

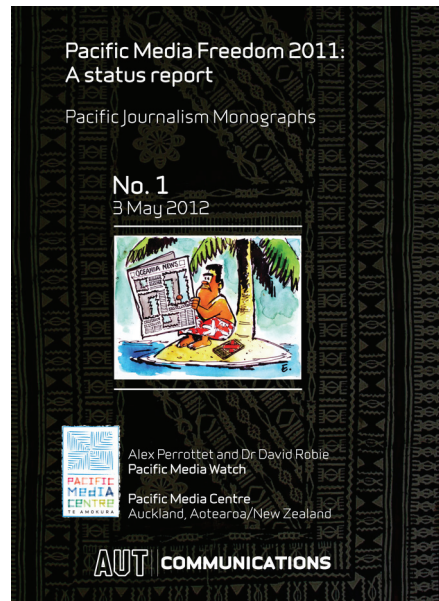
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Pacific journalists and frontline freedom

Pacific Media Freedom 2011: A status report, by Alex Perrottet and David Robie. Auckland: Pacific Media Centre and Pacific Media Watch. 2011, 44pp. ISBN 978-1-927184-06-6

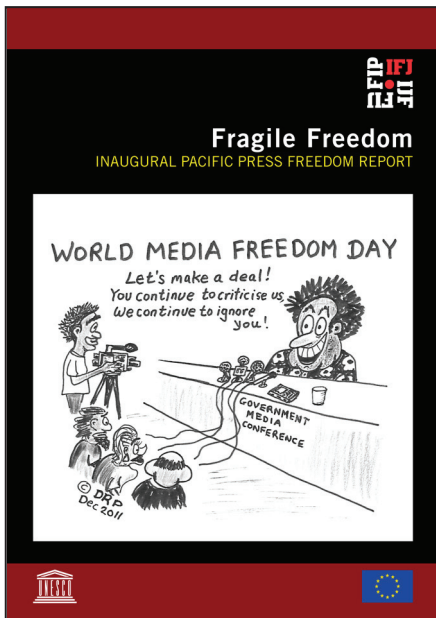
Fragile freedom: Inaugural Pacific press freedom report, by various contributors. Sydney: Asia-Pacific office of International Federation of Journalists, 2012, xx pp. No ISBN

TWELVE countries feature in the new *Fragile Freedom, Inaugural Pacific press freedom report*, a publication concerned with strengthening press freedom and the rights of media workers in the Pacific. When read alongside a monograph from the Pacific Media Centre, *Pacific Media Freedom 2011: A status report*, published the previous year as the region's first media freedom dossier (and republished as a monograph in May 2012), these two documents shed insight into the inter-



acting tensions between journalists and the power structures they work alongside and within.

In the chapter on the Solomon Islands, the IFJ report notes that the *wantok* system protects its media members but it also puts a risk factor on their independence, as an ethnic group may also exert pressure to hamper or compromise a journalist's ability to report fairly. The Deputy Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands talks about media freedom but Dorothy Wickham, a senior journalist with more than 20 years experience of radio, TV, print and a freelancer for overseas media says she has been sexually and verbally harassed by politicians and had her personal



vehicle burnt in front of her house.

Lisa Williams-Lahari, a founding member of the Pacific Freedom Forum and Pacific coordinator for the IFJ Media for Democracy and Human Rights in the Pacific project nails key factors that threaten journalism. Poor pay and lack of decent working conditions play their part and some ethical breaches which occur are often linked to a lack of senior journalists and a weak editorial frontline.

Readers may see a confirmation of her views in the debacle facing *The Fiji Times* over its publication of stories in 2011-2012 that landed it in court on charges of contempt of court with a fine being sought of

F\$500,000 and a six-month imprisonment term for the editor-in-chief. In mitigation, lawyers for *The Fiji Times* argue that the publication was the result of errors in the newsroom. It appears that the editor was away, the job was given to someone else who gave it to someone else and the error occurred.

The PMC and *Pacific Media Watch* freedom monograph by Alex Perrottet and Dr David Robie includes a two-page matrix chart with headings for killings, abductions, assaults, formal censorship, police arrests etc. (Robie is also interviewed at length in a new half-hour IFJ-funded *Media Freedom in the Pacific* report for television produced by the University of the South Pacific (Pollock, 2012). It is clear that West Papuan journalists face more dangers than any other Pacific journalists with two killings, five abductions, eight assaults and two police arrests during the March 2010-2011 year. The situation has been bad ever since.

Foreign journalists are unwelcome. Only three journalists accompanied by ‘minders’ were allowed into West Papua during 2011. The authors of the monograph conclude that the situation for journalists is not likely to change in West Papua while the international community remains inactive on media safety and there is

impunity for the security forces on media abuses.

Papua New Guinea has the largest number of people working in the media industry in the South Pacific region, but it is dogged by a poor salary structure, lack of direction from managers that compromise the quality of journalism, plus a bubbling brew of violence and intimidation. At a Media Rights Workshop held in Port Moresby in 2011, journalists said that police in search of a reporter stormed the newsroom of *The Sunday Chronicle*. They entered the premises and threatened staff, but that story was not reported.

Vanuatu Daily Post Publisher Marc Neil-Jones faced intimidation and threats in 2011 when his office and person were attacked. The minister involved faced charges of inciting, abetting assault and unlawful assembly. The case ended with the minister pleading guilty to aiding and abetting and paying a small fine of US\$162.

Compare this to the fine of US\$116,000 given in legal costs and damages to Prime Minister Derek Sikua of the Solomon Islands and his secretary and the fines and jail sentences that may be imposed on journalists, editors and publishers in Fiji for their breaching of content regulations.

Not examined in *Fragile Free-*

dom or the *Pacific Media Freedom 2011* is the limitation of internet access to the public. Nice words are said about social media and new media platforms turning information gate-keeping on its head.

I don't accept this view. There is a 7.6 percent usage of the internet in Vanuatu. Solomon Islands has 3.4 percent. Timor-Leste has 0.2 per cent. Even a large Pacific country like Fiji can only claim internet access for 16.6 percent of the population.

How much of this internet coverage is urban and how much is rural? In a number of villages there is no electricity. Internet access in several countries is also expensive compared to the average worker income.

The real benefits of the limited internet access in many Pacific countries go to the media who talk with the outside world and with other broadcasters. Government and commercial businesses are the other main beneficiaries.

The chapter on Samoa in *Fragile Freedom* raises questions. What impact does the media have on the potential audience of under 200,000 people that is exposed to 18 radio and television outlets and several newspapers? Who benefits in Samoa from an internet audience of 4.7 percent?

A Code of Ethics with the powerful acronym of JAWS guides the

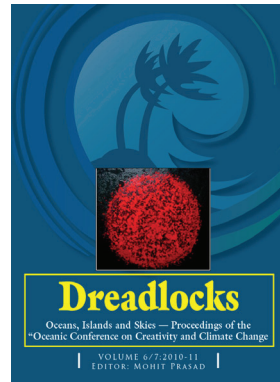
Samoa media industry. There are calls to review part of the code where journalism conflicts with the cultural content of accepting traditional gifts. There is no clear consensus among the media on whether these gift tokens qualify as *sua* or, according to the code, as bribery. Some leading journalists argue that *sua* is part of their culture, but for the *Samoa Observer* newspaper, the policy is clear. Accept no gifts.

I expect *Fragile Freedom* to appear each year, applaud its work, and I hope *Pacific Journalism Review* sees it way to publish another PMC monograph on Pacific media freedom next year. Both appearing at the same time would be a bonus.

Reference

Pollock, D. (2012). *Media freedom in the Pacific*. Director. [Video documentary]: Suva: International Federation of Journalists and the University of the South Pacific. 26min. Available online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLANV10xm5M

DREADLOCKS: OCEAN, ISLAND AND SKIES SPECIAL EDITION



Edited by Mohit Prasad

This special edition of the literary journal *Dreadlocks* incorporates proceedings from Oceans, Islands and Skies - Oceanic Conference on Creativity and Climate Change. The conference highlighted the role of writers, artists and the media in environmental challenges in the Pacific.

The conference was held from 13-17 September 2010 at the Laucala Campus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva.

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