

# Reviews

## ROBBIE ROBERTSON

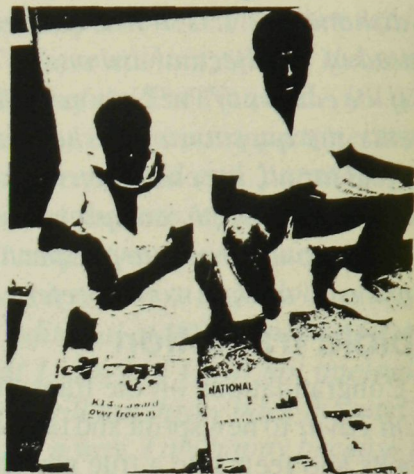
Associate Professor, History and Development Studies; Head, School of Arts, La Trobe University, Bendigo; and co-author of *Fiji: Shattered Coups*

## Challenges over Pacific 'free media'

*Nius Bilong Pasifik: Mass Media in the Pacific*, edited by David Robie. Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1995, 274 pp. K15. ISBN 9980-84-052-8. Also distributed by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (University of Technology, Sydney), A\$19.95.

THIS IS the first comprehensive resource book on the South Pacific news media. Its foreword, by Tongan Futa Helu, sets the agenda. 'Media freedom in the Pacific islands,' he declares, 'is in the balance' (p1). The 18 regional contributors who follow all agree — but they differ widely about the cause or causes of the danger. Helu emphasises the role of the 'privilegentsia' and argues that 'the road to a free media in the islands is for media to be privately owned' (p2). What follows does not altogether vindicate that perspective, although as David Robie

## Nius Bilong Pasifik



## MASS MEDIA IN THE PACIFIC

*Edited by David Robie*

notes in his introduction, the style of today's press is predominantly a 'free market one' (p6). The issue is whether competition itself guarantees press freedom and higher standards.

Two themes are raised consistently throughout this book and should provide the basis for lively discussion among students and researchers of journalism. The first concerns the extent to which journalism in Third World countries — sometimes called development journalism — is unique, or at least significantly different from that prac-



tised in First World countries. Unfortunately this theme is not pursued consistently by all contributors, although most touch on and emphasise differences.

Pacific journalism is largely conducted in nonvernacular languages and when this handicap is added to national problems of literacy and the dominance of foreign ownership, special difficulties certainly emerge as a feature of Pacific journalism. Literacy is sometimes regarded as a foreign imposition or of low national priority in comparison with providing jobs [one chapter quotes *Niugini Nius*' 'books and other rubbish' description of vandalism in a school (p141)]. Consequently radio has traditionally had greater influence than the print media, a fact reflected by its continued dominance by state bodies. The answer, it seems, is greater use of the vernacular in order to reach more people and make newspapers more relevant; a point reinforced by Fr Diosnel Centurion's argument that Christianity only became relevant and widely accepted once the Bible was translated and printed in the vernacular (p108).

Certainly other writers touch on the distinctive characteristics of Pacific journalism, but they do not consistently pursue the issue of national underdevelopment or state vulnerability and its impact on state-media relations. Is the heavy hand of the state a consequence of the state's own fragility [Akilisi Pohiva certainly suggests that officeholders are motivated by

fear of losing their political power base (p205)] or of cultural fragility? Joseph Anyanwu sees television imposing 'a pace of dynamism ... too fast for a Pacific culture system which is built on gradual and regulated cosmic rhythm' (p53).

Given the variety of cultures across the Pacific, not to mention urban-rural and educational divides, we might want to question the usefulness of such broad generalisations. In fact, Peter Cronau's examination of the Australian media suggests that notions of a simple First World-Third World divide have more political than academic meaning, especially if they are designed to promote national unity by fostering stereotypes of others or by enlisting national patriotism to minimise internal debate.

But the mere idea of such divides does not fully explain the attitude of Pacific states towards their media. Is it state fragility, fear of change, or an overbearing colonial inheritance which encourages states to increase controls over the media? In some instances the state regards its media in the same manner that it might its armed forces — as an arm of the state and not as an independent entity. Hence the PNG Information Minister Martin Thompson's declaration in April 1994 that the National Broadcasting Commission must 'reflect our drive for national unity' (p192).

That may be fair comment, but as Robie notes all too often 'governments tend to treat themselves as the sole



## ROBBIE ROBERTSON

judges of what constitutes the national interest' (p10).

Many of the consequences of such an attitude are case studies in the second part of the book. When national interest, cultural exclusivity, and personal ambition combine, the results are usually not favourable for media freedoms, let alone democracy. Does this make Pacific societies or Pacific journalism unique? The histories of Western societies do not suggest so.

The second theme of *Nius Bilong Pasifik* concerns the role of private media enterprises. Helu's enthusiasm for private ownership is not sustained by most of the book's contributors. If anything, the authors reveal that all forms of ownership have problems. Escaping the clutches of an authoritarian or domineering government does not in itself guarantee a free press. In countries with low levels of literacy where the price of newspapers is comparatively high, where media awareness is low, and where media sources of revenue are limited, 'free' newspapers may still be dependent on government advertising revenue or on income from large national or transnational companies. Such dependency reduces the scope for investigative journalism.

Of course, this situation is not unique to 'development' journalism. Recently Rupert Murdoch accused one of Australia's largest retail companies of threatening to withdraw advertising from his papers unless they reported its corporate affairs more sympatheti-

cally. The point is simply that private ownership does not guarantee a free press. Nor, as Cronau's chapter on Australia's 'shallow, sensationalist and ill-informed' treatment of Pacific stories reveals, does a free competitive press guarantee an informative press.

Indeed, Claude Marere points out that the political agenda of French Polynesia's privately owned press (to maintain French rule) not only dictates the parameters of investigative journalism but promotes silence over instances of government corruption (p185). And, he laments, when journalists went on strike in 1991, they didn't even list press freedoms among their demands.

*Nius Bilong Pasifik* focuses on news presentation at the institutional or enterprise level, but among its many articles lies the suggestion that media freedom also depends upon the actions of individual journalists. Says Wally Hiambohn, some journalists — especially those preferred by the establishment — 'turn a blind eye to corruption and other ills of society' and report only favourable and 'good' news (p198).

Clearly there are many dilemmas associated with the mass media and journalism. This book brings them into the open for debate — and within a highly informative format, including country profiles and other appendices. For doing this it should be welcomed across the Pacific.