

Time to rethink ‘watchdog’ journalism in the Pacific

Abstract: For more than five decades, ‘Watchdog Journalism’ has been taught as the yardstick for a free media. With the so-called ‘mainstream’ media becoming increasingly commercialised—both in a global scale and domestically—and with the media being primarily owned by business conglomerates, the ‘watchdog’ model has created a journalism culture that is too adversarial and creates conflicts rather than helping to solve today’s problems/conflicts. A new paradigm of watchdog journalism is needed where the media is able to hold powerful players to account for facilitating the development/livelihood needs of communities, especially those in the margins of society. This new paradigm of journalism needs to focus on ‘development rights’ rather than ‘human rights’ taking into account many aspects of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs should be looked at in terms of a new definition of human rights where the journalist could play a similar role to that prescribed in ‘watchdog’ journalism theory, but looking for solutions rather conflicts, and include a larger field of stakeholders which need to be made accountable such as governments, big business and particularly conglomerates—even NGOs and faith-based organisations. This watchdog role needs to be applied to trade agreements and other treaties, including those addressing climate change. To develop a new journalism culture to address these issues, media training programmes in the Pacific need to rethink their strategies and examine how to promote independent social media models that are economically and sustainably viable.

Keywords: China, climate change, democracy, development journalism, development rights, Fiji, journalism models, journalism theory, Pacific journalism, sustainable development goals, United Nations, watchdog journalism

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Introduction

FOR WELL over five decades, we have been teaching the idea of a ‘free media’ as one that is privately owned and being able to make governments accountable for the welfare of its people—not suppress them. We call it ‘watchdog’ journalism. According to the US Freedom Forum, you cannot have

democracy without a free press (media) (Freedom Forum, n.d.). It describes the watchdog theory as:

Protected by the First Amendment, a free press means our government answers to the people. An independent news media uses its watchdog role to investigate and report on government overreach and wrongdoing and hold those in power accountable for their actions. Because of press freedom, we get to decide what news, information and entertainment to consume. The government does not have the power to select which media to allow. Our exposure to a variety of viewpoints encourages self-expression and debate and helps us make informed decisions about our community and country. This core freedom also entertains us, provides a ‘first draft of history’ and spurs some of us toward activism. At its best, the press connects us and provides information we rely on to participate in public life—protecting all our freedoms. (Freedom Forum, n.d.)

These are good lofty principles, but does it work that way today? When the mainstream media in the United States and United Kingdom disseminated lies (without fact checking) claiming that Saddam Hussein had ‘weapons of mass destruction’ paving the way for the US and its allies to invade Iraq in 2003, did it really spur the public towards antiwar activism?

In his study of how a misinformed public can be manipulated by foreign influences to support going to war against Iraq, Ferguson (2023) noted: ‘Disinformation is a deliberately constructed narrative intended to deceive, while the well-meaning carriers of that information who believe it to be true transform it into misinformation.’ He argued that ‘disinformation cannot become misinformation without a trusted source to serve as its unwitting carrier, which gives the false narrative its power. Knowing one’s audience is key to this process because trusted sources differ based on the target’ (Ferguson, 2023).

This is an important argument to consider when analysing how the ‘China-bashing’ journalism by the Western (as well as Indian and Japanese) media is driving people towards supporting military spending rather than questioning the overreach of governments and their alliances with the industrial-military complex.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the media’s unquestioning promotion of vaccines and one particular brand Pfizer—without questioning the morality of making huge profits (made by Pfizer in particular) out of a pandemic, and the US government’s lack of support for a motion at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by developing countries to lift the patents on the vaccines, is more akin to ‘vaccine consent’ journalism rather than watchdog journalism (Seneviratne, 2021). In fact, those who dared to question the efficacy of the vaccines, the role of global Pharma monopolies and patent regimes, were labeled as ‘conspiracy theorists’ and shut out of the mainstream media, and even platforms like Facebook

and Twitter. That is not watchdog journalism that makes powers accountable for their actions.

Watchdog journalism worked as long as media owners only owned media; today they have become conglomerates owning not only networks of media, but also other businesses, even in oil and arms industry. Today this ‘watchdog’ has become the ‘lapdog’ for everyone with power and they are not necessarily governments.

So, when the conglomerates own the media, we need a watchdog to watchdog the watchdog. Speaking at a media conference in Beijing in 2005, Dr Shashi Tharoor, the UN’s then Head of Public Information said:

The question isn’t whether the media teaches, it’s what it teaches. It can reinforce existing stereotypes, or build new positive ones. It can denigrate and dismiss cultures that are different, or, it can show how wonderful this complicated world of ours is. The custodians of our airwaves can choose to be purveyors of weapons of mass distraction, or, they can choose to be builders of a better world.

Unfortunately, the mainstream media, especially the Anglo-American media—which still wields enormous power to influence (or should I say misinform)—the world, has chosen to be the ‘weapons of mass distraction’. If I am going to list them it will take me many pages.

‘Free’ media and propaganda war

Chandran Nair (2023) has argued that people in China and the non-Western world must realise that when it comes to the workings of the mainstream media we are in a new era—a propaganda war the likes of which the world has never seen before, powered by today’s digital technology. ‘The media war is real, and tech-driven, and it is not a fight for eyeballs to deliver fair, honest, and educational news. It is almost everything else but that, especially when it comes to China or enemies of the West’, he noted.

On one side is sheer propaganda aimed at the preservation of Western power. The idea that Western media is run by fair-minded people who are independent, driven only by a desire to talk truth to power, is a mirage. It is a myth, and it is a bitter pill that needs to be swallowed. (Nair, 2023)

He argued this was the first stage in enabling one to step out of the propaganda mist we are engulfed in on a daily basis, so that one can examine different viewpoints as news is consumed. ‘This is not easy, given the current dominance of Western media outlets and their apparently collective mission,’ Nair argued.

Weaponising democracy and human rights

Today much of the world believes that world peace is threatened, not by terrorists,

Russia or China, but by the US, NATO and its allies such as Australia—but that is not what we are being told by the global Western media. Western media tries to convince us that China is a secretive power that is trying to create debt-traps to corner the resources of the world, while on the other side the Chinese say that their mission is to deliver a shared future of prosperity for the global community (Zheng, 2023).

It is important to understand this bias in the global media narrative in the midst of the process taking shape in the South Pacific, where Chinese development aid is labelled as ‘debt traps’ while the West’s promotion of a ‘security threat’ from China is being normalised. As far as the Pacific is concerned, it is Australian media’s narrative of a Chinese threat that should be worrying. If no proper critical journalism is practised in the region, the Pacific would be forced into debt to arm itself in alliance with Western powers.

It should also be remembered that the Pacific was treated as ‘forward defence’ battlefields for the war with Japan in the Second World War and as a dumping ground for nuclear weapon testing after the war.

In March 2023, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and *The Age*, published a series of five articles by defence analysts arguing that Australia needed to prepare for war with China within the next three years, and the country was not prepared for it. The series came as the federal government was beginning to consider the biggest defence shake-up in nearly four decades. In an editorial, *The Herald* said ‘discussing Australia’s preparedness or lack of preparedness for war is responsible journalism and important for democracy’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2023).

In an article written a few months before his death in December 2023, the exiled Australian journalist John Pilger (2023) warned that America’s ‘war on terror’ had cost millions of lives but the enormity of this violence and suffering seemed to have no place in Western consciousness. He added that as China-bashing heated up in mainstream journalism, no literary critics and journalists seemed prepared to question the foundations of the Western way of life (and their mentality).

Referring to fear-mongering in the mainstream Australian media about an ‘imminent Chinese attack’ on Australia in coming years, Pilger argued that regularly they had political and military analysts who presented these views to ‘poison’ Australian’s minds, without any credible evidence to back them up (Pilger, 2023). He noted:

There is no threat to Australia. None. The faraway ‘lucky’ country has no enemies, least of all China, its largest trading partner. Yet China-bashing that draws on Australia’s long history of racism towards Asia has become something of a sport for the self-ordained experts. (Pilger, 2023)

Dollar-chasing democracy vendors

It is through the funding of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) to mount so-called ‘colour revolutions’—that the Western media describe as ‘people’s movements for democracy and human rights’—that alliances are promoted, especially among young people to promote Western-centric domestic political agendas. The West has thus weaponised democracy and human rights and the Anglo-American media are its missionaries.

These ‘colour revolutions’ have manipulated the youth to overthrow governments—not subservient to the West—by calling for greater democracy and human rights. When they succeed, the new democracy has been more draconian than what they had—Egypt, Libya and Ukraine are some examples. It is no surprise that China’s President Xi Jinping (ABC, 2022) warned about these colour revolutions in a speech to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in 2022 and offered to set up a counter-terrorism training centre to help monitor them.

I would call these groups ‘dollar chasing democracy vendors’. They say what the Western funders want to hear. They cannot be trusted to be news sources.

Most Asian governments, including India, have imposed strict controls on NGOs receiving money from overseas because these ‘colour revolutions’ are fuelled by Western funding agencies – to instigate insurgencies (First Post, 2023). The Pacific would also need to closely scrutinise NGO funding from overseas and impose controls if that is designed to create chaos and threaten national security.

Military mindset

If the media is going to act according to the true spirit of the watchdog media theory, they should be questioning loud and clear the military mindset of the West, where everything is today interpreted as ‘security threats’ and solutions are promoted as increasing your military budgets and preparing for war. War is good business for Americans. Consider their stock prices after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and multi-billion military aid packages on offer. If critics question this military spending, they are likely to be labelled as a ‘Chinese (or Russian) stooge’.

ABC News (Burgess, 2023) reported in January 2023 that as the Ukraine war continued, the US arms industry had become the biggest winner. The report pointed out that ‘some EU officials’ had expressed concerns about the US reaping the benefits of prolonging the war, through arms sales and increasing gas prices, while some of its member countries had to replenish stocks sent to Ukraine.

Protecting democracy and human rights are a pretext for such war preparations, and the ‘watchdog’ journalists have become their cheer leaders. If providing independent and diversity of views, to spur us into activism is watchdog journalism that is not happening. There is no hint of growing peace movements in the West, or elsewhere.

Rules-based order

Today we often hear Western leaders and their media—Australia included—talking about protecting a ‘rules-based order’ from Chinese threats. Do the media actually ask, what is this rules-based order and how does it work? India’s Foreign Minister S, Jaishankar, addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2023, described it well. He said:

The international order is diverse and we must cater for divergences, if not differences. The days when a few nations set the agenda and expected others to fall in line are over. As the United Nations itself symbolises, finding common ground is an imperative. To listen to others and to respect their viewpoints, this is not weakness; it is the basics of cooperation. Only then can collective efforts on global issues be successful. (Jaishankar, 2023)

He was not directing this at China—China’s foreign minister would have said something similar, if called upon to describe this so-called ‘rules-based order’.

Most countries in the Global South have been extremely unhappy at the way the West started a war with Russia and asked them to fall in line. Jaishankar has been blunt about this and a video of his comments that called for a change in the European mindset went viral across the globe (Jaishankar, 2022). Today, when it comes to reporting China, not only the American media but also the Australian media practises a type of journalism I regard as ‘China-bashing journalism’ not watchdog journalism. The Chinese call it ‘smear journalism’. Such journalism misrepresents many of the good things China is doing by calling these initiatives ‘debt traps’ or ‘security threats’.

Spanish journalist Javier Garcia, author of a new book, *China: Threat or hope?: The pragmatic revolution*, in an interview with China’s Xinhua news agency (Xia, 2023) listed the ‘arsenal of words’ aimed at instilling fear in anything related to China and reinforcing the negative image installed in the heads of readers, manipulating the terms like ‘regime’, ‘purge’, ‘propaganda’ and ‘repression’ or expressions like ‘power struggles’, ‘under threat’ and ‘debt trap’. In this sense, the rich in the United States are millionaires or great entrepreneurs, while those in China are oligarchs; China does not fire corrupt or inefficient officials, but rather ‘purges’ them; China does not grant advantageous loans to develop infrastructure in poor countries, but ‘traps’ them in debt; China adopts ‘vaccine diplomacy’, and other countries donate them selflessly.

Unfortunately, when it comes to reporting about China, Australian media has forgotten what objectivity and fairness is. This is irrational, irresponsible journalism not freedom of expression. It is threatening Australia’s security and that of the region.

Reporting the Pacific

This type of China-bashing journalism is also common when the Australian media reports about China's engagement with the South Pacific. Everything that China does is a security issue or threatening the rules-based order in the Pacific.

Daru in Papua New Guinea is an interesting example. In December 2020, China announced a \$200 million deal to build a fisheries harbour in this sleepy village, which did not even have a daily market (Cluff, 2020). Immediately, the Australian media and several parliamentarians in Canberra became hysterical (I was in Sydney at the time), declaring that China was planning a naval base 200 kilometers from Australia's shores.

What went largely unreported was that just before the announcement, China had signed an agreement (Godfrey, 2020) to build a fish processing plant in PNG and to allow PNG to export fish products to China, which has the world's largest seafood market. In the long term this project would have opened up the China market to the fishing industry right across the Pacific via the Daru fishing harbour, where a new city was to have been built.

A potential win-win situation was turned into a divisive security issue.

Pacific: A hotspot of geopolitical conflict

Adjunct Professor Vijay Naidu in Development Studies and Governance at the University of the South Pacific has argued that the South Pacific became a hotspot of geopolitical battles at the turn of the century with the Chinese coming into the region.

South Pacific was expected to be under the ANZUS umbrella in the post-Second World War period¹. They were to be kept together under regional organisations like the South Pacific Commission and not to be too involved with countries that ANZUS partners see as enemies. Thus, Pacific Island Countries (PICs) had very little involvement with the Soviet Union or with China. Even India was looked upon with suspicion. I would go further and say, in fact, all Asian countries were regarded with suspicion by ANZUS ... With increased engagement in the Pacific by China there is virtually hysteria in all these ANZUS countries. (V. Naidu, interview with the author, October 2023).

Naidu views this hysteria as stemming from the fact that for a long time since the end of the Second World War, the South Pacific region had been a backyard for Australia, New Zealand and the US. 'So they see this as something almost exclusively their own. They had this policy of strategic denial to the Russians (Soviet Union). I think they would like to have that against the Chinese,' he argues.

China's engagement with the Pacific is growing. In a two-hour meeting with China's ambassador to Fiji, Zhou Jian, he told me that he would like the Pacific

media to see China as a development partner. (Zhou Jian, meeting with the author, May 2023). In April 2022, the China Pacific Island Countries Climatic Action Cooperation Center was inaugurated in Shandong Province in China. There are a number of other projects covering health, agriculture, construction, police training and so on across the Pacific.

In September 2023 (Seneviratne, 2023a), Shandong Province and Fiji signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to exchange scholars and experts from the provincial institution to assist the Pacific Island nation in the agriculture sector. At the signing event, Fiji's Agriculture Minister Vatimi Rayalu said that Fiji and China had a successful history of cooperating in agriculture. He told the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation that this initiative was critical to agricultural production to promote heightened collaboration among key stakeholders and help Fiji connect to the vast Chinese market. China was also helping Fiji to revive its rice farming sector and had recently posted six Chinese agriculture technicians to help introduce high yielding seeds and rice farming technology in order to attract young people to become rice farmers (Seneviratne, 2023b).

Unfortunately, the Australian media is unable to see the development assistance aspects of these projects. On the other hand, they praise the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM) as a development aid project that would help Pacific Islanders, especially Fijians, to earn a good living in Australia and help their families back home.

In an article in *The Fiji Times*, Catholic Archbishop of Fiji, Peter Loy Chong (2023) claimed that the workers were treated as 'modern day slaves' in Australia. It is not only seasonal workers, Australia is openly encouraging professionally qualified nurses, teachers and other skilled staff to migrate to Australia to plug a skills shortage. In the process, it is threatening to seriously disrupt public health and education sectors, and also the agriculture sector in Fiji. Pacific media need to hold Australia accountable for this situation.

They are being guided by Australians to think of the monetary benefits Fijian families would enjoy from remittances sent back home. Addressing an economic forum at the Asian Development Bank in Manila in September 2023, Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Professor Biman Prasad (2023) said:

We see major global powers locked in a geo-strategic competition. This is hugely unsettling for us across the Pacific. Fiji and the Pacific nations find themselves on the frontlines of this geopolitical contestation. This contestation will have long-term adverse consequences for the region. There are no win-win options on the road ahead. None. There will only be hard choices. (Prasad, 2023)

The Australian and Western media have played an irresponsible role in bringing the region to this predicament. They have created a poisonous cocktail

of conflict reporting and this kind of watchdog reporting—biased and prejudiced—has created an adversarial journalism culture that is creating conflicts and the media don't know how to solve it or more so to promote cooperation for development.

Conclusion: Development rights and rethinking watchdog journalism

In an essay by a final year journalism student, Nivash Kumar (2023), at The University of the South Pacific (USP), he said:

Development journalism is a news reporting framework that prioritises the economic and social development of a region. In the Pacific region, where many countries are still struggling with poverty and lack of basic infrastructure, development journalism can play an important role in highlighting the issues and proposing solutions. This approach involves working closely with communities and stakeholders to identify their needs and to report on the progress being made towards achieving those goals. It can also help to foster a sense of community engagement and responsibility, which is crucial for long-term sustainable development. (Kumar, 2023)

This is precisely what the Pacific media needs and watchdog journalism concepts could be applied to such reporting without treating these as conflicts needing two opposing viewpoints. In the Pacific, we can address the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and report in such a way that journalism assists in achieving these goals.

In October 2023, the UN Human Rights Council voted to forward to the UN General Assembly a draft international covenant on right to development, which was supported by both China and India, and opposed by 13 Western countries (UN Human Rights Council, 2023). If adopted as an international treaty, rather than individual rights, this community rights concept would be more suitable for the Pacific.

Human rights, according to the development rights agenda, are what is there in the SDGs. Providing clean water and sanitation to the people, a good education, developing and nurturing sustainable systems of agriculture to provide food security to people, protecting the environment and protecting communities from the impacts of climatic change, empowering women, providing proper housing and healthcare to people, and so on.

Governments should be held accountable to providing these rights to people, but that cannot be achieved by the media always accusing governments of inefficiency or corruption.

We as reporters need to go out to the communities talk to the people and find out how they live, what is lacking and how they think these services could be provided and how, by governments. Then, we can ask questions from the

government of how they could provide for the people and what are the barriers? Journalists could even become a facilitator of a dialogue between the communities and the government.

Such development rights based reporting could also question the geo-political machinations in the region and question outside powers about their role in Pacific affairs. This includes close scrutiny of Chinese activities as well, but in an objective manner. As China sees assistance to the Pacific as investments – not charity or aid—these investments need to be carefully analysed to see if it is assisting local communities by creating jobs and other income generating avenues or if it is setting debt traps. If Chinese workers are brought in, if they are doing jobs that could be done by locals, and also if they are being trafficked by crime syndicates. There are many human trafficking syndicates that are involved in trafficking people—both out of the Pacific and into the Pacific. Some of these traffickers may be Chinese, but they should not be linked to the Chinese government nor should Fijian and Australian traffickers be linked to their own governments. Those trying to instigate ‘colour revolution’ need to be exposed as well for trying to destabilise countries, and be made accountable.

In 2017 and 2018, I was involved with a group of Asian communication scholars with UNESCO funding to develop curriculum to train Asian journalists in ‘mindful reporting’ using philosophical concepts from Buddhism and Confucianism. We are now in the process of promoting this curriculum called ‘mindful communication for sustainable development’. This will be very useful for the Pacific to address climatic change issues.

So let us rethink the concept of ‘watchdog’ journalism—not reject it—but refine it so that journalism will unite and empower the people not divide them. This empowerment is not necessarily about freedom of speech, but journalism helping people to improve their living standards to live comfortably and peacefully, especially without being exploited economically, such as for cheap labour.

Note

1. The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) was established in 1951 as a non-binding collective security agreement to cooperate on military matters in the Pacific Ocean region (Wikipedia).

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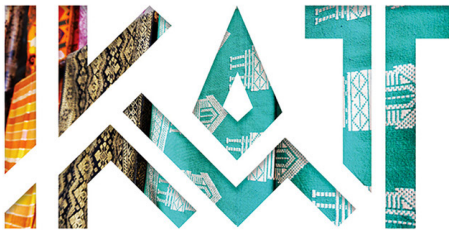
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