

# 7. The Pacific right to know in the Digital Age

## COMMENTARY

The explosion of mobile telephony in some islands of the South Pacific has literally connected our peoples to the rest of the world and opened up access to a wide variety of information. While there are some who view this expansion as a huge threat to the traditional media, the ongoing development and expansion of this technology presents the traditional media with enormous opportunities to reach a wider audience at basically little cost. But of course there is also a financial cost to the consumer, which in the case of the South Pacific can be a significant issue.

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### **Vanuatu—a case study**

**V**ANUATU boasts a total population of 234,000 (VNSO, 2009), just under 22 percent of whom live in its two largest urban municipalities, Port Vila and Luganville. The remaining 78 percent live in rural and remote areas. The average Vanuatu household consists of at least five people. Women account for close to half the population while people under the age of 25 make up almost 40 percent of the total population.

For a country with a small but fast-growing population (which is rising at 2.8 percent a year overall, and at 4.1 percent annually in urban areas), Vanuatu has a fair share of media outlets which are showing some signs of maturity and growth.

The government-owned Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) runs the only free-to-air television channel whose coverage is limited to the capital Port Vila, and three radio stations, including Radio Vanuatu (which has national coverage). There is also a private commercial radio station and three other small FM community-based stations. Vanuatu also has a daily and two weekly newspapers, along with a monthly magazine. Three pay-TV operators cover the country, and applications are pending for a new

privately owned free-to-air commercial television station and several more community radio stations.

Daily newspaper circulation is under 3000, with an estimated 10 television sets and 254 radio sets per 1000 (VNSO, 2009).

However, real explosion in growth has been in the telecommunications sector. Telecom Vanuatu Limited (TVL) currently has an estimated 7400 land-line users. It has close to 2500 internet subscribers and predicts this can grow to between 6000 to 10,000 subscribers. This growth forecast is based on planned reductions in internet charges, the development of electricity supply grids, and greater user knowledge of computers. The other operator—Digicel Vanuatu—introduced its internet mobile phones in mid-2009, but has not released figures on its subscription base. Estimates of total mobile phone subscribers put the figure at about 20,000 shared between TVL and Digicel Vanuatu.

Only 16.7 percent of the total population is connected to land lines. And while mobile coverage reaches a little over 80 percent of the country, only 8.6 percent of all people have active mobile connections. Under 2 percent of the population is estimated to have access to the internet via fixed lines, but this jumps to 10.6 percent if you include the internet access provided by new mobile phone operator Digicel Vanuatu.

To illustrate the impact of mobile phones, VBTC introduced talkback radio in June 2009 when Radio Vanuatu could only be heard in Port Vila. In July of the same year, VBTC switched on new shortwave transmitters providing 100 percent coverage of the islands. Two months later, the number of callers jumped 347 percent. This monster increase can be attributed to the expansion of radio coverage, and the increased availability of mobile phone connection in rural Vanuatu.

A quick glance at International Communications Union (ITU) statistics on internet penetration in 34 countries under the Oceania umbrella (excluding Australia and New Zealand), has the figure at 26 percent of the total regional population. For instance, internet penetration in the following countries is: The Cook Islands (42.1 percent); Fiji (10.9 percent); Kiribati (1.8 percent); Papua New Guinea (2 percent); Samoa (4 percent); Solomon Islands (1.7 percent); and Tonga (6.9 percent). I note that these are 2009 figures which do not take into account mobile phone internet connectivity.

With increased internet penetration and the growth of mobile telephony, more and more Pacific Islanders have access to information via the internet. Some are even able to listen to their favourite local radio stations or view their

television stations on their mobile phones. And earlier this year the Blackberry was introduced into Vanuatu.

So where does this leave the traditional media outlets?

### **Traditional media**

Despite the introduction of television in the Pacific in the 1990s, and the advent of new, computer-based media, radio remains the staple medium for accessing information in our small and highly vulnerable island states. Newsprint is expensive, heavy to transport and susceptible to heat and humidity. All these factors tend to mean that the Pacific print media is an urban medium. Television on the other hand, while a relatively new phenomenon in our region, is fast expanding and gaining in popularity. But it still remains expensive.

There is little evidence that the introduction of television has been at the expense of radio. Instead TV has increased the range of media options for those people who can afford to buy television sets. Television viewers, like newspaper readers, are more likely to be town and city dwellers rather than rural villagers or remote islanders—unless of course they have access to pay television.

As well as access to the media, people generally have a wider value choice of content and programming. Here too, the situation has changed over the past two decades. Until the 1980s, almost all radio in the Pacific was government-owned, and operated on public service principles—and largely pushed the state's agenda. Subsequently two changes occurred: one was the introduction of private commercial radio; and the second change was the commercialisation (if not full privatisation/corporatisation) of the public broadcasters.

Multilingual Pacific nations have always had access to several radio stations to cater for their various language communities. By itself, however, this does not constitute programming choice. The advent of commercial radio introduced more choices (albeit limited) and has thus increased competition between broadcasters.

The introduction of a broad range of radio formats has forced the radio sector to embrace the introduction of strategies that have seen radio formats become more refined than those offered by television. This targeting in recent years has most likely played a part in the stability of radio's overall audience. This stability might also be attributed to the fact that radio is a medium built on habit.

There is no evidence to suggest that technology in our region has influenced or changed listening or viewing habits. This ‘absence of influence’ is more than likely to intrigue some media consultants because it contradicts earlier theories that internet radio and television streaming would radically transform the consumption habits of our audience.

However, with the availability of mobile phones with radio capabilities, one suspects this could see an upward movement in the choice of locations where people can now listen to radio. These assumptions obviously need to be studied further.

The fragile and vulnerable economies of Small Island States make it unrealistic to assume that there will be a rapid shift away from traditional ways of listening to radio or watching television. The exorbitant cost of internet and mobile services in our region put them out of reach of the average person.

Development priorities for island governments put mobile phones and internet, low down on the list of basic needs for most of the Pacific people's who predominately live in rural and remote areas. Infrastructure and basic services such as roads, bridges, water supply systems, health centres, agriculture and education are a higher priority for regional governments. And in the event governments do develop an e-governance network, most are definitely not influenced by the peoples’ right to know that we in the media are struggling to protect. It has more to do with expanding government services to the people.

### **The right to information**

Digital technology has literally begun to open up communications in our island countries it has given people more opportunities to access a wide range of information faster and without detection. Groups such as the media, civil society, the private sector and governments are taking advantage of this technology, both to push their own agendas and to inform the community.

Sadly, despite all the available technology, we have heard distressing stories over recent days about the struggles that many of our colleagues in the region are forced to endure because of pressure from their respective governments. We have heard stories about repressive measures adopted by some governments to control the flow of information. We heard about efforts by some regimes to control access to the internet and curtail peoples’ right to receive and impart information.

And despite the exertion of these controls in pursuit of the new ‘journalism of hope’ model promoted by some, thankfully the internet remains relatively

free from the clutches of the official decrees and regulations that have successfully silenced the media and controlled the free flow of information.

But, apart from these impediments the right to information, the right to free expression and press freedom, there remains the challenge facing so many people in our region who are deprived of these rights—not because a regime introduces a decree, but because they do not have access to the technology or because they simply cannot afford it.

Accessibility to broadcast medium (largely radio) will remain integral to where and how we get information. The challenge (given the relatively low income levels of the majority of Pacific islanders) remains—can we ensure that those of our people who cannot afford the new technology will NOT be deprived of the same level of content available to the owners of these ‘new media’ gadgets?

For a moment, let us mentally swap places with people living in isolation 700 kilometres from the nearest urban centre who are unemployed or whose yearly earnings are less than the price of a 42-inch flat screen television. They definitely cannot afford such luxuries as ‘radio on demand’, pay television, broadband, HD radio and television, daily newspapers, and podcasting. Is the media morally obligated to provide them the same (or close to the same) level of ‘service’ and ‘content’?

Yes, I agree we cannot ignore the commercial reality of the world we live in. But I believe we do have a responsibility to provide our peoples with an exceptionally high level of content and a balanced diet of information, even if they are not in the privileged position of being able to afford the new digital phenomena.

## Reference

Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO) (2009). Provisional.

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