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THE TIMES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA: AN INVESTIGATIVE TRADITION

In May 1995, one of the Pacific's best known newspapers closed. A regional magazine summed up *The Times of Papua New Guinea* thus: *Strength*: the diversity of views and efforts to cover national life full. *Weakness*: Loss of skilled journalists that it develops to organisations like the *Post-Courier*.

By HARLYNE JOKU

I WAS FIRST inspired into a career of journalism by *The Times of Papua New Guinea* because the newspaper was so different from the dailies, and also because of its indepth reports and interesting profiles of people. I was attracted to read a new copy in my school library each week and was fascinated by journalism which seemed quite new to me at the time.

When *The Times* was first introduced to Papua New Guinea on the fifth anniversary of PNG's independence, people -- particularly the young educated, became its loyal readers -- welcomed it like a breath of fresh air. I was one of those readers, a young student at Sogeri National High School, who didn't know then that one day I'd write for the newspaper, even making it to become acting editor during the last four months of its publication.

The Times was officially launched on 12 September 1980. Distinguished Australian journalist Michael Davie, editor of the *Melbourne Age*, launched it and Franzalbert Joku was founding editor. Said the first editorial:

It is no coincidence that we launch *The Times of PNG* today. It is our way of marking, as an independent weekly newspaper, our fifth anniversary of independence as a nation. Five years ago PNG was on the verge of nationhood...

The Times of PNG aims to be part of the process of diagnosis and will not always be popular. But we will always strive to tell as much of the truth as we can get hold of. And we hope we can help find a new way for our nation in the 1980s.

The circumstances leading to Word Publishing Company's board of directors' decision to discontinue *The Times* is unfortunate. There are many loyal readers out there who totally disagree or cannot understand why. To them, including loyal fans like myself, *The Times* is

indispensable -- PNG cannot do without it. An investigative newspaper like *The Times* was much needed in this young country's development.

As astutely put by the then Premier for Morobe, Utula Samana, now PNG's ambassador to the United Nations: 'The true voice of PNG is yet to be heard, shaped by its people to influence development on the basis of its own aspirations and values. The 1980s is a crucial decade for this nation. It is my hope that *The Times* will be instrumental in this decade in encouraging and promoting PNG's national "consciousness", which would in turn become a vital tool to reshape our society in our human image.'

Papua New Guinea was then a young, inexperienced nation and *The Times* was seen by many educated people as a new model of communication between the Government and the people.

The Times has since served its purpose, despite criticism from its predecessors that it has lost its touch and direction.

As early as the years it was launched, its first media columnist, University of PNG's founding journalism lecturer, Ross Stevens, wrote a memo to the editor titled: LETS HAVE THE HARD STUFF!

People like the depth in your stories and the way you looked. I agree with them. But I missed the hard stuff -- the one hard story that wrapped it all up in a way a weekly can. Example: What's happening in Simbu? Why are the coffee factories going broke? Why has Waigani got to bail out the provincial government etc?

After Stevens wrote his commentary, *The Times* began to publish investigative reports. Sinclair Solomon began as *The Times'* first recognised investigative journalist. His stories uncovered vast corruption in the logging industry, one of the issues that touches the heart of the majority of Papua New Guineans. The consistency of those reports gave way to a public outcry against this corruption, resulting in the establishment of a national inquiry into the allegations which was headed by Judge Thomas Barnett.

Former leaders like Deputy Prime Minister Ted Diro and Sir Julius Chan were implicated in the report. Diro resigned from public office as a result.

More of *The Times* investigative reports followed from journalists like Neville Togarewa and Bernard Maladina on logging and other issues valued by *The Times'* aims and objectives:

- To promote gospel values, through encouraging total human development, by helping people to mature intellectually and spiritually; and in the use of material resources.
- To seek the truth.
- To oppose injustice, inequality, violence and the destruction of the environment.
- To hold a mirror to society and all institutions.

And Word's aims:

- To disseminate information so that people can form true and objective judgements.
- To encourage reader participation.
- To reflect a wide variety of opinions.
- To build an interest in serious reading.
- To encourage in-depth reporting on a wide range of institutions, including the churches.

Former editors, journalists and support staff of *The Times* have in their own way upheld those philosophies and values. I pay tribute to them, especially my editor-in-chief Anna Solomon, who through thick and thin led *The Times* editorial team onwards until the decision by the board to have *The Times* suspended indefinitely due to financial difficulties.

The Word Publishing board made its decision in the light of the hard economic situation being faced by the country. The trying times have further affected businesses and firms as our newspaper company is the only one that is nationally owned in this country. The recent birth of another daily newspaper, the Malaysian-owned *National*, has generally affected the print media advertising market.

If *The Times* newspaper, rated one of the best in the South Pacific, had to be sacrificed to keep PNG's only nationally owned newspaper company, Word Publishing, surviving, then probably it is worth it. Loyal readers must need to know that when good times return, there will be a rebirth of *The Times* to a better publication than it ever was before. I recall 1989 when it was rated by a regional news magazine as 'best newspaper in the South Pacific'. Said the magazine:

The Times of PNG. Strength: the diversity of views and efforts to cover national life fully.
Weakness: Loss of skilled journalists it develops to organisations like the *Post-Courier*.

On 12 September 1995, it would have been 15 years old. I remain proud always to have written for such a paper.

- Harlyne Joku is a Senior Reporter of *The Independent*, successor to *The Times of PNG*. At the time of the closure of *The Times*, she was News Editor on that paper. This is reprinted from *The Times* of 25 May 1995.

