

Regional conflicts: getting both sides

How well has the mass media in the South Pacific fared covering military, social and political conflicts in the region — such as Bougainville? What are the problems encountered by journalists covering such disputes?



By SORARIBA NASH

HOW WELL has the mass media in the South Pacific fared covering military, social and political conflicts in the region? To what extent can we rate the risks taken and responsibilities accepted by journalists covering such disputes? The most recent Pacific experience has been the Bougainville conflict which is continuing into its seventh year and is proving such a difficult task to find a solution.

Secessionist leader Francis Ona made a unilateral declaration of Independence over Bougainville in 1989. Papua New Guinea military forces were withdrawn from the island the following year and then gradually sent back. However, although they have recaptured the capital of Arawa and claim to occupy most of the island, the soldiers have not defeated the rebels.

To make matters worse, the Government of PNG slashed its military budget on Bougainville in 1994 to K10 million — divided between security operations and restoration. In 1993, the military soaked up more than K60 million. Last year and this year have seen very little changes. The price tag of K200,000 put on Ona in 1990 by the previous Namaliu Government was lifted by the former Prime Minister Paias Wingti in 1994.

The process of ending the conflict is taking a long time. Full of misunderstanding, mistrust and suspicion. The Papua New Guinea Government did grant unconditional amnesty to the members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army

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(BRA), but the soldiers are being shot dead. So are the soldiers shooting back at pockets of BRA rebels. While negotiations and consultations continue, people of Papua New Guinea are experiencing a certain degree of anxiety — and perhaps the Pacific neighbours also. Bougainville remains a test case for Papua New Guinea's 20 years of independence and unity.

The Pacific has gone through the traumatic experience of the Second World War. It also has a diverse post-war history of disputes and conflicts. The nuclear bomb tests by the United States on Bikini in the early 1950s and the effect on its inhabitants; annexation of West Papua and later East Timor by Indonesia; French rule over New Caledonia; the frustrating saga of Belauans - involving assassinations and bribery — enroute to free association with the US and the Fiji coups of the late 1980s have made headlines.

Government attitudes towards the free flow of information in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Western Samoa have been a factor. Recently pro-independence movement groups in French Polynesia have been stepping up their campaigns for self-determination. Their activities intensified when President Chirac announced that France would continue nuclear testing on Moruroa atoll. The Mabo issue over Aboriginal land rights stands out like an ugly shadow on the sideline in neighbouring Australia.

Running stories

There are a number of running stories regarding conflicts and the political future of the few colonies in the region which must be considered. What is the future of Tahiti? Now that France intends to continue nuclear testing on Moruroa, when will the South Pacific enforce its nuclear free campaign? Are there any environmental impacts from the past testing in the region by both United States and France? What is the future of New Caledonia (or Kanaky)? France still wants to continue nuclear testing in the Pacific and I suppose the peoples of the South Pacific cannot escape being 'guinea pigs' for another century.

The Fiji coups of 1987 actually shocked the world as they were the first in the Pacific. And they presented a more realistic impression of the region than the misconceived paradise lost Pacific of swaying coconut palms with hip-swaying island girls played ukuleles and singing sweet romantic harmonies.

What we are dealing with is simply: *the right to know* versus *the duty to tell* — but equally important is the question about who benefits and who takes the risk?

What do we expect journalists to tell during a situation of strife and ethnic violence, not to mention war or large-scale conflict? Nowadays it has become a common practice for media observers and critics to jump to conclusions and resort to the word 'truth'. There is no harm in that, but to me the word truth is

very expensive, especially during ethnic conflicts or war. In such situations, journalists should be seen to be striving to 'tell it as it is'.

There are some key questions which must be considered during the course of the discussion such as:

1. How can journalists maintain their objectivity when events cause turmoil within their own nation?
2. How can they protect their lives in conditions of military or civil conflict?
3. Is it possible to get both sides of a story during ethnic conflict or war?
4. Should second-hand sources of information be trusted?
5. How can propaganda from both sides be identified and verified?
6. What lessons have the media learned from the conflict on Bougainville, the coup in Fiji, and other disputes?

Some of the issues as reported

On April 5, 1994, the PNG Government barred the National Broadcasting Commission from reporting on the New Guinea Islands Region leaders summit,¹ bringing upon itself a storm of protest about attempts to interfere with media freedoms. PNG Journalists Association interim president Frank Kolma, Pacific Journalists Association president Ambie Bulum and the nation's first Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, called on the NBC to ignore the ban. However, NBC chairman Sir Alkan Tololo said the minister was legally empowered under the NBC Act to make such directives. But he said 'some people would view with great concern'² political directives taking the NBC to task over its role to inform and educate the public, and added that he would be 'most likely' be calling the NBC board to a meeting to discuss the commission's role. Former *Post-Courier* editor Luke Sela said the ban was the first of its kind by any government in PNG since independence. He asked: 'Is dictatorship here?'³

The degree and amount of coverage which has resulted in news about the region gaining international awareness at such intensity over the last 10 years means that journalism in the Pacific has come of age as more and more independent publications and broadcast stations are emerging.

There is a distinctive shift away from Government-run or controlled media. As a result greater responsibility, in terms of professional standards, is now being placed in the hands of people from and around the region. At the same time, the flavour of the broadcast programs and news stories are becoming more Pacific-oriented, focusing on issues of significance and importance to the region.

Coverage of such important issues have been quite dramatic. From independent movements and nationalist sentiments to rebellion, to military coups to

secessionist and land rights activism. Bougainville has been one of those issues which has prompted United Nations and European organisations to voice concern about human rights violations.

The Fiji coups of 1987 caught the world napping and then got them guessing. Earlier, it was the Vanuatu rebellion at independence in 1980 that threatened the very concept of a 'peaceful' Pacific. Nationalism or self-determination movements in New Caledonia and West Papua have always been nagging issues, so is the continuing nuclear testing by France in the Pacific.

Quantitative and qualitative coverage by journalists from both within and outside the region have helped the rest of the world to understand the importance of the Pacific peoples in terms of economic, political and cultural allegiance.

West Papua

In June 1993, two Papua New Guinean groups challenged the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation to restore Indonesian-ruled West Papua to the list of non self-governing territories. Lawyers representing the PNG-based Melanesian Solidarity (Melsol) and the Individual and Community Rights Advocacy Forum (ICRAF) criticised the committee for ignoring the oppression of West Papuans and other Melanesian peoples.

ICRAF's director at the time, Brian Brunton, a former PNG judge, told committee chairman Renagi Lohia and delegates to the Pacific regional decolonisation seminar that he spoke for oppressed and colonised Melanesians who were 'denied a voice'.⁴ He asked the committee to heed the 'reality of the Pacific' in the 1990s. Melsol's Powes Parkop also pleaded for West Papua's struggle for self-determination to be reconsidered by the Decolonisation Committee in the spirit of the UN's declared International Decade of the Eradication of Colonialism.⁵ Renagi Lohia was PNG's Ambassador to the UN. He said the committee had no mandate to receive such a petition. Earlier, he told talkback listeners on national radio West Papua was a 'non issue'.

Sean Dorney has been a long-time resident correspondent of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Papua New Guinea. He has covered nearly all major issues regarding Papua New Guinea, including Bougainville since independence in 1975. Dorney discussed his experience of trying to cover the West Papua issue over the years. Even before the independence spill-over effect from Irian Jaya, he had seen a lot of border crossers or refugees into Papua New Guinea.

In late (November) 1990, Melanesian rebels from one of the various factions of the Free West Papua Movement, the OPM, raided the Papua New Guinea Government center of Amanab in the remote Bewani Mountains of PNG's Sandaun Province. They took six people hostage. One was the PNG

Government's District Officer-in-Charge at Amanab; another an American missionary, Steve Shafer; his New Zealand assistant, John Marsh, and three Filipino road construction workers. The OPM band raided at night and by morning the armed OPM rebels with the mostly international hostages had moved west back towards the Irian Jaya border. I soon became aware of the story because one of the demands — in a ransom note given to the pregnant wife of the American missionary (whom they had left behind unharmed with her young daughter at Amanab) — was that they be allowed to tell their side of the Irian Jaya story to Sean Dorney from Radio Australia.⁶

The situation was such that the OPM named Mr Dorney as the international correspondent to whom they wanted to tell their story. The then Prime Minister, Rabbie Namaliu, approved Mr Dorney's travel to the border area so as to 'make contact with the rebels and their hostages'. He was accompanied by the then stringer/cameraman Frank Mills and Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, then Pacific correspondent with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.

Things, I thought, were going perfectly. Well, they were until we landed our MAF charter at Amanab. Soldiers from the PNG Defence Force's Second Battalion, Pacific Islands Regiment, the battalion's company based at Vanimo, had flown up to Amanab the previous day. According to the press release put out by the Government in Port Moresby these troops had launched Operation Shooting Star and were fanning out into the jungle of the border region confident of tracking down the rebel group and releasing their hostages. When we flew into Amanab the soldier claiming to be in charge of Operation Shooting Star, a Defence Force intelligence sergeant, threatened us. I had run into this man a few times before on Bougainville and the experience then had not been pleasant⁷ either. He shouted and waved his automatic weapon ordering us to leave.

Despite approval from the then Prime Minister and a reinforcing fax message from Port Moresby, Dorney and his colleagues were placed under house arrest at Amanab for two days. He never had the chance to establish contact with the OPM, and therefore never got the story first hand. A local government official did and took in some medicine for one of the hostages who had a heart condition. Two weeks later the hostages were set free.

Dorney offered this account as an example of how difficult it can be for journalists to get the other side of the story in a conflict that has extended beyond three decades. The western half of the island of New Guinea has been a province of Indonesia since the early 1960s. He expressed similar encounters with the Bougainville coverage. Dorney admits that at times, sources can mislead reporters. In November 1993, ICRAF, Papua New Guinea's leading human

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rights group, claimed Indonesian troops had crossed over the border, surrounded the PNG village of Yapsei and massacred 13 Papua New Guineans. ICRAF produced photographs of Naok Naplo, a patient in the Boram Hospital, showing an ugly scar seven cm long across the front of his neck. It said Naplo, from Yapsei, had been bayoneted by an Indonesian soldier.

I duly reported the incident and ICRAF's demand for a coronial inquest into the alleged massacre. On further checking, and this took days, however, I found that there had been no Indonesian raid on Yapsei. Naplo had been attacked, there was no doubt about that. But not at Yapsei. The Indonesians had swept onto an alleged OPM village on the Indonesian side of the border — not a Papua New Guinean village 12 km inside PNG. I am not trying to belittle ICRAF. The truth is very difficult to get at in such circumstances and, in human rights terms, a massacre is a massacre no matter which side of the border it happens on.

But my point is that the truth is extremely elusive in some of these regional conflicts and it is far from easy to get both sides. The only answer for we journalists, and it is not a very satisfactory one, is to get to know the history of the dispute, gather as much information as you can, get to the scene if possible and weigh up the probabilities of what you are told being accurate. Then, be prepared to acknowledge that you may not have got it right.

Meanwhile, Pacific dependencies listed for consideration by the UN Special Committee were the French territory of New Caledonia, the New Zealand territory of Tokelau, Britain's territory of Pitcairn Island and the US territories of American Samoa, Guam and the remaining Trust Territory of the Pacific, Belau (Palau). Belau, however, was granted self-determination by the United States on 1 October 1994. President Kuwino Nakamura of Belau expressed his feelings to those who attended the independence ceremony on 1 October 1994.

My heart fills with pride and joy. Today Palau leaves behind the safe harbor of trusteeship and journeys forth as the newest member of the international family of nations.

East Timor has been another of those controversial issues since the Indonesian invasion of the Portuguese colony in 1975 and annexation the following year. Such an act of aggression has never been recognised by the United Nations. In June 1993, former PNG's Foreign Minister Sir John Kaputin opened the three-day seminar of the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation in Port Moresby, saying the peoples of the South Pacific had been more patient over decolonisation than any other regions of the world.

'Thus more than 70 years after the League of Nations was established, almost 50 years after the Charter of the United Nations was concluded and 30 years after the declaration that colonial countries and peoples should be granted independence without delay, we find ourselves in a decade dedicated to the eradication of colonialism and attending a seminar concerned with the remaining dependencies in the South Pacific,' he said.

During the seminar ICRAF's Brian Brunton said: 'The issues in Melanesia are peoples denied the right to participate in free and democratic votes; of peoples oppressed by armies; of disappearances; of state killings; of torture; of settler colonies; of land theft; of the larceny of natural resources; of the domination of multinational corporations; of the manipulation of national politics by bribery, corruption; of the degradation of indigenous culture; of the superimposing of an ersatz world-culture based upon the narrow view of big business; of the domination of so-called democracy by the corporatists of the world of international finance, and their helpers in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.'

Brunton said the people of West Papua did not undergo a legal act of self-determination. 'The so-called Act of Free Choice in 1969 did not accord with the rules of international law. It was a "rigged" election.' Melsol's Powes Parkop said the West Papuans were 'the first victims of the Cold War'. He cited a list of atrocities committed by the Indonesians against the Melanesians of West Papua, including the use of napalm to kill about 37,000 people in the Baliem area in 1978 and the killing of about 1000 people killed in villages south-west of Jayapura in bombing raids by military aircraft.

The tale of a soldier

Yauka Liria is a former lieutenant in the PNG Defence Force who served as an intelligence officer on Bougainville. He has written a book entitled *Bougainville Campaign Diary*. Yauka recalled his misconstrued and sketchy understanding of the role of journalists during the Bougainville coverage:

I would now want to take your memories back to Bougainville in 1989, back to Aropa airport, through Arawa town and down to camp 10 in Panguna. In July of that year, I was the Contingent Intelligence Officer. I recall clearly seeing these group of frenzied-looking people in 'T' shirts and jeans, with their cameras dangling around their necks, and their 'bilums' or bags swinging wildly from their shoulders.

Some were black and the others were white, but I had no idea who they were, or why they were there! Funny though, because I was in the intelligence and was one of the key persons assisting the field commander in public relations, and yet, I had no idea about the media people.

Let alone, how to deal with them! But of course I soon came to know just who these people were. They were journalists.

So when I first saw Sean Dorney, Wally Hiambohn and this AAP guy, my first instinctive reaction was that of alertness — that reporters were around, that they were a definite security threat/risk; that they were untrustworthy; that they only cared and wanted stories, and therefore they had to be carefully monitored, and so on.;

At that time, any servicemen who made any contact with journalists were up for immediate suspension. And for intelligence people? We were the last people expected to make contacts with journalists. It was a taboo! In fact, the mere presence of Sean Dorney or Wally Hiambohn sent a wave of paranoia through the officers in particular. And talking about paranoia, I can recall that some of our superior officers were somewhat highly paranoid about the media.¹⁰ They just did not like or wanted any contact with the media people.

Yauka then went further to express doubt whether staff colleges which PNG officers attended in both Australia and New Zealand offered courses on media-military relations. There were no such instructions, briefings, or even guidelines from PNGDF Headquarters in Port Moresby to their officers in the field about how to deal with the media personnel in a war situation. Ignorance led to 'suspicions and mistrust existed on both sides that played into, and even manifested the poor military-media relationship'.¹¹

The former soldier then concluded by recommending for guidelines to be formulated by panel of experts from within the media and the military to foster media-military relations in such crisis situation as Bougainville. He also suggested specialised courses or training modules within training institutions. But whether this sort of arrangement is practical, needs to be put to test.

Truth is possible

Peter Niesi is a journalist with the *PNG Post-Courier* based in Rabaul. Niesi has been covering Bougainville from the Rabaul office over the last several years. He began by addressing the question: how can journalists maintain objectivity in events causing turmoil in the nation?

The importance of objectivity was strongly highlighted for me when I met armed Bougainville Revolutionary Army members at Pakia — not too far from Panguna Mine on 30 March 1995. Simon Ona, acclaimed as Secretary of Bougainville Interim Government President, Francis Ona (no relation), asked why I was there because 'journalists often painted them as bad'.

My response was that it was difficult to get in touch with the BRA

as they are always on the move. I also said to him that the war for independence by BRA on behalf of BIG and Security Forces on behalf of the PNG Government was not my fight. I was more interested in promoting peace so the oppressed women and children could be freer and have access to basic humanitarian services. I also pointed out to him that two days earlier, I had spoken with their Honiara-based spokesman, Martin Miriori, who was one of the few that could be contacted by telephone.

That encounter with Simon Ona drove home to me principles of maintaining objectivity:

- Maintain regular contact with available sources of information from the other side that are not easily accessible;
- Highlight journalism as the champion of the underprivileged, the pitiful and oppressed (appeal to conscience);
- Highlight the difficulty of contacting the man on the ground.

I think it is important to remember that one day you may be meeting the person you are writing about face-to-face and you had better be ready to defend yourself and what you have written.¹²

Is it possible to get both sides of the story during an ethnic conflict or war? Niesi says 'yes', but one should not expect them all in one story because of logistic problems. In other words having access to the trouble spots or the right contacts — especially from both sides — is everything a reporter needs in such a situation.

What lessons have the media learnt from the conflict on Bougainville, the military coups in Fiji, New Caledonia, West Papua, the Vanuatu rebellion, the plight of the East Timorese, voices of independence in Tahiti, struggles against the Tongan monarchy, tax protests in Western Samoa and other disputes? Says Niesi: 'I can only speak for Bougainville and that is the media has a role to be the voice of the oppressed. The media must learn to persevere in covering a situation. While the primary role of the media (especially privately owned) is to make money by selling the news, principles such as being an advocate for peace, justice, human rights, etc should not be cast aside.'

Conclusion

It has been a long and winding road of difficulties, harassment, restrictions and censorship for the evolving life of journalism in the South Pacific — but I guess this is a sign of maturity. Journalists in the region must learn from the courageous reporting of events by reporters in Eastern Europe, Middle East, the former Soviet Union and South Africa over the past years. Finding and presenting that simple truth is important to a society that strives to maintain

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openness and freedom of expression as a recipe for democracy.

Unfortunately, some South Pacific island nations have negative attitudes towards the media, imposing restrictions which are a threat to democracy in the region. Truth in itself, whether it comes easily or at a high price, is an ingredient to total liberation for any society and its people. Journalists, besides other responsibilities, must see themselves as the agents or messengers of that evasive and yet simple truth.

Notes:

¹ PNG *Post-Courier*, 7 April 1994.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ David Robie, 'Challenge to UN Special Committee over Melanesian Reconciliation', Pactok PNG conference, 9 June 1993.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sean Dorney, PINA 1995 Convention, Port Moresby, 28 June 1995.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sean Dorney, *op. cit.*

⁹ President Kuwino Nakamura of Belau (Palau), speech at independence ceremony, 1 October 1994.

¹⁰ Yauka Liria, PINA 1995 Convention, Port Moresby, 28 June 1995.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Peter Niesi, PINA 1995 Convention, Port Moresby, 28 June 1995.

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