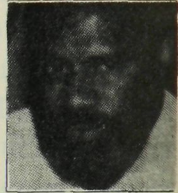


A blurred and distorted view of PNG

Some “mischievous” news media do not present a full portrait based on real life in Papua New Guinea but a caricature — without the humour of a cartoon — which too often misses the point.



By **GABRIEL DUSAVA**

HOW PLEASED I am to have the opportunity to address a subject I imagine is the reason I have been asked: the increasing frequency with which I have found it necessary to express my concern, both personal and official, at representations of my country, Papua New Guinea, in media published in the region.

In fact, the misleading — and even mischievous — ways in which Papua New Guinea is depicted in many media accounts suggest that the topic and theme of this panel contain an important element of self-contradiction: “How the media portray life in the region” is all-too-frequently not the product of a shared Pacific vision, but of a blurred and distorted view from outside. Thus, certain sections of the media do not present a full portrait based on real life in Papua New Guinea but a caricature — without the humour of a cartoon — made by an artist who fails to draw clearly because he or she, like the pencil they hold, misses the point.

Unlike many other countries, including some from which certain of our critics come, Papua New Guinea enjoys freedom of the press both in law and in practice. Section 46 of our National Constitution guarantees every person — and not just citizens of Papua New Guinea — freedom of expression and publication within the law. A competitive press ensures that the freedom provided by law is exercised in practice.

The news media includes two national daily newspapers, a Government-owned, though independently operated, radio network as well as a commercial

radio station, and a privately-owned television station. Periodicals like the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, *Islands Business* and *Pacific* magazine are widely available, though quite expensive when compared with most national incomes. Though they provide news and comment about the region, their attitudes sometimes depart from what many Pacific Islanders would regard as a regional perspective.

Short-wave radio broadcasts from other countries, including programs in Tok Pisin made in Australia, can be picked up throughout Papua New Guinea. So can television shows beamed by satellite from Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States.

Improved access to alternative media with global links, such as the Internet, are expected to add to our communications capacity in both directions — and, perhaps, to our problems — soon. Censorship of material entering the country from outside is limited to hard-core pornography and gratuitous violence — and to media such as print and film that can actually be intercepted.

Journalists from other countries are generally able to pursue the kinds of stories they please. But, much to my own — and others' — regret, the number of resident foreign journalists, as well as the number of foreign observers who pay regular visits, has been going down since independence. The result is a long-term decline in well-informed reporting and analysis of developments in Papua New Guinea and other island countries in the region.

While we recognise the need for the Australian and New Zealand media to pay greater attention — and to devote more resources than they have in the past — to our Asian neighbours, in particular, it seems somewhat strange (and even counter-productive) that they should increasingly overlook the South Pacific as they look further abroad.

Freedom under the Papua New Guinea Constitution is not just a matter of individual rights. It also involves social obligations. Good, professional journalism, surely, requires balance between the two. While Government is required by law to respect the rights and freedoms on which journalism depends, I believe that the wider community has an equal right to be respected in return.

In countries where nation-building is still an objective, and not yet an achievement, it is, after all, not only the mass media whose position may be fragile but the well-being of the society in — and on — which the media report. Journalists may, for example, want access to a particular situation in order to observe, describe and analyse what is happening (or not happening) there. But their doing so may itself become a factor in that situation — if, for example, they provide opportunities for self-promoting publicity to people engaged in breaking the law (such as criminals who recently staged an illegal hold-up while, and one hopes not because, they were being filmed).

The early stages of the Bougainville crisis, before peace and services began to be restored, provided many examples of situations in which reporting itself either generated or became news. Simply allowing journalists to enter and move as they like in areas where they might not be safe adds to the burdens that police and other authorities are expected to bear if things go wrong. Providing transport for journalists wishing to travel to places where other means are not available may divert scarce resources from other important uses.

Again, the Bougainville crisis provides many — but not the only examples (others include incidents on the common border with Indonesia and natural disasters, such as the volcanic eruptions around Rabaul in September 1994).

In other words, journalists need to do more than “report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty”, as stated in paragraph 1 of the code of ethics of the Papua New Guinea Journalists’ Association, reprinted in the book, *Nius Bilong Pasifik*, edited by my fellow-panellist, David Robie — and expressed in most other journalistic codes of ethics too. They need to understand the overall context in which they work and events occur. When members of the press seek privileged access to important people or public events, they need to remember that — important though their role in disseminating public information might be — our leaders have not been elected and public affairs are not conducted primarily or exclusively for the benefit of the press. Other people have rights of undisturbed access too.

Pacific Islanders tend to value — and are certainly entitled to — the respect that tends to be upset by the noisy clamour of journalistic activity caused when cameras are being set up, microphones are being tested or questions are thrown, uninvited, through the air on important occasions. Many Papua New Guineans have a strong feeling that events that many journalists regard as newsworthy are often atypical of the country as a whole. Cases in point include stories that focus on the relatively small number of violent crimes, instead of the much more orderly and peaceful lives that most people lead for most of the time.

We feel frustrated too when reports on issues such as corruption seem to single us out — as if Papua New Guinea is obviously worse than (or even different in kind) from places like Queensland and Western Australia during the 1980s, or many other places at the same and other times. In such circumstances, comparison may not be odious, as the saying goes, but instructive — precisely because it provides a sense of real-world perspective (in which, incidentally, the situation in Papua New Guinea, though still undesirable, appears not to be unique — and certainly not uniquely bad).

People who have read letters that I have sent personally to journals physically produced in — but not in attitude of — the South Pacific region will know how annoyed many Papua New Guineans can become when baseless

criticisms of minor irrelevancies are publicised at the expense of much more important events. Examples include an inaccurate story in a regional monthly early this year that dwelt on insignificant details of travel arrangements for the Pope's visit — instead of moving demonstrations of faith by some hundreds of thousands of people, and the beatification of the Papua New Guinean martyr, Blessed Peter ToRot.

But it may not be so apparent about an error-ridden and self-absorbed mindlessness that turns a legitimate story about the negotiation of a loan from Taiwan into one published under the headline — and with the theme — of an account carried prominently in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 31: "PNG's deal in recognising Taiwan worries Canberra". It is as if the only interest in what we do is what our former rulers are alleged to think.

In an incident less than two years ago several otherwise highly-regarded Australian media carried a story — planted by a self-styled, non-citizen spokesperson for an illegal movement — that a senior minister had refused to meet him when he had not asked for a meeting, and the purpose of any meeting had not been made known. But, then, none of the media that carried the story bothered to check with officials who might have known whether it was true. The story was clearly too newsworthy as it was to be spiked because it had no base (or, perhaps, to run as an example of how certain self promoters try to manipulate news).

Certain stories are not, of course, just stories — at least, as far as their effects are concerned. The situations to which they give rise reveal truths much greater, longer lasting and vastly more complex than the truth which journalists claim to uphold. Take, for example, the way in which repeated allegations of environmental damage, circulated in order to press claims for compensation, create an image of Papua New Guinea that disturbs environmental activists and prospective investors alike. The broader context that includes many mutually beneficial, environmentally sound investments may be ignored. People whose prospects are adversely affected when other investors are discouraged are overlooked. So are the interests of a tourist industry whose promotions are undermined by accounts of crime which, though true, are not placed in context — and of employers who have difficulty, for similar reasons, in recruiting skilled staff from overseas.

Evidence for the damage caused by such stories can be found in questions raised — and concerns expressed — in the many discussions that Papua New Guinean diplomats have in the course of performing their duties abroad. And what do we learn from Australian and New Zealand media that depict only people from other (particularly, Asian) countries as careless about the environment, ruthless exploiters and sources of corruption in Papua New Guinea?

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Perhaps only that certain sections of the media have prejudices which most Papua New Guineans do not share, and that may even help to explain why we are seeking other sources of investment.

What can we conclude from stories that criticise diplomats from Island countries because they work like diplomats often do — quietly and out-of-sight — in ways that journalists writing for regional magazines cannot observe and seem not to understand? Perhaps only that the problem does not lie where such journalists say it does, but in the egos and ignorance of those journalists themselves. If I seem rather critical of what certain — emphatically, not all — journalists in the region say and do, then the reason is not to be found in anything other than experience and observation.

Similar criticisms can, in fact, be levelled at other professions, including academic and other researchers who exploit people in difficult situations as sources of information — or use them as guinea-pigs in experiments that cannot hurt the observers. Again, the Bougainville crisis provides many examples.

But journalists are in a special position — servants of that indispensable element in a vibrant democracy, the public's right to know. Their rights — and their duties — derive from that special position. So do the right — and duty — of other people, like myself, to demand that they maintain the highest possible professional standards.

It is, therefore, in the context, of the important contribution that a free press plays in ensuring transparency, accountability and other essentials of good Government that I have made the criticisms of current journalistic practice — and outlined the requirements of good journalism — embodied in my presentation. Similar considerations explain why I am pleased to have been invited to give this address and why I have spoken as frankly and bluntly as I have.

I look forward to the development of an increasingly localised and highly skilled profession in — and of — the region, consisting of journalists with a vision that is truly Pacific: informed by insight, foresight and the wider view — a profession that does not confuse mere spectacles with real news. Despite the many criticisms I have made of past and present performances, it is, I believe, the kind of profession to whose development many are already making an active, positive contribution.

□ *Gabriel Dusava is Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Papua New Guinea. He gave this address at the Pacific Islands News Association 1995 Convention in Port Moresby on 27 June 1995.*