
Theme : Media and democracy in the Pacific

1. Press freedom and communication rights: What kind of journalism does democracy need?

ABSTRACT

The task of identifying appropriate models of journalism for Pacific Island nations as they strive for more democratic governance is not a straightforward one. This article summarises several contending models of democracy—market liberalism/competitive elitism, public sphere liberalism, and radical democracy—and their attendant expectations of news media. When measured against the stated ideals of press freedom, and notwithstanding the emergence of the internet, the existing news systems of the dominant Western liberal-democracies, notably the US and UK, have significant democratic shortcomings, in relation to ‘watchdog’, public sphere, community-building and communicative equality criteria. Accordingly, the author argues that the practices and concept of press freedom need to be expanded and supplemented by a broader understanding and implementation of communication rights, entailing legal and cultural forms that support the full participation of all segments of society. Such a paradigm is especially appropriate for postcolonial countries dealing with issues of economic development and inter-ethnic conflict.

Keywords: communication rights, global South, journalism paradigms, media democratisation, models of democracy, media freedom, press freedom

ROBERT A. HACKETT

Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

SURROUNDED by distinguished practitioners, teachers and researchers of media and democracy in the South Pacific, I am acutely aware that my personal and academic background is rooted in the North Atlantic heartland of global capitalism—the US, UK and Canada. But I want to advocate critical selectivity rather than wholesale adoption of ‘Western’ models of democracy and media in the global South, and to express hope that South Pacific nations may be able to bypass some of the entrenched shortcomings of dominant Western media.

Gandhi was once (perhaps apocryphally) asked, ‘What do you think of Western civilisation?’ He famously replied, ‘I think it would be a good idea’.

One could say the same about Western democracy and its associated concepts of press freedom. There is a large gap between ideals and practice. Postcolonial societies, such as many in the South Pacific region, need thoughtfully to select what aspects of the currently hegemonic Western societies they adopt. For example, US officials see their country and media as global exemplars of democracy and freedom, but many Americans themselves critique their political system as a plutocratic, corporate, imperial and/or national security State, with the dominant media serving as a propaganda system for ruling elite interests (e.g. Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In my own country, some critics worry that Canada is descending towards an authoritarian petro-State.

The democratic deficits of their own regimes do not stop Western officials like Hillary Clinton from lecturing countries of the global South on how to implement democracy. That is not what I intend to do here. Rather, I would like to offer food for thought. Is the standard liberal concept of press freedom the most useful normative guideline for journalism in an emerging democratic polity—or are more recent concepts, such as ‘communication rights’, a better guideline? Are they necessarily exclusive? What kind of journalism would help foster governance that is stable and peaceful, as well as democratic and sustainable (in the dual sense of being able to reproduce itself, as well as being ecologically responsible)?

Let us acknowledge immediately that ‘democracy’ is not a goal universally shared. In the context of economic stagnation and political turbulence, a majority of Russians apparently feel that strong leadership is more important than democracy. In Bhutan, the king had to persuade a people reluctant to abandon monarchy, to vote in parliamentary elections. Concerns for security, stability and economic well-being often trump commitment to democracy, and in the

context of globalisation, the concept itself carries the baggage of association with hegemonic Western capitalism. Yet democracy, in the sense of legitimacy derived from a popular mandate, is undeniably the globally-dominant form of political legitimation: 'Political regimes of all kinds describe themselves as democracies' (Held, 2006, p. 1).

Equally undeniable is that 'democracy' carries radically different meanings for different ideological perspectives. Political theorist David Held (2006) describes 'autonomy' as a principle common to most conceptions of democracy:

...[P]ersons should enjoy equal rights and, accordingly, equal obligations in the specification of the political framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them; that is, they should be free and equal in the processes of deliberation about the conditions of their own lives and in the determination of these conditions, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of others. (Held, 2006, p. 264)

Even within this commitment to equality and self-determination, there can be quite different emphases, and reasons for favouring democracy in the first place. Democracy can be regarded instrumentally, and sometimes grudgingly, as the best way of achieving other objectives—as a means of protecting citizens against each other, guarding against bullies, and limiting the abuse of power by governments; or as a means of maintaining political stability in pluralist societies, partly by making government decisions bindingly legitimate; or as the best form of government to protect human rights and individual dignity. Or democracy can be regarded more fulsomely, as a form of government and society through which people have the maximum opportunity to develop their full human capacities. As the late Canadian political theorist C. B. Macpherson (1966) argued, the 'real world of democracy' can encompass, in theory at least, vastly different political and economic systems—from free market neoliberalism, to the Marxist project of building a classless society.

Thus, depending which rationale is considered key—protection or development—there are different models of democracy, each with different expectations of how journalism should function, what its ethical principles and practices should be, and what institutional and legal framework best supports it. In the next sections, I briefly outline three models that have underpinned

(explicitly or implicitly) recent academic and policy debates on the democratic roles of journalism: market liberalism; public sphere liberalism (akin to deliberative democracy); and radical egalitarian democracy (including but not confined to socialism).¹

Market liberalism and elitist democracy

Since the 1980s, the ‘free market’ vision of democracy has gained political and cultural hegemony in the US and UK. This ideology holds ‘that government is best which governs least’—with the exception that the State’s military, police and prisons are seen as necessary to preserve the social order.

Democracy is seen not as an end in itself, but as normally the best institutional arrangement to maintain political stability and a liberal political culture characterised by individual rights and choice, particularly economic rights of ownership, contract and exchange.

Though it often adopts a populist and anti-elitist stance, this ‘free market’ vision actually fits well with an elitist version of democracy, classically articulated by Joseph Schumpeter (1942/1976; cited in Baker, 2002, p. 130). His theory of ‘competitive elitism’ meshes with market liberalism’s emphasis on private consumption rather than public virtue. Given the complexity of modern political issues, the vulnerability of the masses to irrational and emotional appeals, and the risk of overloading the political system with competing demands, ongoing public participation (in this view) is neither necessary nor even desirable. While they should be fairly autonomous from the mass public, policy-makers can be held sufficiently accountable through periodic elections, the entrenchment of individual political rights (assembly, expression), and a free press. Democracy is seen as a procedure for selecting leaders, with citizen participation confined mainly to voting every few years—essentially, the role of consumers in a political marketplace.

Journalism would thus have several roles.

- By exposing corruption and the abuse of power, the press should act as a watchdog on government, which is considered the main threat to individual freedom.
- The press ‘need not provide for nor promote people’s intelligent political involvement or reflection,’ since ‘meaningful understanding of social forces and structural problems is beyond the populace’s capacity’ (Baker, 2002, p. 133); nor need it raise fundamental questions about State policy or the social order.

- But journalism, particularly the ‘quality’ press, can report intra-elite debates and circulate ‘objective’ information useful to elites themselves—a mandate for journalism articulated last century by the legendary American political columnist Walter Lippmann (1963).

If *free market liberals* (known in the US as ‘conservatives’) see a democratic deficit in contemporary journalism, they usually focus on one of two perceived problems. One is the influence of the State, whether through informal attempts by governing politicians to manipulate journalists; or through formal laws and regulations, such as restrictions on media concentration; or through outright State ownership of media enterprises, such as public service broadcasters. Such State intervention (it is argued) distorts the marketplace, undermines media’s ability to give consumers what they want, and risks State authoritarianism.

Conservatives, especially in America, see a second problem with news media—a pervasive hostility towards mainstream or middle American authority figures or values, due mainly to the ‘left-liberal’ political biases of journalists—a myth that helped legitimise Fox News as a right-wing electronic soapbox.

These market liberal critiques rest on very debatable assumptions, as do the practical ‘solutions’ that flow from them (such as privatisating and deregulating media, or hiring more conservative journalists). The ‘left-liberal bias’ thesis focuses on journalists as individuals, and downplays their institutionalised routines and pressures (especially from business and the State) that in the view of most media sociologists largely determine the shape of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Conservative critics offer relatively little evidence that journalists’ presumed liberalism is radically at odds with the political culture, or that it systematically influences actual news content.

The notion that free market policies generate democratic journalism has been extensively critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Baker, 2002; Curran, 2002; McChesney & Nichols, 2010), and in a later section of this paper. Briefly, market liberals ignore the extent and implications of concentrated and conglomerate media ownership, high costs of entry in traditional media markets, and advertising as a basis for underwriting the production costs of journalism. At best, market liberals’ prescriptions for media ‘work’ only if one accepts their very truncated and elitist notion of democracy.

‘Public sphere’ liberalism

The elitist model of democracy has been criticised on many grounds. Its negative view of citizens’ participation is unduly pessimistic; in referenda and elections on fundamental issues, citizens have shown a remarkable capacity for learning and civic engagement. Conversely, scandals such as the apparent manipulation of security intelligence by the Bush and Blair governments before the 2003 Iraq war, suggest that the elitist model overestimates the competence and accountability of policy-makers, absent ongoing public participation.

Similarly, the related market liberal approach to democracy overlooks the excessive power of concentrated wealth in policy-making processes. It dismisses the threat to political equality and even meaningful individual freedom posed by the growing gap between rich and poor. And it ignores the erosion, by a culture of acquisitive individualism, of the sense of community underpinning democratic governance.

Such considerations have strengthened an alternative vision that accepts the elitist democrats’ support for individual rights and an independent ‘watch-dog’ press, but places a much higher value on popular participation through established political channels. Participation can be valued as a means to both produce more just and legitimate policies, and to develop the democratic capacities of citizens.

Liberal participatory democrats prioritise the role of media in facilitating or even constituting a public sphere— ‘that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed’ (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 7).

As theorised since the 1989 English-language publication of Juergen Habermas’s now-famous dissertation, the public sphere is not necessarily a physical setting, but a conceptual space within various venues. It is ‘a neutral space within society, free of both State or corporate control, in which the media should make available information affecting the public good, and facilitate a free, open and reasoned public dialogue that guides the public direction of society’ (Curran, 2000, p. 135). It is characterised ideally by discussion free of domination, equality of participation, and rationality in the sense of an appeal to general principles rather than sheer self-interest. In a participatory democracy, government policy would reflect the decisions of a civil society collectively deliberating about its future.

In such a deliberative and participatory democracy, what specific roles or tasks are expected of public sphere-building journalism?² Baker (2002) advocates two offsetting types of news media: first, a segmented system which provides each significant cultural and political group with a forum to articulate and develop its interests; and second, journalism organisations which can facilitate the search for society-wide political consensus by being universally accessible, inclusive (civil, objective, balanced and comprehensive), and thoughtfully discursive, not simply factual (pp. 129-53).

Norris (2000) proposes a checklist of ‘public sphere’ tasks for journalism:

- If news media are to provide a civic forum that helps sustain pluralistic political competition, do they provide extensive coverage of politics, including a platform for a wide plurality of political actors?
- Do media provide ‘horizontal’ communication between political actors, as well as ‘vertical’ communication between government and governed?
- Are there multiple sources of regular political news from different outlets, underpinning effective government communication, multiple venues for public debate and reduced costs to citizens for becoming politically informed?
- Is there equal or proportionate coverage of different parties?
- Finally, as an agent in mobilising public participation, does journalism stimulate general interest, public learning and civic engagement vis-à-vis the political process? (pp. 25-35).

Radical democracy and the political economy critique

The public sphere liberals’ critique is a limited one. It seeks to reform the practices of journalism, but does not raise fundamental questions about the market-oriented corporate structures of news media, and still less the social and political order. By contrast, *radical democrats* offer a more robust set of benchmarks for evaluating media performance. If market liberals emphasise individual liberties and restrictions on government power, and public sphere liberals highlight public deliberation about policy, radical democrats add a third dimension—a thoroughgoing view of democracy as not just a set of procedural rules, but a societal environment which nourishes developmental power—everyone’s equal right to ‘the full development and use’ of their capabilities (Macpherson 1977, p. 114; Downing et al. 2001, pp. 43-44).

Such a standpoint transcends public sphere liberalism in several respects. First, radical democrats seek not just to reinvigorate the existing system of representative democracy, or to ensure equality of legal and political rights for everybody. They also prize approximate equality in wealth and power, and direct participation by people in making the decisions that affect their lives.

Second, radical democrats have a more critical and holistic view of power in capitalist society. In their view, political and economic elites may have interests which conflict with those of the rest of the population. A democratic public sphere cannot be insulated from power hierarchies embedded in State, economy, gender and race; so long as they exist, they will tend to undermine equality of voice in the public sphere. Thus, given these and other assumptions, radical democrats are often quite critical of unregulated corporate capitalism and its impact on politics, society and the environment.

Given this view of power and democracy, what political roles are expected of news media? Radical democrats endorse the watchdog and public sphere functions celebrated in the previous two models respectively, but add such criteria as these:

- Enabling horizontal communication between subordinate groups, such as workers, women, ethnic minorities—and social movements as agents of democratic renewal (see Hackett & Carroll, 2006, chapter 3). By giving public voice to civil society, media can facilitate needed social change, power diffusion and popular mobilisation against social injustices.
- Expanding the scope of public awareness and political choice by reporting events and voices which are socially important but outside, or even opposed to, the agendas of elites. Such issues include environmental sustainability and other extra-market values integral to a just and humane society.
- Counter-acting power inequalities found in other spheres of the social order. As McChesney (1999, p. 288) has put it, ‘Unless communication and information are biased toward equality, they tend to enhance social inequality’. The unchecked inertia of market-driven, corporate-dominated journalism will tend to transpose economic inequalities to the cultural and ideological spheres.

Implications of contending views of democracy: Structured pluralism

Before proceeding further, I want to draw attention to several implications of these different normative models of democracy and media.

First, one must distinguish between two concepts that are often confusingly conflated in Western news and political discourse. *Democracy* (a word deriving from the classic Greek for rule by the people) denotes popular sovereignty and decisions by majority vote; so democratisation of the media might then imply popular participation in shaping media policies and content, reflecting reasonably proportionately the political and cultural diversity of the society. *Liberalism* (deriving from the Latin word for freedom) denotes the rule of law and respect for individual rights; so liberalisation of media and communication could imply a legal framework that protects media operations and individual rights of expression from arbitrary or authoritarian State action. In the context of post-authoritarian ‘transition societies’ in eastern Europe and elsewhere, media liberalisation has also come to mean the widespread introduction of commercialisation and private ownership. While democratisation and liberalisation are compatible in many ways (and while they have historically fused in the typical Western regime-form known as liberal-democracy), they are conceptually distinct. I am arguing that some forms of liberalisation (particularly the dominance of market forces) are not necessarily compatible with democratisation of the media field.

The diversity of concepts of democracy, and of democracy’s relationship to economic liberalism, leads to a second implication. No single type of media can serve all democratic purposes. There is no perfect one-size-fits-all democratic news organisation. Arguably, contemporary democracy is best served by ‘structured pluralism’ in the media system, in which each of several types of co-existing media make distinct contributions and offset the biases or limitations of the other types (Curran, 2000). Privately-owned commercial media are good at providing entertainment, responding to popular tastes as expressed through the market, and potentially acting as a watchdog on political power; but not so good at investing in quality journalism or culturally-distinct drama, or holding the powerful business sector accountable. Those latter tasks are better fulfilled by public service broadcasting (PSB) organisations such as the BBC; but critics fear that PSB is too vulnerable to pressure from the governments that fund it. Smaller-scale alternative and community media also have a role: in giving voice to local concerns, oppositional or counter-hegemonic

perspectives, and minority cultures; in limiting the dominance of corporate or State media; and in providing greater opportunities for ordinary people to participate directly in media production. Indeed, in Canada, all three sectors (private, public service, community) are statutorily recognised as integral to the broadcasting system, though they are not treated or funded equally.

Structured pluralism in media implies that not all journalistic media need to be 'objective', at least in the limited sense that it has acquired in the US (as Baker, cited above, notes). There, objectivity has been reduced to a set of somewhat rigid and 'conservatising' practices, such as relying very heavily on official sources, and covering conflict as 'balance' between two sides. To be sure, a democracy can ill afford a news system filled with deliberate falsehoods and manipulative communication intended to deceive and persuade—i.e. propaganda in the worst sense. But it is possible to imagine a democratic media system with a diversity of news outlets expressing different and counter-balancing political orientations, as in Western Europe.

Such structured pluralism will not occur spontaneously through market mechanisms, however, precisely because not all these forms of media (and their associated journalisms) are profitable; market-driven media are only one of several sectors. Thus, though it may seem paradoxical to market liberals, there is a potential positive role for governments, in creating the conditions for a diverse and free press—not through censorship, dictation or punishment, but through arm's length subsidies, incentives, regulation and democratically-constructed legislative mandates. Governments are not likely to be enthusiastic about facilitating independent media that might criticise them; the current state of government-media relations in many South Pacific countries confirms this generalisation. Thus, civil society and social movements need very energetically to advocate democratic media policies, and to build independent media themselves.

Given the conceptual diversity of 'democracy' and of the role of media, it is no surprise that in structure and practice, there is no single model of media-State relations. Even within generally similar Western liberal-democracies, a pioneering comparative study of 18 countries identified three models: polarised pluralism, democratic corporatism, and (market) liberalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). But what is common to all the concepts and models of democratic media discussed thus far, is a commitment to 'press freedom' in the sense of media autonomy from the State, and guarantees of individual

freedom of expression. In the next section, I consider whether North Atlantic media actualise the democratic expectations for press freedom.

Press freedom in the US and the UK?

To revisit the challenge implied by Gandhi's comment on Western civilisation, does the US (as the world's most powerful liberal-democracy) fully enjoy the benefits of a 'free press', one that holds power accountable, extends citizens' freedom of expression and right to be informed, and provides a diverse 'marketplace' of ideas? Clearly, the US press is 'free' in the sense of being mostly privately owned and largely free of overt censorship, backed by a constitutional guarantee. The US press undoubtedly does sometimes contribute to public enlightenment and political reforms. Two prominent examples are the Pulitzer Prize-winning computer-assisted research on racial bias in banks' mortgage-lending practices in the 1990s, and famously, the exposure of the Watergate scandal by *Washington Post* reporters, leading to President Nixon's resignation in 1974. In my own country, Canada's national election of 1988, fought over the issue of 'free trade' with the US, was hailed as a high point for media support of public political engagement. On a more everyday level, some researchers find a 'virtuous circle' between exposure to news media, and trust/participation in the political system (Norris, 2000).

But that optimistic view is challenged by a 'media malaise' thesis advanced by 'critical' researchers who see significant democratic deficits in contemporary US journalism. And journalists themselves (e.g., Fallows, 1996) are starting to agree. After all, they have much to worry about—drastic cutbacks in newsroom resources, the increasing exploitation of short-term 'precarious' labour, and in the UK, stunning scandals involving Rupert Murdoch's British media properties. Shaking the very legitimacy of the press as an institution, those scandals involved not only phone-hacking and the invasion of privacy, but also high-level corruption and the corrosion of democracy.

Several major themes leap out from the critical evaluations of the performance of American news media, which arguably fall short in relation to all three of the models of democracy outlined above (see Hackett & Carroll 2006, chapter 1).

The sleeping watchdog/concentration of power

First, constitutional guarantees of press freedom do not necessarily translate into effective monitoring of power by dominant media organisations. There

are several reasons. With the retreat of the ‘welfare State’ and the rise of neo-liberalism, business has wielded enormous and arguably growing influence over public policy as well as the economy since the 1980s. Business control over the commanding heights of the economy gives it a *de facto* veto over economic policy (Miliband, 1973), but corporate power is also exercised more directly, for example, through subsidising policy institutes, conducting lobbying and financing election campaigns. The essayist Thomas Frank (2013) reports that the recent US election cost about \$6 billion; one implication is that viable presidential candidates are in effect dependent upon billionaire sponsors.

Yet dominant news media have paid little attention to the implications of corporate power for democracy, society, economy and environment, and still less attention to alternatives to it. Thus, disasters like the Enron scandal, the sub-prime mortgage bubble burst, and the bank collapse of 2008 catch conventional journalism completely by surprise, as did the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests against corporate greed and economic inequality. Part of the problem is the traditional liberal assumption that publicly-relevant power resides with government, not the private sector. But more important are the interlocking interests between the media, political and corporate spheres. Dominant commercial media not only depend on advertising revenue from big business; they are now big business themselves, bound by overlapping ownership, joint ventures and shared political ideology to the rest of the corporate sector (Bagdikian, 1997). And they may have shared interests with the political elite; two leading analysts of American media politics suggested that the US media’s now widely-recognised failure to critically cover the Bush administration’s rationale for invading Iraq in 2003—an intervention which cost thousands of lives and perhaps a trillion dollars—was partly related to media corporations’ hopes for regulatory favours from that same administration (Nichols & McChesney, 2005).

The watchdog may be too well fed and comfortable to bother barking. Media corporations are themselves sources of concentrated symbolic and political power. As early as 1997, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and educator Ben Bagdikian (1997) estimated that the number of media corporations ‘with dominant power in society’ had shrunk to 10 and it is fewer than that now, comprising in his view a ‘private ministry of information’ (pp. xiii, 1). Needless to say, media corporations are not critically monitoring them-

selves. If legal guarantees of press freedom are defined by policy-makers and by courts as property rights of media owners, rather than the right of a people to express and inform themselves, then they can be used to fend off governmental efforts to restrict concentration of ownership, to support the rights of journalists vis-à-vis employers, or to facilitate access to the public sphere of people who do not own the means of symbolic production.

Less obvious than direct corporate influence, more subtle forces reduce access and diversity in the public sphere. To the extent that information is commodified, its production dependent on sales to affluent consumers and/or subsidisation by advertisers, the door is open to market-based structural censorship. Historically, the history of the British press suggests that market forces worked better than government repression at confining radical opposition to the margins of public discourse (Curran, 2011, pp. 140-152). Each year, Project Censored in the US finds newsworthy stories that, while not censored by government officials, simply do not get published in dominant media. The list for 2012 includes America's slide towards a police State, the ecological devastation of the world's oceans and the unreported radioactivity from the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster—all news that calls into question established ways of doing business (see www.projectcensored.org). In Canada, our similar NewsWatch project found ongoing blind spots in the national press on issues of workers' rights and working conditions, environmental degradation as an ongoing problem, poverty and social inequality, corporate political power through lobbying and public relations, white-collar and corporate crime and the dark side of Canada's involvement in militarism (Hackett et al., 2000). Standard agenda-setting theory suggests that media silence will generally be matched by lack of public awareness or demand for action on these issues. Since such action would challenge the interests of dominant elites, that silence suits them just fine.

Failure to help constitute a democratic public sphere

For much of the 20th century, the American press had been able to balance its character as a market-based advertising-dependent industry, with notions of professionalism and social responsibility. That balance was achieved partly through incorporating commercial imperatives into such professional notions as 'objectivity' (Hackett & Zhao 1998), but nevertheless enabled the press to constitute some semblance of a public sphere, providing civic information and a discussion forum for, at least, mainstream political perspectives.

That balance has been shifting since the 1980s, partly due to changes within the media system—the shift from local and family ownership of newspapers, to ownership by conglomerates driven by shareholders intent on short-term profit; deregulation of broadcasting; and the rise of digital media. Combined with broader political and cultural change, such as multiculturalism and the blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres, the era of ‘high modernism’ in American journalism has ended (Hallin, 2000). While some observers have seen the decline of the ‘professional model’ as an open door for new kinds of media democratisation, I want to highlight two undoubtedly negative consequences.

One consequence is the sharp cutbacks of investment in resources for journalism. Original newsgathering, local coverage and investigative journalism have been decimated. Important news may be ignored if it is regarded as too costly to produce; North Atlantic news organisations have cut back substantially on foreign news coverage since the end of the Cold War. Conversely, ‘reality’ programmes, infotainment and celebrity news abound. The economic crisis of American and British journalism is not one of profitability, but of under-investment (Freedman, 2010).

A second impact is the marketability of ‘sensationalism’, a form of journalism that lends itself far too readily to an anti-democratic politics of moral outrage. I recall a conversation with a (white) man fishing in a canal on an idyllic day in the English countryside a few years ago. Watching the swans floating by, he commented how much he enjoyed nature and wildlife, and then turned direction, suggesting it was all being ruined by ‘immigrants’. He cited the story of Muslim refugees from Kosovo, capturing and barbecuing royal swans. Shock, horror! It turned out the story was a fabrication, but one widely publicised by Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid *Sun*, the largest circulation paper in the UK. Right-wing British tabloids (and more recently, Fox News in the US) have been notorious for attracting audiences by appealing to prejudice, oversimplifying stories, ignoring contexts, reducing conflicts to two-sided contests of good versus evil and demonising not only foreign enemies, but internal opponents of neoliberalism, such as militant trade unions (see, e.g. Williams, 2009). That kind of journalism is likely to exacerbate racial tensions, xenophobia and authoritarian approaches to social problems.

Undermining community

A third cluster of themes emerging from the ‘media malaise’ thesis points

to a failure of journalism to help build a sense of community. I am speaking not of reinforcing ethnic or geographically-based identities, to the exclusion of ‘outsiders’. Rather, I refer to journalism’s capacity (and expected role) of helping to create a sense of intertwined fates and of common futures, at levels that range from the local to the global; to find expressions of commonality as well as of difference (Howley, 2005, p. 6); and to build our collective capacity to identify and solve problems.

When read from that perspective, critical media scholarship suggests several ways in which US journalism is not helping to sustain community. One problem is the shrinking of local news, a growing disconnection from local communities. Since the *Telecommunications Act 1996*, ownership concentration and corporate rationalisation in the radio sector has led to the near-disappearance of local radio news. One notorious incident illustrates the real hazards of absent local news: a train crash unleashed clouds of toxic gas in Minot, North Dakota, in 2002. Local emergency authorities, wanting to warn the populace to stay indoors, discovered to their shock that nobody was staffing the local radio stations, all owned by one corporation—they were all programmed by computer from corporate headquarters in Texas! One man died, and hundreds of people sustained injuries (Klinenberg, 2007, pp. 1-11).

At the national level, the rise of vehement partisanship in broadcasting, spearheaded by the right-wing Fox News network, has reinforced polarisation in the political system; so too has the spread of blogs and websites that make it easier for politically-interested citizens to cocoon within their own ‘opinion tribes’. The decline of general interest journalism means that compared to a generation ago, Americans find it easier to avoid, ignore and dismiss opinions and information that challenge their own convictions.

Commercial films and television, particularly prime-time entertainment, pose a different threat to an inclusive sense of community at the national level. The research of the late communications scholar George Gerbner demonstrated that violence-saturated TV drama ‘cultivates’ particular views of the world among heavy viewers; they are less trustful of other people, more likely to see the world as threatening and violent and more favourable to authoritarian solutions (such as more prisons) to social problems (Gerbner, 2002). Moreover, commercial media whose lifeblood is advertising are likely to promote audience-grabbing entertainment over politically-empowering, citizen-relevant information, and an ethos of consumerism and narcissistic individualism,

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values that are not particularly compatible with building sustainable communities. And at the international level, it is similarly not obvious that media are helping to build a global civil society. However subtly, nationalist biases still manifest themselves, as most audiences rely on their own country's media for news, and even transnational media (such as satellite TV news networks) are based and funded in individual states. One could, for example, read America's free press daily for a year, and still have little idea why US foreign policy arouses such hostility in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Communicative inequality

In both State and commercially-based media systems, those who own the means of communication obviously enjoy a privileged position in public discourse. Others face institutional barriers to entry, some of which are specific to media systems (such as lack of professional skills, or high start-up costs), others of which broadly reflect the uneven distribution of economic and cultural capital (including literacy, social connections and prestige). The American political columnist A. J. Liebling famously said, 'Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to the man [*sic*] who owns one'. In a commercial system, there are barriers more subtle than legal exclusion or outright censorship. It is biased towards affluent consumers over the less affluent, and right-wing, pro-business views over left-wing perspectives more critical of capitalism. Market-driven media follow not the democratic logic of 'one person, one vote', but rather, 'one dollar, one vote'. In the huge 'emerging market' of India, for example, quality, content and choice in the corporate/commercial media are overwhelmingly skewed towards promoting a consumerist lifestyle for the urban and English-speaking 'consumer-audiences', virtually ignoring the informational and communicative needs of the 41.6 percent of the total population that falls below the international poverty line (Saeed, 2012).

Will the internet set journalism free?

Will the internet enable journalism to avoid the democratic deficits of the hegemonic North Atlantic media? Debates about the internet's impact on public communication, particularly journalism, are well rehearsed. Technophiles emphasise its perceived contributions to democracy, including its potential for interactivity and many-to-many communication, and its capacity to evade or bypass censorship, to counterbalance propagandists in a more diverse marketplace of ideas, to facilitate transnational mobilisation by democratisation movements, and vastly to reduce the costs of publishing,

thus broadening the range of voices and information in the public domain, with the Wikileaks revelations being a recent example.

The internet can amplify the voices of peacemakers, witnesses and victims in conflict situations, subject disinformation by elite sources to more effective public refutation (Allan, 2010, pp. 195-217) and enable communities collectively to discuss matters ranging from school picnics to global warming. The internet can also incubate new forms of journalism. As one of these new forms, online citizen journalism has transformed public discourse in important ways—broadening the range of opinion and eyewitness accounts in the public domain; forcing established news media to react more quickly to breaking events or to correct errors, forcing journalists to spend more time being accountable to ‘the people formerly known as the audience’, in Jay Rosen’s phrase (Allan, 2010, p.242); and sometimes setting the media agenda.

But do digital networks, including social media, automatically promote the kind of dialogic and inclusive communication that can revitalise democratic journalism? There is nothing magical about the internet. The ‘digital divide’ in access to and effective use of the internet, parallels and reinforces rather than challenges the distribution of cultural, political and economic power globally. It can be used as conduits for hate, racism and harassment campaigns. Perhaps because of the cloak of anonymity, online discussions of important political issues seem to degenerate too easily into vituperative personal attacks, a phenomenon I have sadly witnessed in both Canada and Fiji. Even responsible, volunteer-based citizens’ journalism, while it usefully fills gaps in the news system, cannot replace the daily reporting of professional journalists. As two leading American media reformers put it:

...there needs to be a significant body of full-time paid journalists, covering their communities, the nation, the world, in competition and collaboration with other paid journalists. There need to be independent newsrooms where journalists who are secure enough in their livelihoods to focus on their work can...receive professional editing, fact-checking and assistance. There needs to be expertise, developed over years of trial and error, in vital areas of specialty and paid journalists accountable for those beats.... There needs to be news institutions that can preserve and promote journalism...support long-term investigative work, and free up journalists to do their work, rather than having...to hustle their next meal through shaking down an Internet micropayment or a commercial advertisement for their blog. (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, pp. 81-82)

Expanding press freedom through communication rights

My review of North Atlantic news media has been one-sidedly critical, in order to highlight aspects that would be problematic if they were thoughtlessly replicated in Pacific Island countries—the sensationalising of conflicts through ‘Us versus Them’ narratives, the privileging of marketable infotainment over educational and development-oriented information, the excessive concentration of symbolic power and the reinforcing of socio-economic and communicative divides between rich and poor, urban and rural.

Without exception, the Western critics I have quoted universally accept the idea of press freedom, but feel that (as Gandhi implied) Western realities fail to live up to the stated ideal. Some analysts call for reforms in media structures and practices in order to achieve a genuinely independent, informative and diverse press. Others go further, to suggest that the concept itself needs to be (re)defined as a right of people in general, not just a property right of media owners (e.g. Barron, 1981, pp. 11-19). Others go still further, arguing that not only does the concept need to be expanded in theory and better implemented in practice, but supplemented by other rights and concepts, if democratic communication is to be fully actualised. Such critics point to limitations inherent in the liberal concept of a free press, and of individual freedom of expression that historically underlies it. In the liberal tradition, it applies to individual rather than collective or group rights (such as the right of cultural or linguistic minorities to maintain the conditions of their communal existence). Protection of individuals’ expression from censorship or punishment by the State or its agencies, does not extend to other centres of power; thus, a worker fired by a private sector employer for expressing dissident views enjoys no constitutionally-enshrined remedy. Constitutional guarantees of free expression generally do not extend to the conditions needed to make such expression meaningful in an era of mass media, viz., access to the means of communication. The underlying vision of society is one of a ‘kind of debating club’ of individuals with ‘an equal right to conceive, impart and receive ideas from others and thereby to rationally arrive at decisions of mutual benefit’ (CRIS Campaign, 2005, p. 21).

Such a vision ignores the real-world blockages to the free and effective use of free expression in the many societies that are profoundly unequal. Such blockages include illiteracy; suppression or marginalisation of minority languages; social class inequalities that translate into unequal access to

educational material, or to basic communication services, such as telephone or internet; government and corporate secrecy and surveillance; the enclosure of knowledge through 'intellectual property' regimes; hierarchies of 'cultural capital', in which some forms of expression (such as written press releases) are privileged over others (such as the oral tradition); concentration of media ownership; and the domination of public communication by commercial or State propaganda. Legal protection of press freedom does not offset or address these threats to building a communicative democracy and a more just society; indeed, as noted above, when it is defined as a property right of media owners, the 'free press' can be used as a judicial weapon to prevent the more equal distribution of communicative resources through public policy.

Does this critique mean that 'press freedom' should be abandoned as a legal, political or ethical principle? Absolutely not. A press that is free from control by a self-serving State apparatus is fundamental. It is a chief means of holding governments and power-holders accountable, exposing and preventing corruption (one of the chief barriers to genuine social development), enabling a society to identify and address problems and to discuss and find its own path to development, engaging and developing people's capacity for democratic citizenship and helping people to feel that they have a voice in determining their country's future, and thereby an obligation to participate in building it.

Rather than discarding it, press freedom needs to be supplemented by a more expansive notion of 'communication rights'. That concept derives not only from radical democratic critiques of market liberalism in the West, but more significantly, from the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate that erupted in the United Nations and other inter-governmental arenas in the 1970s and 1980s. Originating with the Non-Aligned Movement of Third World countries seeking neutrality in the Cold War between the Soviet and Western blocs, and with deep roots in anti-colonialism and Third World demands for fairer global economic and communication orders, NWICO's landmark was the UNESCO-commissioned MacBride report. That report endorsed 'the right to communicate' without defining it very clearly (MacBride, 1980, pp. 172-174), and the UN buried the concept along with the report itself, given the ferocious and successful opposition of the US and UK governments and Western-based media conglomerates to NWICO (for retrospective analyses, see Galtung & Vincent, 1992, pp. 31-121; Nordenstreng, 1999). But in the more workable guise of plural communication

rights, the concept has since been adopted by civil society media reformers in diverse countries.

A communication rights (CR) approach to journalism and media policy would aim to do much more than protect individuals' right to speak, or media's right to publish, without State punishment (though of course these are included). CR are intended to overcome barriers to listening—such as prejudice, hate and discrimination (CRIS Campaign, 2005, p. 24)—and to foster a social, cultural, legal and political environment favouring the production and sharing of social knowledge; a sense of community; and human rights outside the communicative domain.

One of the international leaders of the CR movement is the ecumenical international development organisation, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). It summarises the concept as:

...those rights that enable all people everywhere to express themselves individually and collectively by all means of communication in order to improve their lives. Communication rights are vital to full participation in society and are, therefore, universal human rights belonging to every man, woman, and child. Communication rights encompass freedom of expression, freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and knowledge. But they *add to these freedoms*, both for individuals *and communities*, the concepts of accessibility, participation, and cultural diversity. Communication rights include democratisation of the media, protection of traditional means of communication, linguistic rights, and the right to enjoy the fruits of human creativity. These are questions of inclusion and exclusion, mutual respect and human dignity. (WACC, n.d. Emphasis added)

Communication rights thus include freedom of expression and of press, but are much more expansive. CR envisage journalism actively contributing to a social cycle of communication (CRIS Campaign, 2005, p. 26). Freedom of expression entails the right to seek and receive ideas, to generate ideas and opinions; and to express and speak without fear of government punishment. CR add to this the right to be heard (and the reciprocal obligation to listen); the right to be understood; to learn, enhance and create ideas and information; and to respond to others and share with them, as integral to participation in the life of one's community and society. Press freedom is deepened and expanded, to include or facilitate such desiderata as access to relevant public,

government and corporate information; genuine diversity as well as plurality of media organisations and content; balanced ‘intellectual property’ regimes that do not unduly restrict users’ rights; and universal access to public media (CRIS Campaign, 2005, p. 43).

Philosophically, a society which fully embodied communication rights for all would have much in common with the public sphere and radical egalitarian models of democracy outlined above. It could be considered a ‘communicative democracy’, in which every cultural, ethnic and political sector can circulate ideas and information that potentially reach every other sector of society (Jakubowicz, 1993).

This expansive concept of CR reminds us that it is not just political philosophy and laws on the books that shape how journalism works in practice. Media systems influence, and are influenced by, the political, social and economic systems and the cultural traditions of each society. Thus, it is difficult to specify precisely what journalism structures and practices would best institutionalise CR in different societies. Suitable communication policies might include the kind of ‘structured pluralism’ discussed above; public service and community media that are relatively free from corporate and State control, with mandates to both reflect diversity and find common ground; rights of access and/or reply to dominant media; limits to concentration of media ownership; guarantees of free expression subject to limitations (such as hate speech, defamation, and incitement to violence) that are recognised in most democracies; widespread media education and literacy programmes; and affordable access to telecommunications services and digital networks.

But State policy clearly cannot do it all. There is a role, on the one hand, for journalism education and professional paradigms, such as Peace Journalism, as a more contextualised, responsible, accurate and comprehensive way of reporting conflict, one that is arguably especially appropriate for societies characterised by inter-communal conflict, and that will undoubtedly be discussed elsewhere in this journal. On the other hand, at the macro-level, communicative democracy both reinforces and requires a political culture of civility and respect, and an economy that avoids inequalities and antagonisms between social classes serious enough to render stable democracy nearly impossible.

From the North Atlantic to the South Pacific

How relevant are the concepts of press freedom, democracy and commu-

nication rights to Pacific Island countries? After all, with the exception of NWICO, most of the ideas I have been discussing were developed in the context of ethnically-homogeneous nation-states with privileged positions (often including colonial or informal empires) in the global political economy. I am no expert on this region; other contributors to this volume will bring to bear more detailed knowledge. I conclude this essay by briefly considering the ethical implications for journalism of two distinctive challenges facing many South Pacific nations—material poverty and peripheral position in the global economy; and ethnic conflict, in the context of a history of authoritarian and/or colonial government.

Development journalism

Some academics and journalists argue that the specific material, political and social needs of ‘developing countries’ of the global South necessitate a distinct form of journalism based on ‘development communication’ (Wilkins, 2008). Such Development Journalism (DJ) would comprise the strategic use of reporting intentionally to promote social change. This model privileges the role of education over entertainment, public goals over commercial principles and long-term structural processes over coverage of today’s events (Waisbord, 2012, p. 149).

All well and good. But does that mean that countries such as Fiji should discard Western notions of the free press and adopt a distinctive ‘Southern’ DJ paradigm? I argue not, for several reasons. First, DJ is not a single, coherent paradigm. It is a ‘complex and contradictory notion’ that combines two different approaches: a social and communitarian reporting of rural, education, health and economic news that affects ordinary people, amplifying popular voices in identifying problems and solutions; and by contrast, a Statist approach that envisions journalism as an instrument of government policies to build integrated, stable and economically-advanced societies (Waisbord, 2012, pp. 148-150). The former, communitarian approach is compatible with press freedom, and even more so with communication rights, which more explicitly call for widespread participation in the social cycle of communication. The latter, Statist approach consciously contravenes press freedom, in the name of other nation-building goals, including internal ethnic harmony; but arguably, history suggests that it can backfire. It removes a vital means of holding governments accountable, facilitating corruption and arbitrary dictatorship that ultimately may undermine just and sustainable economic

progress. Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe is an egregious example.

A second reason for rejecting a separate 'Southern' model of journalism is that any such model would be:

...embedded in an essentialist vision about the 'global South'. Just to cluster countries as 'poor' (or 'wealthy' for that matter) says little about supposed common demands for a certain model of journalism. One could argue that a journalism that contributes to participation, citizens' expression and social justice...is not linked to the position of countries in the 'Human Development' index. Rather, it is a requirement for democracy without adjectives and geographical boundaries. (Waisbord, 2012, p. 154)

It would be wrong simply to impose models from the imperial citadels of global journalism, and thereby to ignore 'particular histories, cultural trajectories and unique realities' (Waisbord, 2012, p. 156). But it is also problematic to insist that 'journalism should uncritically support government policies in the name of national security and integration' or to insist that there are 'unique local values' that journalism should embody, to the exclusion of independence and diversity.

The danger is to fall into essentialist and relativist positions that romantically view local models and ethical prescriptions as inherently good. Such positions easily provide justification for curtailing debate and critical reflexivity on the grounds that they threaten values such as 'respect for authority' and 'local morals'. (Waisbord, 2012, p.155)

The idea of communication rights implies a critique of, and the need for alternatives to, *both* corporate-dominated, market-driven journalism, *and* State authoritarian control over media— whether in the global North or South.

Ethnic conflict

In ethnically-mixed societies with a history of ethnic conflict, one of the justifications for the Statist version of Development Journalism has been the perceived need to enforce press support for government policies of national integration, and conversely, to censor coverage that could inflame ethnic relations. Such a position might be especially appealing to some in countries like Fiji, where the media have been blamed in the past for stimulating violent ethnic conflict.

But the ‘solution’ of censorship, as one facet of authoritarian government, is worse than the cure. There is no doubt that in recent history, media have helped pave the way for ethnic cleansing and genocide, most disastrously in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (Thompson, 1994). But in those cases, the problems were rooted in social cleavages and political machinations, not the media as such. In so far as media did play a role, the conflict was exacerbated by the suppression, not the presence, of a press that was sufficiently independent from dominant political forces (including the governments of Rwanda and of the former Yugoslav republics) to expose the latter’s destructive strategies and propaganda. Having spoken with journalists and researchers in three former Yugoslav republics, I am persuaded that such censorship and intimidation, far from preventing ethnic cleansing, was actually integral to politicising ethnic identities, spreading fear and unchecked misinformation, demonising other ethnic groups and inciting people to slaughter their former neighbours. Imagine that communication rights had been effectively institutionalised in both Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The minorities under attack would have had guaranteed access to respond, and more broadly, the society would have nurtured a culture of respectful dialogue.

I do not mean to trivialise the challenges of a multi-ethnic society struggling with economic scarcity and inequality. Driven by commercial or political considerations, a ‘free press’ may indeed pander to its audience’s prejudices and exacerbate conflict through sensationalised coverage. But as a means of containing ethnic tensions, press censorship—even if well-intentioned—could allow tensions and misperceptions to fester underground through such mechanisms as gossip, graffiti and unregulated ‘social media’. If not addressed, such tensions could explode when authoritarian government collapses from popular discontent and from its own inefficiency and corruption. The recent era of globalisation provides numerous examples, particularly when the rapid introduction of political (competitive elitist) democracy enables direct challenges to the previous power of ‘market-dominant’ ethnic minorities (Chua, 2003).

As previously noted, censorship may be justifiable in extreme cases, such as incitement of hatred or violence. But positive alternatives to censorship are arguably more ethically justifiable and effective in the long run. These could include journalism training and institutional support for Peace Journalism, or as some prefer to call it, conflict-sensitive reporting. (For an introduction, see Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; for recent developments, see Shaw, Lynch and

Hackett, 2011). Another longer-standing tradition is public service journalism, which is independent of both State and capitalist control, and has a mandate to promote minority cultures, as well as social cohesion and inter-cultural communication. Elsewhere, such journalism is most often housed within public service broadcasting (PSB) organisations. A comparative study of European multi-ethnic states indicates a diversity of segmented and universal PSB models with varying degrees of effectiveness in supporting democratic stability (Basic-Hrvatin et al., 2008). Without their own tradition of PSB, Pacific Island nations may prefer other routes to develop public service journalism. We should also be mindful that journalism cannot solve all the world's problems; inter-ethnic relations are profoundly intertwined with the economic, education and political systems in particular. Moreover, an 'enabling environment' for responsible and effective media takes time to develop, involving change in the professional practices and ethos of journalism and in the broader culture, not just legal and structural reforms (Price & Rozumilowicz, 2002). The point is that the expansion of communication rights, not their restriction, is fundamental to long-term social stability, as well as democracy.

A similar case could be made for other challenges, such as global warming. Pacific Island countries are not responsible for this unfolding ecological catastrophe, but they disproportionately bear the brunt of its impact, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather. Effective mitigation and adaptation require the circulation of accurate information, open discussion of policy options, and the active participation of those most affected by climate change, in the social cycle of communication at both regional and global levels.

History suggests that expanded popular communication rights will not be granted through the benevolence of governments. They are built from the ground up—through alternative and community media, through the communicative needs of popular movements addressing vital needs for just and sustainable development and through campaigns aiming specifically at media democratisation. If they succeed in such struggles, the peoples of the South Pacific may have a good deal to teach those of us in northern America.

Notes

1. The following three sections are derived from Hackett, R. (2005), Is there a democratic deficit in US and UK journalism? In Allan, S. (Ed.), *Journalism: Critical issues* (pp. 85-97). Maidenhead, UK: Open University.

2. While deliberative and participatory democracy are not equivalent, as Held (2006) points out, I am conflating them for purposes of this comparative discussion.

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Professor Robert A. Hackett is in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a keynote address at the conference on Democracy and Media in the South Pacific, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 6-7 September 2012. He is grateful to Dr Marc Edge, then acting head of the journalism programme at USP, for initiating the conference; to Professor David Robie and Shailendra Singh for comments on the regional media; to Pinar Gurleyen for bibliographic research assistance funded through an institutional research grant, 'Paradigms in contention', from the Vice-President Research, Simon Fraser University, in 2011; and to Angelika Hackett for editorial assistance.
hackett@sfu.ca

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