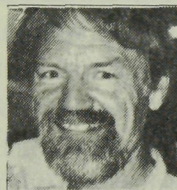


# Share the whole vision, good news and bad

Image-massagers sprucing up Pacific government images aren't enough. While issues such as the raskol problem, land disputes and Bougainville remain unresolved, there will continue to be a 'bad press'.



By DAVID ROBIE

A FEW WEEKS ago our first-year journalism students were doing their examination in practical reporting. Their task was handling a press conference after a tragedy at sea off the coast of West New Britain. In a role play, the reporters were questioning National Disaster and Emergency Services chief Leith Anderson about a barge that had sunk with a young football team on board. They were told five bodies had been recovered. The question by one reporter was: were the bodies dead?

At first glance, you might wonder well why am I using this anecdote in the context of today's discussion theme about how the media portray the region. In fact, it leads to an important issue when we consider many criticisms levelled at the news media reporting in the Pacific — frequently the criticisms focus on semantics. Often at the heart of criticism is a misconception by governments and corporations that somehow the media should only reflect the 'good news', that it shouldn't be too negative or too picky — especially when it is news for overseas consumption.

In other words, it should perform some sort of quasi-public relations role. This notion doesn't accept a basic rationale for news media coverage of holding a mirror to society. It doesn't accept the argument that if well informed, a society is able to benefit from genuine participatory democracy, informed debate and wiser decisions. This point of view hasn't got the foggiest idea of what news is really about.

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The bottom line for the news media is that journalism is information in the *public interest* — not information in the *corporate* interest. Not information in the *government* interest. These are the hallmarks of public relations. Unfortunately, many journalists in PNG and in some other Pacific countries swap between public relations and journalism jobs with such regularity that it isn't surprising that real journalism — *information in the public interest* — is forgotten.

This happens in other countries too. But the news media organisation usually has sufficient depth among its senior editorial staff to shrug off losses to public relations. In most Pacific countries, the loss of one or two top reporters, particularly specialists, to public relations or press secretary jobs leaves big gaps that are hard to fill. Hence the sort of problem that the Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan, was talking about yesterday — the glut of young and inexperienced reporters without background or a sense of history.

In the 1960s, as television was evolving into our principal source of information, the philosopher and media critic Raymond Williams wrote a series of essays with a vision for TV. Williams made a case for a broadcasting service that was neither commercially driven, nor paternalistic. He argued for something simple, but elusive — that the media ought to be the voice of the people, not the voice of the state and its powerful friends. In other words, a free people deserve a truly free media.

Papua New Guinea today is perhaps better served by its constitutionally guaranteed free media than many countries in the region — certainly this is so with its newspapers. In spite of overseas ownership of the two major dailies, there is a genuine choice with newspapers. The Murdoch-owned *Post-Courier*, Malaysian-owned *National* and the PNG-owned — through its mainstream churches — *Saturday Independent* and *Wantok* are very diverse papers with contrasting news values. Whatever arguments might be made about the *National's* perceived links with the logging industry, it has made a refreshing debut with technological excellence unmatched elsewhere in the region. It has also given a vision of the Asia-Pacific region which is rather more dynamic than that usually given by the traditional and rather parochial Australasian media influences in the Pacific.

The new *Saturday Independent* is really *The Times* dressed up for the weekend, but thankfully it still tries to keep its thoughtful and in-depth look at major issues. And this is the one paper that makes consistent and substantial use of non-government organisations — an important news source in environmental and sustainable development issues — which are too often neglected by some of the region's media.

In recent years, governments in PNG and other countries have spent heavily

NATION

# Paper hits PNG image

By MOHAMMED BASHIR PORT MORESBY: A major Australian newspaper, The Sydney Morning Herald, has published a three-part series of articles on Papua New Guinea that is not likely to go down well with local leaders.

Entitled "PNG In Crisis, Our Troubled Neighbour", the articles in its Spectrum pages highlight the poor law and order situation, the corruption, the tribal fighting and other social and economic problems.

Under the headline "Rascals, A Nation Wasted By Greed and Corruption" the articles by reporter Paul McGeough were accompanied by blown up pictures of men with guns, tomahawks, bows and arrows and clubs.

It has referred to Papua New Guineans as people who loved tinned fish and "would sell their catches of trout to Europeans and use the proceeds to buy canned imported fish".

On economics, another article stated that international lenders had lost patience with PNG and had demanded hard policy

## Damaging report on nation's problems

changes as a condition for loans.

"Price rise the catch in protection deals" claimed that the Government of PNG had given foreigners "100 per cent monopoly" in industries like sugar in Ramu, cement in Lae, fish cannery also in Lae and the planned oil refinery here "in the name of bringing prices down and downstream processing".

It said that the end results were otherwise and that consumers were paying three to four times the equivalent of imported brands.

The newspaper further added that all PNG was earning was a few extra dollars.

The report went on to say that the Koreans were bringing in Korean clinker (lump cement) and grading and bagging it here.

Mackerel was imported and being put into tins here for four times the price of other imported brands.

The reports implied that there was no government control and if there was, somebody was obviously ignoring it or benefiting along the line. It also touched on the Ombudsman Commission report on the controversial US\$55.5 million Murray barracks accommodation redevelopment as one that was done under the pretext of a loan so that a Malaysian firm benefited from lucrative tax exemptions.

"In the housing deal, a straight forward commercial contract has been dressed up to look like an aid project and thereby earn lucrative tax exemptions," the report said.

It could not be established whether the pictures run were of genuine "rascals" which the paper referred to or just security guards or other people gathered for compensation gatherings which is common in the Highlands.



The three men rest against a wall at Gordons

## Getting the taste of city life

By ENNO KUBLE PORT MORESBY: Armed with authentic traditional burling gear, three men believed to be from Wesai, Kikori, are here for a taste of big city life.

And one of their first was a slip from a soft drink can offered by a bystander at Gordons. Their reactions had the crowd in laughter.

The men, attired in traditional gear with strings beads criss-crossing their shoulders and chests, dined road straws down their loins and their bows and arrows and stone axes, have come to the city to experience "white man's life".

So their placard appealing for money says: It is believed they arrived on

Jan 8 from a village at the of the Daras Hills of the V area, about 300 km south of Kerema, the capital of Province.

"I think they are saying they walked from Wey Kerema and then to Me where they were given a the city," an interpreter told cautious crowd.

### Recycled 'damaging news' in *The National*, 14 February 1995.

on public relations consultants and other image-massagers to spruce up their international reputation. I would argue that governments doing this are barking up the wrong tree, particularly wasting money on propaganda exercises in these stringent economic times. There are always going to be negative stories, especially given the nature of some countries' serious social problems such as in Papua New Guinea today. The issues of 'raskols' and spiralling crime, landowner disputes over major resource development projects and Bougainville — as long as they remain unresolved — will continue to generate a so-called bad press abroad.

Remarkably, the negative headlines get recycled here as well. For example, one paper earlier this year published a Page 3 lead news story headlined PAPER HITS PNG IMAGE: DAMAGING REPORT ON NATION'S PROBLEMS.<sup>1</sup> This is a case of semantics. The story paraphrased three articles written by visiting reporter Paul McGeough and published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It highlighted such factors as given by the headline, A NATION WASTED BY GREED AND CORRUPTION, accompanied by blow up pictures of men with guns, tomahawks, bows and arrows and clubs.

Other points made included the view that international lenders had lost patience with PNG and had demanded hard policy changes as a condition for loans. Yet the report in one of Port Moresby's dailies was itself a biased and

## DAVID ROBIE

selective summary of the articles. The PNG reporter indulged in editorialising in the report saying things such as: 'It could not be established whether the pictures run were genuine "rascals" which the paper referred to or just security guards or other people gathered for compensation gatherings which is common in the Highlands.' Next thing we would have the reporter denying there is a rascal problem.

In any case, the story was published in *The National* next to an item about three villagers from the Darai Hills of the Wewi area who had come to Gordons armed with traditional hunting gear.<sup>2</sup> They were sampling city life and nobody questioned whether they were 'authentic'.

Earlier this year, *Pacific Islands Monthly* was castigated for an allegedly unfair report at the time of the Pope's visit.<sup>3</sup> Among complaints about the story were a mention of potholes in the roads. As somebody who has had his car springs wrecked on several giant-sized potholes, I cannot honestly say that I could find much wrong with the report.

Again, it comes back to semantics. A front page banner headline in the *Post-Courier* shouting the latest crime outrage is just straitforward news reporting. But an article about the process of crime and justice and the difficulties confronted by PNG dealing with them published in say, the *Independent*, a national business weekly in Auckland, is an outrageous embarrassment and might scare off investors. It doesn't matter that it is true. And when governments go overboard denying economic and social problems that are widely known to be true, their credibility suffers.

Now to take a slightly different tack, I'd like to discuss a recent SBS *Dateline* television documentary, 'PNG: Under the Spell',<sup>4</sup> which caused more than ripples here. I will show you just a brief glimpse of the report so that you can get a sense of the context.

*ITEM 1: 'PNG: Under the Spell'*

*Cue in: tape start.*

*Cue out: old man ... 'that's all we know.'*

This report was by Helen Vatsikopoulos, who won a Walkley Award three years ago for her international reporting on the Commonwealth. She has also stirred controversy with a report on politics in Malaysia and covered the demise of the Berlin Wall. I watched her well-documented report one weekend last month. The report was particularly damning about some of the country's political elite — not to mention Sir Charles' coup comment — and I expected to see several followup stories in both PNG dailies on Monday morning.

Unbelievably, there wasn't a word — apart from a paragraph in the Drum

column in the *Post-Courier* which mentioned the 'hot' program and challenged EMTV chief executive John Taylor to show it. A challenge, I might add, that he enthusiastically took up. But I'll come back to that in a moment.

By the end of the week there was still not a single news story in either daily — or even in the *Times* — even though much of Moresby was talking about it. As I had taped the program, we showed it to student journalists a few hours after it was originally broadcast on SBS. We then led the front page in *Uni Tavur* on the program's allegations.

Yet it still wasn't until 11 days after the broadcast that the *Post-Courier* finally ran a news story and the *National* ran a letter of complaint about the program — only because by then EMTV too had broadcast the program. And it took two weeks for a response by the Prime Minister who described the program as exaggerated.

EMTV must be highly commended for broadcasting this program so the issues could properly be debated. And EMTV must be also commended for showing a sequel — canvassing the strong public reaction — which is being broadcast tonight under the title 'Are We Under the Spell?'<sup>5</sup> I would rate these responses as part of my vision for news media seeking greater interaction with the people and truly serving the public interest.

Pacific news media tend to look at major issues within a narrow framework usually defined by international news services as filtered by the major regional gatekeeper Australian Associated Press (AAP). A classic example of this is how O J Simpson became a major story in the Pacific. Who gives a damn? And why have Pacific news editors so readily allowed their news values to be colonised?

Another example is the news debate, or rather lack of debate about privatisation and the World Bank GATT, NAFTA, and APEC etc etc ... Our news media only report on these issues with one-side spectacles. When you next read about GATT, NAFTA and APEC look for any mention of the fact that these agreements of so-called free trade are resigned to ensure that the wealth of the world remains with one fifth of the world's population, controlling three-quarters of the world's resources. It is unlikely you'll see it — or that in barely a half century one-seventh of the world's population will control most of its natural wealth. Where are the journalists questioning the real benefits or costs to the Pacific?

Now to move to another example, a program made by NZ's *Frontline* investigative reporter Rod Vaughan called 'The Tiongs' — and understandably a damning report about the rapacious logging practices of Rimbunan Hijau in Sarawak and Papua New Guinea, and troubled investments in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

*Cue in: Frontline logo — no sound.*

*Cue out: abrupt end of clip.*

Remarkably this program has never been shown on television in PNG. Nor has it been reported — even though it had far more revealing information than the ABC's *Four Corners* 'Bush Bugarap' documentary last year. 'Bush Bugarap' was widely reported on two successive days in the *Post-Courier* but was ignored by *The National*. And I don't think the reticence over the Tiongs report has had anything to do with litigation threats reported in New Zealand.

In fact, Television New Zealand was later forced to broadcast an apology to Rimbunan Hijau's local subsidiary Ernslaw One Ltd for the allegedly 'unfair' Tiongs investigation. 'The Broadcasting Standards Authority,' reported *The National*, 'ordered TVNZ to apologise after it found that the station's *Frontline* program was "neither fair nor balanced".' The Malaysian logging group has a penchant for filing defamation or other cases against media and non-government organisations in the region. In PNG, RH has a defamation case pending against NBC's Radio Kalang and talkback host Roger Hau'ofa while in Malaysia it is pressing a lawsuit against a rainforest community action group.

It is intriguing to see the extent to which the company apparently wants to 'sanitise' its logging reputation in PNG and Sarawak in New Zealand where it is a fast-growing newcomer as a forestry investor. The BSA has a statutory duty to uphold NZ's Television Code of Broadcasting Practice (something PNG's own ill-fated National Information and Communication Policy was trying to do). A key element of this is the overall standard G6: 'To show balance, impartiality and fairness in dealing with political matters, current affairs and all questions of a controversial nature.' Another, standard G19, reads: 'Care must be taken in the editing of the program material to ensure that the extracts used are a true reflection and not a distortion of the original event or the overall views expressed.'

Of course, when it comes to the crunch any open-ended definitions such as these are bound to be subject to wide interpretation — especially when dealing with investigative journalism which by its very nature sets out to establish a hypothesis, or case. So it wouldn't be surprising, given the facts of the Tiongs investigation, that this ruling itself would be rather controversial.

The ruling, following an exchange of letters between TVNZ and Ernslaw One's solicitors, found *Frontline* breached standard G6 by not dealing with Ernslaw One's environmental and business practices in a 'balanced, impartial and fair manner'. But the BSA also decided that the program did not breach standard G19 and declined to uphold any other aspects of the RH group's complaint. The authority said it seemed that TVNZ had adopted the approach

# The Tiongs, TVNZ and a 'cautionary tale'

FIVE PARAGRAPHS tucked away at the bottom of an early page in *The National* the other day told the story — "RH gets apology". Or did they?

Television New Zealand, said the unsorted story, had broadcast an apology to Rimbunan Hijau for an "unfair report" on the company's logging activities in Papua New Guinea, Malaysia and New Zealand.

"The Broadcasting Standards Authority," continued the brief report, "ordered TVNZ to apologise after it found that the station's *Frontline* program was 'neither fair nor balanced'."

Now it would be interesting to know whether this report came via a wire service or through RH's local subsidiary in New Zealand, Ernslaw One Ltd. It is also interesting to put this little item in context, given the Malaysian logging group's penchant for defamation or other cases against media and non-government organisations in the region.

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## VIEWPOINT

David Robie



ported by the rest of the Papua New Guinea news media. However, it isn't surprising it was given a run in *The National* which, after all, is owned by the RH group.

Second, it is intriguing to see the extent to which the company apparently wants to "sanitise" its logging reputation in PNG and Sarawak in New Zealand where it is a fast-growing newcomer as a forestry investor.

The program, "The Tiongs", was reported by award-winning investigative journalist Rod Vaughan who has also recently carried out exposés on the Cook Islands tax haven scandal and French nuclear testing in the Pacific. His Tiong family report included secret filming in Sarawak.

Needless to say, Vaughan is unimpressed by the BSA ruling, lamenting: "This was a cautionary tale and this judgment goes a long way to undermining investigative journalism in New Zealand".

ruling under the Broadcasting Act 1989, I'll do a little "balancing" of the *National* item myself.

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breached standard G6 by not dealing with Ernslaw One's environmental and business practices in a balanced, impartial and fair manner".

But the BSA also decided that the program did not breach standard G19 and declined to uphold any other aspects of the RH group's complaint.

The BSA said it seemed that TVNZ had adopted an approach that the operations of Ernslaw One in NZ were suspect "because of the questionable operations of the Tiong family companies in PNG and Sarawak".

TVNZ had "used the guilty by association method to convict Ernslaw One". It had not distinguished between business and environmental practices in Malaysia and NZ, and had not included information from an "independent source" about the company's operations in NZ.

The ruling then was a far cry from the bald apology to RH that *The National* would have us believe. In fact, "The Tiongs" was more revealing than ABC's "Bush Bugarap".

Incidentally, another Tiongs company, Oregon Forestry, has just bought a NZ radio station, BoP 1521.

□ Lecturer David Robie is Uni

## Rimbunan Hijau and the media in *Uni Tauru*, 15 September 1995.

that the operations of Ernslaw One in NZ were suspect 'because of the questionable operations of the Tiong family companies in PNG and Sarawak'.

Incidentally, award-winning reporter Rod Vaughan ran into a spot of bother recently in the Cook Islands too. After filming for six days for a report on the Cook Islands economy, his crew was ordered by Immigration to stop filming because they didn't have a work permit. And to add salt to the wound, the award-winning reporter and TVNZ were reported to have been accused by the Prime Minister, Sir Geoffrey Henry, of 'being a front for a CIA plot to subvert government'.

With such astonishing ability to shoot themselves in the foot, governments needn't bother wasting money on public relations consultants. Surely it makes more sense for governments to encourage journalists to come here. And the same applies to any Pacific country. If there is indeed a vision for the country, or the region, then share it with the world.

Abolish this nonsense of requiring journalists to have a special business or work permit. Allow them in on ordinary tourist visas without obstacles. Journalists don't fit ordinary business criteria — they are not negotiating export markets, they're not working for profit. In fact, they have usually come here at great cost to their news media company — or to their own pocket if they are freelance. They are simply dealing in information for the public.

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After all, travel writers rarely face these sorts of problems — their stories are always welcomed as safe, good news. I don't buy the argument that negative stories will necessarily harm development and investment. Potential investors want accurate information not 'glossing over' of problems. In any case, surveys show that they tend to rely on information from knowledgeable colleagues rather than the news media.

With a wider range of serious journalists on assignment in PNG and other Pacific countries, the more negative reports would tend to be balanced in the long run by a variety of in-depth articles and reports dealing with many of the positive developments and achievements of the nation. And at no cost to the national budget. Why not start now and open the door fully and enthusiastically to journalists for the 20th independence celebrations. Share the vision with the world.

To conclude, I'd like to share this quote — thanks to Kundu Dixit. It is from Robert Savio, director-general of the Inter Press Service:

There is no development without participation,  
There is no participation without communication,  
And there is no communication without information.

And this is the vision I leave with you — that the Pacific gains a truly free media that the free people of the region deserve.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> 'Paper hits PNG image', *The National*, 14 February 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Getting the taste of city life', *The National*, 14 February 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Dusava slams magazine article on papal visit', *The National*, 3 March 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> 'PNG: Under the Spell', Reporter: Helen Vatsikopoulos, *SBS Dateline*, 6 May 1995.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Are We Under the Spell?', Reporter: John Eggins, EMTV, 27 June 1995.
- <sup>6</sup> 'The Tiongs', Reporter: Rod Vaughan, *TVNZ Frontline*, 30 October 1994.
- <sup>7</sup> 'RH gets apology', *The National*, 7 August 1995.
- <sup>8</sup> David Robie, 'The Tiongs, TVNZ and a "cautionary tale",' *Uni Tavor*, 15 September 1995.
- <sup>9</sup> Lisa Williams, 'TVNZ gagged,' *Pacific Islands Monthly*, June 1995, p 33.

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