

Pacific media freedom since the pandemic

Commentary: This article discusses the status of media freedom in the Pacific region and the impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. It primarily draws on informed comments made by experienced Pacific journalists during an online discussion in December 2021. Further, it updates the situation in several Pacific countries, based on reflections made by the same journalists in March 2023. There have been two major developments in 2023: the newly elected government in Fiji has repealed the country's controversial media law while the government of Papua New Guinea considers introducing a media law. The article highlights the importance of ongoing vigilance with regard to media freedom in Pacific Island countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, Fiji, media freedom, Pacific journalism, Palau, pandemic, Papua New Guinea, political influence, Solomon Islands, Tonga

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Introduction

PACIFIC ISLAND countries have varied levels of media freedom, which differ between countries. In addition, media freedom can vary over time, fluctuating in response to political developments and crises. This article considers media freedom challenges in the Pacific during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the experiences and viewpoints of journalism veterans. An ability for the mainstream media to conduct enquiries without hindrance or fear of reprisal is an important element of a democracy (Grete, 2017, p. xii). To what extent are journalists able to carry out their work in the Pacific? Did emergency measures designed to address the COVID-19 pandemic create obstacles for reporters on the ground? Economic downturns occurred due to pandemic response measures, such as slowdowns in commerce, closure and/or downsizing of businesses and the sudden halting of inbound tourism, a major source of economic activity, foreign exchange and revenue in the region. Did news media outlets experience decreases in advertising revenue? If so, to what extent did the economic downturns and national lockdowns affect news media organisations' finances



Figure 1: Panel discussion participants: Bernadette Carreon, Georgina Kekea, Kalafi Moala, Dr Shailendra Singh, Dr Amanda H A Watson and James Batley.

and news-gathering capabilities? This article presents insights about the challenges on the ground with respect to the operations of the Pacific news media sector. It also considers the impact of media freedom in Pacific Island countries during the unprecedented health crisis.

The Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University hosted an online panel discussion with experienced Pacific journalists in December 2021.¹ Facilitated by the first author of this article, the panel consisted of: Bernadette Carreon, a journalist based in Palau and a member of Pacific Freedom Forum;² Georgina Kekea, freelance journalist in Solomon Islands, president of the Media Association of Solomon Islands and member of the Melanesian Media Freedom Forum; Kalafi Moala, editor of the *Talanoa 'o Tonga* website; and the second author, Dr Shailendra Singh, the head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific. The event began with an introduction from James Batley, Distinguished Policy Fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs (Figure 1).

This article highlights the main insights that emerged during the discussion. It contains four sections: discussion of the definition of media freedom; description of the situation with regard to media freedom in the Pacific Islands region prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; reflections on the challenges of reporting of COVID-19 by the Pacific media sector; and examination of the impacts of the pandemic on Pacific media. The fourth section provides updates from the panel members. The article also briefly explains the latest developments

in Fiji and Papua New Guinea at the time of writing. Unless indicated otherwise, direct quotes were made by panel members during the online seminar. Given the backgrounds of the panel members, the article tends to focus on Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Fiji, although some trends described may resonate with experiences elsewhere in the Pacific region.

The concept of media freedom in the Pacific

Most would agree that media freedom in the Pacific is important (for instance, see Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, p. 65; Watson, 2022, pp. 231-234). But how did panel members define media freedom? Georgina Kekea defined media freedom as a circumstance in which media workers can conduct themselves ‘freely, [and] without fear’ and suggested that media freedom allows for an environment in which journalists ‘thrive’. Bernadette Carreon warned that media freedom can be restricted when authorities do not answer journalists’ telephone calls and do not provide information to journalists. Therefore, she argued that ‘uninhibited access to information’ is essential to media freedom.

The second author, Dr Shailendra Singh, suggested that media freedom can be a complex concept that must be assessed with respect to the relevant national context. In a situation in which there is a history of political instability, ‘governments use stability as an excuse to curtail criticism and even hide corruption’. He described debates that had occurred in conflict-prone countries like Fiji about which scenario would be worse: tolerance for ‘a certain level of corruption’ for the sake of stability or the risk of an ‘implosion’ due to unrestrained media coverage in an unrelenting pursuit of the ‘truth’. In Fiji’s case, Fijian political scientist Professor Steven Ratuva, director of the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand, believes that hyper-critical coverage of the Chaudhry government encouraged the 2000 coup plotters (Robie, 2001). While the media did not cause the coup, the nature of the coverage inflamed a tense situation and emboldened nationalist rebels to roll on with their plans (Robie, 2001).

The suggestion is that the burden to make judgments falls on the shoulders of journalists in fragile settings or during moments when instability is looming. As Singh put it, in fragile situations, media freedom is tied to ‘journalistic responsibility’ more strongly than in mature democracies, which can withstand robust aggressive coverage. In at-risk societies, there is a greater consideration about the implications of how certain subjects are reported because of the potential for violence. It is plausible that in such situations journalists are more circumspect and through their work, they may seek to contribute towards a more peaceful and cohesive society, especially when they are part of the same society. Solomon Islands journalist Robert Iroga’s (2008) research into his country’s media after ethnic violence in the 1990s found that media complemented the state’s reconstruction efforts, even while free to criticise government. Senior reporters

who were interviewed stated that the country had suffered and as responsible citizens, they did not want to see further derailment (Iroga, 2008, pp. 166–172).

The status of media freedom before the pandemic

Before turning to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media sector, panel members were asked to describe the status of media freedom prior to the pandemic. Both Carreon and Kekea referred to the issue of ‘smallness’ and associated challenges. As Cullen and Hassall have explained elsewhere, many of the Pacific Island countries can be thought of as small island developing states (2017, p. 4). As such, they ‘have certain vulnerabilities, some related to economic ‘shocks’ and natural hazards and others as a consequence of their geography’ (Cullen & Hassall, 2017, p. 7).

For Carreon, the idea of ‘smallness’ is felt in Palau in terms of the number of media workers and the amount of advertising revenue available to the media sector. She described the key challenges of small newsrooms and limited numbers of journalists. She referred to a tension between, on the one hand, freelance journalists needing to make sufficient money to live and, on the other hand, media houses constrained by a limited advertising market. In her estimation, most pre-pandemic advertising revenue came from tourism businesses and government departments.

While Kekea similarly referred to a small media industry and small newsrooms in Solomon Islands, her main concern was with the way that the country’s small population impacts her work. She explained that it is difficult to cover a story when someone involved is related to her. Because it is a frequent experience that people know one another, culture and traditions can have a bearing on the ways that journalists carry out their work. Kekea also referred to geographical challenges, such as the difficulties of travelling to outer islands to cover stories.

Kalafi Moala emphasised the impact of the entrance of social media. He said that 10 or 15 years ago print media was the primary source from which people in Tonga sought news and information. He argued that nowadays print media ‘is irrelevant’ in Tonga. He mentioned that radio broadcasting remained important, but that social media has caused major changes in the communicative landscape. At present, he said, ‘traditional media is suffering financially because they’re still trying to operate the way they were operating 20 years, 10 years ago’ (see also Panapasa & Singh, 2018, p. 137).

In the case of Fiji, a recent change of government following an election late in 2022 has had a major impact on media freedom. The new government initially announced that it would review the media laws (Kumar, 2023; Nasiko, 2023). On 29 March 2023, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka announced in Parliament that cabinet had approved the tabling of a bill to repeal the controversial *Fiji Media Industry Development Act* ‘as a whole’ (Anthony, 2023). Rabuka stated:

I am proud to stand here today to make this announcement, which was key to our electoral platform, and a demand that I heard echoed in all parts of the country that I visited. (Anthony, 2023)

The potential significance of this change is highlighted by the fact that when speaking in the online seminar in December 2021, Singh's assessment was that the main turning point regarding media freedom was the year 2006 when Fiji experienced its fourth coup. The Fijian media sector was hit soon after the coup by a number of restrictions (Robie, 2014, pp. 324-325) before the punitive *Fiji Media Industry Development Decree* (later transformed to 'Act') was introduced in June 2010 (Kumar, 2023). Singh said that prior to 2006 media freedom in Fiji was on a par with, or close to, the media freedom in Australia and New Zealand. The media restrictions after the 1987 and 2000 coups were short-lived, whereas the post-2006 coup restrictions were the most prolonged and pervasive in Fiji's history. Before it was repealed, Fiji's media act loomed over the media sector like a guillotine (Morris, 2015, p. 37), because of the serious financial penalties and jail terms contained therein (Robie, 2016, pp. 96-99).

The reporting of COVID-19 in the Pacific

During 2020 as the pandemic commenced, concerns were raised about whether Pacific governments were using the need for health restrictions as an opportunity to curtail press freedom (Aualititia, 2020; Press freedom in the Pacific: Coronavirus spurs media crackdown, 2020; Robie, 2020). Such concerns contributed to the impetus to organise the panel discussion on media freedom in the Pacific region.

In Palau, the media industry chose to treat the COVID-19 pandemic as a health issue and avoid politicising it, according to Carreon. She spoke of a positive working relationship between health officials and the media sector, with a joint WhatsApp³ communication group for the sharing of information and questions. She described how media workers were able to check the accuracy of what they were writing. In her view, the media coverage contributed to high COVID-19 vaccination rates in Palau.⁴

Moala said that from early in the pandemic Tonga's media sector established a close working relationship with the health authorities, which allowed the media to gain accurate information. A flow-on benefit of this relationship was that health authorities brought advertising revenue to media outlets, in their efforts to disseminate public health messaging. Kekea's experience in Solomon Islands was not as positive. She explained that government departments were establishing communication officer roles, which she felt created obstacles for journalists. She argued that such officers could make it difficult for journalists to gain access to the people they wanted to interview.

Although there were lockdowns due to COVID-19 in both Tonga and Fiji, Moala and Singh said that media workers were able to continue working during those periods. As Dr Singh described in the case of Fiji, ‘media were considered essential service and reporters could move freely’. Nonetheless, Singh expressed some concerns about negative impacts of the pandemic on media freedom in Fiji. He explained that “after a while the health ministry press conferences were replaced by media releases” and pondered whether the Fijian government used the emergency situation to curtail media freedom (see also Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

As it turned out, curtailing mainstream media was counterproductive. Research indicated social media platforms became fertile grounds for misinformation in Fiji, with anti-vaccination material proliferating online, threatening to increase vaccine hesitancy (Kant & Varea, 2021). Although there are complex dynamics at play (Newman et al., 2012), news media are generally viewed as having more credibility than social media. For example, research in Papua New Guinea found that citizens were more likely to trust the media than social media platforms (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 6). Thus, the mainstream media may be able to assist governments to counter misinformation. Further, the media could be supported by fact-checking initiatives, training to improve fact-checking expertise (Robie, 2022, pp. 31-39) and training in use of ‘reflective practice’ (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020, p. 187).

Moala described an ongoing battle against misinformation in Tonga, including in relation to COVID-19 vaccinations. Singh argued that the mainstream media was best placed to provide accurate information to members of the public. He acknowledged that there had been some instances of inaccurate reporting by media outlets in the Pacific Islands region. Singh posited that professional lapses in Pacific journalism had deep causes. In part, such lapses stem from ‘uncompetitive salaries’ offered by media businesses due to slim profit margins, meaning that turnover of journalists is high, which makes it a challenge to build and sustain newsroom capacity. These issues are not new. For instance, salaries and staff turnover came up during discussions at a meeting of the Pacific news media industry in 2018 (Panapasa & Singh, 2018, p. 136). Research by Singh and Hanusch (2021) shows that Pacific journalists are among the youngest, most inexperienced and least qualified in the world. The structural weaknesses in the Pacific media landscape can become pronounced in crisis reporting, such as covering the pandemic. Singh suggested that ‘capacity building’ of journalists may help to reduce the likelihood of inaccuracies emerging from mainstream news media coverage of complex issues. The capacity-building should be proactive rather than reactive.

Impacts of the pandemic on the media sector

In December 2021, during the online seminar, Carreon described major impacts

of the pandemic for the media sector in Palau, including a shortage of advertising revenue, cash-strapped media outlets and rapid turnover of journalists. Singh had observed similar trends in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. He drew an explicit ‘link between financial viability [of media businesses] and media freedom’. He said that the pandemic may have brought some media outlets to the brink of collapse. Singh pointed out that the advertising market in the Pacific Islands region was ‘small to begin with’, that ‘digital disruption’ had begun to dent the funding model and that the pandemic may prove to be ‘the final nail in the vulnerable Pacific media coffin’. He predicted that financially weak media businesses would close or downsize. The Pacific media industry was small, he said, but it did have much strategic value.

In March 2023, the panellists were asked about developments since December 2021. Carreon reflected that pandemic border closures meant that foreign reporters were unable to travel to the Pacific, which allowed local journalists to receive more recognition than they had in the past. Her impression was that this had led to a flourishing of the Pacific media sector, with increased work opportunities for freelance journalists and the establishment of several new media organisations, some of which are receiving external funding. Carreon has the sense that there is now greater attention on the media sector in the Pacific Islands region, coupled with additional media development initiatives.

In Solomon Islands, a recent change has been the advent of weekly government press conferences since about the start of February 2023. Kekea explained that journalists were able to send in questions in advance to the Prime Minister’s office. If a question related to the work of a specific government department, a relevant senior bureaucrat would be invited to the press conference to respond. For example, if a question was submitted about agriculture policy, the head of the department that handles agriculture would attend the press conference.

It is important to note here that typical practice for media conferences in democracies is that written questions are not sent in advance. The drawbacks of sending questions, as opposed to stating off the cuff questions during media conferences or one-on-one face-to-face interviews, are well-known in the field of journalism. Among them, the disadvantages include the opportunity for authorities to provide crafted responses, to be selective as to which questions to answer, and to avoid follow-up questions.

Moala said that misinformation remained a challenge facing the media sector in Tonga. Those opposed to vaccination, including religious leaders, claimed that COVID-19 shots had led to deaths and suggested that there had been a spike in the death rate. Health authorities countered that any rise in the number of deaths would be due to COVID-19 itself. Media outlets continued to publish information from the health authorities in a concerted effort to counter misinformation.

Moala mentioned that Tongan media houses met recently to discuss their

experiences. One topic of conversation was the relationship between the media industry and the government. Moala said that there was a need for the media to remain vigilant in monitoring and reporting on government activities even while the government was the main source of advertising revenue.

While Papua New Guinea was not discussed in detail during the event in December 2021, it is important to note that the government of Papua New Guinea released a draft media policy in early February 2023. This raised concerns regarding media freedom because the draft included the idea of licensing journalists and revoking licences for breaches (Harriman, 2023). In addition, there were other aspects of the draft policy that caused alarm (Anthony & Hawkins, 2023; Pacific Media Watch, 2023a; Waide, 2023). Following calls for an extension of the initial short consultation period (Harriman, 2023), an extension was granted (Vincent, 2023) and a consultative workshop was held early in March (Watson, 2023). Late in March 2023, the Minister for Information and Communication Technology, Timothy Masiu, indicated that a report on the consultation process would be released shortly and a revised policy would be released in late April 2023 (Kenneth, 2023). At the time of writing, no revised version had been made available but an online survey was accessible on the website of the Department of Information and Communications Technology so that members of the public could contribute their views. Pacific Freedom Forum and others continued to call for the process to be abandoned, arguing that no media policy was required (Hawkins, 2023; Pacific Media Watch, 2023b).

Conclusion

While there are diverse contexts across the Pacific Island countries, Pacific journalists, news editors, media organisations and media scholars remain convinced of the need to discuss media rights because of the links with freedom and democracy. When he announced the repeal of Fiji's media act, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka described media freedom and freedom of expression as the 'oxygen of democracy', adding that these 'fundamental freedoms are integral to enable the people to hold their government accountable' (Anthony, 2023). It remains imperative to highlight the value of media freedom and the need to protect it. In this regard, COVID-19 has been a stark reminder about the link between media freedom and the financial viability of media organisations, especially in the Pacific, where the advertising markets are relatively small and profit margins correspondingly limited. Although media businesses faced challenges during the height of the pandemic due to revenue downturns, the media industry across the Pacific continues to strive to conduct impartial reporting, for the benefit of citizens and the societies in which they live. Media professionals and businesses face various challenges and thus it is important to support their work and ensure that they are able to operate without fear of violence or any other forms of reprisal.

Notes

1. A video recording of the panel discussion is available at <https://youtu.be/UjxfIAT9xUg>
2. At the time of the panel discussion (December 2021), Bernadette Carreon was a freelance journalist in Palau and chair of Pacific Freedom Forum. At the time of writing (March 2023), she was a Pacific investigative reporter with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and coordinator of Pacific Freedom Forum.
3. WhatsApp is a smartphone application that allows for chat groups such as the one referred to here, as well as one-to-one communication.
4. In October 2021, Palau had one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world (IFRC, 2021).

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