

**THEME:** JOURNALISM UNDER DURESS IN ASIA-PACIFIC

# 1. A decade of resistance

## The Pacific Media Centre, Pacific Media Watch, impunity and human rights

**Abstract:** Auckland University of Technology's Pacific Media Centre marked its tenth anniversary with a wide-ranging public seminar discussing two of the region's most critical media freedom crises. The 'Journalism Under Duress in Asia-Pacific' seminar in November 2017 examined media freedom and human rights in the Philippines and in Indonesia's Papua region, generally known as West Papua. The introduction to the PMC seminar, later presented at a Reporters Without Borders (RSF) summit for Asia-Pacific freedom advocates and activist journalists in Paris in July 2018 examined the culture of impunity over crimes against journalists and journalism safety as a major factor undermining media freedom in the region.

**Keywords:** activism, advocacy, Asia-Pacific, crime, impunity, journalist safety, media freedom, New Zealand, Philippines, press freedom, West Papua

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### Introduction

WHEN the Pacific Media Centre was founded just over a decade ago in October 2007 at Auckland University of Technology—and launched by Laumanuvao Winnie Laban who was then Minister of Pacific Island Affairs—the region faced a turbulent era. Fiji's so-called 'coup culture' had become entrenched through yet another coup in December 2006, by military commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, although this time it was not an ethnocentric putsch, but a 'coup to end all coups' and claimed to be in support of a multiracial future (Fraenkel, Firth & Lal, 2009, p. 4). A six month state of emergency followed with many human rights violations, ending in May 2007 (US State Department, 2008a). There were concerns in Papua New Guinea over human rights violations, including police brutality and killing of suspects in law enforcement episodes (US State Department, 2008b). Relations were strained between Solomon Islands and Australia over the Moti affair, about an Australian lawyer Julian Moti who had been appointed to the post of Attorney-General, culminating in an Australian police raid on the Solomon Islands Prime

Minister’s office (Nautilus Institute, n.d.). Corruption, gender violence and other human rights violations were rife.

In the wider Asia-Pacific region, arbitrary, unlawful and extrajudicial killings by elements of the security services and political killings, including of journalists, were already a major problem in the Philippines (US State Department, 2008c)—but not on anything like the scale that has occurred since President Rodrigo Duterte came to office in 2016, with more than 12,000 killings in the so-called ‘war on drugs’ (Human Rights Watch, 2018). In Timor-Leste, security forces carried out nine killings that year (2007)—less than a third of the 29 the previous year—and there were human rights violations against journalists and other civilians (US State Department, 2008d).



**Figure 1: The Pacific Media Watch anchor page at Auckland University of Technology and (inset) the news page.**

Since 2007, media freedoms in the Asia-Pacific region have steadily declined with a Chinese model of state-controlled news and information being ‘copied in other Asian countries, especially Vietnam and Cambodia’ (RSF Index 2018: Asia Pacific democracies threatened, 2018). The Chinese model has also become increasingly influential in the South Pacific, too, with at least one country, Papua New Guinea, flirting with a Beijing-inspired social media platform to replace Facebook (Ainge Roy, 2018; Marshall, 2018).

## Background

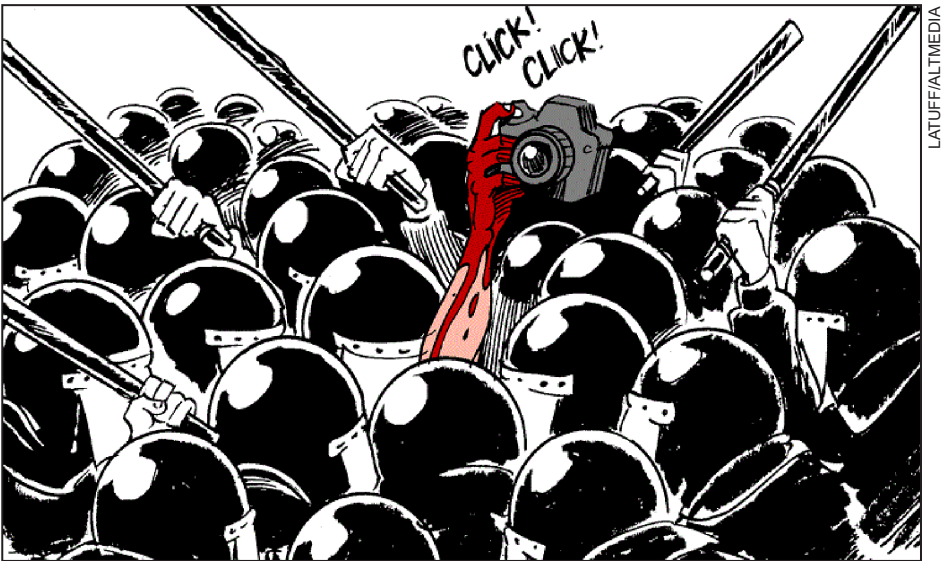
The circumstances of the 2007 era prompted the establishment of the Pacific Media Watch freedom project ([www.pacmediawatch.aut.ac.nz](http://www.pacmediawatch.aut.ac.nz)) as one of the first research and publication initiatives under the Pacific Media Centre umbrella, having been transferred there from the University of Papua New Guinea and University of Technology Sydney where it had been founded by ABC *Four Corners* investigative journalist Peter Cronau and I (Figure 1).

Billed as an independent, non-profit network reporting on media developments in and around New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region, the initiatives and work were inspired by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ)—which formally closed in April 2017 after a quarter of a century of cutting edge investigative journalism (Adair, 2017)—and especially by the work of Cronau and two former directors of the ACIJ, Professors Chris Nash and Wendy Bacon. The ACIJ was ‘best known for its groundbreaking investigative work’ in its magazine *Reportage* (Figure 2), and its research into Australian media bias and reporting, according to *Altmedia*.

‘It’s been the best journalism school in Australia, no doubt. In fact, it put the [University of Technology Sydney] on the map,’ Michael West, a former Fairfax journalist turned business watchdog, told *City Hub* ... at the [ACIJ] ‘Hidden stories past and present’ symposium. (Adair, 2017)

Despite its limited resources, the PMC has contributed to greater diversity and more analysis of the region’s media. The Pacific collaboration goes back to 1993, and especially 1995, when Wendy Bacon travelled to the University of Papua New Guinea and conducted a short course in investigative journalism. The journalism programme newspaper *Uni Tavour* won the 1995 Ossie Award in Australia for best publication partly due to her investigative inspiration. The collaboration continued at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, when the ACIJ stepped into the breach in the aftermath of the George Speight coup in May 2000 by publishing the USP student journalists’ articles at UTS after the student website *Pacific Journalism Online* was closed by the university for two months (Cass, 2002; Pearson, 2001; Robie, 2001, 2010).

As faith in neoliberalism and the quality of newspapers has eroded in Australia and New Zealand, universities and other non-profits are becoming increasingly regarded as potential alternative producers of serious journalism (Robie, 2018). The Pacific Media Centre is regarded as an early example of such a venture, and project Pacific Media Watch, was originally launched in 1996 at UTS and fuelled on the ‘smell of an oily rag’ (Robie, 2014a). The PMW project was awarded the AUT Dean’s Award for Critic and Conscience of Society in 2014 (PMW freedom project wins, 2014) and a year earlier in 2013, the then



LATUFF/ALTMEDIA

**Figure 2: Sydney's independent journalism centre, the ACIJ at the University of Technology, Sydney was 'killed off' by campus authorities in April 2017 after 25 years of groundbreaking investigations.**

student PMW project contributing editor Daniel Drageset, a Norwegian broadcast journalist, won Columbia University's Dart Asia-Pacific Media Centre Award for Journalism and Trauma Prize for a multimedia series in which he reported on the torture of two Fijian prison escapees by security forces (Torture series wins, 2013).

Another cornerstone of the Pacific Media Centre's publications has been *Pacific Journalism Review*, a Scopus-ranked international research journal that was originally launched at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1994 and has now been published for 24 years. At a conference at AUT in 2014 celebrating 20 years of publishing and the production of 710 articles, an academic analysis by Queensland University of Technology journalism coordinator Dr Lee Duffield (2015) concluded that *PJR* 'gives oxygen to campaigns that decry suppression of truth' and examines self-censorship by news media.

*Pacific Journalism Review* is concerned with freedom, and with truth, easily defined as the outcome of inquiries based on plain evidence. Its stance is above all journalistic; as a publishing outlet for investigative journalism, and for scholarship in media and community; as an outlet for reflective debate within the media community about its work, and as a contributor to the formation of new entrants into journalism—in their values and aspirations to best practice. (Duffield, 2015, p. 31)

Duffield observed that the conditions in the Asia-Pacific region offered more publishing opportunities for *PJR*. 'Change continues in the region, calling for a continuation of the monitoring and research,' he added (2015, p. 32).

### Origins

The Pacific Media Watch project was founded as an independent, non-profit and non-government network by two journalism academics. In 1996, the kingdom of Tonga jailed two journalists and a pro-democracy parliamentarian in an event that shattered any illusions about press freedom and democracy in the South Pacific. The two *Taimi 'o Tonga* editors, 'Ekalafi Moala and Filokalafi 'Akau'ola, had been accused of contempt. The Member of Parliament, 'Akilisi Pohiva, was at the time the best-known whistleblower in the region, having waged a decade-long campaign for open government and democracy (Robie, 1996). Since 2010, Pohiva has been the Prime Minister of Tonga, having been re-elected in November 2017 with a decisive majority, Ironically, he has had a conflicted relationship with the media since he gained power (Vaka'uta, 2017).

Many media commentators saw the jailings in Tonga as the most serious threat to media freedom in the South Pacific since the Fiji coups in 1987. Although news media in neighbouring Australia and New Zealand largely ignored the episode, journalists at the ACIJ launched a campaign in support of the so-called 'Tongan Three'. Pacific Media Watch was established in their support.

A voluntary group with no funding, Pacific Media Watch developed a media freedom news service and organised an international letter campaign calling for the three detainees to be released. More than 170 protest letters from academics, journalists, media commentators and students were sent to the kingdom. The three men walked free on 14 October 1996 after having served three weeks of their 30 day sentence after the Tongan Supreme Court ruled that they had been detained illegally in violation of the Constitution (Robie, 1996).

Pacific Media Watch later became a regional independent Pacific media freedom monitor based at the University of Papua New Guinea (1996-98), the University of the South Pacific (1998-2002) and AUT (2002-2007), before being adopted by the PMC (Robie, 2014a). It gained its first development grant in 2007, engaging postgraduate student interns. It was subsequently awarded a grant by the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2009 (Pacific Media Watch expands resources, 2010).

Pacific Media Watch developed a strategy to challenge normative views of ethics, media freedom, industry ownership, cross-cultural diversity and media plurality. It has been involved in reporting coups d'état, civil conflict and struggles for media independence. The media service has been an important catalyst for journalists, media educators, citizen journalists and critical journalists collaborating amid a broader context of Pacific power and protest.





**Figure 3: The UNESCO 2018 trends report notes a trend of continuing legal restrictions on the media such as criminal libel, ‘insult’, blasphemy and lèse-majesté (an offence violating the dignity of a reigning sovereign) laws.**

Probably the watchdog’s most consistent campaign over many years has related to the West Papua self-determination issue. Although it is independent of activist agencies, Pacific Media Watch has worked to robustly report on and profile a range of West Papuan development, self-determination and social justice issues, advocates and newsmakers through its related website *Asia Pacific Report* (asiapacificreport.nz) (Robie, 2018; Leadbeater, 2018, p. 235). West Papua figured prominently in the inaugural region-wide 2011 media freedom report published as a *Pacific Journalism Monograph* (Perrottet & Robie, 2012).

The UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development (2018) reported that public perception of media freedom had declined globally, citing a 2015 Gallup poll covering 131 countries in every region of the world. In 2012, 67 percent of residents in surveyed countries said their country had a ‘good level’ of media freedom (Figure 3). This had declined by six percentage points by 2016 and remained on that level the following year. Nevertheless, while media freedom was perceived to be under threat, it was still valued globally. The report noted a trend of continuing legal restrictions on the media such as criminal libel, ‘insult’, blasphemy and lèse-majesté (an offence violating the dignity of a reigning sovereign) laws.

Declining freedoms in Asia-Pacific were highlighted sharply with cases in Myanmar and Cambodia in mid-2018, and to a lesser extent in Nauru. In the case of Myanmar, two Reuters correspondents, Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone,

were jailed for seven years after what was widely condemned as a ‘sham trial’ and a ‘dark day for press freedom’ (RSF, 2018d). The journalists were convicted of violating the country’s *Official Secrets Act* for investigating the massacre of 10 Rohingya civilians by soldiers in Inn Dinn, a village in the north of Rakhine state on 4 September 2017.

In Cambodia, 69-year-old Australian documentary filmmaker James Ricketson was jailed for six years on an espionage charge after using a drone to film a rally by the main opposition party, which was banned a few months later (RSF, 2018c). In Nauru, Television New Zealand’s Pacific affairs correspondent Barbara Dreaver was detained for three hours at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders’ summit after attempting to interview refugees at the Australian government-established detention centre for asylum seekers, which had been widely condemned by international agencies for human rights violations (Benedict, 2018; Cook, 2018).

### The George Speight affair:

JOE YAYA/PACIFIC JOURNALISM ONLINE



**Figure 4: Two USP students, Laufa Eli (Samoa) and Noora Ali (Maldives) pictured with Fiji third coup frontman George Speight in May 2000 while reporting on the unrest.**

In May 2000, during George Speight’s ‘attempted coup’, the University of the South Pacific regional journalism programme’s website *Pacific Journalism Online* and its newspaper, *Wansolwara*, were heavily involved in the reportage. The website was closed down by the USP administration on 29 May 2000 when martial law was declared in Fiji in response to threats, and news stories

about the Fiji crisis were not permitted to be published (Figure 4). For three months, University of Technology Sydney journalists Fran Molloy and Kate MacDonald published the stories and photographs from Fiji journalism students and USP staff on the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) website—now zip file-archived in the UTS Library (Internet archive of 2000 Fiji coup, 2000). The site was designed and set up within hours by Fran Molloy, and with the support of then ACIJ director Chris Nash and head of journalism department Wendy Bacon, the USP journalism students were able to have their stories published shortly after they were filed. The USP students subsequently won several awards for their online (and print) coverage of the coup in the annual Journalism Education Association (JEA) Ossie Awards, including best regular publication in the Australia/NZ and Pacific region. Awards went to *Pacific*

*Journalism Online* and the students working on *Wansolwara* (Pearson, 2001, p. 19; Robie, 2001, 2004, p. 93).

### **Philippines and the ‘war against the poor’**

‘Eight years, zero convictions.’ This is how IFEX, the global media freedom exchange, in November 2017 summarised the status of the trial of the accused in the Ampatuan massacre in which 32 journalists were among 58 people killed in a political ambush. With more than 100 charged, even a dedicated branch of the court could only do so much. The magnitude of the trial necessarily imposed a slow pace. The decision to include so many individuals on the same charge necessarily delayed the delivery of justice. (Looking back at the 8 years, 2017)

The hearings began on 5 January 2010, less than two months after the massacre in Ampatuan town, Maguindanao, on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao on 23 November 2009. At first, only Andal ‘Unsay’ Ampatuan Jr. was named and charged before the court in Cotabato City. Unsay was positively identified by witnesses to have led the attack on the Mangudadatu convoy.

Other Ampatuan clan members, police officers and Civilian Volunteer Organisation members were included in the charge list for the murder of 57 (later extended to 58 counts). This brought the number of the suspected masterminds and accomplices to 197. These were individuals who were identified in two separate investigations, one by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and another by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI). At the time of preparation of this article, the Department of Justice (DOJ) data showed 188 people had been officially charged before the trial court.

Threats to journalists in the Philippines since President Rodrigo Duterte came to office on 30 June 2016 and unleashed his so-called a ‘war on drugs’ have punctuated a death toll of more than 12,000 so far,<sup>1</sup> including drug addicts and innocent people, many of them children. Many commentators describe the drug war as in reality being a ‘war against the poor’ (Wells, 2017). *Vice* journalist Gianna Toboni concluded in an article earlier in 2017: ‘It’s super dangerous to be a journalist in the Philippines—but a brave few are working hard to maintain an independent press’ (Toboni, 2017). She continued:

Discussion of oppressed journalists generally focuses on Russia, China, Turkey, Syria, and Mexico. What many don’t know is that outside of active war zones, the deadliest place to be a journalist is the Philippines. Despite boasting the longest-standing democracy in Southeast Asia and a functioning free and independent press, journalism in the Philippines has a dark history. (Toboni, 2017)

Research published in this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* has revealed the serious impact of trauma on Filipino television journalists who have been



covering the ‘graveyard shift’ and becoming witnesses to the violence and brutality under the ‘war on drugs’ campaign. The first phase, called Oplan Tokhang in 2016, was ‘executed ruthlessly and relentlessly’. Four graveyard-shift TV journalists agreed to face-to-face in-depth interviews (Gonzalez, 2018).

On 15 January 2018, President Duterte’s government revoked the operating licence of the largest news website in the Philippines, *Rappler*, founded by former CNN Philippines investigative journalist Maria Ressa. A Justice Ministry announcement next day said the state was bringing legal proceedings against the popular news and current affairs website (RSF, 2018a). The government claimed it had violated a constitutional provision under which only Philippine citizens can own media.

President Duterte claimed in a state of the nation address: ‘Try to pierce the identity and you will end up [with] American ownership.’ However, according to *Rappler* this was just a rumour spread on social networks. The website plans to appeal against the licence ruling based on documentary evidence. Daniel Bastard, head of RSF’s Asia-Pacific desk, says:

The revocation of *Rappler*’s licence is the latest stage in President Duterte’s open war against independent media. *Rappler* is highly professional and its journalists stick to reporting the facts, facts that apparently annoy the government and its supporters, who have waged a smear campaign against the website on social networks. Instead of seeking the truth, the authorities have now clearly demonstrated their desire to kill the messenger. (RSF, 2018)

In March 2018, RSF accused the Duterte government of ‘hounding’ *Rappler* after National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) officials confirmed that a previously dismissed defamation action against *Rappler* had been revived. This followed the opening of a \$2.5 million ‘tax evasion’ complaint by the Bureau of Internal Revenues (BIR, a division of the Ministry of Finance) against the website (RSF, 2018b).

### **Social media censorship and sedition threats in the Pacific**

On 22 May 2018, with Fiji facing its second general election after eight years of post-coup military backed rule, the so-called ‘Fiji Times Four’ were acquitted on sedition charges in what was celebrated around the Pacific as a heartening victory for media freedom. (Cava, 2018). ‘It’s a victory for the media in Fiji and we should be encouraged to keep going and to stay within the law,’ said publisher Hank Arts as he and his staff celebrated (Figure 5).

After three assessors unanimously found the quartet not guilty, High Court Justice Thushara Rajasinghe ruled that the prosecution had failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that an article published in the Fiji-language *Nai Lalakai* newspaper on 27 April 2016 was seditious and that it had the tendency to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility among Muslims and non-Muslims. *Nai Lalakai* letter writer, Josaia

Waqabaca was acquitted of sedition while *Nai Lalakai* editor Anare Ravula and *The Fiji Times* editor-in-chief Fred Wesley were acquitted of aiding and abetting the publication of the article. Hank Arts and Fiji Times Ltd were acquitted of publishing a seditious article in *Nai Lalakai* newspaper. The drawn-out courtroom saga of the *Fiji Times* group focused attention on the deteriorating situation of media freedom in the South Pacific where governments and politicians increasingly resort to legal actions and bans on social media to gag news organisations (Field, 2018; Hearne, 2018; Maclellan 2018; McGarry, 2017, 2018; Makin, 2018; Morris, 2017; *Pacific Media Watch*, 2018a; Vaka’atu, 2018).



**Figure 5: *Fiji Times* publisher Hank Arts waves to colleagues and supporters after being acquitted in the *Nai Lalakai* sedition trial on 22 May 2018.**

For journalists working in small island states, treading on the toes of someone powerful in government or business is an occupational hazard for which, sooner or later, they’ll make you pay. In recent years, however, there is a noticeable trend to use serious legal charges to hobble journalists and media organisations in an attempt to promote a climate of self-censorship. (Maclellan, 2018)

*Islands Business* freelance contributor Nic Maclellan, writing on the Lowy Institute blog *The Interpreter*, pointed to an example of this involving his colleagues at the Fiji-based regional news magazine (Maclellan, 2018). A police investigation into *Islands Business* probed its reporting of a long-standing industrial dispute at Airport Terminal Services in Fiji, which operates Nadi International Airport. The magazine had exposed the fact that a magistrate who ruled in favour of striking ATS workers would not have his contract renewed. The police detained a former company managing director, the editor and the reporter involved, and seized mobile phones and computers in an ill-fated attempt to identify the whistleblower. The news magazine staff faced serious charges and although the public prosecutor’s office declined to proceed, the incident highlighted the pressure faced by Fiji journalists with an election due later in 2018.

The pressure is severe elsewhere in the Pacific. In Papua New Guinea, for example, media freedom advocate and former EMTV news editor Titi Gabi said there was no media freedom in her country, with journalists ‘working in fear’. She claimed local media had become a ‘public relations entity for the powers that be’ and the annual May 3 Media Freedom Day simply served to remind the public about the many issues at stake not being covered (Pacific Media Watch, 2018b). She told RNZ Pacific:

With interference from outside influence, right up to setting the news agenda to bribing journalists to threats to threats of court action against journalists. There is a lot of censorship, there is a lot of control. We no longer enjoy media freedom so today it is really sad times here in PNG. (Pacific media Watch, 2018b)

Noting that there was little prospect of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg ‘turning up’ in Fiji, Papua New Guinea or Samoa to defend his company’s method of dealing with political issues as he did in Washington, veteran journalist Michael Field highlighted the Pacific concerns: ‘South Pacific leaders see Facebook as an even greater social threat than do their Western peers and are not waiting on Facebook to address their concerns (Field, 2018). He added:

Facebook is proving revolutionary across a region where ordinary citizens have been expected to remain quiet and on the sidelines of decision-making, which remains largely in the hands of traditional elites, even when trappings of democracy exist. Elite older males unaccustomed to public criticism have found the social network unsettling; while gossip, known here as the ‘coconut wireless’, has always been present, its power has been magnified by the sharing of posts across scattered communities at home and overseas. (Field, 2018)

In January 2018, Nauru President Baron Waqa lifted a three-year ban on Facebook, saying he had created a safer nation and a more transparent justice system. However, other Pacific nations, including Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu have moved to impose bans or have threatened to do so with new ‘cybercrime’ laws. Papua New Guinea’s Communications Minister, Sam Basil, used a *Post-Courier* interview to threaten a one-month shutdown of Facebook to ‘allow information to be collected to identify users that hide behind face accounts, users that upload pornographic images, and users that post false and misleading information on Facebook to be filtered and removed’ (*Pacific Media Watch*, 2018c). Basil initially backed off after his comments caused an uproar and with the knowledge that PNG was due to host the APEC conference in November, but he later again repeated the threat. Prominent EMTV television journalist Scott Waide wrote on his blog:

Maybe it was a slip of the tongue or a misinterpreted statement... But there is no doubt that whatever it was that Papua New Guinea's Minister responsible for Communications and Information Technology, Sam Basil, said this week has created a storm now being reported on global media outlets. (Waide, 2018)

In Samoa, 73-year-old Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi threatened to ban Facebook and other social media platforms, saying this would be his government's last resort if bloggers critical of government did not start revealing their identities (Online blogger, 2018; Samoa PM threatens, 2018). According to Michael Field, who lived and worked for many years in Samoa, Tuilaepa has faced almost daily accusations from powerful, but anonymous critics on Facebook on the page of *O le Palemia*, Samoan for 'prime minister' (2018). The posts are mostly defamatory, alleging that a range of politicians are engaging in sexual affairs and financial corruption. On 13 June, Malielegaoi named two overseas Samoans who he claimed an investigation had identified as the page's key authors.

On 16 May this year the Fijian Parliament passed an *Online Safety Act* which threatened those whose posts caused harm with fines of up to F\$20,000 and prison sentences of up to five years. Government officials said the law was intended to protect women and children (Swami, 2018). However, Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum claimed in Parliament some social media pages and forums were becoming 'a web of lies, racism, bullying and hatred'. He said it was always the same 'same cowards' hiding behind fake profiles and insisted many were opposition politicians (Lacanivalu, 2018).

In Vanuatu, Prime Minister Charlot Salwai warned that a cybercrime bill was being developed that would 'take care' of Facebook and social media issues following an allegedly fake news attack on a former prime minister, Sato Kilman (Vanuatu plans cybercrime law, 2018). Allegations have been made that a minister in Salwai's government was responsible for the attack. This follows a police raid on 31 May against the agency managing the Facebook group called *Yumi Tok Tok Stret*—'Straight Talk'—seeking data on social media critics.

## **New Zealand**

Although New Zealand regained a top 10 placing in the 2018 RSF Media Freedom Index after dropping to 13th in the 2017 Index, there are still serious concerns about the state of media freedom. 'That's not bad considering we plummeted down the ladder last year,' observed RNZ National *Mediawatch* presenter Colin Peacock, adding: 'But does that mean everything is rosy?' (*Media Watch*, Peacock, 2018).

Writing for the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Media Freedom Review, he remarked how in 2016 New Zealand had been placed fifth

behind Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark, and the global transparency watchdog Transparency International had ranked the nation as the least corrupt country in the world for the second year running in 2018.

The 2017 RSF report explanation for New Zealand's 'plunge' was government secrecy and journalists' struggles with the *Official Information Act (OIA)*, adding: 'Political risk has become a primary consideration in whether official information requests will be met and successive governments have allowed free speech rights to be overridden'.

The then chair of the country's media industry's advocacy group, the Media Freedom Committee, Joanna Norris, was broadly in agreement: '[There is] consistent and cynical misuse of official information laws which are designed to assist the release of information, but are often used to withhold it.' (cited by Edmunds, 2017)

However, this was not the full story. The RSF Asia-Pacific summary gave a hint about why New Zealand had leapt back into the top 10 countries. It said:

The authorities blocked a proposed merger between the country's two biggest media groups, thereby providing media pluralism and independence with new guarantees. At the same time, investigative reporting should be strengthened by a law protecting whistleblowers. (RSF Index, 2018)

Peacock cited many concerns of New Zealand journalists:

1. Journalists routinely 'vent their frustration on social media' about official information obstruction using the hashtag #fixtheOIA. 'Media management plays a big part in [OIA holdups]. Delays take the sting out of politically-sensitive newsworthy details' (Peacock, 2018).
2. Resistance by officials is also routine over information sought under the related Local Government Information and Meeting Act (LOGOIMA), which requires local bodies to provide information unless there is sufficiently good reason not to. 'In March, RNZ's reporter Todd Niall revealed a letter to Auckland Mayor Phil Goff which said the release of information should be delayed so it could be "managed". The letter was withheld from RNZ for 15 months despite intervention by the Ombudsman' (Peacock, 2018).
3. During elections (especially the 2017 election), politicians called in the lawyers or even police against journalists doing their jobs, reports Peacock (2018). Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters launched proceedings for a breach of privacy against two journalists who reported that he had been paid too much superannuation. He later dropped the case (Young, 2018).
4. A new law passed in 2017 strengthening the powers of the nation's spy agencies created a new offence for passing confidential information to



journalists, risking up to seven years in jail.

5. A new bill to ‘tidy up’ the New Zealand law on contempt of Parliament is before Parliament and could impose heavy fines on journalists for breaches.

While media freedom threats have been regarded as endemic in the Pacific, increasingly they are becoming a concern in New Zealand as well.

### **Malou Mangahas and Johnny Blades**

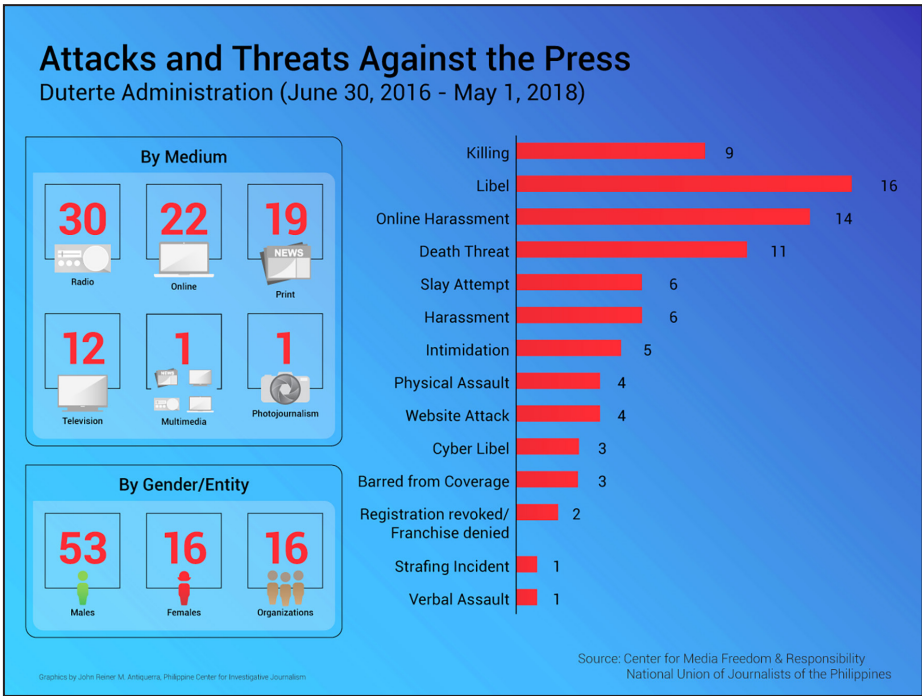
In the Philippines, Malou Mangahas, executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and her team are among those brave few journalists and media researchers trying to expose the truth in a chilling environment. Mangahas is a veteran of Philippines journalism and as well as her role with the PCIJ, she is host of the weekly public affairs programme *Investigative Documentaries* on GMA NewsTV. In her earlier years, she was a university campus journalist and the first woman president of the Student Council at the state university, where she finished her thesis on a portable typewriter while on the run from Ferdinand Marcos’ military intelligence teams. She was eventually arrested and was a political detainee in 1980-81, but still finished her journalism degree with honours (Malou Mangahas, 2017).

A fellow of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University in 1998-99, Mangahas has worked as editor-in-chief of a national newspaper, radio programme host, executive producer of a TV debate programme and was the first editor-in-chief of gmanews.tv online, while working as vice-president for research and content development of GMA News and Public Affairs. She has conducted training on investigative reporting, data journalism, campaign finance, covering elections and uncovering corruption for journalists in the Philippines and across Southeast Asia and parts of Africa.

I met Mangahas for the first time during a visit to the PCIJ in Manila on a sabbatical in 2016 and was at her presentation on the ‘war on drugs’ at the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day 2017 conference in Jakarta. She was one of the two panellists at a seminar marking 10 years of the PMC on 30 November 2017.

In an editorial introduction to a special PCIJ report *Speak Truth to Power; Keep Power in Check* produced for World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2018 (PCIJ, 2018), Mangahas noted that Duterte’s presidency had ‘altered and controlled the public discourse so radically in its favour in ways rude and bold’ that it had produced a tragic result—restricting and narrowing the ‘celebrated freedom’ of the Philippine press and the public right to know (see Figure 6).

In his first 22 months in power, [Rodrigo R.] Duterte has earned the dubious honour of logging 85 various cases of attacks and threats on those dual values that the Constitution upholds as inalienable rights of the citizens. The number far exceeds those recorded under four presidents before him.



**Figure 6: Attacks and threats against the Press in the Philippines, 30 June 2016-1 May 2018. The 85 attacks and threats against the Philippines media under the Duterte Administration, 30 June 2016-1 May 2018. Source: Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP).**

These 85 cases—murders, death threats, slay attempts, libel, online harassment, website attacks, revoked registration or denied franchise renewal, verbal abuse, strafing, and police surveillance of journalists and media agencies from 30 June 2016 to 1 May 2018—have made the practice of journalism an even more dangerous endeavour under Duterte. (PCIJ, 2018)

According to the PCIJ, such cases ‘project the force of presidential power dominating the political sphere’, with relentless support from Duterte’s allies and appointees and their paid online trolls. Duterte’s supporters have accused the media of press ‘corruption and misconduct’ with no evidence to back up their allegations. These constant, ill-founded, attacks on the Philippine media undermine the role of the press in sustaining democracy through an exchange of ideas on public issues.

Closer to home in the Pacific, but equally ignored by most New Zealand media, is the ongoing human rights crisis in the two Indonesian-ruled Melanesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, which we generally group together as the region of West Papua.

It has been very difficult, even dangerous, for journalists to go to West Papua independently. Many have chosen to go there illegally as tourists and report under cover at great risk to themselves, and even greater risk to their sources (Robie, 2017). Johnny Blades, a senior journalist of RNZ International, and his colleague Koroi Hawkins took advantage of incoming President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo’s change of policy to go there in October 2015, the first New Zealand journalists in decades to visit there with a green light from the Jakarta bureaucracy.

Johnny Blades is host of *Dateline Pacific* and has written and reported extensively about the Pacific Islands, covering some of the most remote corners of this diverse region. However, in recent years he has specialised in Melanesian affairs, a woefully under-reported part of the Pacific. His profile on the RNZ website says:

Whether it be dodging rocks in Papua New Guinea’s Highlands, probing the militarised border of West Papua, being force-fed kava by cargo cultists in Santo, or sitting in RNZI’s office in Wellington negotiating the worst phone connections in the world in search of audio, Johnny has shown a keen commitment to learning about the Pacific and helping New Zealand make sense of its wider region. (Johnny Blades, n.d.)

Both the Philippine and West Papua crisis situations are examined in more depth in the following pages of *Pacific Journalism Review*.

## Note

1. According to Human Rights Watch (2018), Duterte’s ‘murderous “drug war” entered its second year in 2017, resulting in the killing of more than 12,000 drug suspects ... Duterte and his officials have publicly reviled, humiliated, and in one instance, jailed human rights advocates’. The death toll has been a disputed statistic for most of Duterte’s presidency. An opposition senator, Antonio Trillanes, claimed in a speech in February 2018 that the death toll had surpassed 20,000 (Regencia, 2018). Trillanes cited the Duterte administration’s own report showing 3,967 ‘drug personalities’ had been killed during police operations between 1 July 2016 and 27 November 2017. A further 16,355 homicide cases—from 1 July 2016 to 30 September 2017—had been classified as ‘under investigation’. *Rappler* ran and updated a tally of the drug war statistics with a total of 7,080 killed by 31 July 2017 compiled from the information supplied by the police to its reporters. This is no longer updated: In Numbers: The Philippine ‘war on drugs’ [www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/145814-numbers-statistics-philippines-war-drugs](http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/145814-numbers-statistics-philippines-war-drugs) Other media kill lists included the television station ABS-CBN and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. President Duterte accused the media tallies of being ‘fake news’ and set up a ‘Real Numbers’ public relations campaign to challenge the media and human rights organisations’ figures (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

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## JOURNALISM UNDER DURESS IN ASIA-PACIFIC

*Dr David Robie is director of the Pacific Media Centre. This is a revised and updated version of the public address presented at the 'Journalism Under Duress in Asia-Pacific' seminar in Auckland marking 10 years of the Pacific Media Centre on 30 November 2017 and at the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific summit in Paris on 4-6 July 2018. The original address video can be viewed at: <https://livestream.com/aut/events/7945794/videos/166601569>  
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