

CHRISTINE FOGG

Researcher, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, University of Technology Sydney, and author of *Mastering the Maze*.

Pactok: How the Pacific covers 'nius' on the Internet

Pactok's Pacific Talk virtual library:

<http://pactok.net/>

Papua Niugini Nius:

<http://www.pactok.net.au/docs/nius/>

Pacific Media Watch:

<http://acij.uts.edu.au/pmww/>

Email: niusedita@pactok.net, or robg@pactok.net

FOR ANYONE in Australia with World Wide Web access, it has been easier to be well informed on the finer details of Madonna's pregnancy than the politics of Papua New Guinea. Now a new venture by the Pactok organisation has created on-line access to locally produced news from the South-west Pacific region.

The promise of the Internet of being able to publish reports produced at grass roots level, to make locally produced news available to the world free from the control of mass media organisations, is limited. An Internet connection relies on access to a reliable phone system and the majority of people in the world do not have access to a telephone, let alone the Web server

Nius ... Pacific news on the Web.

access necessary to create the home pages which introduce World Wide Web sites.

Getting up-to-date reliable information from the Pacific region has always been very difficult, according to David Robie, lecturer in journalism at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). The combination of orally based societies, limited technology, and unreliable telephone lines has meant the news from countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomons and Vanuatu makes its way fleetingly to the outside world, if at all.

Robie, temporarily based at the University of Technology, Sydney, says that journalists from Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand frequently contacted him in PNG look-

ing for contacts, information and sources. With a monopoly over communication, PNG Telikom has set the price of Web server access too high for institutions such as universities or the National Library to afford direct World Wide Web access.

In 1996 the Pactok cooperative communication system began offering non-governmental organisations in the region assistance in creating Home Pages on the World Wide Web. Pactok provides the crucial Web server access and, through an association with the UTS Department of Social Communication and Journalism, assistance with Web page design.

Pactok was set up in 1991 as a low-cost electronic mail network to serve the NGO movements in the Asia-Pacific region. Through its new scheme, a Papua New Guinea news service or 'niuswire' <www.pactok.net/docs/nius/> has been carried by Pactok since April 1996.

Robie, who initiated the service, said it was created in response to requests from PNG expatriates, mainly academics and students, wanting to stay in touch with what was happening in the area. The Niuswire carries stories from a variety of local sources, including *The National*, *PNG Post-Courier* and *The Independent* as well as reports from the Association of Progressive Communications and Inter Press sources. Stories carried by the news service usually cover socio-economic, political, environmental, human rights and media issues.

David Robie edits the Niuswire with input from UPNG journalism students and other correspondents. The Niuswire content is emailed to more than 80 subscribers on a worldwide listserv, and to the Pactok Sydney hub where a software program, Word 6 Internet Assistant, automatically turns it into Web page content.

Thus, by using access to email, the lowest level building block of the Internet, as well as ingenuity and cooperation, stories from a region which lacks full Internet access can jostle the big boys in cyberspace.

With Pactok providing technical expertise and computer conferencing facilities at a minimal cost, grassroots organisations working in areas such as human rights, peace, labour issues and environmental and sustainable development issues have been able to stay in touch with each other and exchange information.

Pactok, says Robie, was 'a God-send for us'. Using email, PNG reporters can interview sources from around the world, as when reporters emailed questions to Aroha Mead, deputy convenor of the New Zealand Maori Congress for a recent *Uni Tavar* story about live cell patenting.

Network manager Rob Garnsey says Pactok's role is changing as computer networking in the region multiplies. One new network, the Sustainable Development Network, is working with Pactok to improve computer communications in the Pacific region, while keeping control over network

content with local organisations, particularly those dealing with environmental issues.

A grant from the United Nations Development Program has provided money for salaries for local coordinators in Fiji, Vanuatu and Western Samoa to provide the technical training, hub maintenance and administration which was formerly provided by Pactok from Sydney.

Pactok is now moving towards providing content-based services rather than communication based services. Their Pacific Talk virtual library provides access to information from the countries of the Asia Pacific region, concentrating on the efforts being undertaken by non-government organisations and international institutions to address regional and development issues.

The Pacific Talk site <www.pactok.net>, through the APACE page, set up by the Appropriate Technology for Community and Environment group, leads to the Voko women's bakery project site in the Solomon Islands, an example of the use of appropriate technology transfer for community development.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines' Press Pack includes details about campaign activities, and the Philippines Australia Union Link connects Philippine trade unions with a link to reports from the *Philippine Reporter*.

Pacific Talk has its own search engine, and a discussion area titled

'Pacific Talk Coffee Shop'.

With its latest project, creating a Web site for the Australian Council for Overseas Aid in Canberra, Pactok continues to look for ways to explore cyberspace's promise of publishing without a printing press with little more than a computer and a phone line.

□ Pacific Media Watch <acij.uts.edu.au/pmw/>, an independent group monitoring news media censorship, press freedom and ownership issues in the region, launched a website through Pactok and the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism in October 1996. It also has a listserver through Pactok and has links with the major international press freedom organisations. □