

Nurturing resilient journalists

A Fiji case study of student news reporting in challenging Pacific environments

Abstract: This article examines the multifaceted learning experiences University of the South Pacific (USP) journalism students gain from practical training. It is the latest in a series of papers on applied learning and teaching at USP journalism. Applied training methods take into account the challenges of the Pacific news reporting terrain in which USP journalism graduates will operate once they start work. The article reiterates that the best way to condition future journalists for their work environment is to expose them to the elements. The article uses USP student journalists' coverage of the 2018 and 2022 Fiji elections as background case studies of practical experience and learning outcomes.

Keywords: case study, elections, Fiji, Fiji coups, learning outcomes, Pacific, practical training, student journalism, University of the South Pacific, Wansolwara

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Introduction

JOURNALISTS in most Pacific Island countries face a challenging news reporting terrain. Besides dealing with political instability, coups, civilian unrest and complex developmental issues, journalists must contend with hostile government attitudes and draconian media legislation (Singh & Hanusch, 2021). Considering this, a key issue facing Pacific journalism schools and training institutes is how to best prepare students for the challenging environment that they will face once they become professionals. One strategy adopted by The University of the South Pacific (USP) Journalism Programme is the emphasis on practical training through the USP Journalism student press, mainly the student training newspaper, *Wansolwara*, and the online news portal, *Wansolwara Online*. This article looks at the learning outcomes of practical training through student journalists' coverage of Fiji's 2018 and 2022 general elections. Both elections were

momentous events in the coup-prone country's path to democracy, thus highly newsworthy from a journalistic standpoint.

This article is part of a series of research papers emanating from the USP Journalism Programme into applied learning and teaching (Cass, 2002; Drugunalevu & Manarac, 2015; Robie, 2000, 2001a; 2001b; 2002, 2010; 2012; Singh & Drugunalevu, 2016). Jointly owned and governed by 12 Pacific Island member countries—Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu—the USP is one of only two regional universities in the world. Over the years, USP Journalism students from the region have covered major events out of the main Laucala Campus in Suva, Fiji, including regional meetings, national elections, USP student elections, and coups, political upheavals, and civil unrest.

Regarding the 2018 and 2022 Fiji elections, the USP student press chose to differentiate its coverage from the mainstream media by preferencing a 'constructive journalism' approach, as opposed to the classical 'watchdog journalism' stance. The former is seen as less adversarial and less elitist than the latter (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Student journalists focused on lesser-known candidates, female contestants, and grassroots voters, whose voices are usually drowned out, or dominated by the better-known and well-established candidates, whom the mainstream media choose to preference. The elections coverage was not just an opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with Fiji's media laws and electoral procedures, but to also become better acquainted with the challenges facing the country and the difficulties encountered by citizens. This was achieved by following the national debates, and through interviews with everyday people and political candidates.

This reflective article discusses the context that informs learning and teaching at USP Journalism, the editorial approach for the elections coverage, including pre-planning and training, and the news outputs, learning outcomes, and other insights from this exercise.

The context informing learning and teaching

The learning and teaching of journalism at USP, including practical training, is anchored to the Pacific media and political contexts. Singh (2020) has detailed the hazardous nature of the Pacific news reporting terrain via his internal and external threats typology. The major external threats include political pressure and coercion from government and other powerful elements, commercial pressure from advertisers, and more recently, pressure from foreign interests/countries attempting to influence how they are portrayed in island countries' national media (Singh, 2020).

Internal threats, which emanate from within the news media sector, are more covert and less coercive in nature, and as a result, they are not as widely known,

or as well recorded as external threats. Internal threats include uncompetitive salaries in the journalism field, attributed to small advertising markets and limited revenue, resulting in a high rate of journalist turnover due to the pursuit of better paid jobs in public relations. This high journalist attrition trend is manifest in a young, underqualified and inexperienced journalist cohort in Pacific island countries (see Singh & Hanusch, 2021). This leaves media organisations in a constant struggle to build newsroom capacity, with a potentially negative impact on the quality of news and on journalism as a whole. This is an intractable problem that is hard to address because it is tied to the very nature and make-up of Pacific Island countries, with respect to their small economies, and small population size. The lack of critical mass and diseconomies of scale make it challenging for news media organisations to achieve and sustain healthy profits, which, in turn impact on staff retention and capital investment. The high rate of newsroom staff turnover means that a young and inexperienced journalist cohort is at the forefront of the coverage of major news events at any given time (see Singh & Hanusch, 2021). This situation underscores the importance of practical training in Pacific journalism schools to prepare graduates for the eventuality of being thrust into the forefront of reporting big events as soon as they are recruited.

With regards to external threats, Pacific Island governments habitually propose or implement stronger media legislation to address what they claim to be the lack of standards and professionalism in journalism. A good example is the former Fiji government's punitive *2010 Media Industry Development Act*, implemented in the name of improving standards. It had been in place for 13 years before it was repealed by the newly-elected Coalition government in April 2023. By then, Fiji had earned the reputation of being the worst Pacific Island country to be a journalist, according to the 2022 Reporters Without Borders report (Reporters Without Borders, 2020) with the media act linked to a culture of self-censorship (Singh, 2018). Fiji has proved to be a major challenge for journalists: Robie (2009, p. 86) has written how Fiji, even after four decades of independence, continued to face the 'paradox of a traditionally free press and a succession of mostly authoritarian or paternalistic governments, whether elected or installed as the result of coups'.

While Fiji had the harshest media legislation between 2010 and 2023 on top of a tricky political landscape, the media in other Pacific island countries were not free of challenges. Just when Fiji repealed its media act, PNG launched its draft media act, raising new concerns about free speech and media rights in that country (Watson & Singh, 2023).

The 2018 Pacific Islands News Association Summit discussed how media in the region continuously faced political pressure and the risk of harsher legislation for reporting long-standing problems, such as corruption, while journalists faced threats, violence and intimidation (Panapasa & Singh, 2018). The pre-existing

financial and editorial problems were exacerbated by the twin impacts of the digital disruption and the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in an online panel of experienced Pacific journalists. The discussion was convened by the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University in December 2021. Besides eating away the already limited advertising revenue, digital disruption and the COVID-19 pandemic saw further government crackdowns, eliciting calls for greater protection of media professionals and media businesses, as well as support for freedom of speech and media rights (Watson & Singh, 2023).

However, insofar as media rights are concerned, there is a longstanding debate in the Pacific about the most appropriate form of journalism practice in an under-developing region, with persistent questions about the extent to which the media should be free in politically and socially fragile environments. According to some arguments, a young, inexperienced, and underqualified journalist corps could exacerbate potentially volatile situations, especially in Pacific countries with ethnic tensions, such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (Iroga, 2008; Rooney, Papoutsaki & Pamba, 2004; Singh, 2015). However, Hackett (2013) argues against totally discarding Western free press ideals because of their strengths, such as holding power to account, even while recognising their ‘significant shortcomings’ (pp. 23–34). Cass (2014) has observed what he perceives to be a unique form of journalism that has evolved in the Pacific—a hybrid of the developmental and watchdog models.

These arguments resonate with an ‘International Debate’ organised by the Denmark-based International Media Support in 2007. The debate has some relevance for Fiji, PNG and the Solomon Islands, which have experienced serious levels of ethnic tensions, violent confrontations and political instability. The debate, published in a report, *Press freedom post-conflict: a cause of instability or foundation of democratic development?* (International Media Support, 2007), focused on issues surrounding press freedom in post-conflict situations, with arguments for and against liberalising media environments in post-conflict countries. The questions are worth revisiting in relation to the complexities of issues in the Pacific media sector, and informing debates about media practice and journalist education in the region:

- Should advocates of media freedom stand on principles or pragmatism?
- Are media development actors too dogmatic about freedom of expression, applying it unyieldingly in circumstances where more nuanced approaches are needed?
- Is it a ‘one size fits all’ approach at its worst?
- How should international community foster and support the appropriate blend of media related programmes in post-conflict settings? (International Media Support, 2007, p. 4)

The debaters were organised into two opposing groups—media purists and media pragmatists. The pragmatists contended that true democracy was impossible without a pluralistic media unencumbered by undue regulation. They insisted that media freedom was the foundation for stability in both democracies and fragile societies alike. Media becomes ‘important as a conduit, a channel and a public platform that will (if executed according to sound professional standards) expose failures and malpractices’ (International Media Support, 2007, p. 7)

This position underscores the significance of ‘sound professional standards’ as a pre-requisite for a democratic media. The lack of ‘sound professional standards’ identifies as an ‘internal threat’ in Singh’s (2020) typology of threats. It highlights the link between media freedom and ‘professional’ standards: without the latter, the former is imperiled in that lack of standards become a government excuse to impose harsher legislation. This scenario became a reality in Fiji with the government imposing the *2010 Media Industry Development Act* in the name of improving standards (Singh, 2020). The Pacific has a comparatively young and inexperienced journalist cohort pushed into the forefront of news coverage because of high staff attrition rate (Singh & Hanusch, 2021). If the alleged lack of ‘sound professional standards’ that Pacific governments and others often complain about is attributed to inexperienced and underqualified journalists, then it represents an internal threat to media freedom (Singh, 2020).

Pragmatists further argued that it should not be automatically assumed that the media consistently act as a force for good, respect other peoples’ freedoms, show impartiality, or even contribute to stability. They stressed that the limits of free media must be acknowledged, especially in post-conflict settings with a broad variety of concerns to address (International Media Support, 2007). Media is only one and not necessarily the most important priority, hence freedom of expression must be carefully restricted. Whether the media like it or not, these restrictions can promote stability, which would actually be in the interest of the media in the long term. The media is a powerful vehicle to expose injustice, but citizens’ welfare is best protected by institutional checks and balances. Therefore, paying attention to the contextual environment (in a post-conflict situation) might take precedence over guarantees of media freedom and freedom of expression (International Media Support, 2007).

The USP Journalism practical training approach

The scenarios outlined in the previous sections reflect some of the dilemmas and dangers in the Pacific island news media sector, and the challenges that they pose to journalists, including student journalists who join the workforce. They also outline questions and dilemmas about which type of journalistic style is best suited for the Pacific region. In this regard, practical training is indispensable to provide student journalists a taste of the real world to equip them with the right

tools to deal with any confronting situations. Practical training is also crucial for experimenting with different forms of journalism in the field, including constructive journalism, which may be more suited than the classical watchdog style in certain situations, as argued in the International Media Support (2007) report.

USP Journalism's major practical learning tool is the student training newspaper and online news portal, *Wansolwara*, besides six-weeks professional work attachments with mainstream media organisations for final year students.

Wansolwara is published twice in the academic year in magazine-format, and is supplemented by an online news portal, *Wansolwara Online*, which is more news-focused, including any major breaking news. The student newspaper is available in PDF format on the *Wansolwara* news website (<https://www.usp.ac.fj/wansolwaranews/news/>).

Initially 16 pages in size, *Wansolwara* is now a 24-32 page newspaper published in full colour. Since its founding, the newspaper has relied on advertising revenue (raised by the students) to fund production costs, and reporting assignments outside the capital city, Suva.

In more recent years, *Wansolwara* has been published and distributed as an insert by Fiji's two national newspapers free of charge—first by the *Fiji Sun* for several years, and more lately by *The Fiji Times*. Besides nationwide distribution of *Wansolwara*, the support from the national dailies enabled the programme to raise advertising revenue to fund reporting assignments in other Fiji towns and cities, besides Suva.

The regular *Wansolwara* news beats broadly cover campus news and Pacific regional news. Fiji national and community news are also prioritised, since the paper is published out of the USP journalism programme based at Laucala Campus in Suva, Fiji. *Wansolwara* coverage includes USP student politics, Fijian politics, major regional meetings and events, natural disasters and environmental reporting, and any major upheavals, such as the Fiji military coups. Some of the major events covered include George Speight's putsch (May 2000), the first ever mutiny in Fiji's military history (November 2000), Fiji general election (August 2001), the 2000 coup trials and court martial (2002), the Bainimarama coup in 2006 (and its aftermath). The students also cover the softer side of news, such as arts, music, entertainment, and sports. The reporting experiences of the students have been documented in several research papers on experiential learning through *Wansolwara* (see Drugunalevu & Manarae, 2015; Robie, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2010; Singh & Drugunalevu, 2016). The findings indicate that besides the usual benefits of practical training—improving writing skills, developing contacts, building confidence and learning to work under deadline—one of the major benefits is the exposure to various forms of pressure—political, institutional, societal, community and cultural—and learning how to respond to them.

New Zealand-based media academic Philip Cass (2016), the founding lecturer

of *Wansolwara*, has highlighted how from the early days the coverage of some financial irregularities within the USP Student Association resulted in threats against student reporters. Singh and Drugunalevu's (2016) work indicated that little had changed in the following years, with their case studies documenting the experiences of a second-year student who faced threats and coercion for reporting discrepancies in the USP Student Association finances. Another second-year student was assaulted on campus for another report into student association financial irregularities. The third case study showed a how final year Samoan student was ostracised by her fellow Samoan campus community for reporting a dramatic slump in their academic performance. This example was consistent with Robie's (2002, p. 147) observation of how customary obligations and pressures are frequently a burden on journalists in the South Pacific. It was only through practical training that the Samoan student was able to get an early taste of such cultural pressure. While initially she felt depressed, she said that the experience toughened her (Singh & Drugunalevu, 2016).

The USP student press has, at times, drawn controversy from the faculty, especially in relation to the 2000 Fiji coup coverage, with USP administrators closing the news website due to 'safety concerns', and the then vice-chancellor Esekia Solofa (in Robie, 2002), issuing a statement claiming that journalism students should be trained through 'simulated' instead of 'real' journalism.

However, Singh and Drugunalevu (2016) have argued that it was through practical training that students gained first-hand experience in problem-solving skills, such as circumventing gatekeeping at USP during the 2000 coup, and skirt-ing state censorship in covering the 2006 Fiji coup. While the hostile reactions against student reporters are unpleasant, the exposure to confronting situations provided an early taste of real-world journalism. The learning outcomes showed that the experience toughened students' resolve, indicating that students should not be cocooned because they learn from the exposure (Singh & Drugunalevu, 2016).

National elections as a training ground for student journalists

In terms of practical journalistic experience, elections are among the most significant news events in any country, as they involve a plethora of major national issues under intense scrutiny and debate in the public arena, at like at no other time. The debates and the media coverage of the incumbent government's performance can be seen as a form of 'national audit' of the country's governance and state of affairs, including how the issues at stake would be addressed in future. Elections not only provide journalists with easy access to a multitude of newsworthy stories, both of the hard and soft news categories, but also a deeper understanding of the nation and its problems, both through the public debates, and via interviews with the election candidates, expert commentators, and every day people out to cast their votes. The politicians in the race are

usually more accessible to journalists than normal, vying as they are for votes to get into office. These elements make elections an excellent news event for student journalists to try their hands at.

Both Fiji's 2018 and 2022 elections were significant in that they were only the second and third elections held under the new 2013 Constitution, implemented by the Bainimarama government, which came into power through the 2006 coup. The 2013 Constitution was Fiji's fourth since independence in 1970, which betrays the country's turbulent political history, including the forceful removal of democratically-elected governments in 1987, 2000 and 2006. The 2018 and 2022 elections were seen as a test of the durability of the 2013 Constitution, and the robustness of Fiji's fledgling democracy. The elections offered student journalists both a major opportunity and a major challenge with regards to cutting their teeth in political reporting in the complex Fijian political terrain. Societal pressures in the multiethnic country are at their height during a politically-charged event like the elections (Ramesh, 2010), and one of the major challenges journalists face is how to not inflame a tense situation, while reporting the facts without resorting to undue censorship.

For USP journalism, the elections are an opportunity not to be missed, despite the risks, or perhaps because of the risks. Election coverage aligns with USP Journalism's longstanding motto to not shy away from tough assignments, based on the premise that shielding students from the real world that awaits them does not adequately prepare them for the challenges that lie ahead. To the contrary, exposure to the elements provides an indication of what could be in store in the field, and the experience conditions students to the hard realities of news reporting in real time.

Because taking calculated risks is part and parcel of journalism, it should be, by default, part and parcel of journalism training, notwithstanding that journalist safety is paramount, and any calculated risks need to be mitigated by, among other things, adequate preparation and clear safety protocols. For the elections, this includes identifying the potential risks beforehand, assessing their gravity and formulating worst-case-scenario plans to deal with any contingencies. In other words, to get the best results from elections, extensive pre-planning is required, not just to understand the process and how best to report on it, but also how to keep safe. During the workshops for the 2018 and 2022 elections, it was noted that while tensions are higher than normal during the polling period, actual violence was rare. However, the student reporters were advised not to take any chances, and to be on higher alert than normal while on their reporting rounds. Students worked in teams, and were reminded to always be aware of their surroundings. Should a situation arise, it was safety first, and they were to leave any risky site or area, as soon as possible, with reports to be filed once they were out of the danger zone. The students were advised to keep in phone contact with each

other and the lecturers, and to call the police for help, should the need arise.

Despite a few temporary tense moments, the two elections passed without any major problems, and the students did not encounter any risky situations.

Besides physical risks, there were the non-physical risks to consider, such as the legal repercussions of falling foul of Fiji's electoral and media regulations. In this regard, the students attended several workshops designed to train them on not just the practicalities and ethics of elections reporting, but also on the mechanics of both Fiji's electoral system and its national media law. This included two workshops organised by the US Embassy in Suva on 'Political and Elections Reporting' by journalism professors Mark Horvit and Gary Kebbel, from the University of Missouri and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln respectively. Student reporters also attended Amnesty International's launch of the Human Rights Agenda outlining six essential priorities for all candidates to commit to, and a final briefing and training on the safety and security of journalists. The reference for this training was the Reporters Without Borders' *Handbook for Journalists During Elections*.

These generic workshops were supplemented with several in-house workshops specific to the Fiji elections. The training was conducted by the USP Journalism teaching staff and other local experts, based on resources developed by the Fijian Elections Office and Reporters Without Borders. It included an internal workshop by USP Journalism staff on election reporting guidelines and legislation, based on the *Fiji Elections Office Media Handbook 2022* and, Dialogue Fiji's *Elections Reporting Guide for Fijian Journalists*. The topics also covered Fiji's 2013 constitution, electoral system and political landscape, and the provisions of the punitive *Fiji Media Industry Development Act*.

The workshop served to remind students about the impacts of Fiji's media act, and reinforced the fact that even though they were student journalists, they were equally bound by and accountable to the laws of Fiji. The workshop re-emphasised the critical public interest role of the journalists in elections, given that the public usually rely on information in the news media to inform their voting decisions. In this regard, balanced, fair and accurate coverage was more crucial in national elections than normal, and the journalist was pivotal in this regard. Discussions about the public interest responsibility of the journalist in elections coverage was pertinent in Fiji in light of media biases uncovered in a research report based on the content analysis of the 2018 elections. Entitled, *News Coverage of Fiji's 2018 General Election Campaign: Insights from a Content Analysis of the National Print and Broadcast Media*, the report was co-written by this author (Singh & Lal, 2022) and published as a discussion paper by the Australian National University's Department of Pacific Affairs.

The results indicated that four of the five media organisations heavily favoured the governing FijiFirst party in the 2018 election, in both the quantity

and tone of the coverage. The only exception was *The Fiji Times*, whose coverage was comparatively more balanced, and more critical of the incumbent (Singh & Lal, 2022). The reasons ranged from the effects of Fiji's punitive media law, conscious and subconscious bias of journalists, the political and ideological alignment of the media company, and state financial incentives in the form of advertising contracts and public service broadcasting (Singh & Lal, 2022).

Editorial approach, news outputs and learning outcomes

In his contribution to the Dialogue Fiji report on the media coverage of the 2018 elections, Fijian political scientist and the director of the McMilliam Brown Centre, New Zealand, Professor Steven Ratuva, stated that election stories sell, especially when spiced with intrigue, scandals, mysteries, conspiracies and warring narratives:

The media can feed into election frenzies, inflame passion and at times encourage boisterous political behaviour and prejudice, which can be socially destructive. By the same token, the media can also be used as a means of sensible, intellectual and calm engagement to enlighten the ignorant and unite people across cultures, religions and political ideologies. (Panapasa, 2022)

Ratuva's message is pertinent to Fiji, a fragile country vulnerable to ethnic tensions and societal conflict, in the backdrop of a restive military, with four coups to show for it. The aggressive and sensationalist style of reporting highlighted by Ratuva is usually attributed to the traditional watchdog journalism approach adopted by mainstream media, with the challenging task of balancing commercial imperatives with a public interest role (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). The Western-liberal inspired watchdog journalism approach is based on adversarialism, which purports to report the facts and hold governments accountable to the public. In the Pacific, watchdog journalism is praised for holding power to account, but sometimes accused of being simplistic and excessively negative. In the Fijian context, questions about whether the media fuel communal tensions and/or contribute to instability gained traction after the 2000 coup. Political scientist Ratuva was one of many analysts to highlight the Fiji media's potential culpability in the 2000 coup. Ratuva stated that media portrayal of then Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, the first Fijian of Indian descent to hold that position, fed the rising tide of ethnonationalist mobilisation in Fiji. The media did not create conditions for the ethno-nationalist upsurge, which was already present, but provided nationalists the 'legitimacy to roll on' (Ratuva, in Robie, 2001a).

All this is not to say that watchdog journalism does not have a role in Fiji or the Pacific, but rather, to strive for balance, and to be open to experimenting with new journalistic approaches. In this regard, USP Journalism's news coverage is

also informed by alternative journalistic models, such as solutions and constructive journalism.

The Constructive Journalism Institute based at Aarhus University in Denmark describes itself as ‘an independent center at the heart of the global constructive journalism movement’. It states on its website:

Traditional news reporting is often biased on the side of negativity and cynicism, forgetting to contextualize the news of the day with relevant context and research. This imbalance has resulted in people grossly over-estimating the negative and under-estimating whatever progress has been made on a particular issue. Surveys across the world show that what the public believes about their countries is often far from the truth. People rate the performance of their societies much more poorly than the reality. This has consequences for how people live, vote and treat one another. (Constructive Institute, n.d.)

The institute goes on to add that ‘political polarisation has also encouraged the growth of partisan agendas online, which together with clickbait, algorithms feeding on outrage and various forms of misinformation, help to further undermine trust in media—raising new questions about how to deliver balanced and fair reporting in the digital age. Business as usual is no longer an option for news organisations’ (Constructive institute, n.d.).

The limits of the watchdog approach and its risks in certain situations or settings are well documented, and alternative/supplementary formats such as peace journalism, conflict-sensitive reporting, solutions journalism, and constructive journalism have been proposed (see Frohardt & Temin, 2003; Howard, 2009; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). These journalistic frameworks are deemed more thoughtful, less commercial; more analytic, and less deadline-driven or frenzied. Notwithstanding breaking news, they allow journalists more time to research, reflect and write.

In this regard, the USP student press is non-commercial, and does not face the same financial pressures as the mainstream media, which allows for greater flexibility to experiment with different news reporting approaches. The 2018 and 2023 elections reporting was predicated on, and also informed by previous experiences of USP student journalists coverage of the 2001 elections. As the then coordinator of the USP Journalism programme, David Robie observed, the mainstream media were focusing on slanging matches between the different parties, whereas the students were keen to provide independent and different coverage. He added:

Our focus will be the issues and whether the different parties take notice of the needs of the grass roots. This experience will give students a tremendous sense of purpose which will serve them well in the future. (cited in Cass, 2002, p. 571)

Robie's stance is reminiscent of the constructive journalism school of thought, based on an editorial approach that goes beyond the 'if it bleeds it leads' scenario by focusing on important societal issues (Constructive Institute, n.d.). Constructive journalism not only recognises, but 'enhances the vital role of "watchdog" by promoting democratic conversation and suggesting solutions to problems' (Jørgensen & Risbro, 2021, p. 2). Because the mainstream news media usually take the dominant 'hard news' approach in covering elections, USP journalism made a conscious decision to adopt a 'soft news' methodology for the 2018 and 2022 elections to differentiate its news product, rather than duplicate what was already being covered in the establishment press. Rather than chase powerful politicians and the elite candidates based on the dominant news values of 'prominence', 'impact' and 'conflict', USP Journalism chose to focus on the news value of 'human interest', which is usually considered 'soft news'. Where the news media chased prominent candidates and politicians on the campaign trail for interviews, USP Journalism chose to focus on the women and youth, who are usually marginalised in society, and underrepresented, both in Parliament and in news media coverage. As a group, the voices of women and youth, whether election candidates or voters, are often crowded out by the bigger players and USP Journalism decided to prioritise the former by providing them with a platform. The USP Journalism election reporting team was told to elevate the 'faces' and 'voices' of women, youth and ordinary voters through stories that reflected their struggles, hopes, dreams and aspirations. This was the vein of the coverage in both the 2018 and 2022 elections, which produced more than 40 stories on the two elections, besides social media updates on the *Wansolwara* Facebook page, @WansolwaraNews (est. 5,126 followers) and Twitter feeds (@uspwansolwara). In 2018 there was a special 8-page edition of *Wansolwara* specifically on the elections, published as an insert in the *Fiji Sun* daily newspaper. There was no print edition in 2022 because of some logistical challenges.

The human interest angle meant giving the community a voice and allowing them to express what the elections meant for them, rather than just reporting it as a race, or a fight between the political parties and the major candidates. Students were able to speak/interview Fijians from all walks of life, and visit and report from some remote parts on Viti Levu, which the mainstream media do not often cover.

The focus on youth, women, and the community was reflected in headlines such as 'My vote will count'; 'Young voter fails to win but optimistic about future'; 'First time voters speak up'; 'Hope for a better future'; 'Voters share concerns'; 'Aspirations, wages, employment top priority', and so forth. In 2018, voters aged between 18-30 years comprised one-third of the total registered voters, so providing a platform to group was justified. In 2018, Journalism students interviewed USP associate professor Sandra Tarte, who pointed out

that it seemed first-time voters did not think that their vote mattered, despite their voting power. Student leader Aneet Kumar highlighted the need for more youth in policy-making forums and parliamentary committees, while first-time voter Vivek Pawan called for government policies to support students who could not secure scholarships. Another young voter, Marianne Tabuaciri, then a politics and sociology student at USP, highlighted the need to address issues around mental health and poverty, youth unemployment, and create additional scholarship opportunities.

One of the highlights of the 2018 election was the increased number of women in Parliament—10—compared to eight in 2014, although this number dropped to six in 2022. One of the successful candidates interviewed in 2018 was the then newly-elected opposition member of parliament, the National Federation Party's Lenora Qereqeretabua, who stressed that female representation in Parliament can only occur if women enter the race for office. On the momentous occasion of a record number of women being elected in 2018, Qereqeretabua stated that they would transform Parliament into a more inclusive and bipartisan chamber.

These few examples of the coverage not only encapsulate the focus on societal issues, youth and gender, but demonstrate the multiple advantages of practical training, and the experience and knowledge gained from it. Besides speaking to election candidates, student reporters get a chance to interview youths, who are their peers, and everyday people out to cast their votes. Not only was this an opportunity to improve their writing skills, student journalists gained in-depth knowledge about the challenges in the country, especially as they relate to women, youth and ordinary citizens. Student journalists also get an opportunity to practice interviewing everyday people and their peers, allowing them to build confidence, in preparation for interviews with more prominent, powerful and potentially difficult individuals, such as politicians, business tycoons, and others. Their learning outcomes of the pre-election training are not to be discounted either. They allow student journalists to acquire in-depth knowledge about the electoral system and the media laws of the country, as they apply to the elections and to news reporting in general.

Conclusion

This article re-emphasised the importance of practical training for student journalists. Practical reporting carries certain risks but this is outweighed by the learning outcomes. Besides, handling risks is part of journalism training, and the risks can be mitigated by proper planning and adoption of safety measures. This article used USP journalism students coverage of the 2018 and 2022 Fiji elections as case studies to make the argument for applied learning and to posit that shielding students from confronting situations does not prepare them adequately for future challenges in the real world, whereas exposure to the elements

provided an early taste of what to expect, and how to cope with it. Being put into challenging reporting assignments and environments, and facing difficult situations allowed students to hone their problem-solving skills and work out innovative ways of overcoming obstacles. Pre-elections training deepens student knowledge of media laws and electoral systems, while the coverage of elections instils better understanding of the country and its people by following national debates and covering them, and by interviewing and interacting with everyday citizens and election candidates.

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