

11. Media freedom in Fiji

Journalism challenges facing *Wansolwara*, an independent, campus-based newspaper

Abstract: This article is a case study of *Wansolwara*, the University of the South Pacific (USP) journalism programme student training newspaper. The article compares the outcomes of *Wansolwara*'s coverage of the 2000 and 2006 Fiji coups in relation to student learning and an alternative media voice in a climate of restrictions. Interviews with student journalists and lecturers involved in the coup coverage indicate that *Wansolwara*'s status as a campus-based newspaper has been a strategic benefit in filling some gaps in mainstream media reporting, besides providing students with empowering learning experiences. The case study illustrates the importance of an independent, campus-based newspaper somewhat less restrained by commercial pressures and less exposed to direct state coercion.

Keywords: censorship, Fiji, journalism education, press freedom, student press, University of the South Pacific, *Wansolwara*

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THIS ARTICLE examines how the University of the South Pacific journalism training newspaper, *Wansolwara*, covered the 2000 and 2006 Fiji coups, skirting institutional pressures and state censorship. The real-world training included having to come to terms with punitive legislation, such as the *Public Emergency Regulations (PER)* introduced in 2009 and the *Media Industry Development Decree 2010*. It was part of efforts to provide undergraduate students a 'taste' of what it is like to be a professional journalist. The article also examines *Wansolwara*'s contribution to the media discourse at a time when the national media were reputedly restrained in their reporting due to legal curbs and owners' commercial considerations (see Narsey, 2013). While equally bound by the media laws, *Wansolwara* fell somewhat under the radar, possibly because it was a journalism training publication printed and distributed infrequently, with a limited circulation at the time. However, since September 2009, the paper has been printed by a major national daily newspaper, the *Fiji Sun*. It is distributed nation-wide as an insert in the *Sun*. A PDF version is available online.

In spite of claims by former USP Vice-Chancellor, Esekia Solofa, that journalism students should practise ‘simulated’ journalism, The USP journalism programme considers *Wansolwara* as a serious newspaper tackling major national and regional issues. The publication has won several Journalism Education Association (JEA) awards in its 16-year existence, including the Dr Charles Stuart Best Publication award for coverage of the 2000 George Speight attempted coup (Robie, 2010).

The May 2014 issue, under the leadership of student editor Tevita Vuibau, focused on media freedom, media responsibility and the impending 2014 elections. This was at a time when some mainstream media outlets were accused of producing ‘churnalism’ as a result of legal constraints and the commercial considerations of the owners (Hooper, 2013; Narsey, 2013). Vuibau works at *The Fiji Times*, but considered that he had more freedom to report in the campus newspaper, as this article will discuss. Based on document review and interviews with former student journalists and former lecturers, the article finds that while the replicated newsroom experience gained through *Wansolwara* is achieving its core aim of providing training for students, much more has been gained. This illustrates the importance of an independent campus-based newspaper that is unencumbered by commercial and other forms of pressure emanating from owners and advertisers, and is somewhat less exposed to direct state coercion.

Background

Media are deemed to provide a platform that enables dialogue across all sectors of society, even if there is considerable debate about this concept (Aslam, 2011). Media are seen as channels for the dissemination of and obtaining knowledge and information, ranging from blogs to podcasts (Vasterman, 2005). According to UNESCO (2014), media freedom is essential for ‘building strong democracies, promoting civic participation, upholding the rule of law and encouraging human development and security’. Such goals are purportedly achieved when the media act as the Fourth Estate and scrutinise the government on behalf of the public (Darwish, 2010). However, in many countries, including Fiji, the media is subjected to censorship due to political and/or cultural reasons (Perrottet & Robie, 2011).

The normative notion of media as a social watchdog faces various challenges in an ethnically and politically unstable country such as Fiji, which has faced four coups between 1987 and 2006 (Robie, 2014; Singh, 2010). The media have faced various levels of censorship since the country’s first coup in May 1987; staged by the then Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka in the name of Indigenous rights (Robie, 2001a). Successive Fiji governments have argued for tighter media controls for the sake of social stability. Such arguments gained momentum after the 2000 nationalist coup that toppled Fiji’s first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. Some claimed that ‘reckless journalism’ emboldened the coup plotters, while others insisted that a ‘blundering’ Chaudhry government was ultimately responsible for its own demise (see Hunter, 2009; Robie,

2001). Veteran Pacific Islands correspondent Michael Field pointed out that the 1999 election result that brought the Chaudhry Government to power was ‘remarkably clear but the media, or elements of it, were reluctant to accept it’. Sections of the media were ‘arrogantly anti-democratic’ (cited in Robie, 2001b, p. 152). Former *Daily Post* publisher T. R. Singh (2011, p. 37) claimed that ‘Chaudhry contributed to the problem through some bad choices’, including controversial appointments, while Lal (2001, p. 11) described Chaudhry’s leadership style as ‘pugnacious’.

The Fiji media faced another round of crackdowns after military commander Commodore Frank Bainimarama ousted Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase’s elected government in a coup in December 2006. Bainimarama claimed that the Qarase government was corrupt, discriminatory and racist (Goodwin, 2010). After assuming power, the Bainimarama government introduced various pieces of media legislation, including the PER on April 2009 and the punitive Media Decree in June 2010, claiming that journalists were more a threat to communal harmony than a public watchdog. The decree criminalised what were once considered ethical breaches. Violations of the provisions are punishable by a fine of up to FJ\$10,000 (US\$5000) or imprisonment of up to two years for journalists. Penalties for media companies are as high as FJD\$100,000 (Media Decree, 2010, p. 739). The Media Decree was retained after Bainimarama’s FijiFirst Party won the 2014 General Election.

Campus-based newspapers

The USP’s journalism programme is based in the Fiji capital, Suva, and its flagship publication, *Wansolwara*, has been publishing in the context of Fiji’s political and social environment, including its national media laws. Generally, independent campus student publications are seen as an important educational tool while keeping people informed, with some viewing them as strategic models (Robie, 2011). Such publications are regarded as the primary mass medium of communication on most campuses—an ‘excellent barometer of the views and moods of the student body it serves and the campus it reports’ (Oetting, 1980; Zimmer, 1975). Over time, the common role of the student newspaper has changed, with readership no longer confined to the university environment. Newspapers like the *Badger Herald* at the University of Wisconsin-Madison encompass a broad readership no longer bound by the physical attributes of the campus (Steinberger, 2010). *Wansolwara* has been a part of this trend. It covers national and regional events and issues, including global trends affecting the Pacific, and is circulated nationwide as an insert in the *Fiji Sun*.

However, critics of campus newspapers argue that they are founded on a compromise. Such publications can print anything, but only as long as it is not critical of the school or university. Decades ago, Lane (1972) claimed that administrators and newspaper advisers had a common—although unspoken—agreement that the student newspapers could print whatever they wanted as long as it was uncontroversial and uncritical of the school, community, or nation.

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This 'understanding' has not always gone down well with students. In the late 1960s, more and more school newspapers began publishing controversial stories. The unrest and rebellion, which characterised many university campuses that filtered down to the high school, and students began demanding the right to publish stories considered outside the realm of high school publications (Kraus, 1983). Kraus goes on to state that as controversial issues appeared, some school administrations, fearing adverse publicity and possibly the disruption of the schools, censored student publications. The above are some of the examples outlining the impacts that student publications have in university campuses around the United States. To what extent there are parallels with the situation in Fiji is discussed in the next section.

Student publications in the Pacific

There have been a number of student publications in the Pacific region. There was *Uni Tavur* at the University of Papua New Guinea (UNPG), which has since closed. Besides *Wansolwara* (USP), there is *Liklik Diwai* (DWU, PNG). McManus and Papoutsaki (2004) noted that *Liklik Diwai* provides practical training, which motivates students. Knowing that they can actually 'produce worthwhile publishable materials motivates them to improve their work' (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

However, student publications can trigger unpleasant reactions. *Uni Tavur* and *Wansolwara* have had their share of brushes with administrations. *Uni Tavur*, based at the University of Papua New Guinea journalism programme, is no longer in publication. It became the first publication from New Zealand or the Pacific to win the top student newspaper publishing Ossie Award in 1996. The award was in recognition of a series of investigative journalism reports about national development, the environment, forestry, mining and human rights (Robie, 2012). For their trouble, student reporters were attacked by drunken police officers who assaulted student journalists inside their university van. David Robie, head of the programme at the time, described *Uni Tavur* as an example of real-world journalism reported in real time by students (Robie, 2012).

Wansolwara has faced its own battles with the authorities. The newspaper was founded in 1996 by then-lecturer Philip Cass, along with a number of students. Cass was instrumental in the set-up of the publication after noting that there was no outlet for students' work (Robie, 2002). The name *Wansolwara* was adopted, expressing the idea that all those who were born in or live in the Pacific were bound together by the ocean. *Wansolwara* literally means 'one ocean one people' (Cass, 1999). The publication of the first edition was not easy, as Cass noted, but by the following year the newspaper was on a stronger financial footing and starting to gain a reputation for breaking stories (Robie, 2002). The paper's founding student editor, Stanley Simpson, said at its 10th anniversary event that the 'paper was founded by a group of young people who wanted to do things their way' (Founding editor reminisces, 2006). The newspaper was already well established by Cass and Simpson when the new head of USP journalism, David

Robie arrived from Papua New Guinea. Robie introduced changes and integrated the newspaper into the curriculum so that students earned course credits (a similar system to that which he had established at the University of Papua New Guinea with *Uni Tavor*).

Wansolwara covers national and regional issues as well as USP news, with a strong focus on governance and environmental issues. In general, first year students cover campus-based and national news events, often in partnership with the more senior students; second-year students edit the newspaper and write the opinion pieces in semester one, while the third year students write in-depth reports and edit the paper in the second semester. *Wansolwara* has consistently won Journalism Education Association of Australia (JEA) awards and also Fiji Media Awards for Excellence.

Institutional and other challenges of covering coups

Wansolwara shot to greater prominence with its coverage of the May 2000 coup in Fiji and the hostage crisis in Parliament, during which the deposed Chaudhry government was held in captivity for 56 days (Robie, 2001). At the height of the coup coverage, USP authorities shut down the *Wansolwara* news website, citing potential threats to staff and students. The USP acted after coup supporters rampaged through the Fiji Television studio in downtown Suva in an angry response to a current affairs report, and also raided a shop across the road from the main entrance to USP.

Reflecting on the verdict to close the website, the then-head of the USP journalism programme, Robie, stated that management was fearful about the security of the university. But to close the website without consultation was the ‘worst’ decision at the time (D. Robie, personal communication, 18 January 2015). Robie, now a journalism professor at AUT University, describes the 2000 coup as ‘one of the most challenging’ examples of campus-based journalism that he and his students had ever faced. He added that USP students, all volunteers, ‘rose to the task splendidly’ (ibid.). In 2010, Robie presented a paper at the global UNESCO World Press Freedom Day conference in Brisbane detailing a behind-the-scenes account of this period at USP. He interviewed coup-reporting students from USP reflecting on their experience a decade later and how this had impacted on their career (see Robie, 2010). The article conclusion noted:



Figure 1: *The Global Journalist* report about *Wansolwara*, (2000), 3, 26-29.

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While reporting the coup was certainly cathartic, and led to some pedagogical changes, such as including critical ‘military studies’ with journalism school workshops alongside peacekeeping soldiers on leave from Timor-Leste duties in the Suva barracks—to better understand the military psyche—the experience proved to be a unique one-off case. (Robie, 2010, p. 123)

For some students, the closure of the website by the administration was demoralising. It had contradicted what they were taught in class and shook their belief in notions of free speech and academic freedom. A student journalist at the time, Joe Yaya, recalled that they saw the USP management’s action as an ‘infringement on media freedom’. He said:

We felt we were doing a great service in informing the rest of the world what was happening in Fiji at the time because our coverage went beyond what was happening inside Parliament. (J. Yaya, personal communication, 12 January 2015)

Such responses indicate that practising real-time journalism exposes students to some hard truths about institutional barriers, power dynamics, gatekeeping issues, and other limits of media freedom. It helps contextualise any romanticised notions about journalism and allows students to experience and understand the difference between theoretical concepts and the realities of the job. *Wansolwara* founding lecturer Cass describes it as a ‘reality check’. Referring to the closure of the *Wansolwara* news website, he said:

Ultimately the USP administration came down on the students’ coverage, so I think that was a reality check insofar as an institution will ignore questions of freedom of the press if it thinks it is going to be endangered by the activities of journalists or journalism students and staff. (P. Cass, personal communication, 14 January 2015)

Being put into difficult situations in real-life conditions can also produce innovation and a chance to hone problem-solving skills, which cannot always be replicated in classrooms. In order to find a way out of their dilemma, the journalism programme made arrangements to host a ‘mirror’ site at the University of Technology, Sydney. A former USP design lecturer, Mara Fullner, also set up a mirror site. The coup coverage continued, eventually winning USP Journalism JEA Awards for its efforts. Cass later noted that the coup coverage ultimately shaped the journalism courses and experience of the graduates who returned to their home islands (Cass, 2002).

Contrary to the sentiments of then vice-chancellor Solofa, USP journalism students practise real journalism as part of their learning. Pedagogically speaking, coups provide an opportunity to apply ethics and professionalism, including following safety guidelines for operating in a responsible and conscientious manner. Moreover, coverage of the 2000 and 2006 coups by the campus-based newspaper contributed an alternative, independent voice to the discourse, as pointed out by Cass:

Much of the outside coverage seemed to be done by people who were just taking the plotters’ statements at face value or else were writing their reports beside the

swimming pool at the Travelodge, so the students were giving an alternative view that in many cases was much closer to what was going on. (P. Cass, personnel communication, 14 January 2015)

Coverage of the 2006 coup—‘grow a pair’

Indeed, because of its position as a campus-based newspaper, *Wansolwara* has certain strategic advantages. With regards to the coverage of the 2006 coup and related issues that emerged in the ensuing years, *Wansolwara* was able to remain under the radar and operate under comparatively fewer restrictions, less scrutiny and less suppression. In its June 2008 issue, the paper headlined the expulsion of *The Fiji Times*’ Australian publisher, Evan Hannah, by the Bainimarama government. Student reporters interviewed Hannah’s wife, local USP academic Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, who said that ‘journalists are now working in very difficult conditions and I have a lot of respect for their courage in carrying out what I think is a very important role’ (R. Singh, 2008).

In its April 2009 edition, *Wansolwara* ran a four-page ‘Insight Report’ on the 2006 coup and its impact on the media sector. It tackled the associated themes of media freedom and media responsibility. The lead story entitled ‘Caught in the crossfire: Fiji media and the coups’, highlighted the media’s ‘great challenges’ and ‘immense responsibilities’ in coup situations.

Another story, entitled ‘A muted media?’ pointed out that media’s traditional watchdog role was being seriously eroded. The coverage included an interview with prominent Fiji academic and economist Dr Biman Prasad, now an Opposition Member of Parliament. Prasad said the ‘media should champion coup victims, not coup plotters’. He added that coup reporting in Fiji often lacked economic focus, ignored the views of the ordinary people and fixated on coup plotters. Another interviewee, former *Fiji Times* editor-in-chief Netani Rika, said that the media reported Bainimarama’s allegations about corruption within the deposed Qarase government without examining the claims critically.

The Insight Report filled a major information gap at a time when the mainstream media were said to be wary of criticising government, self-censoring and ignoring opposition voices (see Hooper, 2013; Narsey 2013). Moreover, there is little, if any, tradition of critical self-analysis by the national media. This role is often carried out by independent publications. This highlights the important role of *Wansolwara* as an alternative voice in Fiji’s media landscape.

The *PER*, which imposed pre-publication censorship as well as stiff fines and jail terms for any breaches, was implemented while the April 2009 issue was still at the press. The Solomon Islands student editor at the time, Leni Dalavera, called lecturer Shailendra Singh to ask whether they risked arrest once the issue came out. He was assured that the arrests of students were highly unlikely and that the lecturers would take responsibility for the publication. Apart from this being a clear example of the conditions in Fiji at the time, it was an indication of how student journalists were keeping up with developments on a national level.

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The publication revisited the connected themes of media freedom and media responsibility in post 2006-coup Fiji in its May 2014 issue. Under the leadership of tutor Irene Manueli and student editor Vuibau, *Wansolwara* reviewed the impact of the 2006 coup on Fiji's media sector. The front page, entitled 'Fiji media woes', addressed, among other things, the alleged targeting of individual journalists who had attracted the government's ire for one reason or another. This was a major topic on social media, but scantily reported by the mainstream media.

The May 2014 issue included an interview with ABC's veteran Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney, who explained the circumstances surrounding his ban from Fiji at the time. In an editorial, the newspaper lamented eight years of censorship and welcomed the forthcoming 2014 elections. The editorial said that Fiji's late-teen to 20-something journalists would be reporting on a democratic process in which—given eight years of military rule—they had never taken part. It drew attention to the immense responsibility resting on the shoulders of Fiji's young journalists to dig out 'everything the public needs and deserves to know in order to make a properly informed choice at the ballot box'.

This edition drew on the discussions at the 2014 World Press Freedom Day celebrations held at USP. By then, Fiji's media climate was reported to be slightly more relaxed, with the much-disliked *PER* lifted in 2012. However, the Media Decree was still in place and the mainstream media were allegedly continuing to self-censor, even if to a lesser degree (see Fraenkel, 2014).

Under the prevailing restrictions, *Wansolwara's* critique of the state of Fiji's national media and political landscape was considered a bold piece of journalism. This was evident in some Fiji journalists' reaction on the 'Friends of Fiji Media' Facebook page, which describes itself as a 'social forum where journalists, former journalists, friends, family and supporters can interact, exchange ideas and information and plan for the next mix!' (www.facebook.com/groups/friendsofmediafiji/). Some comments are reproduced below:

Go read Wansolwara folks—and grow a pair (Former *Fiji Times* editor-in-chief Netani Rika).

Vinaka (thank you) Tevita Vuibau and *Wansolwara* (Former Fiji journalist Vasiti Ritova).

Brilliant edition - great reading! Some very interesting points made, esp by Ricardo Morris in the USP discussion (RNZ International journalist Alex Perrotet).

USP journalism students covering the 2006 coup faced less institutional pressure—at least in some respects—than there had been in 2000. There was no threat from USP of closing down student publications. In terms of reporting for *Wansolwara*, the students generally felt that the environment within USP journalism was relatively freer than that which prevailed at the national level. USP Journalism provided pockets of space and freedom that allowed journalistic instincts to flourish, to the extent possible under the prevailing restrictions. This is well articulated by student editor Vuibau, who worked at

The Fiji Times as acting deputy chief of staff and had returned to complete his studies in 2014. He indicated that *Wansolwara* provided him an outlet to express himself more freely as a journalist:

‘I had the privilege to express my opinions while I was at *Wansolwara*. This is a privilege that the mainstream media journalists do not have’ (T Vuibau, personal communication, November 24, 2014).

If Vuibau felt more liberated as a student journalist than as a professional journalist, it was partly because of the different outcomes of the 2000 and the 2006 coups. Members of the renegade military unit behind the George Speight ‘civilian’ coup in May 2000 could not secure full army support and their putsch was a failure. The Bainimarama takeover was a full-blown military coup. A military-backed government headed by Bainimarama secured power and ruled for eight years until the 2014 elections. The Bainimarama government had the power to pass legislation to restrict the national media and to pass policies that could affect the profits of the media company owners. Hence the mainstream media were beholden to the government in more ways than a student publication like *Wansolwara* (See Narsey, 2013).

However, students had to be mindful of new pressures in 2006. For one, there was the Media Decree. For another, USP is owned by 12 Pacific Island countries, including Fiji. The Fiji government is USP’s largest single financial contributor, providing around \$36 million annually. Besides, three expatriate USP lecturers who had issued anti-government statements left the country and did not return to USP (Fiji PM opens, 2014; Narsey, 2013).

Vuibau and the student editorial team would have been aware of these contexts. Indeed, as a former USP journalism student from the Solomon Islands, Alex Akwai said, institutional pressures, applied or implied, can weigh heavily on student reporters’ minds:

Some hindrance comes from the institution itself in giving full authority to a campus-based student newspaper to be fully independent. It is a question of the degree of independence. How impartial will the paper be when it comes to reporting stories that will directly or indirectly affect the bigger learning institution as a whole? (A. Akwai, personal communication, January 16, 2015)

With regards to the expatriate lecturers, they may have felt that criticising the government was a legitimate part of their jobs as academics. From a student perspective, Vuibau was of the view that if ‘you are brought in as lecturers, your first responsibility is to your students’ (T. Vuibau, personal communication, 25 February 2015). In one sense, Vuibau found the lecturers’ stance ‘admirable’, but said it was not entirely ‘fair’ on fee-paying students whose education was disrupted as a result of the clash with government. These competing issues and arguments, which are perhaps equally legitimate in their own right, were not present in 2000.

For Vuibau and his team, the challenge was to engage with the issues without getting

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involved in an open clash with the authorities. Taking calculated risks was deemed important for avoiding any further disruption to students' education and possible restrictions on student publications. Despite these pressures, Vuibau felt 'embarrassed' by the accolades that the *Wansolwara* team received from Fiji's media fraternity. He felt the comparison some were making between *Wansolwara* and the mainstream media was inappropriate:

... the praises that I was getting from social media and also from my senior colleagues at *The Fiji Times* made me feel embarrassed because of the kind of environment that they work in. I was able to write freely at USP. And that is why it is very important to have an independent campus-based newspaper. (T. Vuibau, personal communication, 24 November 2014)

An enriching experience

Student interviews indicate that working on a student newspaper is an enriching experience for those who choose to fully participate in the exercise and make meaningful contributions. Solomon Islander Akwai, who now teaches journalism in his home country, said that holding an editorial position at *Wansolwara* provided a fair understanding of how a newsroom operated and what kinds of pressures to expect. His *Wansolwara* experience also influenced his teaching approach:

Working for *Wansolwara* as a student reporter was indeed a wonderful and challenging experience. Coming out of such an experience has helped me in terms of working with my students, who are aspiring journalists. I always try to maintain the experience of a student and a reporter with my students by allowing them to treat the classroom as their newsroom. (A. Akwai, personal communication, 16 January 2015)

Students involved in the coverage of coups and related events found it to be an empowering experience. One student editor in 2014, Priya Chand, said that 'it's important to take some risk, move past self-censorship and uphold the principles of ethical and honest journalism'. Yaya, who covered the 2000 coup, said that:

I enrolled in the journalism programme in 2000 and covering the coup was the best practical experience I could have asked for, particularly as a first year student with no field experience. Covering the coup in a way hastened my journalism career. It also sharpened my analytical skills and deepened my interest and knowledge of Fijian politics. (J. Yaya, personal communication, 12 January 2015)

Besides the firsthand learning experience, there are other reasons why a student newspaper could play a useful role in a country like Fiji. As Robie said:

To some extent, the mainstream media, especially the newspapers, have been bitten by the Western media bug so prevalent in Australia and New Zealand today. Nowadays the media is focused on high profile 'entertainment' and 'infotainment' stories about celebrities, lifestyle and waffle. Quality student papers can carve out a

niche for doing in-depth development and environment stories and issues. (D. Robie, personal communication, 18 January 2015)

Conclusion

This article has outlined *Wansolwara's* coverage of the 2000 and 2006 Fiji coups in terms of the threats and opportunities. This case study highlighted that university-based student newspapers can play an important role in terms of providing training in real-life situations and contribute an alternative view in the discourse. Such publications can be strategic assets in the national media landscape, especially under a climate of state censorship. Reporting live enabled students to experience first-hand institutional pressures and how to cope with them. It also forced them to come to terms with the legislative environment on a practical basis. With regard to state and institutional pressures, a truthful understanding was required of how far it was possible to go without inflicting serious self-damage. Students gained practical experience in how to push the boundaries and provide a valuable public service without becoming a casualty of the law. The learning outcomes indicate that student reporters may benefit by being put into challenging reporting situations and taking calculated risks, rather than practise 'simulated journalism'. Real reporting provided students with some preparation for the real-world challenges they were bound to face in their future roles as journalists. *Wansolwara* reporters were exposed to the realities and challenges of practicing journalism, which some found useful when they started their professional careers. Being put into difficult situations allowed students to hone their problem-solving skills and work out innovative ways of overcoming obstacles. Unrestricted by commercial pressures, student publications can offer different perspectives on the coverage of historical events such as coups.

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