

Media plurality, independence and Talanoa

An alternative Pacific journalism education model

Abstract: The shrinking mainstream media plurality in Aotearoa New Zealand provides a context for examining publication of campus-based media where student and faculty editorial staff have successfully established an independent Asia-Pacific digital and print press over the past two decades. New Zealand's largest city Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) has the largest urban population of Pacific Islanders globally—more than 300,000 people in a total of 1.7 million (Pasifika New Zealand, n.d.), earning the moniker 'Polynesian capital of the world'. The presenter has had a pioneering role with four university-based journalism publications in the Pacific region as key adviser/publisher in Papua New Guinea (*Uni Tavur*, 1993-1998); Fiji (*Wansolwara*, 1998-2002); and Aotearoa/New Zealand (*Pacific Scoop*, 2009-2015; *Asia Pacific Report*, 2016 onwards), and also with two journalism school-based publications in Australia (*Reportage*, 1996, and *The Junction*, 2018-2020) (Robie, 2018). In early 2021, he was co-founder of the Asia Pacific Media Network which has emerged as a collective umbrella for academics, student journalists and independent reporters and writers producing several innovative publications, including the research journal *Pacific Journalism Review*. These contributors are mindful of the challenges of reportage about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This section of the panel explores how an independent journalism model for Asia-Pacific students' storytelling 'Talanoa Journalism' can be an effective bridge to alternative media careers and addressing 'blind spots' in legacy news media.

Keywords: Fiji, independent journalism, journalism models, media plurality, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, publications, SDGs, storytelling, student journalism, Talanoa Journalism

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Background

HOW did I come to be on this alternative trajectory in journalism and media education? After a typical Kiwi journalism formation at the School of Hard Knocks with *The Dominion* daily newspaper, and periods as a subeditor at the Melbourne Herald and editor of Gordon Barton's *Sunday Observer*, I migrated to apartheid South Africa in 1970 to prepare for an overland trip across Africa and the Sahara Desert.

I was chief subeditor of the *Rand Daily Mail*—the leading daily newspaper which was opposed to apartheid with many of its journalists 'banned' and some in jail for challenging the system's injustices. In fact, I learned far more about journalism—and justice—there than what I had learned in Australia and NZ.

Ironically, three years working for Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency in Paris in the 1970s prepared me for global news values and also the South Pacific. I started reporting on NZ and Pacific issues such as French nuclear testing through the 'back door'—from the AFP newsroom in the Place de la Bourse rather than in Aotearoa.

Both South Africa and Paris got me questioning a lot about news values and structural hegemony. When I returned to New Zealand I was foreign editor of the *Auckland Star* for a time and then set up my own independent news agency in the early 1980s covering the South Pacific for news magazines such as *Islands Business* and later *Pacific Islands Monthly*, *The Dominion*, *New Zealand Times*, *The Australian* and global news media.

In 1994, I was appointed head of journalism at the University of Papua Guinea and I embarked on an issues and project-based journalism initiative. Already critical of some aspects of legacy journalism and especially how it tended to cover 'the other' and the Pacific, I began developing ideas and strategies around journalism that could be loosely described as the 'Pacific Way', which had parallels with 'voiceless' journalism in Asia and Africa (Dixit, 1997; Robie, 1995).

These ideas were drawn largely from the students themselves and how they interacted with major issues and crises. It was significantly different from what I had encountered with Western mainstream and more akin with what I had experienced in Kenya as features editor of the Aga Khan's *Daily Nation* and earlier in South Africa. The ideas related especially to economic and cultural development, and social justice (Dixit, 1997; Robie, 1995, 2001).

The notion of Talanoa Journalism evolved over many years. This is at the core of this article and the notion of a 'Pacific way' journalism along with a comparative matrix indicating differences of emphasis with mainstream, or Western, normative journalism are explained and examined at length in academic papers and book chapters (for example, Robie, 2014, pp. 332-333, 2019, 2024; Singh, 2020), and several of the key elements include:

- Grassroots sources

- Hard news with context, cultural explanations
- Free media balanced with social responsibility, and
- Community ethics and indigenous values. (see full matrix, Robie, 2019, p. 13)

The challenge for journalists is partially represented in a quote about the complexities by Mahina and Nabobo-Baba (2004, p. 204) who explain about ‘In the Pacific, people talk of walking forward into the past and walking backward into the future, where past and future are constantly fused and diffused in the ever-changing conflicting present.’ (co-authors’ emphasis). Another point is that reporting truth to power also involves critically reporting on our very own institutions, whether they are media organisations or universities (for example, Johnson & Ali, 2024; MacDonald, 2024; Robie, 2023). This can be rather delicate and challenging.

In this article I will share a snapshot of the timeline of Talanoa development. The evolution started in Papua New Guinea at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in 1993 (Figure 1).

University of Papua New Guinea (1993-1998)

UPNG Journalism school is the oldest in the Pacific. It was founded in 1975 as an ‘independence gift’ for Papua New Guinea (Robie, 2004). Funded by New Zealand, it was established by television journalist Ross Stevens and journalist and historian Michael King, who had coined the term ‘Ngāti Pākehā’ for white New Zealanders—like myself—who did not identify as ‘European’. This is where the notion of Talanoa Journalism took root with a series of reports by students embedded in local villages who wrote about facing climate change

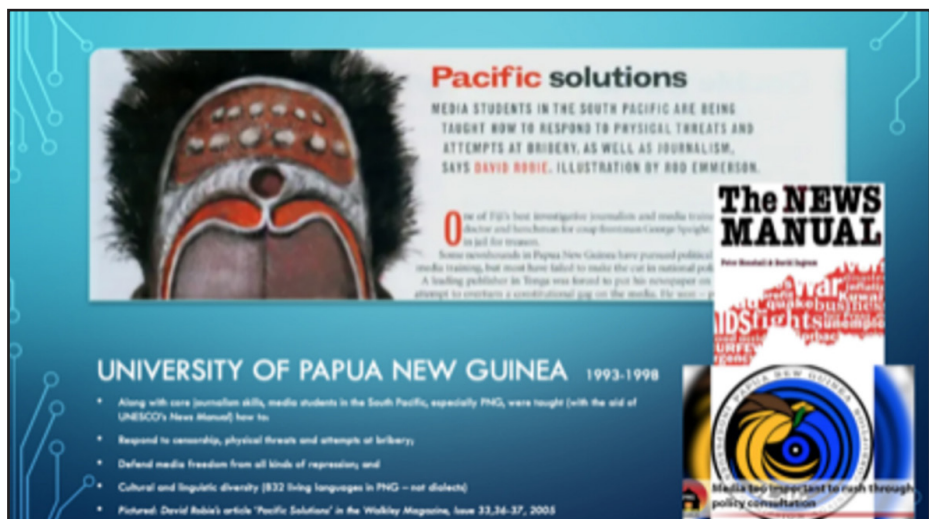


Figure 1: University of Papua New Guinea: ‘Pacific solutions’.

and squatter survival and sought solutions. *Uni Tavar* was their student newspaper and it was published as a liftout section in the weekend edition of the biggest daily newspaper, the *Post-Courier*, an arrangement that I initiated with the management (Robie, 1995).

Along with core journalism skills, media students in the South Pacific, especially Papua New Guinea, were taught (with the aid of UNESCO's 1991 three volume *News Manual* created by the UPNG journalism educator team Peter Henshall and David Ingram) a range of extra skills far less common in many Western media schools, such as how to:

- Respond to censorship, physical threats and attempts at bribery;
- Defend media freedom from all kinds of repression; and
- Cultural and linguistic diversity (832 living languages in PNG—not just dialects)

Among countless examples of Papua New Guinean and other Melanesian student journalists was Champion Ohasio, who started his career as a student journalist on the BJourn programme at UPNG and also as a cartoonist (1994-96) for *Uni Tavar* and the *Pacific Journalism Review* which began at UPNG in 1994 (Figure 2). Today, after a stellar career as a political and social justice cartoonist, Champion is now an established artist and graphic designer in the Solomon Islands. He is also the managing director of Indigenous Media.

Another example was among the big stories covered by student journalists from *Uni Tavar* using Talanoa methodology was the 1997 Sandline Mercenary crisis in PNG. This was a political scandal that became 'one of the defining moments' in PNG history over the Bougainville war. Military commander Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok staged a revolt on the night of 16 March 1997



Figure 2: Project students: multidisciplinary talents. [Inset: Champion Ohasio].

when 44 mainly British and South African mercenaries were arrested at dawn and disarmed. Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan was forced to resign in the aftermath (Robie, 2004, p. 89).

University of the South Pacific (1998-2002)

The University of the South Pacific (USP) journalism degree programme began much later than UPNG and I was appointed head in 1998 after it had been earlier founded by French government assistance. *Wansolwara* and *Pacific Journalism Online*, were USP’s journalism programme newspaper and website (I founded the student website before the three local daily newspapers had established websites of their own). Both the USP journalism newspaper (founded by lecturer Dr Philip Cass, my colleague at PJR, and a group of students led by Stan Simpson) and website are now called *Wansolwara*—literally ‘One Salt Water’, representing cultural and linguistic ties across Oceania (Cass, 2010).

My biggest challenge at USP was covering the 2000 George Speight (attempted) coup in which he and rebel soldiers from the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit seized Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 35 other government MPs at gunpoint in Parliament for 56 days (Cass, 2010; Ransom, 2000; Robie, 2001a & 2001b). Speight was jailed in 2002 for life for high treason. (He unsuccessfully sought a pardon in May 2023). Among others who were jailed for treason were one of Fiji’s most innovative journalists and best media trainers, Jo Nata, founder of *The Weekender*. As I described him in my book *Mekim Nius*, Nata was ‘arguably Fiji’s finest investigative journalist before his forays into public relations and a coup, and also one of the country’s two first journalism graduates’ (Robie, 2004, pp. 40-41). He made the ‘mistake’ of becoming Speight’s media adviser. Before



Figure 3: University of the South Pacific: biggest challenge.

this debacle he had played a prominent role in leading Fiji's journalism fraternity and in training younger journalists (Figure 3).

The USP students vigorously covered the attempted coup on 19 May 2000 around the clock for both their newspaper *Wansolwara* and online editions, and also Radio Pasifik, for two months. Many of the students coped with the military curfew by living in the *Wansolwara* newsroom on campus or with other students who had university flats. As the head of journalism, I had to daily brave the military curfew blockades without being arrested. As Michael Field observed in his co-authored book *Speight of Violence* (Field, Baba & Nabobo, 2005, pp. 112-3):

For the USP journalism students under New Zealand coordinator David Robie, the coup provided a sharp training workshop. Students broke news, at times to the chagrin of other reporters, and published it on [their] website, *Pacific Journalism Online*, and the student newspaper *Wansolwara*. Robie later said the website created its own international niche market: 'In a sense, this was the Internet Coup, and the students were a vital part of it.'

Field et al. (2005) also noted a celebrated moment during the students' coverage of the coup, when one of three young women student reporters was suddenly singled out by Speight when he kissed her on the cheek, apparently thinking she was Indo-Fijian (McGowan & Ali, 2000). She was not; Noora Ali was from the Maldives, and her companions, Losana McGowan and Laufa Eli, were from Fiji and Samoa. Noora recalled in a report for *Pacific Scoop* that 'being kissed by the rebel leader was something, but being the only Indian looking person in the middle of hundreds of indigenous Fijians [in the middle of a coup] made my day' (Figure 4). Ali also wrote on her co-authored story on the USP student website *Pacific Journalism Online* that she had really wanted to witness the drama, but was aware that with 'my Indian looks crossing the line into the Parliament where the indigenous Fijians were gathering, would be kind of scary—but journalism got the better of me' (McGowan & Ali, 2000).

We made our way to the place where a large number of people were gathered and yes, in the middle of it all, stood the rebel leader himself.

George Speight was answering questions put to him by members of the crowd.

When he started making his way back to the place where [there was] another large group, which consisted mainly of old people who were having a grog session, we took this opportunity to dash forward to interview him.

Noora got to him first, and when he saw her, he seemed a little shocked but held out his hand to Noora for a handshake and asked: 'You're Indian and you liked me?' Noora replied, saying she was actually from the Maldives.

Speight quickly leaned forward and planted a kiss on her cheek. (McGowan & Ali, 2000)



Figure 4: The Speight coup: a coupster ‘kiss’ and an international response. Pictured Laufa Eli, Noora Ali (centre) with George Speight.

The incident caused an international response when it was reported by global media and Noora’s administrators asked questions of USP about why was a student journalist on a scholarship to Fiji ‘participating in a rebellion’. (Noora Ali later became a leading official in the Maldives Information Ministry, a testament to the skills gained on her USP internship).

Sean Ransom of the International Press Institute’s *Global Journalist* wrote ‘Fiji’s young [student] media corps had a front-row seat to a strange coup in the Pacific Islands’ (Ransom, 2000, p. 26). I later provided a comprehensive and reflective account of the students’ experience in ‘Frontline reporters: A students’ internet coup’ (Robie, 2001), and former USP journalism lecturer Philip Cass interviewed several students to produce a ‘Baptism of fire’ paper about the Speight aftermath (Cass, 2010). Ransom cited my research indicating that Fiji journalists covering the coup had an average age of 22, and averaged only 2.5 years of experience (Ransom, 2000, p. 26; Robie, 2004a, p. 26). Ransom quoted me as saying:

At first, some of them had trouble determining the legality of the would-be regime. A few showed a too-swift readiness to give legitimacy to, and cozy up with Speight’s rebellion. Fiji’s print media largely failed to give insightful and critical analysis. Even when the media performed well, mob violence forced some shops to close their doors.
(Quoted by Ransom, p. 26)

The USP students covered the attempted coup robustly and with courage from the day it began on 19 May 2000 around the clock for both their newspaper

and online editions, and for the student radio Radio Pasifik for two months. Many of the students coped with a military curfew by living in the *Wansolwara* newsroom on the Laucala Bay campus or by sharing accommodation with other students who had university flats. As head of journalism, I had to daily brave the military blockades without being arrested (although I sometimes managed to gain a curfew pass at a police station; mostly I did not have a vehicle to get me to a station). It was a very stressful period for both students and me. I was acutely aware that it was vitally important that I kept the students safe, and although they were young and lacking experience, they were no younger than working journalists on Fiji news media organisations who mostly had no formal journalism qualifications. We also had a police inspector and a junior military officer on the journalism programme and that was a concern in itself: were they on the course to keep tabs on the journalism team, or genuine students? In the end, I was satisfied that both men had become enrolled as a sincere effort to upgrade their media expertise in the security forces. In fact, the policeman took part in coverage of the coup and reported for *Pacific Journalism Online* just like the other students.

One of the darker days on USP journalism was the sudden closure of the students' Pacific Journalism Online website without consultation on the orders of vice-chancellor Esekia Solofa, of Samoa. This coincided with the day on 29 May 2000 that the military declared martial law for 48 hours and as the university's entire official website went down, I presumed it was simply a spinoff from the martial law. It was difficult to confirm anything because the university was officially closed, the journalism programme was operating in defiance of the university shut down, and communications were erratic. It later transpired that the whole website had been shut down because senior management did not know how to 'pull the plug' on the journalism section of the website alone.

Also, the website closure followed a phone call to me by vice-chancellor Solofa one morning asking me to 'take down' an article written by one of the students, Alison Ofotalau, a Solomon Islander, about how some of Speight's followers had raided the Fiji Television headquarters on 28 May 2000 and smashed the offices in retaliation over *Close-Up* current affairs programme. The broadcast had described coup leader Speight as a 'two day wonder' (Ofotalau, 2000). One of the interviewees, human rights advocate Jone Dakuvula, had said on air:

George Speight is a two-day wonder who had just decided to champion indigenous rights for his own personal reasons in a matter of two days . . . He has no real track record of fighting for indigenous rights.
(Quoted by Ofotalau, 2000)

My response to the vice-chancellor's instruction was a refusal, saying that it would undermine everything that we were teaching the students about accountability, credibility and the pursuit of truth without fear or favour. Solofa seemed

to think student journalists should merely be ‘studying about’ journalism and not actually doing it.

In his response, he appeared to have accepted my explanation, but then he arbitrarily closed down the website the next day, on May 29. Ironically, Ofotalau’s report on Fiji TV was the last published on *Pacific Journalism Online* before we ourselves were closed down. Solofa also tried to censor our newspaper *Wansolwara* by requesting ‘postponed’ publication and for distribution to be stopped. Once again I refused, saying that the paper had already been published (Robie, 2001, p. 52). Our cover story for that special coup edition was ‘Academics warn of Fiji disaster’ (Robie, 2001, p. 50)

The closure of *Pacific Journalism Online* not only frustrated the journalism programme, it also riled academic staff because they had looked to the journalism website to keep up with news of the attempted coup and other developments important for their everyday safety. After a series of letters of protest to the university administration from groups and organisations as diverse as Reporters Sans Frontières in Paris, the Commonwealth Journalists’ Association, the NZ Journalism Education Association, Queensland University’s Journalism Department, PEN New Zealand and the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York (Robie, 2001b, p. 53), I was sent a letter of ‘reprimand’ by vice-chancellor Esekia Solofa—after *Wansolwara* had been distributed in defiance of the attempt to ban it (Solofa, 2000, p. 53). Solofa wrote:

The decision I had taken to close down the Journalism Programme website was a straight-forward decision based entirely on one consideration: the safety and security of the property of the university and of the lives of the people engaged in it . . .

Let me make an important observation which should cover the criticisms you and others have raised over the closure of the website . . .

The USP Journalism Programme is not a media agency, neither is it a news/information outlet. The USP Journalism Programme is an education and training facility for future journalists and others who need journalism knowledge and skills in their work . . . The current closure of the Journalism website has clearly illustrated that our students do not need it to publicise or publish their pieces if that is what their true intention is. (Solofa, 2000)

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2000) issued a statement condemning violence against journalists in Fiji—at least 15 people were killed during the coup and the aftermath—and it also criticised the closure of the USP journalism website: ‘On 29 May 2000, administrators at the University of the South Pacific shut down *Pacific Journalism Online (PJO)* www.usp.ac.fj/journ/, the website of USP’s journalism students. Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa explained the decision as a “security measure” (CPJ, 2000).

Among global academic responses, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) director Associate Professor Chris Nash at UTS said: ‘The suggestion that journalism staff and students, and indeed any academics, might somehow desist from reporting, commenting and publishing on the current situation is akin to suggesting that doctors and nurses should turn their backs on wounded people in a conflict. It’s unconscionable’ (Nash, 2000).

Three senior USP academic staff also immediately protested and the president of the USP Staff Association, Dr Biman Prasad, now a deputy Prime Minister of Fiji, called for the letter to be withdrawn, saying it was ‘unjustified’ and he condemned ‘self-censorship’. Dr Prasad added: ‘Academic freedom is always fundamental to the survival and operation of a university, even more so when there is a crisis and threats to academic freedom’ (Prasad, 2000a). He later described the incident in a paper reflecting on the ‘crisis of conscience’ for USP academic staff when addressing the annual conference of the New Zealand Association of University Staff (NZAUS) in Wellington:

The staff association was vigilant and took a firm stand on issues that we felt were designed to promote self-censorship. For example, soon after the May 19 coup, the university administration in panic and unilaterally decided to close the journalism programme website. The journalism students were provided with a fabulous opportunity to practise skills in the real life situation what they were learning in theory.

Their reporting on the crisis was appreciated around the world. The administration’s drastic move to shut the website down was rather regrettable from the point of view of both staff and students of journalism. The Association of USP Staff protested vigorously against the closure and it was allowed to continue. (Prasad, 2000)

Responding to the closure of the website, two ‘mirror’ hosting sites for USP journalism were immediately established—one by an American graphics designer, Mara Fulmer, who worked with the Media Centre at USP in the mid-1990s. She hosted the students’ gagged newspaper at her *Looking Glass* website in the US (Robie, 2001b, p. 52), and the other site, which had greater profile in the Pacific region, was set up by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at UTS (Robie, 2000): ‘The site was designed and set up within hours by Fran Molloy, and with the support of ACIJ director Chris Nash and head of the journalism department Wendy Bacon, the USP journalism students were able to have their stories published shortly after they were filed.’ Their reports are archived at: <https://bit.ly/4aTOhe7>

A footnote to the affair—and vindication—came in December 2000 when the students won six Ossie awards, including best publication, or runner-up prizes at the 2000 Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA)

annual conference at Mooloolaba, Sunshine Coast. The accolades—the most ever won in a single year by the USP journalism programme—were recorded by Professor Mark Pearson of Bond University, writing for the PANPA Bulletin industry publication (Pearson, 2001):

The United States has its Pulitzer prizes. Australia has the Walkleys. And journalism education in the region has the Ossies, the Journalism Education Association's awards recognising excellent journalism produced by students . . .

Journalism students from the University of the South Pacific under the leadership of course coordinator David Robie won two of the major awards and were highly commended in four others for their reporting of the 2000 Fiji coup. Leading industry personnel judged the awards, and all praised the efforts of the USP students for their coverage of the coup.

Category judge deputy editor of *The Age Online*, Mike van Niekirk, said the student journalists working on the [*Pacific Journalism Online*] publication rose to the challenge of providing high quality reports of a dramatic international news event on their doorstep.

Pacific Journalism Online later merged with *Wansolwara*, the print edition, to become *Wansolwara Online*.

At least 16 people died as a result of political turmoil arising from the takeover of Parliament on May 19 and culminating in the mutiny in Queen Elizabeth barracks on November 2 (Refworld, 2001). George Speight, the leader of the coup, was subsequently convicted of treason and sentenced to death (2000 Fijian coup d'état, n.d.). However, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Jo Nata, a prominent journalist in Fiji, was also imprisoned for life for treason over his role in the coup as media adviser for Speight. He has since been set free and he gave his reflections about the coup to *Islands Business* in a 2024 cover story (Naidu, May, 2024). Twenty one other rebels were also jailed.

Coverage of the coup by the students, their dilemmas, and how they applied the Talanoa Journalism model was analysed in two of my books, *Mekim Nius: South Pacific media, politics and education* (Robie, 2004), which was launched by Tongan publisher and media freedom advocate Kalafi Moala at JERAA in Fiji, and *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (Robie, 2014). Quoting from *Mekim Nius* (literally 'news making'): 'The news media is the watchdog of democracy. But in the South Pacific today the Fourth Estate role is under threat from governments seeking statutory regulation, diminished media credibility, dilemmas over ethics and uncertainty over professionalism and training.'



Figure 5: Pacific Media Centre: Journalism Under Duress.

AUT and the Pacific Media Centre (2002-2020)

From USP, I joined the AUT faculty and over several years initiated several Pacific projects and launched a student journalism newspaper, *Te Waha Nui*, along with colleague Alan Lee. After also developing a body of Pacific media research, I was invited by the university to establish a Pacific Media Centre, the first and only journalism unit of its kind in New Zealand. This was a pioneering step and included the establishment of New Zealand’s only specialist post-graduate ‘Asia Pacific Journalism Studies’ paper (Robie, 2019; 2022). This was under the umbrella of the Creative Industries Research Institute (CIRI), another innovative initiative by the university in the years 2007-2016 (CIRI, n.d.). The PMC’s mission declared: ‘Informed journalism and media research contributes to economic, political and social development, and AUT’s PMC—Te Amokura—seeks to stimulate research into contemporary Māori, Pacific and ethnic diversity media and culture production’ (About the Pacific Media Centre, n.d.). Several projects were launched using Talanoa methodology (Figure 5).

A feature of the PMC’s approach was creating teaching tools by students themselves as part of their coursework. An example of such a tool is a clip of the late Beirut-based British journalist Robert Fisk commenting on ‘50/50 Journalism’, which demonstrated how skewed ‘balance’ often obscures ‘the truth’ in reportage, especially about the Middle East (Pacific Media Centre YouTube, 2008).

A major project was Pacific Media Watch (PMW) performing a watchdog, alternative news and advocacy role, adopted from USP in 2007 although it was originally founded at UPNG in Papua New Guinea and UTS in Australia (Robie, 2016). It was compiled for *Pacific Scoop* initially while based at AUT and later at *Asia Pacific Report* as a regional media freedom and educational resource by a



Figure 6: Pacific internships included the covering post-coup Fiji elections in 2014 and 2018.

network of journalists, students, stringers and academic or NGO commentators.

Closely aligned with Pacific Media Watch was a 15 minute weekly radio programme, *Southern Cross*, run by the Pacific Media Centre and hosted live on Mondays by the University of Auckland’s campus radio station 95bFM, which has nurtured several leading broadcasters in the New Zealand mediascape. The programme, a mix of current affairs and interviews with Pacific innovators, was compiled and presented by the PMW media intern or editor. Cook Islands Māori student Alistar Kata (Ngāpuhi) was a pioneer of this programme and the weekly broadcasts were archived on Sound Cloud (*The Southern Cross*, 2017; Pacific Media Centre, 2016).

PMC students were also embedded with the USP newsroom in Fiji as part of their Asia Pacific Project practicum to cover issues such as the first Fiji post-coup election in 2014 and again in 2018. The articles were published by *Pacific Scoop*, *Asia Pacific Report* and *The Junction* (*The Junction-AUT*, 2018). Project assignments also included internships with the *China Daily*, *Cook Islands News*, *Jakarta Globe*, *Jakarta Post* and *Philippine Star* (Asia Pacific Journalism projects and internships, 2017). (Figure 6).

Also besides reporting from the perspective of Talanoa Journalism, the students conducted their research and coverage within a framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include targets such as ‘no poverty’, ‘zero hunger’, ‘good health and wellbeing’, ‘climate action’, and ‘peace, justice and strong institutions’ (The Sustainable Development Goals, 2016). This frame is relatively rare in both New Zealand media and at journalism schools. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all UN

member states in 2015, provides a ‘shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.

At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries—developed and developing—in a global partnership. They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth—all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. (The Sustainable Development Goals, 2016).

One of the biggest projects at the PMC was the Bearing Witness climate crisis action programme, which combined the resources of both student journalists and documentary making students. One of the finest outcomes of this project was *Banabans of Rabi—A Story of Survival* (Bearing Witness, 2019), a short documentary produced by postgraduate Pacific student journalist Hele Ikimotu and screenwriting and production student Blessen Tom, a communication studies student from India. They made the 10 minute film while on assignment in their 2018 Bearing Witness climate change project in Fiji for the Pacific Media Centre. The documentary was accepted and screened at the 2018 Nuku’alofa Film Festival in Tonga and 2019 Māorilands and Pasifika film festivals (Robie, 2019; Robie & Marbrook, 2020).

Conclusion

Many of the students’ reports and video storytelling initiatives using a Talanoa model have been featured on the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA)’s *Junction* cooperative website for 22 journalism schools across Australia. Staff of *The Junction* also played a key role in rescuing and hosting the entire Pacific Media Centre’s archive when AUT shut down the archive in June 2023 (The Pacific archives, 2023). (The PMC was effectively closed in early 2021 shortly after I retired in 2020 (Robie, 2022). AUT changed its mind under pressure and restored an official PMC archive thanks to the intervention of the Tuwhera digital team which hosts *Pacific Journalism Review*.

All these projects to varying degrees deployed elements of Talanoa journalism. My colleague film maker and academic Jim Marbrook and I explored comparisons between Paulo Freire and his 1967 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Talanoa-style practice as involved in the Bearing Witness project in our joint article (Robie & Marbrook, 2020). We concluded:

Comparing Freire’s ideas on pedagogy and praxis to a ‘talanoa’ approach to practice invites us to reconsider some of the complexities of Pacific communities. While Freire pushes us to rethink power structures inside communities, a ‘talanoa’ approach (as broadly outlined in Figure 1) not only

encourages a more solution-based approach to factual storytelling but also a deeper cultural understanding of story and a ‘recognition of indigenous values’. It values a Pacific-based approach to the idea of ‘praxis’. (Robie & Marbrook, 2020, p. 11)

Also, it ought to be noted that although Talanoa slipped from the core Pacific journalism approaches at AUT after the closure of the Pacific Media Centre, aspects of the Talanoa approach are still very much ‘alive and well’ at the *University of the South Pacific*. As staff there indicate, the tradition of applied training and ‘not shying away’ from controversial topics still prevails at USP (Drugunalevu & Manarae, 2015; Singh & Drugunalevu, 2016). This article is a strong testimony of the benefits of practical training, ‘not just for the sake of conventional training news reporting methods,’ as USP’s Shailendra Singh notes, ‘but for the opportunities of trying alternative approaches to news reporting, addressing reporting gaps left by the commercial mainstream media, and discovering new, and perhaps even better ways to cover certain topics, and tell certain stories, that tend to fall through the cracks of conventional Western watchdog journalism criteria (S. Singh, personal communication, 27 April 2024). The greatest opportunity to innovate is at university journalism schools via practical training with the goal of producing well-rounded graduates who are critical thinkers.

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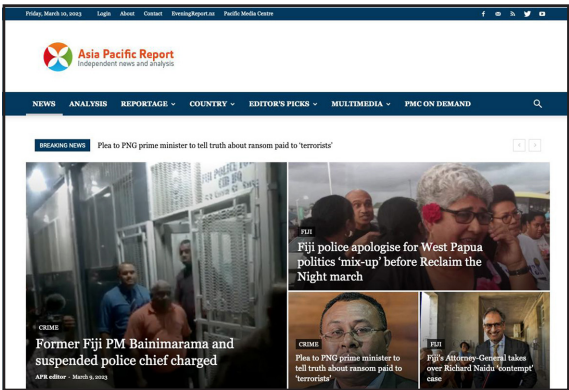
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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Asia Pacific Report website. The header includes the date 'Friday, March 16, 2024', navigation links for 'Login', 'About', 'Contact', 'BrowseReport.nz', and 'Pacific Media Centre'. The main navigation bar lists categories: NEWS, ANALYSIS, REPORTAGE, COUNTRY, EDITOR'S PICKS, MULTIMEDIA, and PMC ON DEMAND. The main content area features several news items:

- READING NEWS:** Plea to PNG prime minister to tell truth about ransom paid to 'terrorists'
- FIJI:** Fiji police apologise for West Papua politics 'mix-up' before Reclaim the Night march
- CRIME:** Former Fiji PM Bainimarama and suspended police chief charged
- CRIME:** Plea to PNG prime minister to tell truth about ransom paid to 'terrorists'
- FIJI:** Fiji's Attorney-General takes over Richard Naisi's 'contempt' case

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