of human rights is one such central concern. The relationship between people and the land (and the sea) is also at

the forefront of many of the images. The role of women, of culture, and of tangata whenua are also fundamental and recurring themes. We've classified this work into categories but, in many photographs, there is an overlap and amalgamation of themes. The women's protest march against the BCL mine earlier in 2017 is one such image.

The publication of this volume also presents us with an opportunity to not only celebrate the work presented here but to give it some context. Co-incidentally, we share our 10th anniversary with that of Apple's iPhone, the device that catalysed a move towards citizen journalism and one that has (along with its android variants) democratised the process of image-making. The role of the citizen journalist has changed the way that photographs are captured, edited and distributed and has also changed the terrain in which the photojournalist works. In response to this, the *Chicago Sun-Times* eliminated its entire photojournalism department in 2013 as part of 'firm commitment to professional convergence'. (Geurrero Garcia & Palomo, 2015). In their 2015 study, Virginia Geurrero Garcia and Bella Palomo canvassed Spanish photographers on the future of their profession. Citing Glaser, they highlighted the fact that photojournalists play an important role as 'they are needed "for crusading work,

the work that takes time and dedication"' (p.35). While acknowledging the importance of citizen photojournalists 'witnessing' key events such as the Arab Spring protests, the Boston marathon bombing, the death of Saddam Hussein, they also underline Anden-Papadoupulos's main characteristics of crowd-sourced footage: 'hypermobility, opacity, non-narrativity'. (p. 38).

In many ways, the photographs in this book are manifestations of opposite tendencies: process, transparency, a sense of story, and an ethical approach to subjects. The photographers interviewed in Geurrero Garcia and Palomo's paper are also concerned about: the 'manipulation in editing of the image, the lack of ethical values in professionals in establishing their moral limits; daily saturation to which the public is subjected; lack of respect for the right to honour the image of the people photographed; and the ideological position of the news media'. (p. 44).

It is my belief that work of the photographers in this volume speaks directly to the concerns outlined above. John Miller's long career documenting Te Ao Māori, Vlad Sokhin's nuanced, in-depth report on violence against women in Papua New Guinea, and Ben Bohane's engagement with the political and *kastom* worlds of the 'black islands'

of Melanesia, are but three examples of a long-standing commitment to the subject, to the belief in the power of the image to communicate, and to the sustained sense of a wider story that is set out beyond the snapshot of the image that citizen witnesses and simpler iPhone-style technology can communicate. The best work doesn't just show us what is there. The best work translates the event, showing it to us from the unique perspective of the photographer. The work of the camera, seen within this context, exhibits what Susan Sontag described as 'the ideal arm of consciousness in its inquisitive mood' (Sontag, 2005, p. 2).

The Pacific Media Centre's focus has expanded over the past 10 years. The news service has moved on from being *Pacific Scoop* (founded in 2009) to its new incarnation: the *Asia Pacific Report* (2016). Visits from international journalists such as Max Stahl, Kunda Dixit and Robert Fisk have widened the scope of the Centre's engagement with issues in Asia as well as the Pacific. This collection of photos mirrors these wider concerns. Kunda Dixit's work highlights an underreported and often misunderstood political conflict zone in Nepal. David Robie's work in New Caledonia during the political chaos of the 1980s, and my own recent work on mining and land rights in this territory, focus on an area that has been absent from the anglophone news sphere, largely

as a result of the opacity of the francophone Pacific for anglophone news organisations. Most tellingly, however, areas like West Papua have been shamefully ignored by mainstream news media. Radio New Zealand's reports have been an exception to this: 'According to Radio New Zealand International news editor Walter Zweifel, the international community regards the West Papua situation as "largely settled" and that the problems were an internal affair for Indonesian authorities to resolve. The main reason for the lack of interest, Zweifel believed, is "the absence of First World protagonists, most notably Anglo-Saxons"' (Robie, 2013, p. 152).

Herein lies the paradox for a photojournalist in the Pacific region and in other underreported areas. A non-commercial public broadcaster like Radio New Zealand International can explore areas like West Papua but it still relies on getting 'newsworthy developments mostly through email,' Zweifel explains. 'Human rights groups, pressure groups, and churches, tend to alert us to what is happening' (ibid, p. 152). A photographer, however, must be 'on the ground'. Giving these issues deeper context, approaching them ethically, requires a more sustained presence, a deeper consideration of culture and custom and an understanding of the complexity of each specific local situation.

In the case of West Papua, this can involve personal risk and also (more importantly, in my view) can place informants and subjects at risk. Areas like the Pacific also have their own specific challenges. Transport is expensive and difficult to organise. In many areas journalists will encounter health and personal safety issues (malaria and dengue fever are but two of these). However, when one looks at the breadth of work here, the continued examination and exploration of issues that are difficult to report, and the specific funding challenges that had to be surmounted for each project, it is clear that there are other drivers to this commitment to story. What I see in all of these works is a shared sense of social conscience.

With newsrooms decommissioning photojournalism departments, it is timely to look at the future of photojournalism in our region and at the future of the Pacific Media Centre and of universities as organisations that can support this practice. The varied work of all the photographers also illustrates possible future pathways for photojournalistic practice. Vlad Sokhin's work is a wonderful demonstration of a long-term commitment to the Pacific. Warm Waters, a Pacific-wide climate change project (Sokhin, 2017) demonstrates a significant and sustained engagement with perhaps our most salient

environmental issue. It is a clear example of conscience guiding practice. However, it is also an example of the shift photographers are having to make away from standard newsroom environments. Increasingly, projects are also running parallel to work that supports NGOs and governmental organisations.

In the age of 'fake news' the balance between advocacy and objectivity has never been more important. But the work of advocacy groups and NGOs, as seen in a case study of the NGO La'o Hamutuk in Timor-Leste (Robie, 2015), highlights how communication-focused NGOs can take key roles in sensitive and balanced reporting. This year, *The New Zealand Herald's* series *Hidden Pacific* reported on social and health conditions in Papua New Guinea, giving New Zealanders news access to one of the most underreported areas in the Pacific. Essentially a collaboration between World Vision and the newspaper itself, it also involved a fund-raising campaign for World Vision projects. While the shape of this collaboration surely had a determining factor in the content of the news items, photographs and video footage, the success of the fund-raising campaign that accompanied this project is a good example of how stories from little-seen areas of the Pacific can gain considerable traction with the New Zealand public.

Ten years ago, not many could have foreseen the impact of the iPhone's introduction into the sphere of news reporting and the rise of citizen journalism, nor in the smart phone's role in the organisation of social movements. The next ten years will see more evolutions in image-making technology and in news delivery. The funding models for photojournalism are also unclear and this makes the support role of organisations such as the university even more important. They can be places where practice is encouraged and seeded. They can help disseminate, curate, and analyse. Hopefully, in a modest way, this volume can be seen as not only a celebration of photojournalism but also be seen as a signal for increased commitment to photojournalism in the next decade.

The fundamental challenges of reporting the news and telling stories with pictures have been touched on here but one cannot ignore the fact that much of this work begins as a labour of love and continues because of a deeper engagement with people, places and events. Ben Bohane, in the commentary accompanying his photoessay for *Pacific Journalism Review* (2014), has given us a perfect summary of the joy of this engagement. Celebrating these works is also celebrating the spirit in which they were done. This is what Ben wrote:

When I am in the warm embrace of the Pacific Ocean, it certainly feels as sacred to me as the Ganges must be to Indian pilgrims, or the way springs and rivers are considered the threshold place of ancestral spirits in Ireland. I am reminded too of the old Danish proverb: no sailor at sea is an atheist.

These lush islands, scattered like a constellation over a vast cobalt sea, will always feel like home: a liquid continent where the great spirits dwell.

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