

3. The challenges of anonymous source stories

A case study of Solomon Islands daily newspapers

Abstract: This article examines the use of anonymous sources in *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* daily newspapers in Solomon Islands. It is aimed to explore why the two newspapers use anonymous sources in the news stories they publish. The two national newspapers face many challenges in maintaining a strong sense of ethics and accountability as most reporters are not qualified, and they compete in a small advertising market to generate revenue. Consequently, they also face challenges from politicians and other public figures over publishing anonymous sources in their papers. The challenges range from threats, intimidation, compensation demands to court battles. This study includes a content analysis of the daily papers and interviews with the editors of both papers and individuals who are affected by the issue.

Keywords: accountability, anonymous sources, content analysis, ethics, newspapers, Solomon Islands, *Solomon Star*, *Island Sun*

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SOLOMON ISLANDS has encountered many challenges since gaining independence from Britain in 1978. The challenges include politics, economics and social aspects. Media, which was a partner in the country's transition period, has also faced many challenges from government, politicians and the citizens for its role in informing the people. As a young growing industry with a lot of inexperienced journalists in newspapers, radio, television and online outlets, the media is regularly criticised for the way it covers news events. The public has also sued the media in court, demanding compensation, and harassed journalists in their line of duty. This became a common practice during the ethnic conflict from 1998-2000 and the period after this crisis.

This research study set out to investigate why the two daily newspapers in the Solomon Islands, *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun*, use anonymous sources in the news stories they published and what impact this has on the papers. The study was based on a thematic analysis of both newspapers and interviews with editors, politicians, government officers and some members of the public. Allied

to these main questions, the research for this article also sought to examine why editors of both papers allow the use of anonymous sources, why government officers do not release information to both papers, the positive and negative impact of using anonymous sources, the challenges confronting journalists who use anonymous sources, and understanding the perception of the public towards the use of anonymous sources towards both dailies.

Research was carried out during 2014 as part of my degree course at Divine Word University. I faced a number of problems with the content analysis and there were complications with funding and travel to and from the Solomon Islands. I wanted to interview two former Prime Ministers, Dr Derek Sikua and Manasseh Sogavare, who were often directly affected by the use of anonymous source stories in both newspapers, but was unable to do so. During the period when I was doing interviews, the country was preparing for a national general election so everyone, including the candidates and voters, were returning to their constituencies for voting. Consequently, Sikua and Sogavare were busy with campaigns in their respective constituencies.

This research is the first of its kind to be carried out. It is intended to help the public understand why anonymous sources are used even after the newspapers have been threatened and gone to court. It will also seek to show whether journalists have acted ethically or unethically when using anonymous sources in their stories.

Journalists face tremendous challenges when dealing with anonymous source stories. Christie (2014) claims journalists make judgmental errors when under pressure to break news. Furthermore, journalists are under pressure to release anonymous stories because of the deadlines of their newspapers. Dotinga (2004) claims journalists use confidential sources as one means of getting stories. Farhi (2013) argues that the alternative of not using anonymous sources is to have no story at all. Journalists try to negotiate with their sources to publish their names but in reality, this usually does not work out. Wasserman (2014) argues that:

Certain kinds of reporting routinely incorporate routine reliance on informants who will not talk unless they are assured of anonymity. Although sensitive political and governmental stories are the areas that first come to mind, business and financial news-especially coverage of closely-held companies, professional firms and the like-would be difficult if not impossible to assemble without source concealment. Yet confidentiality poses ethical conflicts, chiefly because it may clash with two professional norms: accountability and verifiability. The result may impede truth-telling.

A clearly negative aspect of using anonymous sources is that courts can demand the journalist or the publisher to reveal the identity of the person who leaked confidential information. Sager and Wilcox (2007) state that every year

publishers, reporters and editors are asked by courts to disclose the identities of sources. For example a publisher, John Peter Zenga, refused to disclose the identity of his source to New York authorities after he criticised the government. One of the positive impacts of using anonymous sources is that journalists have the privilege to expose the unethical or illegal behaviour of national leaders. Sternadori and Thorson (2009) claim that using anonymous sources could open up the door for ‘spin doctors’ and ‘leakers’ to manipulate the news. In the United States, news organisations discouraged anonymous sources following the exposure of Janet Cook’s child addict story and fabricated stories of Jayson Blair and Jack Kelly. But anonymous stories came alive in the media following the exposure of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the 1991 Gulf War.

The public has negative perceptions when newspapers release news based on anonymous sources. Sullivan (2013) claims that the heart of the problem is one of credibility. This could be influenced by untrue stories leading up to the Iraq war and dishonest reporting by *New York Times* journalist Jayson Blair.

Dotinga (2004) claims that journalists use anonymous sources because they are lazy. Some journalists may even think anonymous sources give more prominence to their stories when they use them. The JEA Scholastic Press Rights Commission (2011a) states that when readers read stories with anonymous sources it makes them wonder whether they are true or accurate.

To avoid questions about plagiarism and/or fabrication, it is best to avoid using anonymous sources. Writing gains credibility when all sources are on the record. Sometimes, though, anonymous sources are the only way to tell the story. (JEA Scholastic Press Rights Commission, 2011b)

Governments have regulations to protect the release of confidential information. Methven (1980) states this is to effectively maintain the functions of the government and protect national security. For example, if the government released an investigative file, it could help the violator to escape punishment. Sager and Wilcox (2007) claim the resignation of former United States President, Richard Nixon, in relation to the Watergate scandal, came about because of one informer in the government, who gave information to two *Washington Post* journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, under the condition of anonymity. Insiders in government try to justify the leak of confidential information to the media in the name of public interest.

Editors always face challenges when dealing with anonymous source stories. According to Kurtz (2010), critics complain that reporters and editors allow anonymity freely and when readers find out about the source of information, they lose credibility. It has been suggested that editors should only publish an article with anonymous sources, if they have the contact details of that person.

Critics also claim that media outlets allow public figures to escape accountability and scrutiny when attributing their claims to unnamed people. Foreman, (1984); Gassaway, (1998) and Smith (2003), also claim that the ethical guidelines of revealing sources of information are in conflict with ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ or those of un-named voices. Editors may decide to publish a story or letter anonymously, or with a pen name, if it is not legally actionable.

Solomon Islands news media

There are six newspapers in the country: *Solomon Star*, *Island Sun*, *Sunday Isles*, *The National Express*, *Agrikalsa Nius* and *Voice Katolika*. *The National Express* has ceased publishing a print edition and now operates online. The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Cooperation (SIBC) is the national broadcaster and operates Radio Hapi Isles, Wantok FM and Radio Hapi Lagun. The other radio stations are ZFM, Gud Nius FM, Paoa FM operated by Solomon Star Co. Ltd and Gold Ridge FM. One Television was a local television station, but it has ceased operations. Other television services are provided by Solomon Telikom Co. Ltd, Satsol and Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) which is broadcast in other countries. Most people listen to the SIBC. The readerships of newspapers is centralised on the capital of Honiara and a few larger provinces such as Malaita and Western Province. This is the same for FM stations which attract mostly young people from the city.

The NGO Anti-Corruption Network Solomon Islands (ANSI), called on the government on Facebook to enact a *Freedom of Information Act* to allow a free flow of information to the public for the sake of transparency, openness, communication and accountability. Article 12 of the Solomon Islands Constitution guarantees Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press. Media legislation includes the *Broadcasting Act 1997*, *Television (Amendment) Act 1996*, *Telecommunication Act 2009* and a draft *Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation Bill 2003*.

ANSI (2013) states:

Freedom of information is a fundamental human right, recognised by international law. Freedom of information laws allow access by the general public to data held by the national government. They establish a ‘right-to-know’ legal process by which requests may be made for government-held information, to be received freely or at minimal cost, barring standard exceptions. While technological advancement and free flow of information is enjoyed in other sectors of our society, our government system, in particular the public sector, seems to be very backward in providing public access to public documents and information pertaining to the management and use of public funds being administered by public institutions.’

The *Solomon Star* began publishing on 28 May 1982. Originally published on Fridays, it is now a tabloid daily. The late John Lamani from Malaita province

owned the newspaper and its headquarters is in Honiara. Recently, the paper opened a small office in Auki, Malaita province. The paper's circulation varies between 3500 to 4500, with the highest sales on Wednesdays and increased circulation on Fridays. The newspaper's major selling outlets are in Honiara, Malaita and Western province, but it also sends copies to other provincial centres. The paper employs 80 staff working in all departments. There are 16 people in the newsroom which includes reporters, sub-editors and the editor.

The *Island Sun* newspaper began operation in 2003 during the era of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) that came to restore law and order after the ethnic conflict. Former senior reporters of *Solomon Star* started the paper which came out twice a week. Today the paper comes out from Monday to Saturday. The paper is based in Honiara and employs 35 people of whom 12 are journalists. Its daily circulation is 3000 copies. Its major selling outlets are Honiara and Gizo in Western Province.

Methodology

Three different methods were used to collect information. These were in-depth interviews, content analysis and internet research. The interviews were carried out in 2014 and the content analysis for the period October 2014-December 2014 in June 2015. In-depth interviews were conducted with different people to represent the views in the street, government, politics, non-government organisations and both newspapers. A total of seven people were interviewed. The interviewees were:

1. Citizen Donaldson Rusa
2. Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII) chief executive officer Benjamin Afuga
3. Member of Parliament for West Makira Alfred Ghiro
4. *Island Sun* newspaper editor Priestly Habru
5. Ministry of Communication and Aviation permanent secretary Francis Lomo
6. *Solomon Star* newspaper editor Ofani Eremae
7. Member of Parliament for North West Choiseul Connelly Sandakabatu

When I interviewed the editors of the *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers, I asked them two main questions: Why does your paper use anonymous sources in its news stories? What are some impacts on the use of anonymous sources on your paper? I then elaborated other questions from these two main basic questions. For the other interviewees, I asked them this question: How do they see the use of anonymous sources in the *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers? Then I elaborated some questions from this basic question. I carried out the interviews before I did my content analysis.

Content analysis: October 2014-December 2014

The content analysis focused on the months from October 2014-December 2014, the period leading up to the national general elections. I collected my data on both newspapers based on a week of each month from October 2014 to December 2014 in June 2015.

I looked for anonymous sources stories that appeared under different categories such as politics, health, the economy, business, police and agriculture. This was done mainly on local news stories that appeared on both papers, excluding international news and features. I also looked for total and hard and business news pages, total national hard and business news stories, stories with anonymous sources, types of stories with anonymous sources, pages, and whether the stories were the main stories or not on the page. The size of headline and space and space of stories were examined to see whether the anonymous source stories are lead, second lead, third lead, fourth lead and so on.

The *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers published a total of 133 anonymous source stories between October 2014 and December 2014. The *Solomon Star* recorded the highest with 90 anonymous source stories, while *Island Sun* published 43 anonymous source stories.

Stories with anonymous sources were categorised under the headings Politics, Police, Business, Health and Education. Of the *Solomon Star* total of 90 stories with anonymous sources, 32 appeared on the front page; 23 on page two; 14 on page three; nine on page four; and three on page five. Other anonymous sources appeared on pages seven, eight, nine, 11 and 13. Of the 43 anonymous sources stories in the *Island Sun*, 20 appeared on the front page, 10 on page two, seven on page three and four on page four. Anonymous sources also appeared on pages five, six and eight.

Solomon Star had nine different ways to refer to anonymous source stories. It used 'close sources' more often, followed by 'decline to give name'. It also used 'spokesperson', 'reports', 'no name', 'eye witness', 'anonymity', 'insider' and 'reliable source' to refer to anonymous sources. *Island Sun*, on the other hand, used 15 different ways to refer to anonymous source stories. It normally used 'sources' more often, followed by 'don't want to be identified', 'reports', 'insiders', 'no name', 'prefer not to be named', 'unnamed', 'want name withheld', 'did not want name revealed', 'wished not to be named', 'one officer', 'eye-witness', 'condition of anonymity', 'elder' and 'resident.'

In the period under review, the *Solomon Star* published a total of 66 anonymous source stories under the Politics category. This was followed by nine anonymous source stories under the section for Business. In the Police section, it published 11 anonymous source stories. Under the category for Health, it published two anonymous source stories. For the Education section, it published one anonymous source story and one for Agriculture. By comparison, *Island Sun*

published 23 anonymous source stories under the Politics heading in the same period. In the Business category, it published eight anonymous source stories and five Police reports. Under the Health section it published three anonymous source stories. For the Education category, it published three anonymous source stories and one under Agriculture.

In the period analysed, the *Solomon Star* had 24 stories with anonymous sources in October, a figure believed to be influenced by the national general election then underway (Graph 1). The finding was based on three weeks, which include 11 in the first week, followed by five and eight. The number of anonymous sources dropped in November to 16 (Graph 2). The first week recorded three, followed by six. However, no anonymous sources stories appeared on the third week, followed by seven in the final week. The number of anonymous source stories increased to 50 in December believed to be influenced by the election of the Prime Minister (Graph 3). This is the highest number of anonymous sources that appeared on the period analysed. In the first week, it recorded 24, followed by 19, three and four in the final week.

Total national hard & business news stories

Solomon Star published 391 news pages during the period of analysis. This included 119 in October, 138 in November and 134 in December. There were 1,145 news stories that *Solomon Star* ran in the months analysed. This includes 331 in October, 427 in November and 387 in December. These were news stories, and feature stories were excluded.

Island Sun newspaper, which is published six days a week, with usually 20 pages per edition, used a total of 43 anonymous sources. It recorded 13 anonymous sources in October (graph 4) and dropped to 12 in November (Graph 5). However, in December, the number of anonymous sources increased to 18 (Graph 6). In October, it used four anonymous sources in the first week followed by five, three and one in the final week. In November, it used three anonymous sources in the first week, followed by two, four and three in the final week. In December, the paper published five anonymous sources in the first week, followed by two, nine and two in the final week.

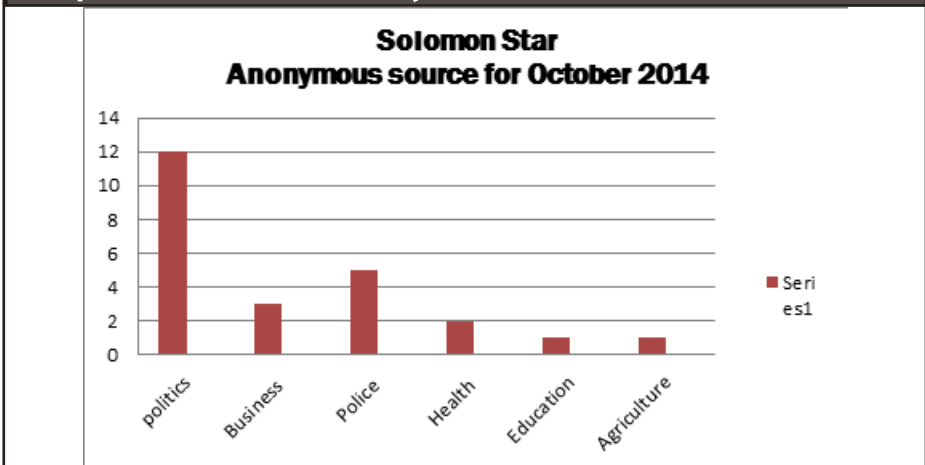
A total of 339 hard and business news pages appeared in the *Island Sun* in the period analysed. This includes 117 pages in October, 117 in November and 105 in December. A total of 857 national hard news and business news stories were published in the *Island Sun* in this period.. This includes 275 in October, 308 in November and 274 in December.

From October 2014 to December 2014, the *Solomon Star* published 66 anonymous source stories under the political category. There were 12 in October, followed by 11 in November and 43 in December. The *Island Sun* recorded the highest number of anonymous source stories under the sections of politics and

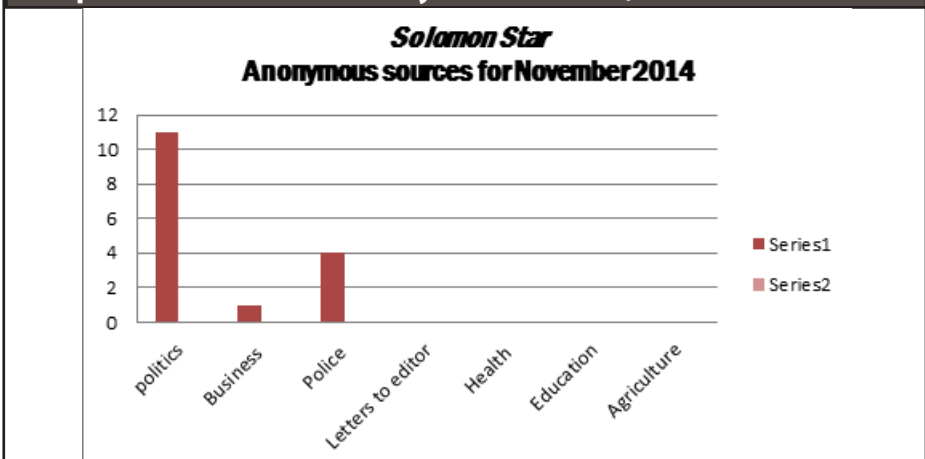
business. It published a total of 23 anonymous source stories under the political category, with seven on October, four in November and 12 in December. In November, business stories got the highest number of anonymous source stories with five.

In the following section, the researcher presents the findings of the content analysis and the interviews. The findings will be based on the tables, graphs and supported by comments from those interviewed. It will provide the reasons behind the use of anonymous source stories on *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* from October-December 2014.

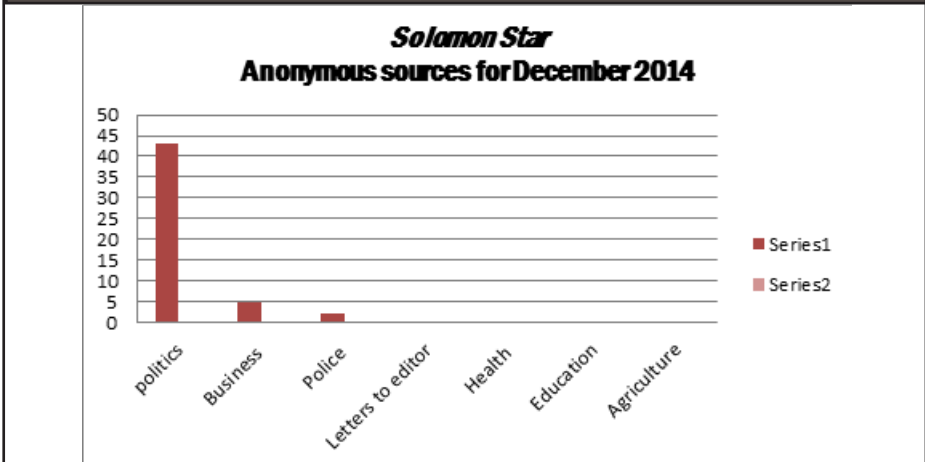
Graph 1: Solomon Star anonymous sources, October 2014



Graph 2: Solomon Star anonymous sources, November 2014



Graph 3: Solomon Star anonymous sources, December 2014



Analysis and discussion

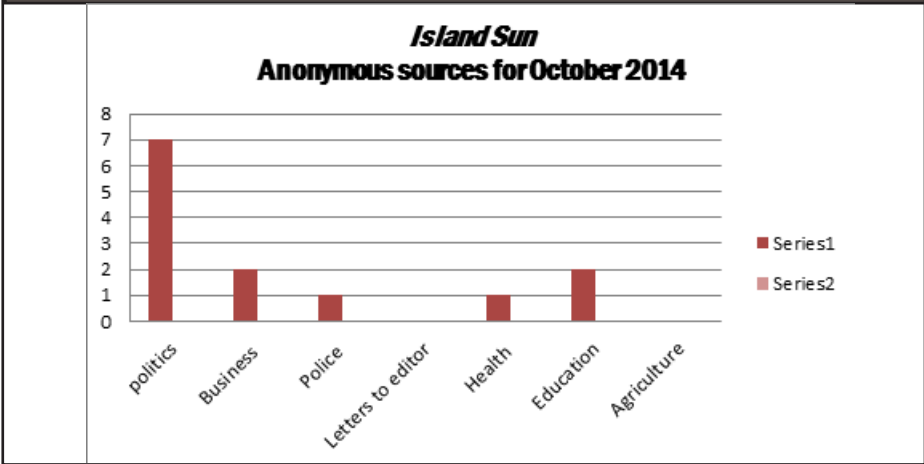
The findings created two perceptions from two different groups of people in regard to anonymous source stories. The public accused *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers for acting unethically in allowing anonymous sources in their stories. But content analysis shows both papers have been using a lot of anonymous sources for controversial or sensitive stories mainly under politics and business. This was evident from the 133 anonymous source stories that appeared on both papers from October to December 2014.

Politicians and other officials have questioned the credibility of both papers when using anonymous sources in their stories. They claim that when newspapers use anonymous sources, it creates a lot of questions about whether the stories are true or fabricated. However, the *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers claimed they only use anonymous sources on stories that were sensitive and controversial. *Solomon Star* editor Ofani Eremae said anonymous sources were given prominence in sensitive stories in order to protect their identity. However, he said that in general stories, journalists were encouraged to use real names in their stories for the good reputation of the company and the reporters.

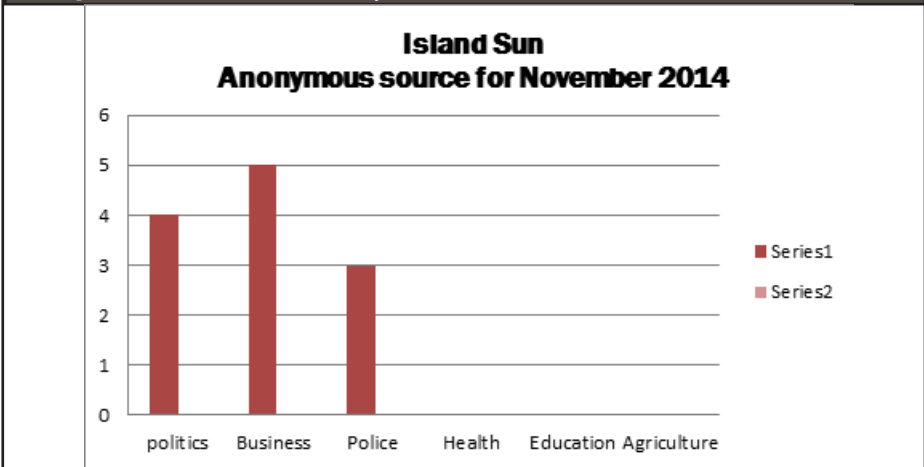
However, there are some cases where we have to accept the use of anonymous sources. For instance, if there is a story regarding permanent secretary accused of stealing public funds and someone working under the PS likes to reveal what going on there, we will allow that person to talk to us in confidence. (Eremae, 2015)

Island Sun editor Priestly Habru said government officers hid their identities in controversial stories for fear of being disciplined by the Ministry they serve.

Graph 4: *Island Sun* anonymous sources, October 2014



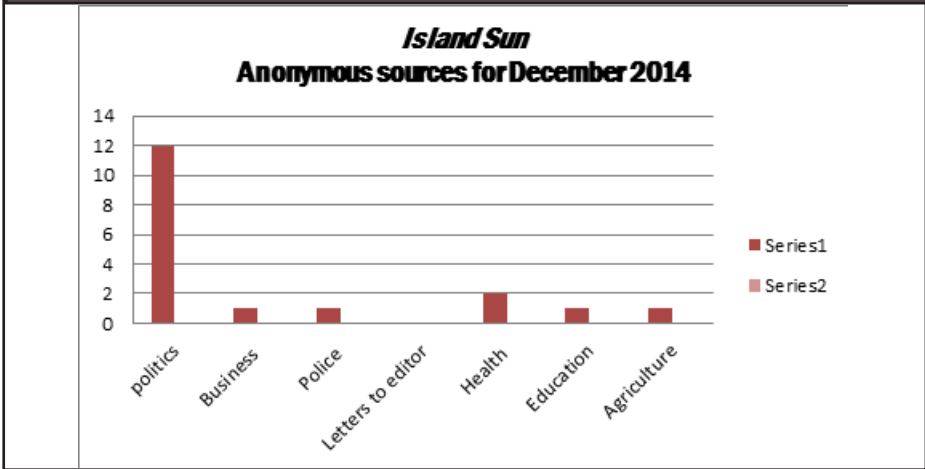
Graph 5: *Island Sun* anonymous sources, November 2014



He said another reason was the *wantok* system, where journalists are living in a small society in which everyone knows each other. For example, if a person criticised a Member of Parliament and if the MP retains his seat, the person might miss benefits from him.

Another thing is, there is a line of understanding in the public service that information can only be released by their information officers, permanent secretaries or the Government Communication Unit. Therefore in any controversial stories, the public servants normally hide their stories in fear of being disciplined by the ministry they serve. (Habru, 2015)

Graph 6: *Island Sun* anonymous sources, December 2014



However, Member of Parliament for West Makira, Alfred Ghiro thinks it is not good for the public if newspapers use anonymous sources.

This is so that any replies on allegations and comments should be directed to somebody you know. People should use real names otherwise it should not pass to media for public viewing. Maybe in other countries people hide their names for security reasons. However, I don't see any threats in our country for people to hide their names. I see use of anonymous names as critics and not making constructive comments for the betterment of our constituencies and the country. (Ghiro, 2015)

His colleague, Member of Parliament for North West Choiseul, Connelly Sandakabatu supported his sentiment. He thinks the credibility of the writer must be honest.

If you want a kind of honest response or feedback, you need to put your name down. But to remain anonymous, maybe what you are writing about could be questioned and therefore, I think it is proper, just and fair that all the writers should really put their names down and that will also deserve a response. (Sandakabatu, 2015)

Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII) chief executive officer, Benjamin Afuga said the the biggest question was whether the media would continue to use anonymous sources or reveal them.

If we start to reveal true identify, will people come forward to reveal the information public wants? I can't say which one is right and wrong. Journalists need to abide by their ethics and public need to be informed... Some people got fired for revealing stories to media. (Afuga, 2015)

Citizen Donaldson Rusa questioned the credibility of the newspapers and sources, the reliability of sources and newspapers, and whether the sources were 'knowledgeable'.

Anonymous sources have good and bad sides. But if we see on some of the issues, there should be no need to use anonymous sources. As a reader, I questioned the credibility of the source behind the story. Why did the person hide his real name even though it's a good story? I will also question the journalists of these newspapers. Have they interviewed the right people or someone just tipped [to] them and write the stories? Rather, the journalists should follow up on the stories and confirm the sources. For example, if they quote the Prime Minister, it will have a weight in the story. (Rusa, 2015)

However, Ministry of Communication and Aviation Permanent Secretary Francis Lomo claims he would agree for people to use pen names if their news promoted the good of the country. However, if they printed news to accuse people, sources needed to reveal their names to encourage healthy debate.

It's good to see companies put notices to verify sources. Some news comes up because of political interests. A lot of things motivate people to write things on paper. Some of the issues that came out on the paper can be sorted out outside of media through phone call or discussion. (Lomo, 2015)

Lomo said the Solomon Islands did not have a clear law about accessing information from government departments.

We are in the process of developing a national Information Communication Technology policy under a World Bank project. It's an umbrella policy, where under it, we will have individual policy to deal with cybercrime and pornography. (Lomo, 2015)

The *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* newspapers have faced a lot of challenges for the use of anonymous source stories. *Solomon Star* editor Ofani Eremae claims one case he remembered was when people came to ask for compensation for a story about a former Prime Minister's extramarital affairs.

They demanded the company reveal the source of the story, although the source of the story came out of social media. Another incident was when the paper ran a story about outgoing MP from Malaita for abusing constituency funding. The source had provided documents to prove their MP did not account for the money of constituency. After the story came out, three men came and demanded the identity of the source in the office. Although I told them we can't reveal the source, this is the kind of reaction we received when publish story that remain anonymous. (Eremae, 2015)

Habru claims he remembered one issue where people came with legal threats for them to verify the stories or apologise within seven days.

We responded on them by apologizing. One example is Bank of South Pacific, where one contributor wrote a private view against BSP and they said the article contained a lot of errors. So BSP demanded us to apologise or it will take us to court. (Eremae, 2015)

However, the *Solomon Star* had won a legal battle over the use of anonymous sources in its story. Eremae said in another case a man sued them for defamation and demanded they provide documents from the paper they had quoted.

The story was based on his previous criminal record in Australia. According to documents, he used to be a drug dealer and got a record with an Australia court as a convicted drug dealer. I wrote the story and after it came out, he sued us for defamation. We went to court; we provided the document the story was based on in court. As a result the accuser did not have any basis to sue us and in the end, the court quashed the case. (Eremae, 2015)

Conclusion

The media in the Solomon Islands have come through a transition period after the ethnic conflict from 1998-2003. Journalists have faced threats in their line of duties to keep government in check and clamped down on corruption. A culture of compensation emerged from the conflict, in which individuals used any opportunity to demand money from media companies for writing sensitive stories, even though they were based on facts and hard evidence.

From the evidence, it appears that the *Solomon Star* and *Island Sun* use many anonymous source stories on controversial or sensitive issues because people who provided the information did not want to reveal their identities for fear of retaliation and losing jobs. The situation is further complicated by the fact that there is no information law in Solomon Islands to allow media to access confidential information from the government. As such, newspapers are likely to continue to rely on anonymous sources within the government cycle to fight against corruption and malpractices.

However, politicians and individuals do not want to see anonymous sources being cited in stories because this could bring into question the credibility and ethics of journalists. They question whether the stories with anonymous sources were based on facts or used for personal or political interests. Such comments indicate that it would be useful to carry out further research to determine whether the media has improved its role since the ethnic conflict in keeping the public informed. This would give a clear picture of whether journalists have abided by their ethical obligations in disseminating factual information to the public or whether they have fabricated the news.

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