

2. Media—a destructive or constructive force in Pacific peace and development?

COMMENTARY

How the media message is conveyed creates either a destructive or a constructive force in peace and development. The power of the media essentially depends on its primary purpose. There is a pronounced convention regarding the purpose of media—for those who believe media must have a purpose. But the purpose of any particular media is dependent on what is designed or set up by the ownership, which is why media ownership is an important issue in the Pacific region today. Those who own the media is ultimately responsible for its performance.

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MEDIA is a tool, a powerful tool that by the very nature of its existence, inevitably engages in the process of social change either negatively or positively. Politicians, historians and anthropologists are usually the ones who give judgment as to the kind of impact media has on a society. But it is the people, the consumers of media, who must make the final judgment. Unfortunately, journalists and media practitioners are too often trained to do their job without being responsible for the kind of social outcome their performance produces.

It says: 'I'm not responsible for how people respond to my message and method of delivery. I toss it out there, and people do with it what they want.' But when media engagement contributes to positive changes, there is an inevitable forward movement with regard to the development of peaceful

relations as well as the construction of a healthy, harmonious, and prosperous society. At the same time, media can also be a tool of destruction in the same way that a wave can be harnessed to produce electricity to help people yet the same time can become a tsunami that destroys villages.

I guess the fundamental thing is that the media is not an indifferent and ambiguous tool without any defined purpose and links to the other sectors and spheres of society. It is an inevitable part of that society. It can be a partner in achieving socio-development goals of a society, or it can be a pest that eats away the strengths and good things in that society.

Tools are created for a purpose. Tools are not created for themselves, or just for display purposes.

Tools are high in utilitarian value. All tools are mechanisms of purpose, to perform a task outside itself. That is what tools are for. We create tools for eating, for transportation, for communication and so on. And the media is a tool created for information delivery, and essentially the nature of the message and method of delivery either aid or hamper social development.

How the media message is conveyed creates either a destructive or a constructive force in peace and development. The power of the media essentially depends on its primary purpose. There is a pronounced convention regarding the purpose of media—for those who believe media must have a purpose. But the purpose for any particular media is dependent on what is designed or set up by the ownership, which is why media ownership is an important issue in the Pacific region today. Those who own the media are ultimately responsible for its performance.

If the primary reason or purpose of a media organisation is to make money, then the content and how its message is delivered is going to be geared to that purpose—to make money. Quality in this case is defined by the bottom line. It does not really matter whether the content and how it is delivered yields a destructive or constructive effect on society. As long as it is making money... lots of it...this kind of media feels fulfilled in its purpose.

If the primary reason or purpose of a media organisation is investigation and contribution to positive changes to society, then we are talking about media with a purpose of social development. It is the media that tell the stories of people, of the events affecting their lives, and of the issues that arise from those events. The real stories we must tell are stories about the human condition, about the environment, and what is being done to improve the

human condition, socially, economically, and environmentally.

Our problem in the Pacific region is that media has been so parallel with the democracy everyone seems to love and worship—like it is the god that will serve all our needs. I contend that democracy has been wrongly touted in our region as the panacea that will solve all our problems. We engage in journalism based on the form and format of ‘Westernisation’ that is pinned to this ideology and practice we call democracy. We simply swallow lock-stock-and-barrel the Western ideological and methodological concepts of democracy, and have to adopt a Western media framework to serve that strange machinery we call democracy. We say Western media practice is the oil that drives democracy.

Democracy has often been practised and expressed throughout the world in oppositional political frames, where the existence of conflict is a battleground where the will of the majority is given the victory. In the same way, modern Western media thrives in the arena of oppositional politics and the promotion of conflict. And we call this checks and balances. We fail, however, to recognise that more things get done for a society when there is consensus politics, an alternative we fail to adopt in our island nations; and we do not develop media as a tool for creating peace rather than conflict.

We think if the outcome of our service to society is peace, then we must be doing something wrong, because we only know how to report and propagate conflict. If the other party likes ice cream, then we must hate it, for that would be the politically correct thing to do. It does not matter whether ice cream is good for us or not; we must create a conflict by taking the opposite sides. That is ‘oppositional politics’ and thus we must have ‘oppositional media’. We hardly report about resolving conflicts, as we are too busy looking for the next conflict.

The story of media in Tonga, for example, needs to be told parallel to the story of our development into a democracy. Last November we completed a high turnout and tremendously peaceful and orderly election for our first democratically elected Parliament. After the first two nights of our ‘honeymoon’ in this supposedly ‘great victory for the people’ and for democracy, we have begun to realise that we have just changed from the rule of one minority group to another minority group, a group we call ‘the people’—not all the people; just some of the people.

It is like changing a partner. You were sleeping with one person the night before, and then you had a democratic election. You wake up the morning

after the election and you are on the same bed, same room, but you now have a group in bed with you, and they start telling you that they can screw you better than the guy you have lived with all these years. And don't worry; they have amended the Constitution to make it legal.

What was amazing, of course, was that the media—especially foreign media—were celebratory in their reporting of Tonga last November, at least this one time. They were jumping with joy, especially in New Zealand and Australia, saying that now Tonga's problems had been solved.

We have finally joined all the 'free nations of the world'. We are now a democracy. Most of the journalists came to Tonga with stories already written, scripts in place, and they were just looking for some kind of evidence to fill in the gaps of their stories. If they could not find the evidence, they could always get a friendly coconut to say something...give him a can of Coke and a kilo of mutton flaps, and he would tell you what you want to hear. This is the nature of the destructive force in journalism.

I give you an example: One prominent New Zealand newspaper, and I do not want to mention any names, other than the fact this mainstream heavily *palagi*-cultured newspaper, often herald their news as factual.

In one of the lead reports about the Tongan election, the newspaper incorrectly reported that the Democratic Friendly Islands Party led by 'Akilisi Pohiva won 70 percent of the vote. This relayed the message to its readers that the overwhelming majority of the people of Tonga voted for Pohiva and his group. They were setting up people to expect and, in fact demand, that the next Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers be from the Pohiva group. This was a gross inaccuracy. In fact Pohiva and his colleagues only won 31 percent of the votes. The other 69 percent voted against Pohiva and his pro-democrats. The voter turnout was 90 percent. In other words the majority of Tongans voted for independent candidates, it is just there were too many of them and they split the votes, leaving 11 of the 17 People's Representative seats to be won by pro-democrats.

What foreign journalists also failed to recognise is that there were also 9 Noble Representatives elected to Parliament. That means there were 9 noble seats, two less than the 11 seats won by the pro-democrats. But six seats of the total 26 parliamentary seats were held by Independents, and they would be controlling whom they would side with to elect the next Prime Minister and consequently the next government.

I wish Pohiva and his group all the best. But at the time, it was most unlikely they would have the numbers to form a government—and they didn't.

Another foreign reporter, among other things, claimed Tonga to be a Roman Catholic country, and that I had had a conversation with the King of Tonga, and he was making tea for me, a commoner. Tonga is a Methodist a country and I have never had tea with the King of Tonga.

Trouble is when I tried to correct these inaccuracies, this reporter's lawyer wrote me a letter claiming I had defamed her by trying to correct her facts.

Inaccuracies are not easy to correct, and harder to correct is the agenda, hidden or otherwise, that media organisations and journalists have. There are diversities in the media, and it is apparent which media organisations have a defined purpose in national social development, and which are only looking for sensational stories in order to sell more newspapers and to solicit more listeners and viewers. Many have also used the cloak of media freedom to hide behind in their hate journalism of Pacific Island countries.

I believe in media freedom, but I also believe in media responsibility and media accuracy and commitment to truth. I also believe that Pacific Island media are under no obligation whatsoever to follow a Western format, as in politics, of media coverage based on conflict.

There are two brief stories from Tonga I want to conclude with: The first one has to do with the TV station OBN that played a role in inciting people to anger against the government of Tonga, resulting in riots and the burning down of the Central Business District in November 2006. It is what we call 16/11 for it happened on the 16 November 2006. This TV station was used by the pro-democrats to go from village to village, and simply assemble supporters, giving them 'a voice'. They produced unedited raw content in which a microphone was given to an angry man or woman, and a camera focused on them. There were personal hate accusations against government leaders, allegations that were far from the truth, and the people of Tonga were fed this information night after night.

A few weeks later, a drunken meeting at a central park in Nuku'alofa led by oppositional politicians instigated mobs of youth to break out of the crowd and destroy the businesses in the CBD. In fact they urged people to gather together and protest. 16/11 was a result. The meetings conducted daily for several days were broadcast on OBN TV.

Let me also share a story about a TV programme my organisation has

been running in Tonga for the past 2 years. We broadcast 6 hours daily from Monday to Sunday. It is called TMN-TV2. We made a deliberate choice when we started that we would focus on telling the stories of the Tongan people, of the events and issues affecting their lives. Our most popular programme is called *The Village of the Week*. We go to a village and tell the story of that village—who are their leaders, what is the main thing in the history of this village, the families in this village?

How do they organise themselves in agriculture/fishing, handicraft making? What are the needs in this village, and how are they going about solving those needs? We find out about schools, churches, and other institutions in this village and so on.

There is a key lesson we can learn from our Tonga situation. Media freedom and purpose-driven journalism are not opposed to each other. They are part and parcel of the same thing and should have unrestricted ability to do what is right. And what is right is always good for society. What is right always builds up rather than tears down.

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