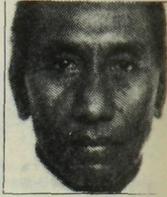


Serving truth with development news

Flawed journalism has sullied Papua New Guinea's good name and built up an unfortunate but valid distrust of the media. The country and its problems have been the victim of shallow journalists unable to look past the bad.



By SIR JULIUS CHAN

ONE THING that can always be said about news organisations is that they seek to create forums to help make news, and to invite a politician to comment at such a forum is bound to create news itself — so you are off to a good start. And for a politician, the chance to address such a large and diverse group of journalists from all parts of the Pacific is just too good a chance to miss.

Recently, as some of you would be aware, I officiated at the launch of a new Papua New Guinea weekly, the *Saturday Independent*, and on that occasion I had cause to speak frankly of the need for accountability in journalism. I do not back away from those comments. But today I would like to speak of some other aspects of the media's role in the modern world.

Today's technology is changing all our lives, but information technology, in particular, is changing the way in which you, as journalists, operate, and is placing increasing demands upon you. And those increasing demands need to be met by an increasing professionalism on your part, but unfortunately the pace of technology all too often outstrips even the intelligent user. Before I go any further, I want what I say to you today to be taken in the context of being positive and being for the purpose of a better understanding, a better relationship, between people in public and private life and news organisations.

We are operating on a two-way street and I am the first to admit that people in public life — and not just politicians — need to understand what makes news and today, more than ever, the technology of dissemination of news and also the

ethics of the news gatherers. I would not be human if I did not in some way criticise the gathering and interpretation of news. Indeed as journalists, I suspect you would be a little disappointed with me if I didn't. Politicians and people in public life, however, are far too often guilty of shooting the messenger, or are they?

I am concerned that in the ranks of journalists today we do not have too many immature professionals. Frontline reporters are too often young and inexperienced, without the necessary background understanding of issues they are expected to write on. It would be better to have experienced senior journalists assigned to important subjects, rather than young journalists who often have no sense of history and appear to have been assigned to a task simply because they are on duty and there is an assignment to be undertaken. The tradition of the career rounds person with an understanding of the history of his or her subject area and the subsequent ability to place a story in a more comprehensive context is rare in journalism today.

It is also fair to say that too many journalists seem to have forgotten that their role is to be the independent observer. Too often we see journalists' opinions carelessly — or in some cases, carefully — interwoven with deliberate emphasis on selected facts. The reality is that technology has forced print journalists, in particular, to be more interpretative, to try to second guess the impact of the statement or the event, rather than just report the issues for the community to study and interpret as it will.

The beauty of electronic media technology bringing us news as it happens is that it does not leave much room for journalistic interpretation: essentially, what you see is what you get. Never has that been better exposed than in the coverage of the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. When the Allied Forces fired their first shots on the 24 February 1991, the world tuned in as one, with the news channel CNN leading the way. It was news as it was happening. It was untouched by interpretation. It was raw and powerful television, and people got from the news — in this case, the television images — the chance to do what they should always be able to do: make up their own minds.

In Chechnya, on 11 December 1994, Russian troops moved to suppress the Chechen independence movement — and the world watched as it happened. What we saw was the purest form of news, and it will become more a daily reality as technology progresses and spreads to every corner of the globe.

It is in this scenario, that the print journalist has a genuine problem in keeping the news fresh, primarily because of the pressures imposed by the 'instant' media of television and radio. As a result, we see journalists attempt to control the direction of a debate, rather than simply letting it pan out as it will.

Too often journalists are instrumental in creating an issue which is not of real importance, and which comes at the expense of issues that are important. Or sometimes we suffer shallow interpretation of a policy which has a major impact on the people. In many ways, it is this particular flaw in the journalistic make-up which has in large measure sullied Papua New Guinea's good name and built up an unfortunate but valid distrust of the media by those who have been once burned. Our country and its problems have been the victim of shallow journalists unable to look past the bad; sensationalist journalists unwilling to look past the obvious; and occasionally just plain stupid journalists who have simply missed the point and should never have been let loose on a keyboard in the first place.

Those then are the litany of journalistic sins that has been unleashed on Papua New Guinea over the years. In saying this, it would be quite wrong not to acknowledge that there have been journalists who have hit the nail on the head and sometimes we still don't like it because the truth isn't always easy to take. Although there are these times when the truth hurts, sadly there are even more times when the lie hurts a great deal more.

These problems have at least part of their origin in the instant nature of media technology where — to use a nineties' buzzword — there is a very limited 'window of opportunity'. When speed is of the essence, however, other virtues such as accuracy, depth and context often go flying out of that very same 'window'. This is not just my opinion. I am well aware of the concerns of international diplomats dealing with crises around the world, who are deeply worried that issues of war and peace — and what greater issues are there? — are being negotiated for the television audience. There is now no opportunity to consider a position overnight, to give it deeper thought or more time. That is the negative side of technology.

Because of satellite television, the comments of a diplomat, a politician or a businessman in one corner of the world can be relayed to interested parties across the globe in a matter of micro-seconds. News is making the world quicker by the day, to the point where it is quite dizzying. This may expose the decision-making process to the world and make good television, but frankly, the haste can lead to some very poor decisions.

This frantic media heightens the problems of difference, division and conflict that countries have today. It heightens the very real impression that only bad news is good news, that only conflict and disagreement are worth reporting. News is, it seems, peoples' misfortunes and failures and only rarely their achievements and success. I know this is a very difficult issue, but there is a crying need to balance conflict news with progressive news and information. I am fully aware that one cannot simply crucify the correspondent, the reporter, for the current state of affairs. Attitudes need changing on subeditors' benches,

in editors' chairs and in media proprietors' mahogany row offices. And in the end, perhaps we need to change the expectations of the reader, the viewer and the listener who are the consumers of your product.

I use the word 'product' because today news is surely a product more than it has ever been in the past — and perhaps that is the greatest weakness of all. Perhaps if it were seen less as a product, a commodity, a source of ratings and income, and more as the lifeblood of democracy and freedom, more as the people's right to know the truth, then we would have a better source of news in the world today.

Let me explain this in political terms: politicians develop policies to fulfil their constituents and their nation's desires for an improved lifestyle and circumstances. But once these policies have been introduced and implemented they are old news. People have increased expectations and wish to see those expectations fulfilled. As most expectations involve some financial commitment, there is all too often restraint or delay in the implementation. However, there may be substantial improvement in services, but these improvements and achievements are lost in the constantly updated debate. Major breakthroughs of improved education or health standards are often ignored and forgotten as the news media continues to chase the Holy Grail of what will eventually be future improvement. We should enjoy the opportunity to ride in the car. And if it is not the model which is being driven in Japan or the US, let us appreciate that we have this technology and let us work to ensure that our region and our country can get the best advantage of that technology.

I hope I am not seen as simplistic in communicating this message, but I believe that in this new age of technology, we are all often guilty of forgetting the fundamentals. We might comfortably operate in a high tech world, but those with whom we are communicating and representing, do not have — or necessarily want — the high tech opportunities at this particular time. The people of the Pacific Islands really have bigger, more fundamental problems to overcome, such as survival of natural disasters, getting enough land and sometimes just getting enough food.

In our high tech communications world, I believe that we are often too keen to transmit our failings and disasters around the world. In doing so, we fail to transmit our triumphs, hopes and expectations and opportunities. We are transmitting too much of the wrong message. I am sure many of you are familiar with my concerns with respect to Papua New Guinea, and the fact that too many people overseas believe that the country is beset by violence and lawlessness. Like every nation, we have our crime, we have too much violence and we have a heavy demand on our law enforcement agencies.

But so do the United States, Australia, Japan and countries throughout

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Europe. It is most definitely not just a Papua New Guinean or Pacific Islands problem; it is a global issue. Civil unrest as we have had in the recent past in Bougainville is not just a situation confined to Papua New Guinea. The media's perception problem can be clearly demonstrated in the fact that for all the many stories and major feature articles in major papers and on radio and television throughout this region, represented by the journalists here today, that surrounded the Bougainville issue during its six years of strife, there have been so few articles highlighting the incredible — and I do mean incredible — progress that has been made in resolving the issue since my Government came to power 10 months ago.

Does no-one want to hear the good news? Is it not a story worth telling to the people and with the biggest of headlines? I would think that it is and I would question the news judgment of anyone who says otherwise. Yet the silence is deafening. I believe that many areas of the world would be interested in our achievement of having a record coffee crop in Papua New Guinea this year, and that despite some horrific natural disasters, our cocoa crop will also be producing a near record. And what of the way in which our people have bounced back from the Rabaul volcanic disaster of September last year. Having witnessed the spectacular pictures of Rabaul's volcanoes in action, and having seen the damage myself, I am sure that there are many people in the world enjoying our palm oil and coconut products who would be interested in learning how quickly those industries have returned to peak production after the holocaust.

Here are stories of achievement and courage and so much more just waiting to be told. Let us have some measurement of progress. Let us have some pride in our achievements and let us tell people that while there are mistakes made from time to time, these are vastly outnumbered by measurable improvements.

In closing, I would like to encourage and commend you as journalists for gathering here this week. It is good for Papua New Guinea that you are here — especially those of you who we have not had the pleasure of meeting before. Take a look at our country. A professional and open look. See the good and the bad, and if you are a fair judge — and I am sure you all are — then you will see more good than bad and many misconceptions and unfortunate myths should be dispelled this week.

It is good that you are here, too, for the cause of journalism. Any opportunity to reflect on what you do, how you do it and why, is worthwhile. I wish you well in your discussions and seminars and hope that the fruit that comes forth will benefit your readers, viewers and listeners.

□ *Sir Julius Chan is Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. He gave this opening address at the Pacific Islands News Association 1995 Convention in Port Moresby on 26 June 1995.*