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## Theme : Media freedom in Oceania

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# 1. Reclaim the right to know *toki* and locate it online

### COMMENTARY

A Cook Islands proverb goes like this: *Taraia to toki, ei toki tarai enua* – ‘Sharpen your adze, the adze to carve nations.’ Applying the proverb in this context, the *toki*/adze can be seen as the media. The right to know is the tool which keeps the adze strong and effective. When the *toki* is well prepared for its work, the impact on public debate and protection of media freedoms is strongest. The diversity of news outlets and ‘talking heads’ in the public domain helps foster a sense of public participation; and ownership of the governance process. When the adze is blunted by lack of Freedom of Information legislation, or by the failure of media workers to pressure for the public interest and the right to know, we see the deadening impacts that many of us can attest to in our countries.

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**K**IA ORANA tatou katoatoa it e aroa maata o to tatou Atua, Talofa lava—I bid you warm Pacific greetings. This week in 2009, the inaugural meeting of a regional media freedom watchdog group, the Pacific Freedom Forum, was happening in Samoa. Twelve months later—to the exact week—we are witnessing the inaugural meeting of a regional network of women in Pacific media, called the Pacific WAVE Media Network. We have delegates from both groups here at this World Press Freedom Day conference, one (the PFF) is a regional media freedom monitoring and advocacy body—and the other (WAVE) is a newly-confirmed network of women working in news and media across the Pacific region. Together, both groups form a constituency of almost 400 online members spread across Oceania’s 22 countries and nine million people, not forgetting its many millions of square kilometres of saltwater.

I am starting this commentary on the overall theme of this session, ‘Threats to Media Freedom and Freedom of Information in the South Pacific’, by extending an invitation to have some ‘media freedom soup’ with me.

I’ve spent the better part of the last year and a half as a founding member of the Pacific Island Journalists’ Online network, which gave birth to the Pacific Freedom Forum, which in turn gave birth to WAVE. Along with our founding coordinator Ulamila Wragg, I’ve done this work—and most of my journalism—from a computer linked up to the internet in my kitchen. Many of my WAVE media sisters share this Pacific reality, as women juggling many hats, balancing their unpaid work at home with paid careers in the media. I spice up my time with vast amounts of post-graduate study, stir fried with the roles of activist, wife, mum, and freelancer. So welcome to my kitchen, and let’s get cooking.

The key ingredient I’ll begin with is the way we in the Pacific media have approached our coverage of HIV/AIDS. Yes, HIV/AIDS. What I have seen as a journalist, trainer and commentator is that HIV/AIDS, more than any other global trend in this part of the world, has created an interesting model which we can use to examine and better understand the main threats and solutions to media freedom in the Pacific.

The first key challenge which HIV/AIDS poses for media freedom *a la* Pacific is that when it comes to reporting big issues, we have the freedom to get it wrong as well as right. From the late 1980s into the 1990s, Pacific reportage of HIV/AIDS was geared towards a sense that this issue was someone else’s problem. Pacific media had reported it, but most coverage fed widespread prejudice and misconceptions that HIV/AIDS was a death sentence delivered by God to gay men, adulterers and prostitutes. Of course, this situation was not exclusive to the media.

HIV/AIDS also highlighted the lack of media-friendly Pacific medical and development professionals able to educate people about a new and emerging epidemic for the region; and the lack of quality statistics and surveillance data to draw upon. It raised all kinds of new questions about the credibility of talking heads who were misinforming rather than informing the news agenda, and about what reporting the truth in the public interest really means.

It began to raise curly questions about objectivity, the credibility of traditional talking heads like church leaders and how we in our reportage were contributing (or not) to a balanced debate on such highly emotional issues.

It underlined the lack of privacy and confidentiality in small islands communities, and the stigma, discrimination and fear which abound when people simply do not have access to all the information they need.

And it was all gaining momentum when the key regional meeting of Pacific media workers, the annual Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) conference, was hosted by French Polynesia in late 1998.

### **Pacific cultural, sexual taboos**

It was at this PINA conference, in front of a regional audience of Pacific journalists, that a young University of the South Pacific journalism student called Maire Bopp Dupont stood up in a plenary session and declared she was HIV-positive. In asking her media colleagues to reject fear-mongering and get back to being professional journalists, Maire took a gamble and sparked new debate, thinking and reflection by her Pacific colleagues. Her stance also opened up public discussions about 'no-go zones' such as the taboos around sexuality, culture and tradition, and the personal attitudes and behaviours which inform our internal news-filters.

Importantly, she highlighted an issue which continues to define challenges around news practice to this day: given all the internal filters we face in gleaning what is news and how it is reported, how do we define our commitments to ethics, accountability, truth and the public interest? Who monitors the notion of just how free, truthful and 'independent' journalists are? What about the language and words we use? And the gendered stereotypes and labelling we are dealing with?

All these questions began to emerge on media as partners in development, the gender dimensions of media work, human rights and social justice issues. In 1999, in recognition of her 'breaking the silence' on HIV/AIDS, Maire was awarded the PINA Media Freedom Award.

This takes me to my next key challenge: the need to respond to gaps and failures in order to address the challenges around media freedom work, FOI and the right to know. Shortly after Maire won the award, her role as a Pacific advocate and voice on HIV/AIDS was cemented and she identified an urgent regional need that required a regional solution. At the time, there was no effective network of Pacific organisations to support people with HIV/AIDS. That all changed when the Pacific Islands AIDS Foundation (PIAF), was formed and began to address the problem. It has since become

the secretariat for a regional coalition of partnering organisations called the Pacific NGO Alliance on AIDS. This story provides lessons at a critical time for us, of being responsive, current, owned by the Pacific region we claim to represent, and transparent to our members. Media freedom, free speech, the right to information and freedom of information are a dynamic and changing set of issues, always evolving, just as the PIAF organisation has done as it addresses our region's HIV/AIDS crisis. I am not alone in knowing that Pacific media is now at the same crossroads as the region faced with the HIV/AIDS crisis, where HIV/AIDS forced a regional, industry-led response that had to be strong, effective and transparent. Just as those most affected got together and formed their own networks and chain of accountability, we as journalists and Pacific news and media organisations must do the same to ensure we remain true to our values and mission, which are now no longer being met. It's at this point that our media freedom soup now comes to the boil. For a range of reasons, we have seen our regional media body PINA lapse into relative silence and fall victim to internal conflict.

I say this is a regional challenge of crisis proportions because any regional body which falls apart doesn't do so silently, and we need to be honest and open about learning from failure. If there is anything the recent global economic crash can teach us, it is that. I challenge us all, in truth and respect for the right to disagree, to urgently seek a space for mediation and most of all for transparency to resolve this situation. At this point in time, a fractured and poorly managed Pacific media regionalism is itself providing the biggest threat to media freedom and FOI. We will always have our dictators and tyrants to deal with; but we need to set our own media house in order. Some will have to decide if they even want a 'regional house' to support our networking. Without well-resourced and effective monitoring, advocacy and coordination effort that is owned and endorsed by all of us, from every part of our region, we will continue to remain in crisis mode. We will not be able to dream of excellence and standards outside of the ad-hoc pockets that do exist. We will not be able to hope to grow media literacy among our youth, leaders and communities so that the right to know is an accepted flip side to the right to ask the taboo questions.

### **A dash of Indigenous hope**

As a last spoonful, I want to celebrate all the stirring with a dash of Indigenous hope. I note the inclusion of another key forum at this WPF

event, that of Indigenous Voices Forum, which also highlighted the need to close the gaps in ownership, participation, content creation, and diversity. Paying homage to the wisdom provided by our ocean-navigating ancestors, here is a Cook Islands proverb often quoted by a former Cook Islands Prime Minister. His belief in the right of a free and independent media to exist meant he was accessible and accountable in ways that would put many current Pacific leaders to shame. It was the doors opened by Sir Geoffrey Henry in the early 1990s which helped pave the way for the Cook Islands to create history on FOI legislation more than 15 years later. The proverb goes like this: *Taraia to toki, ei toki tarai enua. Taraia to toki, ei toki tarai enua.* ‘Sharpen your adze, the adze to carve nations.’ In transforming that into the context of this session the *toki*, the adze, can be seen as the media. The right to know is the tool which keeps the adze strong and effective. When the *toki* is well prepared for its work, the impact on public debate and protection of media freedoms is strongest. The diversity of news outlets and talking heads in the public domain helps foster a sense of public participation; and ownership of the governance process. When the adze is blunted by lack of FOI legislation or media workers themselves pressuring for the public interest and the right to know, we have the deadening impacts many of us can attest to in our countries.

So, from the ancestors to us here today—*Taraia to toki, ei toki tarai enua*: how sharp is your media freedom adze, and who is holding it? Is the adze sleeping in a corner somewhere, growing dull with lack of use? Has it left newsrooms and taken up residence in Ombudsman’s, offices public auditing processes, or is it no longer to be found? I challenge us to reclaim the *toki* and locate it online—in digital spaces accessible for more of us, a toolkit for the future generations of Pacific journalists. I hope you have enjoyed this funky taste of Pacific media freedom soup.

*Lisa Williams-Lahari is founding member and projects leader of Pacific WAVE (Women Advancing a Vision of Empowerment) Media Network. This address was made at the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day Conference at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1-3 May 2010 as part of a ‘Media Freedom and Freedom of Information in the South Pacific Plenary Session panel.*

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