

Dilemma for Fiji media and the constitution

Fiji prides itself on being at the crossroads of the Pacific and yet the rest of the great ocean remains almost invisible to the Fijian press, to whom the world consists of floods in India, stock prices in Australia and OJ in the US.

By PHILIP CASS

HOW should one regard the Fijian press in this age of constitutional reform? Whenever a country's constitution is being reviewed, especially one conceived in the aftermath of a political upheaval, there is a temptation to cry that now is the time to enshrine the freedom of the press in stone tablets, to demand that the constitution guarantee that the press — by which one also means television and radio — be free. I would argue that constitutional guarantees of press freedom are a chimera and that the concept of absolute press freedom implied by such constitutional guarantees is so firmly rooted in the Western/liberal/capitalist/democratic tradition as to be incompatible with traditional Fijian social structures.

That newspapers, magazines, filmmakers, television and radio journalists should operate without constraint by government or officialdom is an ideal to be cherished, but like many ideals it is often less attractive when seen close up. The United States constitution, for instance, guarantees certain liberties to its citizens, among which is the freedom of speech, which has been interpreted to mean freedom of the media as well. I say interpreted deliberately, because the American constitution nowhere says that pornographer Larry Flynt has a constitutional right to publish *Hustler* magazine, or that a newspaper may print stolen government documents or that television cameras may invade the court room and create such an atmosphere of electronic *carnivale* that any chance of a fair trial is lost.

The American constitution does not guarantee any of these things — but it has been interpreted as so doing by the Supreme Court. And those interpretations have been re-interpreted and may be overthrown completely, or superseded by newer, more liberal, interpretations. The notion of a constitutionally

PHILIP CASS

guaranteed right of anything is a myth; worse, it is a dangerous one. That the press should be free is an ideal and one eagerly and solemnly to be sought, but consider for a moment the drawbacks. It is usually said that a journalist has no more right to information than an ordinary citizen and yet the so-called constitutional right to free speech has been used in some cases to give journalists protection that places them far above the ordinary citizen. Worse, the rights of the media — or the interpretation thereof — have often been placed above those of the ordinary citizen. A citizen living under these conditions may no longer be guaranteed a fair trial and may no longer expect to stand equal before the law because the constitution has been interpreted in such a way that a television journalist is more equal than the accused. An unfettered press, free from government restraint, is a wonderful ideal; but when that ideal must be constantly interpreted and then so that the press is freer than the people upon whom and to whom they report then it is no ideal at all, but a delusion.

The sceptical may ask whether complete freedom of the press is an ideal which Fijian journalists should seek. The notion of an unfettered liberal press operating in a democratic society began with Rousseau and was made possible by the linotype. It is doubtful whether the ideal can operate outside the particular parameters of a Western/liberal/capitalist/democracy and some may suggest that the notions of individuality and competition so inherent in this notion are alien to traditional Fijian society. The philosophies inherent in the Western notion of press freedom sprang from a particular tradition and social milieu that are at odds with Fiji's historical experience.

Let us consider, for instance an anecdote involving one of the nation's electronic news services. A news crew was detailed to cover a demonstration against a government minister. One member of the crew refused to go on the job, because the minister was a person of a higher rank from his own landowning group (*mataqali*) and to approach her in this manner would have contravened all sorts of social tabus and obligations. The story died there and then.

In such an instance, Western concepts of press freedom are utterly irrelevant; any obligations towards duty, the audience or even the story are subservient to social obligations. The ideal Western 'free press' will not function in Fiji because the ideal Western 'free press' functions outside society as an observer rather than a participant. More importantly, it acts without regard for the effect of its stories on society, because to do otherwise would be to forego the opportunity to expose painful truths about that society. Regardless of any guarantees — constitutional or otherwise — many Fijian journalists will automatically regard social cohesion and adherence to social protocol as more important than getting a good story. In some parts of the Pacific, these social obligations are being subverted and subverted by editors and senior journalists

who can work through family networks or take on chiefly or other titles and thus deal with people as a social equal or superior, but this option is not open to everybody. It also begs the question of whether it is more dangerous to subvert a social structure than to anger a minister with an embarrassing story.

One may have to accept the notion that to promote Western liberal free market journalism in a developing country such as Fiji may be a critique of the social norms of this country. By presenting a concept of press freedom based on another set of social values may be a way of saying that the social values of this country are faulty and need changing. To those concerned with maintaining the social integrity of a developing nation the promotion of western style press freedom may seem very much like cultural imperialism.

Fiji is not a liberal/Western/capitalist /democracy; it could not be unless it transformed itself utterly. It has its own agenda and its own way of doing things. The press in Fiji will not match the Western/democratic/capitalist model unless society is so transformed as to cast away chiefs, adis, ratus and the whole traditional Fijian social structure which governs to varying degrees the lives of everybody in these islands, whether they be indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians or general voters. It is possible, indeed, to question the whole notion of freedom of the press in Fiji. Western concepts of freedom of the press dictate that everything should be laid out in black and white in the press or in full colour on television, and yet in a society as small as Fiji there are subtler ways of transmitting information and naming the guilty parties. By Western standards there is quite reasonable freedom of expression in most areas. Journalists expose the wrong doings of government, expose their sexual peccadilloes in frightening detail and allow a range of opinion to criticise the government, politicians and other media operators. (One hesitates to mention the fact that those who do most of the exposing are Indian journalists and expatriate editors).

Of course, there are stories that are not printed and anybody who lives here rapidly learns that you have to read between the lines to work out what is really going on. But how much of this is because of political pressure and how much of this is part of the natural constraint of a society whose social structure is still feudal? One could argue that it is impossible that a totally unfettered Western/democratic/liberal/capitalist press should emerge here unless Fijians were prepared to give up their traditional society ... for freedom is as much a product of society as much as idealism.

How then should one regard the Fijian media in this age of constitutional reform? The Fijian media is neither wholly good, nor wholly bad. *The Daily Post* regularly carries apologies for mistakes and inaccuracies and compounds its sins by pandering to the credulous and superstitious with stories about cargo cults, milk drinking elephant gods and women giving birth to snakes. Its rival,

PHILIP CASS

The Fiji Times, is worthy, rather like one of the larger provincial dailies in Australia. The Fiji Broadcasting Commission has so many financial problems that the quality of its news service is hardly worth mentioning. Fiji One's news service has improved since the days when it was provided by the government video unit and could contain such delights as a bulletin almost wholly devoted to Prime Minister Rabuka opening a car dealership. Still, Fiji One has its own style and has been known to repeat the previous evening's copy of the BBC World Television News without apology.

And yet there are highlights, such as the monthly news magazines, chief of which, *The Review*, has broken many major stories acutely damaging to the government. The picture is uneven, and one is struck repeatedly by the uneasiness in the media, a lack of certainty about what it is doing. Uncertainty is a feature of life in Fiji — one need only look at the never-ending saga of Fiji One's two extra channels and poor transmission standards and the FBC's finances to realise that — but the uncertainty is social as much as professional. Fiji prides itself on being the crossroads of the Pacific and yet the rest of the great ocean remains almost invisible in the Fijian press, to whom the world consists of floods in India, stock exchange prices in Australia, rugby in New Zealand and the OJ Simpson trial in the United States. It is a worldview — a *weltenscheung* — of a media and a people curiously uncertain about their place in the world, of a people trying to maintain their traditional culture while looking nervously and expectantly at the horizon.

Perhaps in an age of constitutional reform the most important function the Fijian media can perform is not to seek the chimera of greater freedom, but to find a place for itself and Fijian people of all races in the world; to locate the space within which the constitutional reforms will take place.

□ *Philip Cass takes a devil's advocate role in this essay. He lectures in journalism at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Cass formerly taught journalism at the University of Central Queensland in Australia. Before abandoning UCQ for USP, he took a semester's leave to work as chief subeditor for Word Publishing in Port Moresby.*