

# PNG's new information order (in waiting)

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By REV ORIA GEMO

Why do we need a National Information and Communication Policy? To begin to answer this, I would like to place the question in a historical perspective. Traditional PNG society, like all societies in every time and place, was dependent on communication. No society can function without suitable means of communication because the working of a society means the working of people together to meet common or shared goals. In fact, without communication, we do not even have a society. As a social animal, the human being cannot exist without communication. All societies therefore, whether large or small have a means of media or communication, organised in various ways, to carry messages between people. The means used and the way in which they are organised depends on the way the society is organised, what the needs of its people are, and what resources are available.

Communication structures and media have existed for thousands of years in Papua New Guinea, designed to serve the internal needs of the small tribal states or groups if you like, and their encounters with neighbouring tribes. Their sources used were first and foremost the human body but also instruments or media constructed from natural materials in the environment — like the garamut or kundu, the conch shell, wooden carvings and story boards, or the clays, charcoals and dyes for face painting, tatoos or tapa cloth.

In the 1990s, and as we move on to the twenty first century, to consider



how communication has changed and is going to shape the society in PNG we must remember two things about traditional communication. First, it was appropriate for the kind of society in which it was used, and it served the needs of the people. Anything we plan to do now and tomorrow in communication must be appropriate for the kind of society we have now and will want to have in the future and must meet people's needs. Second, not only are the traditional media still available for our use, but the nature of PNG society has not changed to such a degree that we can just forget them. We cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater. We must keep in mind that while 85 per cent of our people are still rurally based, they are still of use.

A National Information and Communication Policy was not necessary in traditional times because PNG was not one nation. The changes that have eventually led to the need for such a policy began with the era of colonisation that blew across the Pacific reaching our shores.

Papua New Guinea was colonised by European nations, as were many other countries which now make up the developing world. Colonisation took place primarily in the interest of the European colonisers. The colonies were exploited mainly for strategic economic and political benefits and religious reasons. The relationship between coloniser and colonised was essentially one of dominance on the one hand, and dependence on the other. This created a new kind of society which needed a new kind of communication system. Because the colonisers were in control of the society, they established the communication system. The colonisers, with the products of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century at hand, had a whole range of resources available to them that were new to PNG. Even the earliest newcomers to our shores had the technologies of writing and printing, and later came telegraph, radio and the other electronic media. These technologies of course open up many new possibilities for communication and enables information can be sent over greater distances in both time and space in greater quantities and different forms. The advantages of these media are obvious to us.

However, it was not just the new technologies that were introduced by the colonisers. The whole structure of communication systems was imported and it was mainly to serve the purposes of the colonisers. This alone is important for us to note because it is the communication system we have inherited.

In the middle of this century, the existing colonial empires began to disintegrate. The colonised struggled for political independence. Most of them, like PNG won it.

It is acknowledged worldwide, however, that the patterns of dependence, especially economic dependence, remain, both at an international level and within individual countries. The dominant powers in the world today are not colonial administrations, but economic powers. These are primarily



the transnational corporations (TNCs) and the countries in which they are based. The world economic order is largely what controls the relations between nations today, and is part of the new global society which has come into existence. This global society, like the small traditional PNG society, is dependent on communication for it to function. And the content, media and the structures of this communication are determined by the nature of that society and the way in which it is organised.

By the 1970s, people all over the world, especially in developing countries, were critically examining the economic, political and cultural organisation of the international order, and were beginning to realise that international communication processes were an integral part of the dependency relations embedded in it. The characteristics of the international system of communication will be recognisable to you in the existing shape of communications in PNG. For a country to develop appropriately and for all its people to benefit from development, it is essential that everyone is able to be involved in their own development. This was recognised by our founding fathers and is expressed explicitly in the National Goals and Directive Principles of our Constitution, the second of which calls for 'all citizens to have an equal opportunity to participate in', and 'benefit from the development of our country'. However, communication structures at both national and international level limit participation by all. This is partly a question of access, and partly a question of centralisation and hierarchical organisation.

Access is the opportunity to be informed or to receive messages. Access to communication other than at an immediate interpersonal level is severely limited in rural areas of PNG. Use of electronic media is limited by the need for a power source, use of printed materials is limited by literacy level, the postal network does not extend to most villages, the telecommunications network is almost restricted to main population centres, broadcast media — until the installation of a one hundred kilowatt and an additional ten kilowatt transmitter on the microwave and the medium services in 1993 was limited in range by transmission capability. And nearly all public libraries are found in main centres.

Even where there is access, there may not be participation. Participation is not only the opportunity to be informed but also *to inform*. A newspaper content analysis I did on three newspapers in the country to illustrate the direction of news flow also shows the extent to which different people's opinions are expressed through the mass media. I found in my sample that less than 2.5 per cent of the people whose opinions were given in the news were women. Half of the men whose opinions were expressed were national politicians, and very few were '*ordinary people*'.

Radio is probably the most accessible medium in its geographical reach, its oral nature and use of several languages, and the relatively low cost of obtaining reception. But it is essentially one way, except where the tel-





DAVID ROBIE

Press Club president Sinclair Solomon (from left), former *Post-Courier* editor (now an administrator) Luke Sela and *Times of PNG* editor-in-chief Anna Solomon at a media seminar at the University of Papua New Guinea.

ephone network permits talkback programmes such as Roger Hauo'fa's. It is possible for rural people to participate by writing in requests, but even in its use of personal messages, they are mainly from urban to rural areas. Like other media, the opportunity for village people to be involved in the production of radio programmes or decision-making about content is almost non-existent.

Another aspect of existing communication structures is that information is regarded as a marketable commodity rather than a social right. The transnational media corporations determine content by market considerations and the profit motive rather than by the social or cultural needs of individuals or the developmental needs of nations.

To summarise the characteristics of current communication patterns, urban centres tend to be better served with all communication facilities than rural areas, where access to certain services is severely restricted or non-existent.

Inequality in access to and participation in the communication structures are brought about by factors which include language, literacy, infrastructures such as transport and electricity, and the location of the bases of political and economic power. Infrastructures tend to radiate out from the urban centres, becoming sparser the further they extend from the centre. News is disseminated from the centre, with little coming in from the outer



areas. Development information is often distributed from experts based in urban centres rather than within and between local areas. The origin of many of the technologies used is foreign, as is much of the content, especially of entertainment, with a resulting impact on our own culture for good or bad.

The wealthier, more educated members of society are likely to be advantaged, and more money per capita is likely to be spent on communication in urban than rural areas. The examples I have given of how these characteristics appear in PNG's communication system are for illustration only, and are not meant to imply that nothing is being done in the country to change this unfortunate state of affairs. On the contrary, the problems associated with these communication structures are being recognised by the current Government and attempts are being made to change them. And this is why we now have a National Information and Communication Policy.

However, this description should be enough to indicate that there is much to be done by the current Government and by any other government, now there is a National Information and Communication Policy in place, to ensure better communication for our people.

The nature of what was needed for better communication for all our people and the strategies required to achieve this began to be explored at an international level in the late 1970s and led to calls over the following decade for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Most of the aspirations of the NWICO are encapsulated in the phrase 'the right to communicate'. This concept is relevant at both an individual level and at society and national levels. The concept of the NWICO was initially perceived as a need for greater equality in international relations, but its relevance to national communication systems also came to be acknowledged.

A new order is just as necessary in the distribution of communication resources within nations as it is between nations. Within nations, it is necessary to enlarge opportunities for individual access and participation in democratic processes through various channels of communication.

Associated with the concept of NWICO came calls, especially by UNESCO and other international organisations for nations to develop national communication policies which would address the problems associated with the existing patterns of dependence and cultural domination, imbalances in the flow of information, and inequalities between the information rich and the information poor.

In 1976, the following reasons for formulating a comprehensive policy were given by a group of experts advising UNESCO on its communication policy conferences for Asia and the Pacific:

(i) A national communication policy would create in a country the climate and the spirit of common endeavour.

(ii) It would help ensure the optional and systematic use of the communication resources of a country in its efforts at social, cultural and economic



development.

(iii) It would ensure also that the people of a country were not only kept informed of developments relevant to their daily life, but also motivated in a sustained way to contribute to and participate in their country's efforts at development.

(iv) It would bring about the much needed cooperation between the various agencies and organisations in the public and private sectors which are actively engaged in the collection, processing and dissemination of information.

(v) It would facilitate and encourage participation of the public in communication activities which are by and large presently one way and vertically downwards in the social structure.

(vi) The formulation of a communication policy, with the involvement of all interested sectors and institutions in a society, would promote the development of a rational structure for communication activities and help reduce unnecessary duplication of work, redundancy, and the wastage of limited resources.

The Wingti Government recognised that it had to get involved in the total communication system of the country if it was to protect the rights of individual citizens, the rights of social groups — particularly minorities — and the sovereignty and cultural autonomy of the nation as a whole. Development of the communication system, and the resulting effects of that communication system on political, economic and social development could not be left solely in the hands of various communication industries in the country. The communication system had to be made to serve the needs of *all* the nation's citizens and reflect their values rather than serving the needs or wants of foreign nations, transnational corporations or the country's own wealthiest citizens.

This is primarily why the Government needed to put in place a National Information and Communication Policy. The policy was a major initiative of the Wingti Government. The Government has committed itself to strategies which are aimed at bringing the entire PNG community closer together through communication. This would make Government more sensitive and responsive to the needs of the community, and in turn providing the community with the information, skills and resources necessary for participation in our common endeavour.

The establishment of the Department of Information and Communication Services by cabinet on 10 August 1992 was again in recognition of the central importance of effective communication in all areas of social, economic and political life. The Government recognised that there had been a major breakdown in communication between Waigani and the people. Government agencies and decision-makers were too distant from the people and were ill-informed about their needs. This breakdown contributed to many problems like the Bouganville conflict. The Government recognised



also that the people were ignorant of what their leaders were doing, or did not understand their actions. Policies and programmes were being developed for the benefit of the people, but they were not reaching them because communication channels were inadequate and inefficient. In addition, the Government was aware that while the people had the potential to be self-reliant and responsible for improvements in the quality of life, without the necessary information they were handicapped and unable to take the first steps. While Government departments and statutory organisations were making efforts to get information out to the people, there was a lack of coordination, leading to inefficient use of resources and inadequate distribution. The government admits, though, that the people suffering most from this state of affairs are the rural people, who are the majority of our population.

The Government, therefore, considers it imperative to not only place a greater emphasis on communication services and improve strategies, but to tackle the problem head on in a more coordinated and comprehensive way.

However, it is not only the formation of the department that revealed this Government's awareness of the need for new approaches. The public is already aware and talking about the major shifts in policy direction that the Government has made since coming into office.

The most fundamental of these is the reorientation towards the rural people in the establishment of Village Services. This and other initiatives and a new emphasis by the Government would obviously require improved communication more significantly, the new strategies the government is taking are intimately tied to communication structures and embody a model of communication which has barely been attempted before by the National Government.

## **The policy**

The 80-page National Information and Communication Policy report is an umbrella policy document which attempts to integrate existing and ad hoc information and communication-related policies in PNG. It is home grown, and is a fine document. Unlike other policy documents in the country, our National Information and Communication Policy is based on the rights guaranteed us by the National Constitution. It acknowledges that communication is a right equal with all other rights. It includes the right to inform and to be informed, the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of information and assembly, and the right to communication opportunities. It is subject only to the rights of others under the National Constitution.

As a fine piece of document it is based on Christian values and principles and adheres to a philosophy of communication of which the fundamental principles are:

(i) All people have the right to be dynamically involved in the processes of their own development and should have the opportunity to participate in



communication processes at all levels. All expressions of communication should foster integral human development. This is best achieved through participation and interaction in communication processes.

(ii) All people have the right of access to information and communication. They shall have the means to participate as both initiators and recipients of communication. Access to information shall be as equitable as possible and in a language and form which they can understand.

(iii) The national information and communication system shall be comprehensive, varied and flexible enough to meet the needs and aspirations of all.

(iv) Information and Communication processes shall be free from domination by individuals or groups, whether foreign or local, state or private, and shall respect the interests of all.

(v) Information and Communication processes shall contribute to: (a) integral human development through participation and two way communication processes; (b) fostering national identify and unity among our diverse cultures, traditions and people; (c) enhancing cultural preservation and enrichment; (d) guarding and promoting democratic processes; (e) fostering self-reliance; and (f) ensuring environmental protection.

(vi) The focus of the policy shall be on developing appropriate information and communication opportunities.

These principles are the pillars of our Information and Communication Policy. A number of main themes are also included as general guidelines, and these include: ownership, access, content, language/cultural diversity, training, technology, copyright, research and development. The policy also covers, censorship and advertising.

### **Ownership**

Ownership means control. Because media comes in various forms, it can have such a powerful influence and impact on people that our national sovereignty and cultural autonomy are at stake. For this reason, it is now a Government policy for Papua New Guineans to have effective control over all types of media at every level, local regional and national.

### **Access**

Access to the media is greatly affected by problems of distribution in PNG. These problems include inadequate coverage of services, transportation, excessive costs and lack of local infrastructure. Even such factors as illiteracy and choice of language can greatly affect the level of access.

### **Content**

The media's power to influence is based largely on its content. Therefore, media content must reflect human and Christian values, respect national cultures and promote national aspirations and development objectives.



### **Language and cultural diversity.**

Virtually all communication in PNG is cross-cultural to a lesser or greater degree because of the cultural diversity of the population. This situation is compounded by the legacy of our colonial past and the dominant Western cultural assumptions embedded in modern forms of governments, education, commerce, law and so on. The potential for misinformation is greatest among the rural population because many changes are not understood well. For this reason, awareness must play a significant role in the provision of information and communication services, especially among our rural population. Awareness must be conducted in a language and form understood by the people.

### **Training**

The national training policy calls for intersectoral cooperation and rationalisation of training initiatives. This is necessary in the area of communication training. Communication affects all sectors of society in a unique way. It is one of the key means by which each sector carries out its task. For this reason, communication training must be done in partnership with all Government departments, agencies and non-government organisation. In addition, because the meaning and cultural impact of new forms of communication such as television can be difficult to understand. Training must also prepare the population in general to be sophisticated consumers of media.

### **Technology**

Modern communication is increasingly dependent on modern technology. For this reason, there is a direct and growing correlation between national development and the country's ability to support its communication technology infrastructure. In addition, there is a need to use technology in ways that are appropriate to PNG's requirement, taking into consideration the effect of technology on social, cultural and traditional values as well as the environment. Papua New Guineans are prepared to make their own decisions on what is most appropriate for their country and should be in a position to do so.

### **Copyright**

Copyright protects local works of art, music, literature, traditional knowledge, scientific research findings and the work of media. It also fosters increased creativity, productivity and employment. On the other hand, since PNG is a net importer of information, the cost of participation in an international convention would be prohibitive for education and other sectors.

Communication involves more than just technology. There are social implications as well. Modern media techniques and technologies must be



assessed and adapted for appropriate use in PNG. The need for this type of research and development will be ongoing. For this reason, communication research shall be coordinated and the results assessed for purposes of future policy adjustments.

The National Information and Communication Policy is a policy in favour of the people of Papua New Guinea with emphasis on the rural population. The policy recognises that information and communication services is hardly existing for the majority of the population and sets the aim of rectifying this. To expand telecommunications and broadcast services to all areas of PNG is a prime goal. Papua New Guinea and Papua New Guineans have already caught up in the fast lanes of the communication highways — there is no turning back.

Another important objective of the policy is the promotion of PNG ownership. Privatisation and deregulation are encouraged but ideally with a 70-30 per cent ownership ratio in favour of PNG institutions, groups or individuals. This has caused uproar from foreign owned companies. However, it must be seen as an honest attempt by Government to promote cultural autonomy. Control of information and communication is associated with power and the policy asserts that information and communication are more tools for empowering Papua New Guineans for self-determination and reliance and less as a means of selling more Coca-Cola.

### **The reality**

The reality at this moment, however, is probably that Coca-Cola is doing fine whereas the Department of Information and Communication cannot even phone out of its office. The policy document is very broad. It looks into all aspects of information and communication, from traditional media to computer technology, and from copyright to postal services. That is a major achievement, but it also makes implementation much more difficult.

In order to implement a policy, plans are necessary and a National Information and Communication Plan is currently being formulated. However, even with a plan, full implementation of the policy will not be possible under the current budget and with the lack of political support.

The National Information and Communication Policy is a very good policy but maybe we were too idealistic when we wrote it. Maybe it was a dream too far away from reality in a constantly changing political and unsound economic climate. But then policies are meant to challenge reality, and if this policy document can achieve just some of its objectives — despite the constraints facing it — it has succeeded.

□ **REV ORIA GEMO** is Assistant Secretary, Policy and Research, Department of Information and Communication. He presented this paper at the PNG Council of Churches seminar 'The Role of the Media in PNG' at the University of PNG, 19 August, 1994.