

WEST PAPUA

16. Conflict in West Papua

The contrast between historic and contemporary media coverage in New Zealand

ABSTRACT: Many New Zealanders, even in politically aware circles, have a limited understanding of West Papua and frequently confuse the Indonesian-controlled territory with its neighbour Papua New Guinea. This reflects the limited mainstream media coverage of the territory and of the ongoing conflict that is taking place there. However, in 1962 and again in 1969, the New Zealand media gave considerable attention to the crises that enveloped West Papua and determined its subsequent destiny. The territory's Pacific location was often highlighted and the statements of West Papuan leaders were reported. The year 1962 saw escalating Indonesian military intervention in the territory and subsequently the signing of the controversial US-brokered New York Agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia. In 1969 Indonesia conducted an 'Act of Free Choice' which was widely seen by external observers as a fraudulent act of self-determination. This article gives examples of this historic coverage and considers what might be done to bring about change and to bring West Papua back into the frame as a Pacific neighbour.

Keywords: conflict reporting, foreign correspondents, independence, Indonesia, international journalism, self-determination, West Papua

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MAINSTREAM print media in New Zealand gives scant attention to the political and conflict issues in West Papua, and *Pacific Journalism Review* deserves credit for exposing and endeavouring to correct this 'blind spot' (Abplanalp, 2012; Blades, 2014; Leadbeater, 2008; Perrottet and Robie, 2011; Zweifel, 2010). Content analysis undertaken in 2011 by David Robie (Robie, 2013) confirms that the New Zealand print media offer negligible coverage of West Papua, even of major events involving deaths and mass arrests.

Two examples are illustrative. The print media failed to cover the 2014 story of two French journalists who were detained for nearly three months in Jayapura, West Papua. The pair were finally released on 27 October 2014 (Arrivée a Paris, 2014). French journalists

Thomas Dandois and Valentine Bourrat were tried and convicted of misusing tourist visas to work as journalists. The pair, well-regarded in France, were working on a documentary for TV channel Arte, and were following a well-established precedent by entering on tourist visa. The Indonesian authorities almost never grant working visas for current affairs journalists to report on West Papua. Any that do gain permission to work ‘above the radar’ must accept tight restrictions on their activities. The detention of Dandois and Bourrat was highly unusual; others caught in similar circumstances have been summarily deported. Some of the people they met were detained and although tribal leader Areki Wanimbo was released on 8 May 2015, a prosecution appeal was undergoing. Some 46 activists were arrested when they demonstrated in support of the journalist pair (Papuan Behind Bars, 2014).

This was a dramatic story, a story with much to say about the current state of media freedom in West Papua. New President Joko Widodo—who had made campaign promises to open up West Papua—was about to take office in Jakarta (Jokowi to open access, 2014). There was no lack of soft ‘human interest’ story possibilities to include as anxious family members and colleagues set up petitions and traveled to the area. There was even a ‘local’ angle; a solidarity vigil in Auckland attended by representation of churches, human rights organisations and a journalist union.

For once the story did include people from our familiar context. Walter Zweifel, news editor of Radio New Zealand International, which offers extensive and thoughtful coverage of West Papua, has suggested that the absence of ‘First World protagonists’ is a significant reason for the West Papua media blind spot (Zweifel, 2010). However, despite these two journalists’ ‘First World’ credentials, their story appeared in New Zealand only in online media and on Radio New Zealand. If the journalists had been detained in Samoa or Fiji would the reporting have been different?

In August 2014, a rising star among Papuan human rights defenders, Victor Mambor, made a brief visit to New Zealand. He is the Papua chair of the Indonesian Independent Journalists’ Association and the editor of the Jayapura-based newspaper and website *Tabloid Jubi*. Early in 2014, Victor made representations about the lack of press freedoms to the European Parliament. No mainstream print media covered his visit to New Zealand, and media coverage was again almost entirely web and radio-based, although a short TV3 interview (McRoberts, 2014) was a welcome development.

Things were a little better 18 months earlier when exiled West Papuan leader Benny Wenda¹ toured New Zealand. Parliamentary Speaker David Carter scored an own goal when he refused permission for Green MP Catherine Delahunty to hold a meeting for Wenda in Parliament Buildings. Foreign Minister McCully also refused to meet with him, thus giving news media a strong local political angle (McCully snubs West Papuan, 2013).

The situation was vastly different in the 1960s. This was the period when control of West Papua (then West New Guinea, commonly known as Dutch New Guinea) passed from the Netherlands to Indonesia. It was a turbulent time for the people of West Papua,

who had no influence over the international power play which denied them their right to self-determination.

Brief background

Indonesian nationalists unilaterally declared their independence from the Dutch in 1945, but it was a further four years of bitter conflict before the Dutch agreed to transfer power. The nationalists reluctantly agreed to allow the Dutch to continue to administer West Papua in the short term, but over time intensified their campaign for the inclusion of West Papua in the new republic. The Indonesian claim rested largely on the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, that newly liberated states should preserve the boundaries set out by former colonists. The *uti possidetis* principle has a controversial legal status and does not sit well alongside other international legal principles such as the right to self-determination.

As US President Woodrow Wilson said in 1918:

Peoples are not to be handed about from one sovereignty to another by an international conference or an understanding between rivals and antagonists ... ‘Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril. (Wilson, 1918)

By 1961, the Dutch were well-advanced with their plans to prepare the Papuan people for self-determination. The West New Guinea Council—a mostly elected local parliament—had been set up and the national symbols of the nation-to-be chosen. The now-banned *Morning Star flag* was raised officially on 1 December 1961 alongside the Dutch tri-colour.

At the same time, Indonesia was escalating both its military and its diplomatic campaign and had begun armed infiltration into the territory. These events coincided with a critical period in the Cold War when the United States under President J F Kennedy was determined to ward off increasing Soviet influence over Indonesia. In 1962, Indonesia was the largest recipient of Soviet aid in the non-communist world (Saltford, 2002). The United States brokered negotiations between the Dutch and the Indonesians. In August the New York agreement was signed; it provided for a seven month United Nations administration to be followed by Indonesian rule. Jakarta was however obligated to conduct an act of self-determination not later than 1969 (Saltford, 2002).

New Zealand media in the 1960s

An overview of the media coverage of West Papua in 1962 and 1969 follows. A selection of articles from each year from both major Auckland papers of the time, *The Auckland Star* and *The New Zealand Herald*, were taken for this survey. In the 1960s, as today, *The New Zealand Herald* had the country’s highest circulation as a morning newspaper delivered throughout much of the North Island. The *Auckland Star* was an evening news-

paper distributed in the metropolitan area. It ceased publication in 1991, and partly by contrast with its rival, was generally seen as less conservative in both style and political stance.

For the month of May in every year every edition of both newspapers was studied. This overview establishes that the conflict, its causes and the views of the antagonistic protagonists were well covered. If there was bias it was generally pro the rights of the Papuan people.

There were 14 articles about West Papua in May 1962 in the *Auckland Star* and 6 in *The New Zealand Herald*. Some of the *Auckland Star* headlines were 'With West New Guinea foregone conclusion: Indonesia's internal war against Reds is what matters now' (Warner, 1962), 'More Red arms for Indonesia' (1962), 'Indonesians in Dutch territory' (1962), 'Holland urges U Thant: Stop aggression in New Guinea' (1962) and 'Indonesia's slaves, says Papuan' (Heymanson, 1962). At the end of May, the *Star* published an opinion article penned by University of Auckland geography professor Kenneth Cumberland who had visited West Papua and talked with Papuan leaders. His article was titled 'The Papuans want autonomy. Soekarno's claim has slender basis' (Cumberland, 1962).

The *Herald* headlines were a little less colourful but show that the newspaper was covering the contemporary story of military clashes and US attempts to get negotiations under way. For example 'Dutch pour in reinforcements Indonesian troops under attack' (1962) and 'Holland Ready to Reopen N. Guinea talks: American's Plan' (1962).

By 1969, West Papua (officially renamed West Irian) had a well-established guerrilla movement, the Free Papua Movement or OPM (Osborne, 1985). The preparations for the 'Act of Free Choice' took place against the background of armed rebellion in the north-west Bird's Head area and in the Central Western Highlands. Indonesia only reluctantly agreed to go ahead with the Act and then chose the procedures under which it would take place, setting aside the protestations of UN representatives. The conduct of the UN and other Western nations at this time does them grave discredit.

In May 1969, there were 15 *Auckland Star* articles about West Irian, including two separate stories on May 13. *The New Zealand Herald* covered the issue in four articles in this same month. As in 1962, the *Herald* headlines were comparatively sober along the lines of 'Indonesians going on with the vote despite rebels' (1969) and 'Major problems ahead for West Irian rulers' (Mohr, 1969).

The Auckland Star had many arresting headlines such as 'Standing by with guns, axes, blowpipes; 10,000 ready to battle Indonesia in West Irian' (1969) and "'Hot land" in our near north a world of strife' (1969). Two articles, 'On the fringe of tormented land' and 'New Guinea's rebels not from the Stone Age' carried the byline of correspondents in the region. Donald Woodford (Woodford, 1969) reported for the New Zealand Press Association from Wutung on the border or 'fringe' of Papua New Guinea and Frank Palmos, who had visited the territory previously, wrote from Jakarta. Palmos quoted traders and mission members in support of the contention that the Papuans were not 'Stone Age' but rather

a good percentage were ‘schooled, work on small trade ... and have a tight knit village structure of long standing.’ (Palmos, 1969) Several stories featured the concerns of West Papuan leaders in exile and their appeals for UN troops to be sent to the territory and for the UN to ensure a ‘one man one vote’ poll.

The ‘Act of Free Choice’ was a carefully scripted process that allowed for no possibility of a dissenting vote (Drooglever & Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2009). It was conducted by a series of assemblies or ‘musjawaraks’² at which just 1022 representatives were granted the right to vote. Saltford (2002, p. 158) records that Brigadier Ali Murtopo, commander of special operations during the Act, warned Papuans who dared to vote ‘no’ that they ‘would have their “accursed” tongues torn out’.

The process began in July and the New Zealand ambassador was among diplomats invited to observe part of the process. Now that official External Affairs documents have been declassified, it is clear that Ambassador Bill Challis was distressed by his experiences. He reported in a letter to his Wellington colleagues that ‘the atmosphere was oppressive, and joy was artificial, where it was not restricted to the Indonesian population’. The ambassador’s reservations were set aside in favour of the ‘realities of the situation’ and ‘our general sympathies for Indonesia’. (Department of External Affairs, Wellington, 1969).³ However, many New Zealand media articles and editorials were condemnatory.

In June, *The New Zealand Herald* published a lengthy article from Garth Alexander, a British journalist who offered an eyewitness perspective based on a five-week visit to the territory. The byline said the story was ‘specially written for the *Herald*’ and it was titled ‘Army rules in West Irian’. Many people were afraid to talk to Alexander, resorting instead to leaving notes in his luggage or in his hotel room to tell him to open his eyes to ‘this reign of terror’ (Alexander, 1969).

Subsequent stories also emphasised the fear and repression which accompanied every aspect of the plebiscite process. For example a *Star* article on July 19, headlined “‘Free Choice’—so long as you vote “yes”” began: ‘Only 1600 miles away in New Zealand’s near north, a tormented and impoverished little country is being subjected to the farce of what must be the most contrived “free election” outside the communist bloc’ (1969).

A July 29 editorial in *The New Zealand Herald* concluded ‘there was never the least prospect that the West Irians would be allowed to opt for independence—or for any form of rule best suited to their needs’ (Act of Free Choice, 1969).

Australian journalist Hugh Lunn was on the spot to observe the conduct of the assemblies in Manokwari and Biak in the far west of the territory. In July 1969, US President Nixon visited Jakarta and Lunn has since described how his journalistic colleagues were recalled from the territory to cover the Nixon story and he was left to cover these heavily policed events alone (Worth, 2003).

A number of Lunn’s articles were published in *The New Zealand Herald* from the New Zealand Press Association-Reuters news service. Lunn documented the small brave protests that invariably ended in arrests. One group of four tried unsuccessfully to make

their way into the assembly shouting ‘Self..Self..Self’—they were severely beaten and summarily loaded onto the back of a truck (Lunn, 1969).

Discussion

News reporting has been described as ‘the first draft of history’. Forty five years on we have the benefit of scholarly works to help us understand role of the UN and other major players in the events in West Papua at the time of the ‘Act of Free Choice’. Weighed against these works, New Zealand media stories were offering a commendable ‘first draft’.

What are the reasons for differences between the print news coverage then and now? This must be put in the context of the media landscape of the time. In the 1960s, overseas corporate ownership of the media was not predominant and newspapers were relatively autonomous. Newspapers were not in competition with the wide range of other media communications available today, and employed larger numbers of staff. The concept of news as titillation or entertainment was virtually unknown.

The NZPA placed importance on covering international news for a New Zealand readership. It was a non-profit cooperative imbued with a spirit of public service and its links with the Reuters news service enabled the distribution of stories from correspondents such as Hugh Lunn, who was based in the Asia-Pacific region. In 1966, NZPA decided to base a correspondent of their own in South-east Asia (Sanders & Nevill, 1979).

Although there were considerable restrictions on media access to West Papua/West Irian in 1969 (Tapsell, 2015) it was still possible for journalists to gain access as the examples of the visits of Hugh Lunn and Garth Alexander demonstrate. Since then the shutters have gone up and local journalists work under restrictions and threats (Perrotet & Robie, 2011). In the past 14 years only one New Zealand journalist, freelancer Paul Bensemman, has visited West Papua to report on the conflict. His 2013 visit was under-cover and his story featured seldom—heard Papuan leaders speaking about New Zealand’s controversial police training (Bensemman, 2014). Even so, it took Paul Bensemman five months before he was able to get the story accepted for publication (P. Bensemman, personal communication, 27 February 2015).

In 2015, media ownership in New Zealand is concentrated in the hands of overseas companies owned by international financial institutions and wealthy foreign media moguls (Myllylahti, 2014). The mainstream media have a vested interest in maintaining the political status quo which allows this investment to flourish.

The term ‘manufacturing consent’ was popularised by Noam Chomsky in his writings and in a ground-breaking movie, *Manufacturing Consent—Noam Chomsky and the Media* (Achbar & Wintonick, 1992) which illustrates the ways in which media bias serves to control the views and the responses of the public.

A highly memorable example of bias in the *Manufacturing Consent* movie was the comparison of the genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and relatively comparable

level of killing in East Timor, then still under Indonesian occupation. In the time period 1975-1978, *The New York Times* devoted 70 column inches to the crisis in East Timor compared with 1,175 inches to Cambodia. The startling difference in coverage is explained by Western complicity in the crimes committed by Indonesia as well as Indonesia's geostrategic and economic importance to the West. A media analysis of US coverage of West Papua would probably produce a comparable result.

In 1963, Indonesia embarked on a campaign of 'confrontation'—an undeclared war against the newly formed state of Malaysia, mostly fought in Borneo. New Zealand forces were engaged in the conflict alongside Britain, giving rise to public concerns—albeit at a lower level than in Australia—about Indonesian expansionism. However, in 1965 Indonesia's leftward drift was decisively halted by an abortive coup which was blamed on the entire left, who were said to be planning a communist takeover. A prolonged bloodbath followed, in which more than half a million Indonesians were killed because of alleged communist sympathies. General Suharto, who rose to power at this time, fell into line with Western economic and security interests. New Zealand forged closer links with Indonesia from this time—a Jakarta Legation was upgraded to Embassy status in 1968 and military ties were established in 1973. New Zealand's political blind-spot on West Papua also reflects the desire to protect this harmonious relationship with Indonesia.

By 1969, New Zealand had accepted that *realpolitik* meant they would turn a blind eye to Indonesian abuses in West Papua and vote at the UN in favour of endorsing the 'Act of Free Choice'.

A personal clipping file of West Papua news stories in *The New Zealand Herald* covers the period from the 1980s to the present day. The stories were infrequent and unlike the stories of the 1960s, failed to provide a reader with any context to make sense of the issues behind the headlines. For example, in 1984 escalating conflict led thousands of West Papuans to flee across the border and attempt to seek sanctuary in neighbouring Papua New Guinea. A few stories, including two headlined: 'Refugees found starving' (1984) and 'PNG proposal inhumane' (1984) highlighted the deprivations suffered by the refugees and the tensions that developed between Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, but failed to provide an explanation for the exodus.

In recent decades, electronic and digital news services have become far more prominent and many people no longer rely on a daily newspaper to inform them about world events. The 'snapshot' of newspaper stories from representative months which illustrated the 1960s coverage would not fairly illustrate contemporary coverage.

Thanks to the internet, social media, digital cameras and so on there is a steady stream of information available about political developments, human rights abuses and activist movements in West Papua. Although there is room for bias and distortion of events from these more informal sources, information about significant events can be cross-checked across a number of sources, including reports from widely respected church and human rights groups. This means it is more revealing to examine the way in which particularly

newsworthy or notable events are covered or not covered in contemporary media sources.

David Robie, Alex Perrottet and the Pacific Media Watch team took this approach when they surveyed coverage of 2011 violence in West Papua. (Pacific Media Watch, 2011; Perrottet and Robie, 2011). They describe how in October, an otherwise peaceful Papuan People's Congress was brutally disbanded when the Indonesian military opened fire on a thousands-strong gathering. With the notable exception of Radio New Zealand International, the events went under the radar of mainstream media sources. There is a reference to the events in *The New Zealand Herald* but it is in an Op-Ed article published only online, some months later when the Congress leaders were put on trial. (Leadbeater, 2012).

Looking at website news, *Pacific Scoop* stands out as *Café Pacific* (2011) noted:

In a content analysis of a two-week period between the start of the military crack-down on October 19 until November 2, 2011, it was found that *Pacific Scoop* published 66 percent of the total of 99 news stories carried by main NZ news media websites about the West Papua crisis.

On December 8, 2014, five schoolboys were shot dead by Indonesian security forces as they participated in a traditional (waita) dance protest, after an incident the previous evening when security forces allegedly assaulted people attending a Christmas event. The only reference to this shooting in *The New Zealand Herald* was in a listing of events by numbers: '5 protesters died after Indonesian soldiers reportedly opened fire on a crowd of students in the troubled Papua province' (2014).

As an activist, I am keen to challenge both the media blind-spot and the political blind-spot. A change at the media level would encourage greater public engagement with the issue and potentially lead to political change.

Looking back at the 1960s, media coverage suggests two practical points of leverage. The first is the need to press for renewed media access to the territory as was promised by the new Indonesian President in his campaign speeches. A parliamentary resolution put forward by Green MP Catherine Delahunty in support of greater media freedom in West Papua gained cross-party support (Delahunty, 2014)⁴. A similar resolution was passed by the Australian Senate.⁵

Secondly, there is a need to reposition West Papua as a Pacific neighbor rather than part of Asia. This is already the perspective of Radio New Zealand International, *Pacific Scoop* and Pacific Media Watch, to their great credit. In the 1960s West Papua was seen as part of our region. The territory was described as being near to us and its location as the neighbour of Papua New Guinea, then under Australian governorship was often highlighted.

The West Papuan diaspora has played a big role in renewing the campaign focus on the Pacific. For more than a decade there has been a concerted effort towards the goal of West Papuan inclusion in regional bodies, particularly the Pacific Islands Forum and

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the Melanesian Spearhead Group. The newly formed United Liberation Movement for West Papua, which brings together the three major resistance movements, resubmitted an application for membership in the Melanesian Spearhead Group on 5 February 2015. (Radio New Zealand International, 2015). The pursuit of this objective has generated media exposure in Pacific countries, including New Zealand.

At the grassroots level, there is a lively new Māori and Pacific women's collective, Oceania Interrupted, whose performance work focuses on West Papua. The collective is attracting interest in the Auckland Pacific community and is beginning to break through into print media circles such as *Spasifik* magazine (Curran, 2014), as well as having a high profile in social media such as Facebook. In February 2015, a new Fiji solidarity movement held an inaugural march in Suva. The new network has strong church support including backing from the regional Pacific Conference of Churches (Radio Australia, 2015).

These are hopeful developments for the growing awareness that geographically, culturally and ethnically, West Papua is part of the Pacific region.

Notes

1. Benny Wenda was appointed spokesperson for the United Liberation Movement for West Papua in December 2014.
2. The term *musjawarah* is usually translated as consensus but the 1969 assemblies bore little resemblance to consensus decision making practice as it is known in contemporary parlance.
3. The summary in this September 1969 Briefing Paper notes: 'Reservations about the benefits likely to ensue for the West Irianese or about the validity of the method whereby the decision was reached, cannot set aside the hard fact that in 1969 there was no reasonable and *practical* alternative to this result ...'
4. The wording of the New Zealand motion passed on 30 July 2014 was: 'That this House call upon the new President of Indonesia to commit to genuine media freedom in West Papua, including the right of local and international journalists to report on the political situation there without risk of imprisonment or harassment by the Indonesian State.'
5. On October 1, the Australian Senate passed a resolution which noted that press freedom in the Papuan provinces was 'tightly restricted' by the Indonesian government. The motion expressed concern at the imprisonment of two French journalists for working in the area on tourist visas, and urged the Australian government to call for their release.

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