11. A crucible for bottom-up regionalism?

The digital renaissance: West Papuan media suppression and social media in the Pacific

Commentary: West Papua has one of the most repressive media landscapes in the world. Consequently, West Papuans have increasingly harnessed social media platforms to broadcast human rights violations committed in West Papua. Through this, Pacific Islanders around the region are increasingly leveraging social media as a political tool for showing solidarity and support for West Papuans. As a result, in recent years there has been a regional groundswell in support for West Papuan demands for self-determination, with prominent political figures such as former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill of Papua New Guinea, and Gordon Darcy Lilo alluding to the awareness on West Papuan issues that have been raised through social media. This commentary explores how the rise of West Papua solidarity is resulting in a heightened Pacific regional consciousness at the community level.

Keywords: bottom-up regionalism, censorship, digital politics, Melanesia, Pacific regionalism, West Papua, social media

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Introduction

FROM tribal lore to the printing press, to the present era of instantaneous electronic communication, the ability of governors and the governed to access information has had profound socio-economic and political ramifications. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are the latest evolution of mass communication, and offer vast potential to transform governance and the dialogue between citizens and governments. Globally, ICTs and social media, in particular, have been harnessed by citizens as an activist means to demand greater accountability and transparency (Taki, 2013). In the Pacific, a digital revolution has resulted in drastic changes in the means by which Pacific islanders commu-

nicate, access information, and engage in public/political discourse (Cave, 2012). Research has demonstrated that in the Pacific, social media has become a means of communication, disaster awareness, political debate and activism, and even identity formation and rejuvenation (Brimacombe, Kant, Finau, Tarai, & Titifanue, 2018; Finau et al., 2018; Titifanue, Tarai, Kant, & Finau, 2016; Titifanue, Varea, Varea, Kant, & Finau, 2018; Webb-Gannon & Webb, 2019). This commentary argues that as the Pacific Region undergoes its digital revolution, issues such as the Free West Papua Movement act as a catalyst for regional concern and action at the community level.

State-led versus bottom-up regionalism

Wiwasukh (2008) argues that regionalism is typically associated with 'states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence' (p. 2). For the Pacific, regionalism tends to bring to mind state-led organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Melanesian Spearhead Group, and the Polynesian Leaders Group. Such state-led movements tend to typify Hau'ofas (1994) description of being '. . . the preserve of politicians, bureaucrats, statutory body officials, diplomats and the military, and representatives of the financial and business communities . . .' (p. 148).

What often goes unnoticed is the capacity of Pacific Islanders' to 'maintain bottom-up and informal modes of regional identification and connection and a concern with what ordinary people are actually doing' (George, 2011, p. 38). Hau'ofa (1994) argues that these at times can result in 'surprising and dramatic results . . .' (p. 148). This can be evidenced by instances where a bottom-up push from citizens have instigated and complemented regionalism (George, 2011). A case in point for the Pacific is the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific movement where citizens, and NGOs lobbied and supported their governments in taking a stance against nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Media suppression, the rise of citizen media, and Indonesian pushback

Since being politically integrated with Indonesia in 1969, West Papuans have undergone many tribulations. Upon attaining control over West Papua, the Indonesian government has carried out political suppression, with human rights defenders being regularly intimidated and harassed (Amnesty International, 2013). Contemporary sources estimate that since Indonesia has attained control, as many as 500,000 West Papuans have been killed by Indonesian security forces (Robinson, 2012). Gaining accurate information on events within West Papua has been hindered by the West Papuan media landscape. Blades (2018) notes multiple incidents of journalists being 'assaulted, threatened, or arrested' (p. 37). Furthermore, until May 2015, foreign journalists were in practice, barred from entering West Papua (Mitchell, 2015). Blades (2016) notes that

while there was technically no ban on journalists entering West Papua, journalists needed to secure 'approval from 12 separate state agencies' (p. 14).

For decades, West Papuan activists have tirelessly worked towards raising regional and global awareness of the realities within West Papua. However, the aforementioned media landscape greatly hindered their efforts. This media vacuum led to West Papuans turning to alternate media like social networking sites. Facebook and Twitter, in particular, have become prominent platforms for activists raising issues on West Papua and articulating these issues to a wider regional and global audience (Titifanue et al., 2016). The effectiveness of citizen media and social media has been profound. In an analysis of activism in West Papua, Macleod (2016) highlights how the advent of social media has made the revelation of events in West Papua to be almost instantaneous. Comparing a 1998 attack by the Indonesian military with the 2010 occupation of the provincial Parliament, and the 2011 attack by Indonesian armed forces on protesters, Macleod (2016) notes that 'the social media revolution had well and truly arrived in West Papua' (p.48). In essence, he notes that in 1998 it took weeks and months for information of the attack to be spread. While in 2010 and 2011, despite the absence of international media, news was spread in real-time by citizens harnessing mobile technologies and social media.

As the adage by Oscar Wilde goes, 'you can always judge a man by the quality of his enemies'. With the growing effectiveness of social media in informing the world of events within West Papua, systematic efforts have been made to limit internet accessibility and subvert the online narrative from supporters of West Papuan independence and human rights. In August 2019, violent demonstrations took place with activists describing such demonstrations as being the largest to occur in years (Lamb & Doherty, 2019). Over the course of these protests, the Indonesian government slowed the internet in parts of West Papua, with the Indonesian Communications and Information Minister informing reporters that this was to 'filter information and prevent the spread of rumours' (Firdaus, 2019). In the case of West Papuan citizen media, their effectiveness can be gauged by the strength of the pushback by Indonesian online propaganda. In September 2019, Bellingcat, an investigative journalism website, revealed that there existed an active social media bot network disseminating pro-government propaganda (Strick, 2019). Building off the Bellingcat research, the BBC and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) carried out a joint investigation to analyse what it described as a 'well-funded and co-ordinated information campaign aimed at distorting the truth about events in Indonesia's West Papua province…' (Jones, 2019, para. 1). Strick and Syavira (2019) report that the investigation found a network of Twitter accounts that all used 'fake or stolen profile photos' (para. 10). This snowballed into the discovery of a network of accounts spread across four social media platforms and which were traced back to a Jakarta-based

media company. These accounts actively engaged in a process known as 'hashtag hijacking' whereby they would appropriate hashtags used by groups supporting West Papuan independence and human rights. The authors of this commentary have observed that hashtags such as #freewestpapua, #merdeka, #letwestpapuadevelop, and #globalflagraising, have been among those that pro-Indonesian pages have attempted to appropriate. In 2018, a Twitter page titled 'West Papua Human Rights Centre' went so far as to describe the Free West Papua Campaign as hate against peaceful development in West Papua (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tweet in opposition to Free West Papua Campaign

More recently, pages in opposition to the Free West Papuan movement have also hijacked non-West Papua related hashtags that are trending both regionally and globally. Such hashtags include #coronavirusoutbreak, #bluepacific, and #pacificresilient (see figure 2).

Bottom-up regionalism: Regional consciousness through adversity?

As aforementioned, there have been instances in the Pacific region where moral

Figure 2: Tweet in opposition to Free West Papua narrative using popular trending hashtags.

outrage at the community level has instigated and complemented action at regional levels. For the Pacific, a key historical example is the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement. Prominent journalist Nic Maclellan (2017, p. 5) observed that the NFIP was a contrast to most other international organisations, which focussed upon more scientific impacts of nuclear testing (health, environment etc.). NFIP, in contrast, worked to create a synergy between other broader Pacific led campaigns relating to self-determination, and decolonisation. In essence, NFIP was founded in 1975 during a period

when independence and decolonisation movements had significant momentum in the Pacific region. Nuclear testing thus ignited moral outrage among Pacific peoples and caused a groundswell in regional consciousness. Maclellan (2005) also argues that opposition to nuclear testing emerged from:

> … the feeling of being people of the Pacific and not just in the Pacific. That sense of belonging—of looking to the skies, seeing the Southern Cross, and feeling at home—underlies much of the regional opposition to France's nuclear policy (and this emotion against 'outsiders' rings just as true in Australia and New Zealand as in the Islands. (p. 365)

It was also during this period that the Pacific's regional university was founded. The University of the South Pacific at this time became a hotbed of debate on key issues of Pacific concern. Hau'ofa (1993) described the university as 'like a kind of microcosm of the Pacific at large . . . The debates reflected not only the national issues of various islands but also the larger regional issues of nuclear testing …' (p. 81).

Bottom-up regionalism: Social media a crucible for regional consciousness?

Interest and action on decolonisation and self-determination agendas were on the wane. Hau'ofa's aforementioned observations are taken from an essay (ironically titled 'A Beautiful Cemetery') published in USP's 25th Anniversary book. In his essay, Hau'ofa (1993) further noted how 'there are big things happening now . . . But there is nothing on culture and the larger issues about where we are going' (p. 82). However, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, there has been a resurgence in community interest in these topics.

As aforementioned, the digital revolution has contributed to easing the means by which Pacific Islanders can access information. The surge of West Papua related content on social media can be attributed to this. Robie (2014, 2017) argues that social media has contributed to a 'dramatic upsurge of global awareness about West Papua' (2017, p. 161). Macleod, Moiwend, and Pilbrow (2016) note that there has been a rise in 'ordinary peoples support for freedom' (p. 19).

Maclellan (2015, p. 271) notes that through social media helping spread information from inside West Papua, a debate over relations with Indonesia has been forced onto the agenda of Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) summits. Macleod (2016) attributes the rise of social media to what he describes as 'an extraordinary speech' (p. 48) where former Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill embraced West Papuans as 'our people' (p.48). Interviews carried out by Titifanue et al. (2016) with individuals who had been advocates for a stop to human rights violations in West Papua, revealed quotes such as 'at no time in

the past have discussions on West Papua matched the amount of talking that is happening online right now about the situation over there' (p. 267).

This social media groundswell has contributed to a heightened regional consciousness. In 2015 members of the 'We Bleed Black and Red' movement joined with USP students to call for a fact-finding mission to West Papua. In a photoshoot that prominently figured the *Morning Star* flag and the flags of Pacific Islands countries, the hashtag #indonotnesia featured prominently as did the messages of 'Melanesia is not Indonesia, and Indonesia is not Melanesia'. This play on the terms of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia acted to assert a 'Nesian' identity that are reminiscent of Maclellan's (2005) observation of the Pacific peoples taking an anti-nuclear stance and being driven by 'the feeling of being people of the Pacific and not just in the Pacific' (p. 365).

Conclusion

While rare, there have been instances in the Pacific where concerted efforts at the community level have driven and complemented political action at a regional level. For the Pacific region, the advent of such 'bottom-up' regionalism can be found in the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific movement. There are synergies between the regional groundswell in expressing outrage over the issue of nuclear testing, and the contemporary issue of West Papuan self-determination and human rights. In each case, the Pacific peoples have rallied in outrage on an issue linked to decolonisation and self-determination themes. Additionally, in the case of each movement, the outrage of Pacific peoples centres around the notion of 'outsiders' imposing their will upon Pacific/'Nesian' peoples. However, there are marked differences in campaign typology. In the case of the NFIP movement, Pacific Islanders were working in concert with their governments in advocating for a nuclear-free Pacific. In the case of the Free West Papua Movement, there has been a great surge in interest at the community level. However, this is not always reflected at national levels with Pacific Island governments (apart from Vanuatu) having differing stances in relation to the matters of self-determination, and human rights in West Papua.

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