

## HARLYNE JOKU

☐ 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 Saturday 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.*

10 PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW 2:1 1995

# Self-censorship: the most insidious gag

Journalists feel the pressures to conform to the accepted values of their workplace. But those pressures come not just from editors and producers above them, but significantly from the journalist's peers — their fellow journalists.



By PETER CRONAU

MOST journalists think they know censorship when it happens to them — it's when the editor or producer spikes a story or the lawyers decline to allow a story to run. But it's also when a journalist decides not to do a story for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps the source wasn't credible enough, there wasn't time to speak to the contacts, or some other story became more urgent. The result is censorship — some information is kept away from the public, and so the tenuous control that the public has on governance is weakened.

One of the best definitions of censorship I've come across is from the US-based Project Censored. This project surveys the media and reveals the top censored stories each year in the United States, and now also in Canada, and perhaps soon also in Australia and the Pacific. Project Censored defines censorship as a 'suppression of information, whether purposeful or not, by any method including bias, omission, under reporting, or self-censorship, which prevents the public from knowing what's happening in its society'.<sup>1</sup>

Aidan White, general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, who was in Australia in February, has referred to self-censorship this way: 'Living and working in conditions of fear, poverty or employment insecurity, journalists often submit to self-censorship, the most corrosive and insidious form of censorship of all.'<sup>2</sup>

Self-censorship can lead to some stories being hidden from public view. But how does self-censorship happen? I believe that it is both a conscious and unconscious process of limiting stories; it is done both intentionally and unintentionally.

PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW 2:1 1995 11



**Journalism culture**

The process of self-censorship develops in journalists from an internalising of the values of the news organisation in which they work. Over time, through training and a form of socialisation, journalists develop a sense for what is 'news' for their organisation. Journalists develop a set of news values, an ability to know what makes for good news and what doesn't. That set of values is absorbed by journalists from the news values of their media organisation, and from the journalists they work with — from the culture of their workplace. A recent editorial in *The National* in Papua New Guinea said the media's role 'should be firstly to build up those [government] institutions and then stand guard over [them]', and avoid 'uncaring attacks' on leaders.<sup>3</sup>

So the news agenda of a journalist develops in close association with that of their media organisation. If it doesn't, I would suggest, the journalist will feel the pressures to conform to the accepted values of their workplace. But those pressures come not just from editors and producers above them, but significantly from the journalist's peers, their fellow journalists. A journalist who suggests stories that fellow journalists and editors or producers deride or criticise, will quickly learn what values are expected of them in order to get a story into print or broadcast.

Of course, there are exceptions. A journalist I know recently tried four times to get a certain story up at his workplace. Convinced that the story ought to be told, he went back after each rejection of his story idea with a new angle believing it to be of interest to the public. But in this case the facts of the story did not qualify it to get run. On the fourth attempt the journalist succeeded. He did so by linking the story to the views of an institutional spokesperson. So the story only became 'news' when an important person, an expert on the topic, agreed to give their views on it.

So it seems that the very professional standards that journalists try to attain, may be leading to some stories not being told. The need to use 'accredited sources' as spokespersons of society's institutions, puts limits on the views assessed. By this it appears that source and fact have become intertwined. In many ways the news agenda is being set by the sources' agenda.

**Newsworthiness**

Now that journalist hasn't been working at his place of work for all that long; he tells me the biggest critics of his attempts to get that story done were his fellow journalists. They failed to consider it newsworthy.

Newsworthiness is spoken of as something that exists in itself, but it is really the result of the cross-pressures in news production. As media researcher Rod Tiffen has pointed out, newsworthiness exists only in relation to other stories.<sup>4</sup>

News values are embedded in the way information is gathered. The selection and presentation of a story attempts to reflect and capture the public's concerns. 'Newsworthiness' comes from journalists' professional assumptions, the actions of the gatekeepers, and, as we have seen, the criticism of one's peers.

The Western media, upon which the PNG media have essentially modelled themselves, have in many ways neglected their questioning watchdog role, instead repeatedly giving primary access to spokespeople and intellectuals who defend the role of Western governments.

United States dissident and media critic Professor Noam Chomsky argues that academics and intellectuals manufacture consent to the actions of government, and that the media confines debate to the conservative middle ground. The media pre-digests events for the public — it selects the topics, distributes our concerns, frames the issues, filters the information, gives emphasis and tone, and keeps debate within the bounds of acceptable premises. In presenting 'both sides' of a story — that is by giving a story 'balance', the journalist can claim to be letting the audience choose who is telling the truth.

Chomsky (and fellow critic Edward Herman) attempts to explain this by a Propaganda Model where he describes the structures and influences that he believes produce systematic propaganda in the media.<sup>5</sup> The model puts forward five filters on our news:

1. The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant media outlets;
2. Advertising as the primary source of income for most media;
3. The reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power;
4. Criticism by the powerful of negative media statements, of 'flak', used as a means of disciplining the media;
5. Control mechanisms of 'anticommunism', 'terrorism', 'Muslim fundamentalism', and so on.

This is not to suggest some conspiracy theory operating in setting the media agenda, but mainly a form of self-censorship at work. 'Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalised preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organisation, market and political power,' writes Chomsky.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that those five news-filters are not some mechanical force by which news is shaped. It is the coming together of innumerable choices and decisions by journalists and their editors and producers, second-guessing each other and their bosses, and in some cases second-guessing the owners and their powerful friends.



## PETER CRONAU

It results in money and power being able to filter out the news that is fit to print, marginalising any real dissent, and allowing government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public.

## A response

But not all journalists give in to these pressures, as I have already described. Here is what three Australian journalists have said about the role of journalists.

JOHN PILGER (he made television exposés of the Khmer Rouge atrocities and Indonesian repression in East Timor): 'As secrecy and the deception of governments grow more sophisticated, the need for explanation, investigation and polemic has never been more urgent; equally there is a need for journalists to make a stand against the bullies of their own industry.'

WILFRED BURCHETT (he was the first Western journalist to report the nuclear horror of Hiroshima and covered the Vietnam war from the socialist side): 'As members of human society I believe reporters should regard their responsibilities as being above contractual obligations to editors and their own personal interests ... He [sic] cannot remain coldly aloof and objective when basic human issues are involved.'

DAVID BOWMAN (former editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald*): 'Who is to tell the world what's going on? Someone has to represent those hundreds of thousands of innocent readers who without the selfless journalist to inform them would be at the mercy of malign forces in society.'

There are many ways in which journalists wanting to remain independent can avoid self-censorship. As earlier described, a persistent attitude and an understanding of what the media values, is one way.

Another opportunity is when a big revelation occurs. When this happens, the media becomes more open to powerful related stories for a while. It may be worth saving up stories you have had rejected until such an entry point for them comes into view. That entry point may even arrive when a competitor runs the story that your workplace won't.

There are other factors that I believe to be important for journalists in resisting the subtle pressures toward self-censorship: developing and maintaining an extensive range of direct contacts within the community; seeking out alternative points of view from people in a wide range of interest groups and academia, from special interest magazines, newsletters, the Internet, the alternative media, and dissident journalists and writers; and that often neglected strategy of doggedly working your contact book.

Keep up the pressure and await the opportunities. Maintain the pressure to do the sort of stories you feel are important and change can come about in the news organisation in which you may work.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Project Censored 1994 Yearbook*.
- <sup>2</sup> International Federation of Journalists' (IFJ) *1995 Annual Report*.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Media must exercise care', Editorial, *The National*, 18 May 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Rod Tiffen, *News and Power*, Allen and Unwin: Sydney, 1989, pp 66-69.
- <sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> John Pilger, *Heroes*, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1986.
- <sup>8</sup> Wilfred Burchett, *Passport*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1969, p viii.
- <sup>9</sup> David Bowman, *The Captive Press*, Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1988.

□ Peter Cronau is Director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney. This essay is an edited version of an address to journalism students in the Friday Forum lecture series at the South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information in Development (SPCen-CIID) at the University of Papua New Guinea on 26 May 1995.

**GEMINI GEMINI GEMINI**



Serving the Pacific:

*Cook Islands News*

*Evening Post (NZ)*

*PNG Post-Courier*

Radio Sunshine (Niue)

Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corp.

*Times of Tonga*

*Vanuatu Weekly*

and other news media  
in the region.

**GEMINI NEWS SERVICE**

9 White Lion Street London N1 9PD Tel: 071 833 4141 Fax: 071 837 5118 Modem: 071 837 5906