
Theme : ‘Failed’ states and the environment

1. A reflection on environmental awareness and the media in Fiji

COMMENTARY

Issues of ‘failed’ nation-states, political meltdowns, coups and increasing militarisation have dogged the recent postcolonial history and environment of the Pacific. This, aside from the political and economic effects generally ascribed as the main societal impacts from such crises, has important social and cultural effects that are largely undocumented by academia as well as the media. The effects of political crisis on creativity through censorship, for example, are not adequately covered in current research and scholarship. The ‘Oceans and Nations: “Failed” States and the Environment in the Pacific’ symposium was organised concurrently with the Pacific Science Inter-Congress at the University of the South Pacific on 8-12 July 2013. This commentary and several other papers presented at this symposium are being published as part of this themed edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*. This article reflects on the role of the media in Fijians’ awareness, of environmental issues. It considers the question of whether local cultural and linguistic factors make the media a suitable source of information on the environment for Fijians, and proposes a method for future research that would help to answer this question.

Keywords: culture, environmental journalism, Fiji, language

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NEWCOMERS to Fiji and to the neighbouring South Pacific islands nations are often shocked to see the little attention paid to environmental protection in everyday life (Davies, 2009; Mudaliar, 2009). In Fiji, rubbish, including such toxic materials as plastic, is routinely burnt

in open spaces, releasing dangerous chemicals into the atmosphere. Waste, from objects of common use such as cans and food containers as well as from electronic products, such as broken cellphones, can be seen on most beaches and fields or floating on the ocean. In addition, the ageing and poorly maintained cars and buses spill out tonnes of diesel fumes every day.

This situation extends to the damage done to the human body through such habits as inadequate diet and lack of exercise. A simple visit to a local supermarket testifies to the situation. Sugar-free, low fat, organic, or otherwise wholesome food, is difficult to find, especially food that is affordable to average consumers. Wholesome varieties of food are scarce and those that can be found are located in expensive shops catering to the expatriate community.

Compared to its developed neighbouring countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, Fiji seems not to foster awareness of environmental damage and sustainability, and the ensuing health effects. At the same time, however, international health organisations, as well as the Fiji government itself, recognise the significance of daily habits on environmental conditions. For example, the World Health Organisation has reported on the matter, and the Fiji government has considered environmental issues for policy (World Health Organisation, 2004; Fiji Government press release, 2012). So, why does the situation persist unabated?

Several factors could be responsible, and of course, it could also be a combination of these factors. One factor could be that the environmental situation is a reflection of the fact that Fiji has a developing economy; in other words, environmental abuse could be a sign of poverty. Another factor could be that there is government neglect; in other words, there might not be enough or adequate legislation and policies to regulate the protection of the environment and the people living in it. A third factor could be that it is a sign of misinformation; in other words, there could be a gap between government regulation and citizen awareness: citizens may not be as aware as they should be of the condition of the environment and their health, and of how their own practices contribute to this condition. If this is the case, the media could be playing an ineffective role in disseminating information and instructing the public.

These questions cover many different scholarly fields. Since my background is in language, text analysis and communication, I will focus on this perspective. To explore this issue, we can take as a working hypothesis the idea that specialised scientific knowledge on environmental pollution and health

issues is not communicated in a discursively and culturally appropriate way to the general Fijian population, and remains, therefore, misunderstood by them.

In fact, some scholars have argued in favour of this claim. For example, Paul Geraghty (2005) maintains that Fijians are generally misinformed about health and environmental matters because of an unwillingness by media practitioners to acknowledge that Fiji has low literacy levels (in any language). The common practice in the media is to communicate information in English, rather than the local languages Fijian and Fiji-Hindi, thereby excluding and disempowering many individuals.

This claim would seem to be substantiated. For example, a perusal of 20 articles on the environment in Fiji’s two daily newspapers, *The Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*, in 2012 revealed few differences in format or style from articles on similar topics in the *New Zealand Herald* and in *The Australian*. Actually, there does not seem to be a shortage of relevant articles, ranging from news stories to features, with both *The Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun* producing a regular output on environmental issues. For instance, 25 articles dealing with the environment and climate change appeared in *The Fiji Times* between June 2012 and June 2013.

However, a particular feature of Fiji newspapers, in contrast to their New Zealand and Australian counterparts, seems to be that Fiji newspapers tend not to sustain an issue or analysis of an event over several articles. To test this observation, I examined all the issues of *The New Zealand Herald* and all the issues of *The Fiji Times* in 2012 for articles that mentioned the BP oil spill of 2009 (Zeller, 2010). Regarded as the largest accidental marine oil spill in history, the explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico claimed 11 lives. This major international event was chosen deliberately to avoid local news. I found that *The New Zealand Herald* published 23 articles that involved the spill in various ways, compared to only two in *The Fiji Times*. This could suggest a more sustained emphasis on the topic (ie. continuing to explore it years after the event), as well as a willingness to make associations between the spill and other topics. This repetition has an educational effect and encourages critical thinking on the topic by producing more information on it from different angles. This emphasis through repetition seems to be lacking in Fiji newspapers.

Further research is needed on the issue of environmental and health communication in Fiji from a language and text perspective. A plan for this research

could include these steps. After collecting a number of texts from government publications and from major media outlets such as *The Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun*, we could do a discourse analysis of the language used, tracing patterns and recurring themes. We could then compare the discourses and texts produced in Fiji on selected topics with the discourses and texts produced on these same topics in a country with a better reputation on environmental awareness. This could produce some interesting results on the textual level.

However, assuming that perceptions of nature are culturally and politically constructed, if our aim is to find out about whether Fijians, and Pacific Islanders generally, are well informed or not, we would need to supplement this with data gathered from focus groups and surveys. Since 'a picture is often worth a thousand words', we should also take into account multimodal elements, such as visual signs, because visual communication (or its absence) could affect people's responses to verbal depictions in different ways.

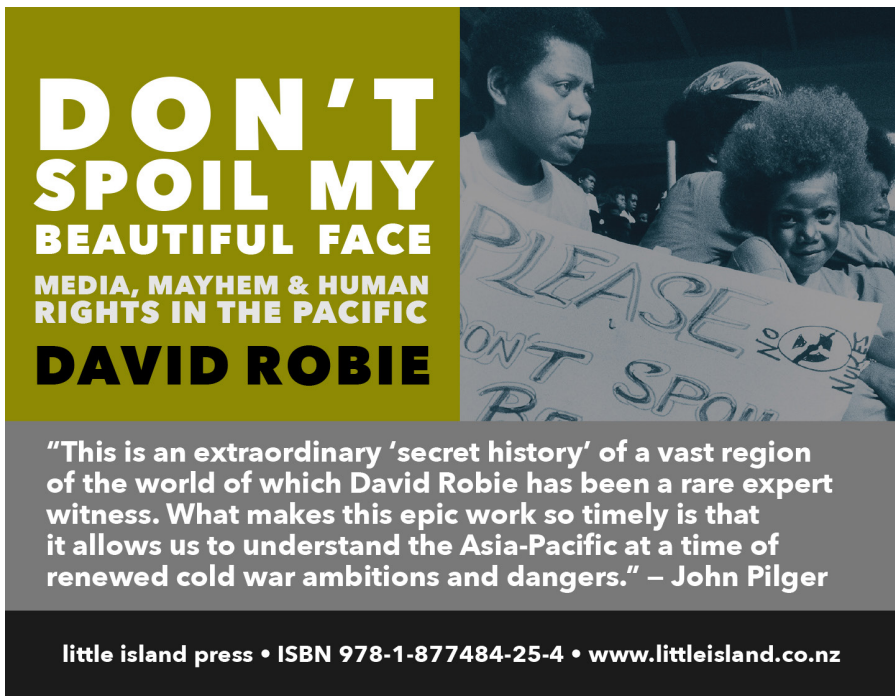
This research framework would enable an understanding of the ways in which information is disseminated in a culturally and linguistically diverse setting like Fiji. It would also help to identify ways in which the media can be effective in educating a non-expert audience on the symbiotic relationship between individuals, communities and the natural environment.

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'FAILED' STATES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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