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Cyberspace, kava bowls and hot news in the Pacific

Tahiti Pacifique, Tahiti Beach Press, The National, Post-Courier, Samoa Observer, Tonga Chronicle, Matangi Tonga, Uni Tavur, Papua Niugini Nius, Online Journalist's 'Tonga Page', CocoNET Wireless, Pacific islands Internet Services, Cafe Pacific, Rabi Online

CYBERSPACE is buzzing with relative hyperactivity in the South Pacific. From virtually no news website of real substance last year, there are now (or at least there were at the time of my count in mid-October 1996 before going to press with *Pacific Journalism Review*) three daily newspapers with regular Web links, two monthly news magazines, two weekly newspapers, one fortnightly paper, a biannual media journal and a daily news service with websites.

This is quite incredible. While several leading Australian newspapers now have impressive — and expensive — websites, New Zealand has only one major daily on line, the *Christchurch Press*.

Arguably the most interesting of the new Pacific media websites is *Ta-*



Tahiti-Pacifique... class of its own.

hiti Pacifique, a glossy monthly news magazine <www.tahitiweb.com/ff/info/tp.html>. The highly professional and readable design displayed (it could show a thing or two to the three dreary Fiji-based news magazines) is mirrored in the website. And it is probably the only Pacific news site in the class of some of the media sites outside the region.

Earlier in the year, the online version of *Tahiti Pacifique* was looking rather dated with a March cover edition ushering in readers to the August website. However, the Alex duPrel-edited magazine underwent an online design revamp. The home page now welcomes readers with the bold scarlet masthead logo and a blurb describing itself as a magazine known for its 'free expression, fiesty independence

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and critical analysis' on local political and economic life.

It also notes that it is the strongest selling French-language magazine in the French-speaking Pacific. No doubt it is, but this sort of claim always carries more weight with audited figures.

But frankly I prefer the old web design with a link straight to the front page and table of contents. You can easily pick up the housekeeping details, address, subscription rates and so on later, if you're still interested.

The latest edition on line was October with the cover story 'Le Matriarcat' and a Gauguinish design of a matriach walking two children to church. (*Tahiti Pacifique's* covers, when they're acrylic works by Philippe Dubois, are also far better than anything in the English-speaking Pacific news media). Also featured were the Pacific Festival of Arts in Western Samoa and the standard question on the economy asked by most Pacific countries today: 'Where are we going?'

In contrast to the class of *Tahiti Pacifique* is the tawdry beachcombing look of Al Prince's Tahiti-BeachPress <www.fix.net/~wdavis/beachpress.html> designed for English-speaking tourists. All I could find as the opener for the past month was a scanned tatty front page cutting of a vahine with a see-through chemise and the unbelievable caption saying, 'It doesn't take much to dress up the vahines of Tahiti.'

The first news item headline said: SUN STROKES FROM TAHITI. Perhaps the sun affected the website too.

The most newsy of the Pacific websites is Papua New Guinea's *The National* by a long shot <www.wr.com.au/national/>. Launched in August, it is yet another tribute to the innovativeness of the Malaysian-owned company with the fastest growing circulation in the Pacific. *The National Online* quickly became popular with PNG nationals abroad starved for both the turbulent social and political news about home — and also sport.

Offered by *The National*, with a delightfully simple but user-friendly design, are home news, editorial (and even letters to the editor), business, sport and a back issue archive. On the day I checked for this review, the big news was Foreign Affairs Secretary Gabriel Dusava being referred to a Leadership Tribunal for an inquiry into alleged misconduct in office, and the aftermath of the temporary gagging of the Ombudman's report on the Port Moresby water scandal.

A month later, the rival Murdoch-owned *Post-Courier* had an impressive launch of its own website <www.ni.com.au/postcourier/postcourier.htm> which was touted as a big breakthrough for the region. However, readers eagerly looking forward to news were disappointed when first they couldn't get a connection to the advertised URL (it was a demonstration address that had been made public prematurely) and then, when they fi-

nally did link up, all they got on line was classified advertising. The *Post-Courier* had been hooked up to its Australian parent company News Ltd's online classifieds.

The negative response to this was so great that the *Post-Courier* has probably lost some of its regular readers studying or working abroad to *The National* when they return home. Both Port Moresby paper websites are not produced by journalists, but by commercial website providers in Australia.

Down the track the *Post-Courier* site improved with a home page giving some information about itself, including a travelogue that no journalist would write: 'Welcome to Papua New Guinea, one of the most exciting and beautiful nations on earth.

'Where are we? The island of New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. Papua New Guinea consists of the eastern half of New Guinea and several smaller islands including Bougainville, New Britain, Manus and New Ireland. The mountainous spine ...' Yawn. And still no news or analysis.

There was a link to the *Post-Courier* classifieds and a PNG trade directory citing as first entries 'betelnuts and mustards', 'passport and visa', 'buttons', 'plant hire' and 'second-hand clothing'. Also there was a message in Tok Pisin to the 'online world'. People having translation difficulties were invited to contact *Post-Courier* editor Oseah Philemon.

Journalists need to reclaim some

Pacific websites so that we get real content.

In Western Samoa, the Polynesian Cafe newsfeed from the *Samoa Observer* <207.158.218.142/apia.htm> was very readable in a no-nonsense way but it was a month old (dated September 11, and it has since ended). Top news item was about a reopened inquiry into a former Electric Power Corporation employee accused of sexually assaulting and harassing co-workers.

Tonga has both the weekly newspaper *Tonga Chronicle* <www.netstorage.com/kami/tonga/news/index.html> and monthly news magazine *Matangi Tonga* <www.netstorage.com/kami/tonga/matangi/index.htm> on line, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Taholo Kami who has established a network of websites from Port Moresby to Nuku'alofa. At the time of this survey, Tonga was still smarting over indignant world reaction to the jailing of two editors and an MP/publisher 'Akilisi Pohiva, and the suspension of Parliament.

Banner (if you can call it that on a website) headline was SHOCK WAVES AS TONGAN KING CLOSES HOUSE. But, ironically, this news item was from the *New Zealand Herald* via Kavabowl, another Kami creation (it is believed he is keen to publish a 'netzine'). Lead news item in the *Chronicle* net bulletin was PUMPKIN SQUASH FIRST SHIPMENT. This was about 1800 tonnes of the vegetable

being finally en route for Japan three days late.

Now I have a minor bone to pick with the *Chronicle* as it claims it is the first Pacific newsfeed on the Internet'. This depends on how this is defined. *Uni Tavor*, the fortnightly journalism student newspaper, published its 20th anniversary of Papua New Guinea independence (16 September 1995) issue on the Web and has since then established a regular newsfeed site <acij.uts.edu.au/UniT_Home.html> along with colour front page graphics and photographs. Since then it has established a daily newsfeed on a website <www.pactok.net.au/docs/nius/> from its Papua Niugini Nius wire, established in March 1996. Nius was chosen Best Pacific Website in October 1996.

Uni Tavor would definitely claim to be the first Pacific 'newspaper' online. And this has been done by journalists and students without intervention by commercial providers.

This paper's pioneering role on cyberspace has been thanks to cooperation and support from the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism and the Pactok communications network.

A word about some of the links to news media in the Pacific. ACIJ's *Online Journalist* <acij.uts.edu.au/> has a resourceful media link.

So too does Michael Ogden's Pacific Islands Internet Services <www2.hawaii.edu/~ogden/piir/index.html>. And Suzanna Layton's CocoNET Wireless <www.uq.oz.au/jrn/

<coco.html> at the University of Queensland is frequently useful, and my own Cafe Pacific <acij.uts.edu.au/cafepacific/> has hyperlinks to news media from country profiles.

However, part of Layton's section on Papua New Guinea, in particular, looks remarkably like data compiled in *Nius Bilong Pasifik*, including the mirroring of now out-of-date information and typographical errors (such as Winnie Singarok — she is actually Weni — who is listed by Layton as Nau FM news director in a September 1996 update when she had been in that role for more than a year). Our information was updated last year and has since been revised several times.

Given that earlier this year Layton was making a jaundiced swipe at *Nius* for an imagined overlap with her book, many would see this is as more than a touch of hypocrisy.

Territorial imperatives are out of place in such an insular region. For our part, we welcome the use of our data as widely as possible. Surely that is the whole point.

Layton is also curiously selective with her sources and links. It is just as well there are alternatives.

Finally, *hot* news from Rabi Online <www.ion.com.au/~banaban/newsrabi.htm>. In mid-October the latest news update was July 20: Item: 'Routine tour: On July 3 Major Malo (interim administrator) arrived on a normal round of tour. He left on July 7.' End of news. □