

Bleak media scenarios confront Vanuatu

Lack of qualified and experienced journalists, a tendency to allow censorship and disregard for the notion of publicly funding broadcasting services belonging to the public hamper freedom of information.



By KIERY MANASSAH

THE NEWS MEDIA in Vanuatu has been gradually taking a new turn since the emergence of a new commercial station, Nambawan FM 98, Television Blong Vanuatu and a new *Vanuatu Weekly* rival, the *Vanuatu Trading Post*. The *Trading Post* publisher, Marc Neil-Jones, was correct when he said: 'Vanuatu is so politicised that it would be almost impossible to find a ni-Vanuatu with newspaper publishing experience that was not a member of a political party.'¹

But a politicised country of that nature is quite unique to Vanuatu. Certainly it isn't of its own making because it is not the trend that other countries of the Pacific have taken. One could ask why such potentially prolific writers and journalists such as Hilda Lini and Grace Molisa (publisher of Black Stone Publications) did not progress further to establish a strong mass media communications foundation in Vanuatu. Both of these dignified women leaders have contributed substantially to the national development of Vanuatu and have yet to do so. However, the reason why I have specifically pin-pointed these two figures is that they have exceptional experience which had they been given the chance, conditions and the support, could have otherwise laid the foundations on which future freedom of expression and communication could have thrived.

Hilda Lini, a University of Papua New Guinea journalism graduate, did not remain long enough in the media industry when she became a member of Parliament. This could be seen as a natural trend but there could be an underlying cause.

On a panel at the 1995 Pacific Islands News Association convention in Port Moresby, Harold Obed, a journalist with Radio Vanuatu, touched on a crucial

Vanuatu

Weekly
Hebdomadaire

50 VUTU

No. 1061 SATURDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 1995

13 VUTU

200 pipol oli representem Vanuatu



CONFERENCE INTERNATIONALE DES FEMMES
"Ecoutez, apprenez et retransmettez vos acquis à travers le Vanuatu"

Vanuatu to export taro to New Zealand

Japanese Trade Mission to Vanuatu

L'application pour la citoyenneté doit se faire dans la légalité



Sunshine®

50 VUTU

The Vanuatu Trading
POST

The FURNITURE WAREHOUSE
107 THURMOU
TEL 27057

INSIDE THIS WEEK

HEBDO POST

Australian Govt will not replace judges
Minister Requests judges accept statement of support for Chief Justice





QUALITY FURNITURE

Vanuatu Weekly ... claims 3000 readers.

Vanuatu Trading Post ... 2500 avid readers.

point about literacy in Vanuatu. He was referring specifically to the relay of live broadcasts of bulletins from overseas radio through Radio Vanuatu (this could also apply to the print media). How much of that bulletin about Vanuatu is actually digested and absorbed by ni-Vanuatu is the point in question. Literacy statistics rank Vanuatu and most Melanesian countries as among the lowest in the Pacific.

The scapegoat? It could be the Government, or the non-government organisations, or the churches because they have not initiated enough literacy or educational programs as early as possible to educate those who have had nil chances of going through any formal education. Maybe the problem could be attributed to the adoption of two official languages — English and French — which has forever left a vacuum, which needs to be filled among the people of Vanuatu. Nevertheless, is not this the basic task of the media — to educate and inform ni-Vanuatu, grounding them with appropriate information? People definitely will not speak up or express themselves if they lack information and knowledge about important national issues. One thing is sure and that is, freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Constitution of Vanuatu. However, that right means nothing if people are deprived of the right to freedom of information. This means that they are not able to make use of that freedom. Of all mediums, a newspaper is the cheapest to establish so long as one has some

form of backing and 'an element of protection' from the Government.² And of course there should be enough readers whom one rely on.

With a population of almost 200,000, *Vanuatu Weekly* claims 3000 readers while Marc Neil-Jones' *Vanuatu Trading Post* has done just fine with 2500 in a very short time frame.

It is very encouraging to know that 'the president has gone on record as saying he supports the *Vanuatu Trading Post*. 'This paper made a landmark in the history of print media in Vanuatu by going bi-weekly in September 1995. According to the publisher, many avid readers, mostly public servants 'want it to succeed'

On the 15th Independence Anniversary, the Prime Minister officially opened the first studio of Television Blong Vanuatu which will enable live broadcasts from the capital. The good news for all ni-Vanuatu is that they are now linked through television to other parts of the world — hence becoming part of this dynamic 'global village'. This new inclusion is a big plus if Vanuatu is to be propelled into the technological information age. During the inauguration of the Prime Minister, Maxime Carlot Korman praised the establishment as it would provide an 'opportunity to do election campaigning'.

'I am not doing this because it's election year. This was planned long ago,' he said. The station would be a 'means of education...propaganda. The worst thing this new innovation can do for the country is to follow the trend that other media like Radio Vanuatu and *Vanuatu Weekly* have taken. Television is not only telling but showing the story and however that is done, it has to be done with responsibility and with the utmost objectivity in informing and educating the citizens of this beautiful country.

A few days after the announcement of the French resumption of nuclear testing on Moruroa Atoll, 'verbal instructions were given by the Prime Minister's Office to the Director of the Government-run Radio Vanuatu and *Vanuatu Weekly* newspaper not to carry any more news related to the subject'³ A peaceful anti-nuclear testing demonstration staged by the Vanuatu Non-Governmental Organisation (VANGO) on 26 August 1995 did not attract more than 200 people because the Government approved the march at the 'last minute'.⁴ These are some of the bleak scenarios which surround the media in Vanuatu and are a blatant disregard for freedom of expression and the right to information.

Part of the reason why this situation has never changed is 'because of the limited qualification and experience... journalists at times tend to allow (themselves) to be influenced by outside elements to censor news.'⁵

At the 1995 PINA convention at the University of PNG, it was reiterated that publicly funded broadcasting services belong to the public. The public is entitled to hear these services 'provide a diverse range of views including

KIERY MANASSAH

criticisms, questions but not just the praises of the Government of the day'.

Notes:

¹ Marc Neil-Jones, *Islands Business*, June 1995, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 'Vanuatu live on TV', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, September 1995, p 10.

⁶ 'Is Vanuatu part of the Pacific?' *Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1995, p. 10.

⁷ *Vanuatu Weekly*, No 560, 2 September 1995, p 2.

⁸ *Pacific Eyes 3*, Pacific Journalists Association, Port Moresby, 1993, p 54.

⁹ *Islands Business*, August 1995, p. 9.

Kiery Manassah is a third-year Bachelor of Journalism student from Vanuatu at the South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information in Development. He won the inaugural PNG/NZ Journalism Student of the Year Award in 1994.



SOUTH PACIFIC CENTRE FOR COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION IN DEVELOPMENT

- Largest and oldest Pacific journalism school.
- Education of journalism, public relations, library and information professionals.
- Research into media and information issues.
- Publisher of newsletters, resource books and the fortnightly newspaper *Uni Tavur*.
- Professional short courses and consultancies.

UNIVERSITY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA
Box 320, Uni PO, NCD. Tel/Fax: (675) 267191

