

Journalism education 'truth' challenges

An age of growing hate, intolerance and disinformation

Abstract: This keynote commentary at the 2021 Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) conference with the theme Change, Adaptation and Culture: Media and Communication in Pandemic Times is addressed through a discussion of three main issues: 1. The COVID-19 Pandemic and how it is being coped with; 2. A parallel Infodemic—a crisis of communication, and the surge of 'disinformation' and truth challenges in this 'age of hatred and intolerance'; and 3. The global Climate Emergency and the disproportionate impact this is having on the Asia-Pacific region. Finally the author concludes with an overview of some helpful strategies for communicators and educators from his perspective as a journalist and media academic with a mission.¹

Keywords: ACMC2021, climate change, COVID-19, disinfodemic, disinformation, fake news, health journalism, investigative journalism, journalism, keynote, New Zealand, pandemic, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, public health, Timor-Leste

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FIRST a tribute to two extraordinary and inspirational journalists who have shed light on dark places and given the rest of us hope. We recently celebrated when *Rappler* chief executive and media visionary Maria Ressa, along with Russian editor Dmitry Muratov, were named Nobel Peace Prize laureates for fighting courageously to 'safeguard freedom of expression' (The Nobel Prize, 2021). The Norwegian Nobel Committee described them as 'representatives of all journalists who stand up for this ideal in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions'.

Julie Posetti, global director of research at the International Center for Journalists (ICJ), wrote about this achievement in glowing terms in *Foreign Policy*, describing the choice as a 'strategic act' that was a call to action for today's journalists (Posetti, 2021). She highlighted how it had been 85 years since a working journalist had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Their predecessor was German investigative editor Carl von Ossietzky who was made a laureate in 1936 for his 'burning love for freedom of thought and

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Figure 1: A tribute to journalists in relentless pursuit of the truth. Rappler’s founding executive editor Maria Ressa (clockwise from top left), Russian editor Dmitry Muratov; Max Stahl of Timor-Leste; and German investigative editor Carl Von Ossietzky, who died in a Nazi concentration camp.

expression’ for peace. Ironically, von Ossietzky was languishing in a Nazi concentration camp on a criminal libel charge at the time of the award. His alleged crime? He had exposed the secret rearmament of Germany in breach of the Treaty of Versailles.

For the record, four other Nobel Peace laureates had journalism connections. Élie Ducommun, a Swiss peace activist who worked as a journalist and translator and as founding director of the Bureau international de la paix, jointly won the 1902 award; Alfred Hermann Fried, an Austrian Jewish pacifist and journalist, was a co-winner of the 1911 award; Liu Xiabao, a Chinese writer, blogger and president of the independent China PEN Centre, won the 2010 award (he was jailed four times and died from cancer in 2017); and Tawakkol Karman, a Yemini women’s rights activist and co-founder of the group Women Journalists Without Chains, won the 2011 award for her role in the Arab Spring uprisings.

The second tribute is to a courageous journalist and filmmaker who sadly died at the age of 66 from cancer in October 2021 after three decades of contributing to the development of his adopted country in Southeast Asia. Max Stahl of Timor-Leste was celebrated around the world for his shocking film footage of the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in the capital Dili. The footage was smuggled out to news media and triggered a chain of events leading to Timorese independence (Santa Cruz massacre, n.d.).

Max bravely filmed the military shootings among the cemetery that killed more than 270 innocent and unarmed men, women and children during a peaceful protest. He hid the footage under a headstone and later, at night, he returned to the graveyard to recover the evidence.

British-born Max Stahl returned to East Timor in 1999 and filmed the referendum on the territory's future, the tumultuous events leading to independence in 2002 and Timor-Leste's evolution as an independent nation. His documentary was entitled *In Cold Blood: The Massacre of East Timor* (1992).

His more than 5000 hours of footage formed the hub of the Max Stahl Audiovisual Centre in Timor-Leste-CAMSTL archive, a unique collection of the turbulent history of the world's newest nation at the time. He was decorated with the Order of Timor-Leste, the country's highest honour for a foreigner, and was awarded Timorese citizenship by the National Parliament in 2019 (Robie, 2014a; Sampaio, 2021a, 2021b).

I had the honour and privilege of meeting him—quite by accident—in November 2013 when we crossed paths in Timor's second city of Baucau while I was travelling overland to a Fretilin political conference in a remote town. We travelled together. The following year, we invited him to be our keynote speaker at the 20th anniversary conference of *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal at Auckland University of Technology. He was inspiring and spoke about the painful path towards nationhood and his hopes for the eventual independence of West Papua.

The common thread linking all four of these media communicators—Maria Ressa, Dmitry Muratov, Carl von Ossietzky and Max Stahl—has been their courageous, determined and relentless pursuit of 'truth' and justice. 'The truth'—this supreme goal of journalists in holding power to account is hugely under threat by politicians, demagogues, and charlatans peddling fake news and disinformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic and how we are coping with it

In response to the escalating COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in mid-February 2020, came a warning by the World Health Organisation Secretary-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who declared that 'we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic'. He added that fake news 'spreads faster and more easily than this virus' (Robie & Krishnamurthi, p. 180; UN tackles 'infodemic', 2020).

In March 2020, in response to the escalating COVID-19 global crisis UN Secretary-General António Guterres identified the 'new enemy' as a 'growing surge of disinformation' (UN tackles 'infodemic', 2020). However, the term 'disinfodemic'—which I much prefer—was adopted by the authors of a policy brief (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020) for UNESCO to describe the 'falsehoods fueling the pandemic'.

This disinfodemic has been rapidly leading to upheavals in many countries—including in Aotearoa New Zealand in the weeks before the Asian Communication and Media Congress (ACMC) conference—with protests, civil disobedience and attacks on health officials, medical staff and frontline workers. Such assaults and violent confrontations have taken particular nasty turns in some of our neighbouring microstates of the South Pacific—notably Fiji and Papua New Guinea, the largest countries and biggest economies in the region. Even Australia and now Aotearoa New Zealand are not immune.

Papua New Guinea has a population of nine million with a vast economic disparity between the 84 percent rural population and squatter communities in the urban areas and the elites who benefit from the wealth of extraction industries. Fiji has a population of just under one million. Both countries have been epicentres for the virus in the Pacific.

In October 2021, authorities in PNG were forced to abandon mobile health clinics and teams of health workers carrying out COVID-19 vaccination and awareness programmes because of the increasingly risky attacks against them. The Chief Executive of the Morobe Provincial Health Authority, Dr Kipas Binga, whose area of responsibility includes Papua New Guinea's second-largest city Lae, declared that health services would only be offered in the urban clinics (Mark & Bauai, 2021). He also warned that they might have to stop some services altogether in communities where health staff were being repeatedly harassed. A St John Ambulance crew was attacked by anti-vaxxers who mistakenly believed unprotected ambulance staff were responsible for administering vaccinations (Gware, 2021; Kana, 2021).

As early as July 2021, Papua New Guinean journalists were warning about increasing tensions over misinformation about COVID vaccines and lack of clear communication from health authorities. Port Moresby's Rebecca Kuku, writing in *The Guardian*, cited Caritas aid representative Diane Unagi, saying:

When messages are not communicated properly it increases the public health risk. People are avoiding being tested because they are worried that they will be locked up when they hear the word 'isolation'. (Kuku, 2021)

Other popular misconceptions, she says, include the belief that COVID-19 only affects people living in cities and towns, and not people living in rural areas. Eighty five percent of PNG's population live in villages and rural areas, some of them extremely remote (World Bank, 2015). However, University of Waikato anthropologist Fraser Macdonald points to an even more basic underlying factor. Millions of Papua New Guineans, he says, are not getting vaccinated against COVID because they are 'terrified of this particular vaccine' (Macdonald, 2021). He argues that this is 'not "vaccine hesitancy", but full-blown opposition, a genuine antipathy'. The key difference is cultural context.



Figure 2: Anti-vaxxer protesters at a rally in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in July 2021, falsely claiming vaccinations in their country are mandatory.

Macdonald says that in PNG there is a fundamentally different view from the Western notion that ‘vaccines are an obvious and intrinsic good’. Instead, for many Papua New Guineans, ‘vaccines are a dangerous, unknown and sinister threat’ (Macdonald, 2021). Some regard the vaccine as the ‘work of Satan’. This is comparable with Papuan New Guineans a few years ago declaring barcodes the ‘mark of the Devil’, and more recently having the same view over the plan for a national ID identity initiative (About PNG Civil & Identity Registry, n.d.)

Recently, there was a concerted attempt by the PNG Council of Churches, including mainstream faiths such as the Catholic Church, to reduce the so-called ‘sinister’ beliefs about the vaccine held by many. Sir John Cardinal Ribat, for example, has been portrayed as a COVID-19 champion and he has been at the centre of a ‘Love thy Neighbour’ advertising campaign with a message of compassion and trust. In one campaign poster, he says: ‘If God blesses people with good knowledge, good intent and the wisdom to make a vaccine to control COVID-19, it is a blessing from God for us all’ (Sir John Cardinal Ribat, 2021).

Media consultant Bob Howarth, a former publisher of the *PNG Post-Courier* daily newspaper, expresses concern after watching mainstream media and social media coverage of—as he describes it—‘the world’s most un-vaxxed country, Papua New Guinea’ (Howarth, B., personal correspondence, 1 November 2021). Much of his recent consultancy work has involved running Asia-Pacific fact-checking workshops, vital in this age of disinformation and conspiracy theories. He notes:

The lack of fact-checking expertise both in official government authorities and media generally has become a huge issue. My observation comes from

experience in February/March 2020 when I flew to Timor-Leste, supported by the UNDP and the very active Timor-Leste Press Council to help run the country's first fact-check training for 38 journalists and NGOs.

Now Timor-Leste has one of the highest press freedom rankings in the region.

So why, asks Bob Howarth, hasn't the basics of fact-checking become part of journalism training in our universities and colleges?

My major co-trainer was local journalist Raymundos Oki, who completed weeks of fact-checker training funded by Google in Singapore. The course covered everything from reverse image searches, advanced internet checking to updated ethics and how to do background checks. Now the Timorese continue upgrading training for their thriving print, electronic and online media which is reflected in the fact that Timor-Leste has one of the highest press freedom rankings in the region.

So why hasn't the basics of fact-checking become part of journalism training in our universities and colleges? Going back to Papua New Guinea the government education and communication strategy to handle the spreading COVID outbreak has become a tragic failure. No daily reporting or updates on numbers of cases and deaths plus obvious super-spreader events like protest marches against mandatory vaccination (which applies only to some businesses protecting staff and customers and some government agencies).

Many look enviously at smaller neighbours like Fiji with high tax rates and celebrating opening their border to the vital tourist industry and travel restrictions being eased. What is the short answer: Roll out fact-check training in PNG and other countries facing the same issue of fake news wildfires, says Howarth. 'To use an old cliché: It's not rocket science!' Howarth reported on some of his Timor-Leste experience in *Pacific Journalism Review* (Howarth, 2018).

The tragedy of COVID is very real, as ABC correspondent Natalie Whiting reported in a video story at the height of the crisis (Whiting, 2021). As cases surged across Papua New Guinea, with all major hospitals struggling to cope as the Delta variant spread rapidly, she described the high rates of hesitancy and fear about the vaccines. Local health workers were exhausted and many had been infected, and hospitals had been overcrowded.

'Patients are lying everywhere. The situation is dire,' she reported in the video story (<https://youtu.be/fzjdsNOIqdw>).

Not content with the disbanded protests in Port Moresby and Lae, the employee union of the National Capital District Commission took out a lawsuit against their employers, challenging the legality of the 'no jab, no job' policy imposed by NCDC under Section 48 of the Constitution (*Freedom of Employment*). Deputy Chief Justice Ambeng Kandakasi called for more details about vaccinated and unvaccinated NCDC employees from the NCDC Workers Association and adjourned the case until November 16 (Moi, 2021).

A parallel ‘Disinfodemic’—a crisis of communication

While these developments were disturbing, especially in Papua New Guinea where the John Hopkins University covid-19 tracker (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>) showed that less than 2 percent of the people were vaccinated against the virus and there were a grossly underreported 34,472 cases and 529 deaths, in New Zealand we were grappling with our own disinformation issues (Papua New Guinea Overview, 2021). Over the previous few weeks, thousands gathered in breach of COVID-19 restrictions and public health measures to protest against lockdowns and vaccination mandates. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described these protests as ‘obviously illegal’ and ‘morally wrong’ (Gillespie & Breen, 2021).

However, as *The Conversation* commented in an analysis about the balancing act that Prime Minister Ardern needs to uphold freedoms protected by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*:

Protesting is part of Aotearoa’s identity. New Zealanders have protested against poverty, war, nuclear weapons, gender inequality and the loss of Māori land and customary rights. Several protests—including those against the 1981 Springbok [rugby] tour—have divided the nation. (Gillespie & Breen, 2021)

There is a major difference between Australian and New Zealand authorities in dealing with anti-COVID lockdown and vaccine protests. While in Australia, some COVID protests ‘had gotten out of hand’ and police suppressed them with rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray (Osborne, 2021), New Zealand police avoided suppressing the protests on the day. Instead they identified the organisers and quietly charged them later under public health violation regulations.

On 9 November 2021, in a Wellington anti-vaxxer protest march on the Beehive, New Zealand’s symbol of democracy, there were scenes reminiscent of Donald Trump’s supporters—albeit peaceful—in the lead up to the storming of the US Capitol in Washington on January 6. Writing in *Spinoff*, editor-at-large Toby Manhire commented on what he described as a ‘new, ugly and dangerous’ side to New Zealand. He wrote:

The government and the media were variously decried on signs as Nazis, Communists, tyrants, terrorists, rapists and murderers (also: ‘lying nerds’). From the crowd who walked from Civic Square to Parliament came slogans declaring, falsely, that ivermectin cures COVID, that the virus is a hoax, that a UN agenda conspiracy is out to get us all, that new Nuremberg trials were coming. ‘Drain the swamp’, blared one sign, in an exhortation that disappointingly amounted to an unimaginative parroting of Trump rather than a commentary on the capital city’s plumbing issues. One gentleman

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in a Maga hat brandished a banner claiming that 9/11 and the Christchurch massacre were both ‘inside jobs’. The solution: ‘hang all involved’. There is, sadly, no vaccine for brain worms. (Manhire, 2021)

In a *New Zealand Herald* article, a plea highlighted what happens when misinformation infects someone with a commentary about a COVID-19 patient who had escaped from quarantine: ‘The man’s social media is filled with dodgy theories about vaccination and he apparently livestreamed his arrest’ (Dirga, 2021). The author, Nik Dirga, who had been working as a fact-checking journalist for nearly two years for the Australian Associated Press (AAP), admitted in his column that he felt angry about how COVID misinformation was encouraging people to go down deep rabbit-holes and splitting up friendships and families about everything from lockdowns to vaccines. He wrote:

One of the reasons people grab onto misinformation is that they’re hurting. They want answers. The world has felt like it has become a terrifyingly random, scary place in the past two years. We all want a villain to blame. And the truth has become an increasingly flexible commodity in finding one. (Dirga, 2021)

A *Mediawatch* commentary by Hayden Donnell warned there was a danger that too much coverage on conspiracy theories and the activists spreading them meant that mainstream media had the potential to popularise the anti-vaxxers’ misleading and distorted messages, as realised during the 2022 Parliament protest.²

The reasons for these stories are clear. The unvaccinated are currently at the centre of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our ability to return to some semblance of normality is directly tied to their willingness to go down to the local pharmacy to get a jab, and the government is introducing a series of increasingly stringent measures to compel them to literally take their medicine. The stories are popular, with strong opinions on both sides. (Donnell, 2021)

Coordinated social media campaigns and emailed threats or harassing phone calls to journalists or scientists are hardly new. Such campaigns have been prevalent in many jurisdictions, such as in the United States over topics like climate change, vaccination and the effects of gun violence (Gewin, 2018). However, a survey by *Nature* magazine has revealed that many researchers had reported that the abuse ‘was a new and unwelcome phenomenon tied to the pandemic’. The *Nature* article pointed to some high profile cases, such as Dr Anthony Fauci, head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, being assigned personal security guards after he and his family received death threats, and when Belgian virologist Marc Van Ranst and his family were

placed in a safe house to protect them from a threatening sniper. While the article acknowledged these well-documented examples were extreme, the survey indicated that two-thirds of researchers polled reported negative experiences as a result of their media appearances or their social media comments. And, disturbingly, 22 percent had received threats of physical or sexual violence.

As social media platforms have tightened their ability to shut down fake accounts and changed their policies to be more aggressive against fake content (such as Facebook via its Third-Party Fact-Checking Programme), ‘agents of disinformation have learned that using genuine content—but reframed in new and misleading ways—is less likely to be picked up by AI systems’.

The complexities of misinformation are highlighted by a controversy over a cartoon by one of Australia’s most beloved cartoonists, Michael Leunig, who was sacked by his newspaper for lampooning Victorian Premier Dan Andrews over his government’s mandatory vaccination policies. It portrayed an anti-vaccine dissenter standing before a tank and syringe gun turret as a metaphor for the iconic and courageous Tank Man who defied a line of tanks during the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, China, in 1989 (Rodell, 2021).

As with most cartoons, this was satirical—at the low end of the misinformation scale—and Leunig had been the editorial page cartoonist at *The Age* newspaper since 1969. However, because of the sensitivity over ‘vaccine hesitancy’ and orchestrated protests against mandatory vaccination, he became ‘cancelled’, although he still draws cartoons for other publications in the stable. *Sky News* digital editor Jack Houghton was among a number of media people who expressed disquiet over his ‘cancellation’. He lamented: ‘Here is the worst thing about this entire saga: after decades and decades of service to a news organisation, the moment he doesn’t toe the editorial line, he’s ousted through a phone call’ (Axing of Michael Leunig, 2021).

Research in New Zealand has shown that conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have ‘dramatically escalated since Delta arrived’ in the country in late August 2021. The Disinformation Project of the University of Auckland’s Te Pūnaha Matatini has been monitoring misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccine since February 2020 (<https://www.tepunahamatatini.ac.nz/2021/11/09/mis-and-disinformation/>). (See pages 138-161).

The project’s report from 17 August to 5 November 2021 showed an unprecedented and violent ‘trajectory of growth and spread that is increasing, widening, and deepening every week’. Much of the content which framed the COVID-19 response as a fight between the individual and the ‘treacherous’ state had been repackaged from US and Australia sources.

All 12 of the so-called ‘Disinformation Dozen’ who were exposed by the nonprofit research Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) for providing close to 73 percent of ALL disinformation on Facebook’s anti-vaccination content are

in the United States. They are compromised by their business interests. (<https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen>). They have been making money out of disinformation.

How do we best deal with this surge of global information pollution? A good starting point is the frameworks and analysis provided by First Draft director Claire Wardle. Along with Hossein Derakhshan, she produced a Council of Europe brief in 2017 entitled ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking’ (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Although it predated the COVID-19 pandemic, it was dealing with the ‘fake news’ phenomena of the President Trump era.

First Draft provided a matrix for misinformation and disinformation that neatly applies to the theoretical and practical challenges related to mis-, dis- and mal-information—the three elements of information disorder. The matrix is split into two overlapping spheres, ‘false’ information, including both mis-information and dis-information, and ‘intent to harm’.

In September 2020, Dr Wardle produced another report, ‘Understanding Information Disorder’, where she condemned the increasing ‘weaponisation’ of information and she condemned the use of the phrase ‘fake news’ as an ‘unhelpful and increasingly dangerous phrase used to discredit and attack “professional journalism”’ (Wardle, 2020).

Most of this content isn’t even fake; it’s often genuine, used out of context and weaponised by people who know that falsehoods based on a kernel of truth are more likely to be believed and shared. And most of this can’t be described as ‘news’. It’s good old-fashioned rumours, it’s memes, it’s manipulated videos, hyper-targeted ‘dark ads’ and old photos re-shared as new. (Wardle, 2020)

Disinformation, argues Wardle, is content that is ‘intentionally false and designed to cause harm. It is motivated by three factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for the sake of it’. When disinformation is shared, it is turned into *misinformation*. Misinformation is shared by people wanting to feel connected to their ‘tribe’— ‘whether that means members of the same political party, parents who don’t vaccinate their children, activists concerned about climate change, or those who belong to a certain religion, race or ethnic group’. The third category is *malinformation*. The term describes genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm.

Dr Wardle has developed a typology with seven types of mis- information and disinformation ranging between low seriousness with satire or parody through to fabricated content and the high end of the scale.

We are increasingly seeing the weaponisation of context and the use of genuine content—but content that is warped and reframed. As mentioned, anything with a kernel of truth is far more successful in terms of persuading and engaging people. (Wardle, 2020)

Climate Emergency, the Pacific and catastrophe

Along with the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the questions of our time is how to report the existential challenge of climate catastrophe—you notice how I am stressing the word ‘catastrophe’ rather than merely ‘change’. That is because for the microstates of the Pacific it is already viewed as an impending catastrophe. Pacific Climate Warrior Brianna Freuan advocates for her people vastly better than I can express it. As she says, ‘We are not drowning, we are fighting’: <https://youtu.be/9Y12ezfEZBA>

Earlier in November 2021, we endured the underwhelming COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow which was condemned as a ‘failure’ by the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, who branded the conference as a ‘Global North greenwash festival’ and said ‘immediate and drastic’ cuts to carbon emissions were needed. Other critics called it a ‘betrayal’.

The people in power can continue to live in their bubble filled with their fantasies, like eternal growth on a finite planet and technological solutions that will suddenly appear seemingly out of nowhere and will erase all of these crises just like that.



Figure 3: Tuvalu’s Foreign Minister Simon Kofe stands knee-deep in the sea for his COP26 speech to draw attention to the Pacific’s climate emergency, Glasgow, November 2021.

All this while the world is literally burning, on fire, and while the people living on the front lines are still bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. (COP26: Greta Thunberg, 2021)

Ironically, the people most affected by climate change are the Pacific nations, yet only three of their leaders could actually be present because of COVID-19 lockdowns and protocols. Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, among those unable to be there in person, sent an appeal. He spoke bluntly about the need for dramatic change by the Global North, or Western countries, for climate financing after years of empty promises (Brown, 2021).

After years of empty promises by major emitters, it's time to deliver on climate financing.

The world is warming. The science is clear. Most large, developed countries need to take ambitious action to reduce their emissions in order not to impact us further.

‘If they don’t, there is dire consequence, and in turn a significant rise in adaptation cost to us, those that did not cause this problem.

‘Some people call it paradise, but for me and thousands of Pacific people, the beautiful pristine Pacific Island region is simply home. It is our inheritance, a blessing from our forebears and ancestors.

‘As custodians of these islands, we have a moral duty to protect it—for today and the unborn generations of our Pacific *anau*. (Brown, 2021)

Responses—a challenge to journalism schools

This sums up many of the problems facing the region. The challenge confronting many communication programmes and journalism schools located in universities or tertiary institutions is what to do about them, how to tackle the strain of an ever-changing health and science agenda, the deluge of disinformation and the more rapid than predicted escalation of climate catastrophe. One of the answers is greater specialisation and advanced programmes rather than just relying on generalist strategies and expecting graduates to fit neatly into already configured newsroom boxes. The more that universities can equip graduates with advanced problem-solving skills, the more adept they will be at developing advanced ways of reporting on the pandemic—and other likely pandemics of the future—contesting the merchants of disinformation and reporting on the climate crisis.

A report by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development on balancing ‘freedom of expression’ with ‘disinformation’ on the internet has offered a useful framework for responses. It provided a typology of four categories (<https://en.unesco.org/publications/balanceact>)

1. *Identification*: Fact-checking and investigation

2. *Responses aimed at producers/distributors*: Such as law and policy.
3. *Production responses*: Editorial and community standards.
4. *Responses aimed at target audiences of disinformation campaigns*:
Such as empowerment

Before I explore some specific examples of strategies, I would like to offer a context of my own trajectory. As a journalist, I have lived and worked in nine countries—mostly in developing nations in Africa and in the Asia-Pacific. This has shaped my world view as a journalist and academic—especially having worked as an editor with both a Western global news agency, Agence France-Presse, and Global South news services such as Gemini (Robie, 2016).

I have written several books on the politics and media of the region, many of them incorporating my professional experience (see Robie, 2014b, 2016; Robie & Marbrook, 2020). Also, I have developed several theories and models that I have explored in a series of papers and applied in my teaching, notably a ‘*talanoa*’ journalism’ model, a homegrown Pacific approach to practice and research (Robie, 2019). My emphasis has been on ‘project journalism’, creating high quality coverage of issues and challenging assignments on university platforms with high standards of journalistic integrity and to foster multi-university collaboration across national boundaries. This approach is explored in my book *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face* about activism, media and politics in the Asia-Pacific region (Robie, 2014).

Over the years, we have collaborated with partners across Asia and the Pacific from China to Tahiti. Our strategies have included:

- a three-year climate change project, Bearing Witness (Robie & Marbrook, 2020);
- a Pacific Media Watch project, mostly in partnership with the University of the South Pacific (Robie, 2016);
- a weekly radio programme, Southern Cross, at 95bFM station at the University of Auckland (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020);
- a Climate and Covid project with Internews (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020); and
- a collaboration with the showcase platform *The Junction* established with the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA).

The Junction’s mission is to:

- Publish high quality journalism by university students for wide audiences by aggregating content from students at university Journalism schools and by publishing original material.
- Achieve and maintain high standards of journalistic integrity and inquiry.
- Meet the dual aims of improving journalism pedagogy and serving the

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Figure 4: A selection of David Robie’s books on media and the Pacific: He highlights the methodology of ‘talanoa journalism’ as introduced by his 2014 book *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific*.

- public through the publication of high quality content.
- Encourage new forms of storytelling through collaboration, networking and experimentation.
- Draw audiences back to the publications of participating journalism programs.
- Foster collegiality and cooperation among university journalism schools. (The Junction About, n.d.)

Finally, a tribute to all those Asia-Pacific media workers who are working hard against great odds in this pandemic and climate crisis era and who are making remarkable use of storytelling to try to make a difference for their people. Take Scott Waide, for example, just a few weeks ago he was the deputy news editor of Papua New Guinea’s major television network, EMTV News. He resigned from his high profile job so that he could get closer to *grasruts* communities to tell their real stories and to get a better social justice deal for them. He uses a variety of platforms, articles on his Wordpress blog, videos on social media, his educator skills and his presence on the ground to know what is really happening. He says:

We have to write our own narrative of positivity through the stories we tell and the stories we encourage our children to listen to. We have to pass on the wisdom of our ancestors to the generation of the future. We have to be the conduit for that change we want to see.

Among his recent narratives are his personal experience of nursing both of his ageing parents who suffered from COVID-19. A harrowing tale but one of great compassion was told by Scott while caring for his mother. Sadly she died from the virus a short time later.

Then there is the team in Papua New Guinea involved in the ABC's *'Sistas, Let's Talk'*—sharing health and survival knowledge with mothers and other young women. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is the *'Let's Talanoa'* series with Dr Lesina Nakhid-Schuster and Rocky Lavea—30 second video clips sharing key helpful health information. These are the sorts of innovative initiatives that communication schools should be partnering with. Real media making a difference. And a free press in action.

Note

1. This full address presentation with visuals can be viewed on *Café Pacific* at YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/9ehqVkJerpQ>
2. These warnings by Nik Dirga, Hayden Donnell, Toby Manhire and others were later borne out by a 24-day siege of New Zealand's Parliament by more than 1000 anti-vaxxer, conspiracy theorist, alt-right and rightwing religious protesters, and a Donald Trump-aligned media outlet *Counterspin Media*, who claimed they were 'fighting for the freedom of all New Zealanders', between 6 February 2022 and 2 March 2022. As health and safety issues grew, the police took action, finally forcibly clearing the protesters from the parliamentary grounds and nearby streets in a day-long operation that resulted in clashes and the burning of a children's playground and tents by angry demonstrators. (2022 Wellington Protest, n.d.)

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