

FIJI

10. Honest Iago?

A media and academic freedom case study

Commentary: This case study involves issues of academic freedom and media freedom at the regional University of the South Pacific (USP) in a dispute between the senior administration of the university and two journalism lecturers over the impact of media releases and media comments made between May and July 2014, about the military-backed government and the right to freedom of expression. In May 2014, just four months before Fiji's post-coup general election, a student at USP, suddenly and unexpectedly, had his scholarship cancelled. As a result, USP student journalists wrote a radio news story, which was broadcast on the USP radio station Radio Pasifik. A few days later, the scholarship was reinstated. Shortly afterwards, the USP journalism lecturers issued a joint media release criticising the military government on two issues: (1) their support of torture; and (2) the refusal of accreditation for two senior Fiji journalists to attend an international conference being held in Nadi. This action brought the two lecturers into an acrimonious dialogue with the USP administration. The article reviews the media coverage and examines the issue from the perspective of the head of the journalism programme.

Keywords: Fiji, Fiji coups, human rights, journalism education, media freedom, media regulation, military, torture

PATRICK CRADDOCK

Broadcaster and media trainer, New Zealand

I HAVE titled this article *Honest Iago* in reference to a Shakespearean character who betrayed Othello, although Othello believed him to be honest and referred to him as 'honest Iago'. This affair is narrated against a backdrop of media and academic freedom issues at the University of the South Pacific over the past two decades.

This year will be the 21st anniversary of the establishment of the USP regional Journalism programme. It began in 1994 with French government aid and one journalist from the BBC World Service, François Turmel, supported by USP staff with a background of journalism. It grew with the appointment in 1998 of David Robie from Papua New Guinea, as its first coordinator, who got a budget, training room space and staff. His appointment was opposed by journalists supporting the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) secretariat in Suva. Unsigned articles purporting to be news stories and denouncing the appointment of Robie because of his previous criticisms of 1987 coup

leader Sitiveni Rabuka and PINA in his book *Blood on their Banner* were published in the *Daily Post*. The *Post* editor at the time was Laisa Taga, a former treasurer of PINA. Robie has long been a defender of freedom of expression in the media and in an article he recounts some of the difficulties when news organisations in Fiji were claiming to support media freedom while at the same time they were also trying to gag a journalism academic (Robie, 2008). Robie was the head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific for five years from 1998-2002.

The George Speight coup started in May 2000 when parliamentarians were held hostage by gunmen in the Parliament building. Journalism students, supported by their lecturers, went inside the parliamentary complex to take photographs, conduct interviews and write stories (Robie, 2007). Other students edited the stories, which were dispatched to news agencies around the world. The Vice-Chancellor failed to see the necessity to cover real events in real time and he closed the journalism website *Pacific Journalism Online*. Student stories were then relayed overseas by staff through several web and mirror sites set up by friends and supporters. Dr Biman Prasad, a senior economics lecturer and president of the Association of USP Staff noted in an article 'Crisis of Conscience' (Prasad, 2001) that the actions of and advice given by senior USP administrators were often in conflict with the principles of academic freedom of speech.

The 'Iago' affair began on 21 May 2014 when 'Tamani', a second-year Fijian student at the University of the South Pacific, had his scholarship cancelled because of his voluntary work supporting an Independent political candidate standing in the Fiji General Election, the first democratic election since a military coup in December 2006.

The student episode may have gone unnoticed, except that the student involved had his photograph published in a local newspaper. This information was reported anonymously to the Tertiary Scholarship and Loan Board (TSLB), which sent a letter to the student cancelling his scholarship and saying that it had come to its attention that he had been associating himself with a 'political agenda' without taking into consideration his obligation to the Scholarship Board. Tamani was ordered to refund all scholarship fees for both the current and previous years. The letter did not explain his alleged errors or give information on any right of appeal (T. J. Seruiraduvatu, personal communication, 21 May 2014).

This TSLB action became a news story for student journalists at the USP. A Fiji lawyer advised the students researching the story that any disciplinary action against Tamani should have been actioned by the USP, and not by the TSLB. Questions asked of both the TSLB and USP administration went unanswered. The journalism students wrote a news story that was broadcast on the USP station Radio Pasifik as the lead item in its weekly news and current affairs programme. It outlined the facts and included details that Tamani came from a poor solo-parent family.

The radio news item increased public interest in the story and Tamani voiced his opinion about his actions:

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

I don't see any violation or any wrong doing of my involvement in Roshika Deo's 'Be the Change Campaign' as I was clearly just exercising my political right (Tokalau, 2014).

The political element to this story developed with a statement by Felix Anthony, leader of the opposition People's Democratic Party, to a journalist at Radio NZ International (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014a):

What we are concerned about is that this government has attempted to try and disqualify groups of people to not take part in the political activity of the country and in this case the targets are students who are beneficiaries of government scholarships.

A former USP economics professor and media commentator, Wadan Narsey, went further and inferred (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014b) that there had been military government interference in the student affair.

Public officers are simply refusing to be accountable to the public on a matter which is so important. If they do not reinstate this scholarship, it is going to reflect very, very badly on Bainimarama's party and whoever has been responsible for terminating this scholarship. I mean it is a shameful episode in the history of this regime.

A few days later, Tamani had his student scholarship reinstated. So, who had initiated the scholarship termination and who influenced the re-instatement? We may never know, but we do have this shifting responsibility statement as reported on RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, from Dixon Seeto, Chairman of the Tertiary Scholarship and Loan Board:

...[I]nvestigations show the information the board received about the student and a recommendation from the USP were incorrect. Mr Seeto says there is a clear document trail on the case, which led to the board's decision. He says the board in no way restricts the activities of scholarship holders outside of their study programme. The University of the South Pacific says it is investigating claims it gave incorrect information to the board. (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014c)

It appeared that the Iago affair was over, but not so. On June 20, Brigadier-General Moses Tikoitoga, Land Forces Military Commander, was quoted in an Australian newspaper, *The Age* (Marks, 2014), admitting that Fiji citizens had been beaten and tortured by the military regime, claiming it was necessary to stave off civil disorder or the threat of civil disorder.

The two lecturers in the USP Journalism programme, Patrick Craddock and Dr Matthew Thompson, wrote a media release (Craddock & Thompson, 2014) condemning the acceptance of torture by the military. Tikoitoga responded:

But a lot of these people were actually trying to instigate violence by creating anti-government movements or militant groups ... They were talking on the radio and so on. If you let them continue to have a voice, you create a potentially dangerous environment... So it was the lesser of two devils. (Madigubuli, 2014)

He said his comments were being taken out of context and suggested that political parties and the two USP staff were using the information for political ends. Apisalome Coka reported for *FBC News* that the Military Commander was quoted 'out of context' from an interview conducted in early 2013 (Coka, 2014). Thompson checked with Kathy Marks, the correspondent for *The Age*, who confirmed that the interview took place on April 2014.

The media release by the two lecturers said that *Islands Business* editor Samisoni Pareti had been denied accreditation to the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) held in the western town of Nadi during June 2014, without any explanation being given. Netani Rika, communications manager for the Pacific Conference of Churches and a former chief editor of *The Fiji Times*, was also refused accreditation. Rika said the police visited his hotel and asked questions about him. Both journalists confirmed the accuracy of their stories to the USP lecturers.

Pareti said in an interview on Radio New Zealand (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014d) that he went through the usual process of applying for accreditation with the Ministry of Information, but found out the night before the forum meeting that his application had been declined.

I suspect it's to do with my previous work, and that was when I was covering the PIDF last year for the ABC in Australia and I did get into some issue and debate with some of the media organisers who were running PIDF who were not happy with my reporting of the conference last year.

Pareti asked the Ministry of Information for an explanation, but received none. The lack of action by the Ministry of Information drew unfavorable comment from the co-chairperson of the Pacific Freedom Forum (PFF), Titi Gabi (PFF, 2014).

The decision to deny accreditation to *Islands Business* group editor-in-chief Samisoni Pareti to the forum without providing reasons or process to allow him right of appeal is a revealing trend that the media restrictions of the host country of the PIDF are part of the parcel governing this new body.

The impact of the academics' media release made them the front page story on the *Fiji Sun* two days in a row on 25 and 26 June 2014 in articles written by Nemani Delaibatiki (2014a, 2014b). They faced an attack from Ashwin Raj, Chairman of the Fiji Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA), also a senior academic at the USP. The *Media Industry Development Decree* was promulgated in 2010 and gave the military government powers to manage the output of media. The authority consists of a chairperson and

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

five members all appointed by the minister, who has the power to remove them as he decides (*MIDA Decree 2010 handbook*). In 2015, when this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* went to press, the Decree was still in place.

In the *Fiji Sun* of June 25, Raj accused the academics of being ‘ill-informed, self-aggrandising, self-selective moral entrepreneurs trying to instill fear among ordinary and decent citizens’ of Fiji (Raj, 2014).

Any responsible academic, as a necessary measure, would have first ascertained and corroborated the facts before making a series of gnomonic pronouncements about freedom.

By this time RNZI and Radio Australia were following the story and Sharon Smith-Johns, Secretary of Information for the military-backed government, produced a statement saying Pareti should not have been barred from accreditation at the PIDF (Koroi, 2014). She said there had been an error due to miscommunication between the Ministry of Information and MIDA. This was an apology to Pareti and also a snub for Raj, who had said that academics should get their facts right and corroborate them. It was ironic that the journalists’ media release, the outrage by Raj of MIDA and the apology to Pareti from the Ministry of Information were all published in the same edition of the *Fiji Sun*.

This author, Pat Craddock, was then phoned by RNZI and so was Raj. I defended my point of view, and that of Thompson,

We felt as academics with expertise in journalism, teaching young journalists to be ethical and bold, we had to speak out about this. (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014e)

Next day Thompson and I received a phone call from the USP administration saying that they we were both required to attend an ‘informal meeting’ with Deputy Vice-Chancellor Esther Williams and the head of the Human Resources Section, Heather Stadel, of USP. We requested to be interviewed together. This was declined.

On entering the HR room, I was surprised to find that the proceedings were to be audio recorded. As I possessed a recorder of my own, I said that I would also like to record the proceedings. This was accepted.

Deputy VC Williams said the meeting was an ‘informal’ one to explore what had been taking place in the media. The word *informal* is crucial and was said by Williams at the beginning of the meeting and can be clearly heard on the audio recording (P. Craddock, personal communication, June 25, 2014). In my understanding, an informal meeting is a private personal matter. The audio recording was to become a crucial part of the Iago saga.

During this discussion, Williams said that there had been a complaint from outside the USP saying that there were ‘errors’ in the journalists’ media release. I asked who had complained but did not receive an answer. I asked about the errors and was told that MIDA should have been consulted for their viewpoint. I rejected this comment. The conversation continued:

Esther Williams:

All of us understand that we don't live in a normal democratic government situation. I've been here a long time. When you released this, apart from this other purpose of initiating discussion, did you realise the situation here and also realise the impact it would have on the university?

Pat Craddock:

What do you mean the position we're in? I don't understand.

Esther Williams:

What I'm saying is we're operating right now, as you know, for the last six years, we're not under a democratic government. We are having elections in September 2014, so whatever we put out in the news media we are very careful, recognising that we've been very lucky: we operate within academic freedom principles – we all know—and we've allowed staff to do that and you realise that, too, but when things like this come out ... you recognise there are some repercussions from the present government. We have to explain what's happening. We are a government institution funded by them.

Thompson also audio—recorded his informal discussion. It was then assumed by the two lecturers that the issue had been resolved, as Williams had not mentioned any further action or investigation. The following morning, the two journalism lecturers saw that for the second day in succession they were the lead item on the front page of the *Fiji Sun*, with their photographs and a heading in bold lettering saying 'USP probe pair' (Delaibataki, 2014b). The university was quoted as saying that the two academics were under investigation.

Both lecturers felt that there had been a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of what had taken place during the discussion. They then met again with the head of human resources, Stadel. Both lecturers asked to audio-record their discussion with her and she declined. During that discussion Stadel said she was unaware that USP would be commenting to the media. We asked if a retraction could take place and we were asked by Stadel to prepare a suitable draft answer for her consideration. We prepared a one-paragraph draft.

Next morning both lecturers received a hand-delivered letter from HR asking them to sign a statement (H. Stadel, personal communication, June 26, 2014). The letter addressed to me said that there had been complaints about the accuracy and nature of the comments in the media release. There was also the inference that I had breached the condition of my work permit, which says that I must not '*behave in a manner that is prejudicial to the peace, good order, good government or morale of the people of the Fiji Islands.*' [Author's emphasis]

This letter also inferred that I had potentially put at risk future work permits for other USP staff. I viewed the content as an intimidation from the USP administration. Within an hour of receiving the letter, I was contacted by a Fiji reporter asking if I would sign

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

it. The letter had obviously been leaked as he was quoting from it. I asked the reporter for his name, if he had a copy of the letter and who gave it to him. He immediately terminated the phone call.

I decided then that the confidence of the 'informal discussion' held with Williams, Stadel and myself had been betrayed and that I would respond through the media. Hence, what previously were personal communications would now be in the public domain. I immediately emailed my letter from HR to the media. I then wrote a media release, which was published in the New Zealand-based media transparency blog *Café Pacific* with quotes from the 'informal discussion'. It included statements about the military and the USP. Audio was also attached. In my media release I said that I would not sign the letter from HR. This led to interviews with both local and the international media. Thompson also declined to sign his letter from HR.

Iago did not end there. Dr Biman Prasad, a former professor of the USP and now the leader of the opposition National Federation Party in Parliament spoke to RNZI on the issue of academic media freedom,

I think these two academics in the journalism programme at the University of the South Pacific were merely exercising their role as academics and commenting on a very, very important issue. I am appalled at the way in which the government has reacted through MIDA and indeed how the University of the South Pacific has reacted to the work and the comment of these two academics (RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, 2014f).

Was the Iago saga now over? Not quite. I lodged a formal written complaint with the USP administration against Ashwin Raj of MIDA for slandering my name (Craddock, 2014). I noted in my letter that he was also a fulltime employee of USP. Amnesty International Australia entered the fray with a statement from crisis response campaign coordinator Michael Hayworth:

This is the latest act of intimidation against journalists by the authorities. There is a worrying pattern in Fiji of the authorities trying to silence journalists ahead of the elections in September.

Attacks against the media are one of the most serious violations of the right to freedom of expression, particularly in the lead up to elections. The media must be allowed to freely publish information concerning the elections, including criticisms of the government and candidates, without fear of retribution. (Amnesty International, 2014)

Emeritus Professor Crosbie Walsh, a former academic at USP, then wrote a two-page opinion article, entitled 'Blowing the embers on old fires', in his Fiji blog, which was republished in the *Fiji Sun*. He said that during his time at USP he had never made comments that were political (Walsh, 2014). His article was full of political opinion. Walsh

had not been teaching journalism to students preparing to build a career in the media. We were. We were trying to develop young minds to ask important and sometimes difficult questions of their leaders. We had ethical responsibilities to students, to the public, to our profession and ourselves.

The story of honest Iago had come to an end. Both journalism lecturers returned to their home countries after the semester ended when the examinations and assessments were completed. Williams retired from USP in September 2014. Raj remains chairman of MIDA and is also on the staff working in the USP Vice-Chancellor's Office. A General Election was held in Fiji during September 2014. The former coup leader, Voreqe Bainimarama, who had retired from the military to become leader of a new political party, FijiFirst, was voted into office with a considerable majority. He is now Prime Minister legally.

References

- Amnesty International. (2014, June 27). Fiji: End harassment of journalists ahead of election. Retrieved on June 27, 2014 from www.amnesty.org/en/news/fiji-end-harassment-journalists-ahead-election-2014-06-27
- Café Pacific*. (2014, June 30). USP's attempted gag over media freedom. Retrieved on January 7, 2015 from www.cafepacific.blogspot.co.nz/2014/06/usps-attempted-gag-over-media-freedom.html
- Coka, A. (2014, June 29). Commander disappointed with Australian newspaper report. FBC News. Retrieved on June 30, 2014 from www.fbc.com.fj/fiji/20914/commander-disappointed-with-australia-newspaper-report.
- Craddock, P. (2014, June 27). Letter of complaint to the chairman of the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA).
- Craddock, P. & Thompson, M. (2014, June 22). *Republika*. [Media release]. Retrieved on January 2, 2015, from www.facebook.com/republikamag/posts/773436642688439
- Delaibatiki, N. (2014a, June 25). Row over duo. *The Sun*, pp.1 & 26.
- Delaibatiki, N. (2014b, June 26). USP probe pair. *The Sun*, p.1.
- Koroi, N. (2014, June 25). Smith-Johns apologises. *Fiji Sun*, p. 26.
- Marks, K. (2014, June 20). Fiji military leader admits beatings, torture. *The Age*, p. 3. Retrieved on June 30, 2014, from www.theage.com.au/world/fiji-military-leader-admits-beatings-torture-20140620-zsg90.html
- Madigubuli, A. (2014, June 24). Tikoitoga clears the air. *The Fiji Times Online*. Retrieved on June 24, 2014 from www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=272370.
- MIDA, Media Industry Development Decree (2010). Part 2 – Media Industry Development Authority of Fiji, p.6, para 6.
- Pacific Freedom Forum (PFF). (2014, June 22). FIJI: PIDF media ban will incur credibility cost, warns PFF. Retrieved on January 1, 2015, from www.pacificfreedomforum.org/2014/06/fiji-pidf-media-ban-will-incur.html
- Prasad, B. (2001). Crisis of conscience. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 7(1), pp. 97-104. Retrieved on November 24, 2014 from, http://repository.usp.ac.fj/5092/1/Crisis_of_Conscience.pdf
- Raj, A. (2014, June 25). USP 2 Statement: Response by MIDA. *Fiji Sun*, p.26.
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*. (2014a, May 30). Fiji party calls for reinstatement of scholarship. Anthony

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

- F. Retrieved on May 30, 2014 from www.radionz.co.nz/news/pacific/245834/fiji-party-calls-for-reinstatement-of-scholarship.
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, (2014b, June 5). Termination of Fiji scholarship must be explained. Narsey W. Retrieved on June 5, 2014 from www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/246427/termination-of-fiji-scholarship-must-be-explained.
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, (2014c, June 9). Fiji board says it was advised by USP to pull scholarship. Retrieved on June 9, 2014, from www.radionz.co.nz/news/pacific/246732/Fiji-board-says-it-was-advised-by-usp-to-pull-scholarship.
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, (2014d, June 20). Leading Pacific journalist barred from PIDF. Retrieved on June 22, 2014, from www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/247791/leading-pacific-journalist-barred-from-pidf.
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, (2014e, June 25). Fiji academics stand by comments. Retrieved on June 26, 2014, from www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/2600981/Fiji-academics-stand-by-comments
- RNZI *Dateline Pacific*, (2014f, July 1). USP criticised for its handling on journalism academics. Retrieved on July 2, 2014, from www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/2601726/usp-criticised-for-its-handling-of-journalism-academics
- Robie, D. (2008). 2000 retrospective: Coup coup land: The press and the putsch in Fiji. *Fijian Studies: A journal of contemporary Fiji*, 6(1,2), pp. 271-285.
- Robie, D. (2007). Cyberspace democracy: Freedom of speech dilemmas in Pacific journalism education. *UTS Law Review*, 5, 131-149.
- Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their banner: Nationalist struggles in the South Pacific*. London, United Kingdom: Zed Books.
- Stadel, H. (2014, June 26). Letter to Patrick Craddock. Retrieved on December 30, 2014 from *Fijileaks* blog archives, p.15. www.fjileaks.com/home/archives/06-2014.
- Tokalau, T. (2014, June 1). Scholarship future worries student activist. *Fiji Times*, p.1.
- Walsh, C. (2014, June 29). Blowing the embers on old fires: Media and academic freedom and responsibility. *Fiji Sun*, p.18-19.

Pat Craddock began his radio career with Radio New Zealand and worked as a producer for Morning Report, the documentary programme Insight and Radio New Zealand International. He was then appointed as the first manager for the newly formed Radio New Zealand Continuing Education Unit. He has been a media trainer in Fiji, Kenya, Kiribati, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Tuvalu. He has worked for the University of the South Pacific (USP) on four different occasions over a time frame of 20 years that spanned the Speight coup of 2000 and the Bainimarama coup of 2006. His last appointment at USP was from March to July 2014. Craddock is on the editorial board of Pacific Journalism Review.

pcqmol@actrix.co.nz