
Editorial Media and free expression

WHEN rumours abounded in December 1998 about the impending sale of Papua New Guinea's *Post-Courier*, arguably the best daily newspaper in the South Pacific, to a consortium headed by a crony of Prime Minister Bill Skate, the Port Moresby media world was in a spin. It turned out to be a false alarm.

However, when controlling shares in the long-struggling *Fiji's Daily Post* were abruptly sold in February 1999 to the Fiji Government, it was a different story. Protests from *other* media organisations were also strong — but too late.

As *Fiji Times* columnist Sir Vijay Singh rightly noted: "The deal is out of the ordinary. It flies so flagrantly in the face of the Government's own privatisation policy — was completed with such unseemly haste, and that too on the eve of the end of this Government's life; and Parliament was so blatantly bypassed, that it sprouts the persistent thought that there has to be much more than meets the eye."

The contrast between the editorial responses to the rumoured sale of the *Post-Courier* and Fiji Government takeover of the *Daily Post* was extraordinary. The *Post* barely covered the story, in spite of the serious national implications for freedom of expression with a general election due in May. And when editor Jale Moala did finally comment publicly on the issue, he told one reporter: "I'm happy about the deal because it doesn't make any difference."

In the weeks before the sale, the *Post* had been sharply critical of Government policies. Post-sale, the editorial line became far more accommodating for the administration, even publishing a leader hailing Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka as a "man of courage".

In contrast, Peter Chegwyn, chairman of South Pacific Post Ltd, publisher of the *Post-Courier*, made strong statements in support of press freedom and the editorial staff when the paper was said to be up for sale. He also publicly supported the editor, Oseah Philemon, amid rumours that the Skate Government was pressuring the paper to have him replaced. At one stage, the paper's editorial staff even considered running a fullpage advertisement with signed statements by its journalists declaring their independence.

"We unashamedly support the constitutional rights of Papua New Guineans

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and will fight to the last drop of ink to protect them," said Chegwyn, echoing an editorial statement on its imprint page. "We support good government by the people who place national interest ahead of personal interests."

With less than three months to go before Fiji's general election, the sale of 44 per cent of the *Daily Post* from the state-owned Fiji Development Bank to the Government was a serious concern. Finance Minister Jim Ah Koy downplayed criticism, saying: "There is no ulterior motive. We are going into an election and could very well not come back into power. So what are they moaning about?"

Insisting that the decision was one of "wealth creation" with a newspaper which has not made a profit since it was founded after the 1987 coups, Ah Koy, says the Government will work with the two other major shareholders, Unit Trust of Fiji and Colonial, to turn the company around. He also pledges that the *Post* will be turned into a "reliable, significant and really dynamic alternate paper" to the *Fiji Times* (in the same Murdoch stable as the *Post-Courier*).

The buy out issue has focussed attention back on the Fiji Government's media policies which seem riven by contradictions. Although the new multiracial 1997 Constitution guarantees a free press and freedom of expression, critics are concerned about the Government's commitment. This has been highlighted by a clash over a prime time interview on Fiji Television with former military commander Ratu Epeli Ganilau; the refusal to allow a "blacklisted" Television New Zealand journalist into the country; state-funded newspaper attacks on one of the country's leading political columnists; and the sale of the *Post*.

Government is drafting new media legislation to prepare the way for a statutory media council replacing the current self-regulatory Fiji Media Council and for a regulated code of ethics and standards. Critics claim the media industry and journalists have not done enough to resist such legislation — in contrast to Papua New Guinea where a public outcry succeeded in having three controversial draft media laws shelved in 1996.

The Fiji law drafters, and even the Fiji Media Council, could do well to note a recent draft document, *Freedom of Expression: A Statement of Principles to Inform Legal Systems in the Commonwealth*. Few would argue with its primary declaration:

Freedom of expression means the freedom to receive and impart ideas, opinions and information without interference, hindrance and intimidation. It may be exercised by journalists, and by citizens generally, through speaking, writing, publishing and broadcasting or through non-violent physical acts.

We regard freedom of expression as the primary freedom, as an essential precondition to the exercise of other freedoms. It is the foundation upon which arise other rights and freedoms.

This document has some specific recommendations that are particularly useful in a Pacific context. Referring to journalists as employees, the document says: "Free expression does not belong to employers and managers. Free expression requires that journalists enjoy substantial independence from their employers. The terms of journalists should respect and reflect this requirement."

Freedom of expression, argues the document, demands the recognition of journalist unions: "Journalists' unions have an essential role to play in protecting journalists and advancing professional values."

Why are there no journalists' unions in the Pacific today, like elsewhere in the world? Teachers, academics, nurses and many other people have professional unions in the Pacific. So should journalists.

Another point is about press or media councils. While the Commonwealth document rightly says they are a good idea and need to be strengthened towards self-regulation, it also adds: "We favour the tripartite model, structured around the separate and distinct interests of the public, the journalists, and the owners or managers."

No Pacific media council follows the tripartite model — instead they favour public-owner/manager models. Free expression needs something better.

THIS EDITION of *Pacific Journalism Review* is being published late. The reason for the delay is partly because of the logistics of the move of the journal from the University of Papua New Guinea to the University of the South Pacific. But a more serious reason is the fact that we haven't had enough money to pay the printing bill. UPNG has effectively hijacked the subscribers' funds. Efforts to have the journal's balance of K1783.42 held in a *PJR* trust account paid back have so far been unsuccessful (*see Page 144*). We are indebted to UNESCO for coming to our rescue and funding publication of this issue.

Several contributors give their perspectives on the *Daily Post* sale. **John Kamea** gives a general overview, **Richard Naidu**, a media lawyer, points out the anomalies, while the University of the South Pacific's **Ingrid Leary** looks at the broader regional context. **Sir Vijay Naidu** provides insights into the Fiji Government's privatisation policies. A *Daily Post* editorial and **Mithleshni Gurdoyal** give fleeting glimpses of the newspaper's own editorial view — reluctantly shared. **David Robie** rounds off this section with an account of the

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reports of the “near sale” to pro-government interests of the *Post-Courier*.

The next section is devoted to problems in French Polynesia with feisty editor **Alex du Prel** giving an account of the shut out of his news magazine *Tahiti-Pacifique* by the President, Gaston Flosse. **Maire Bopp** describes similar problems for the pro-independence Fa’aa community broadcaster, Radio Tefana.

FijiTV’s chief executive **Peter Wilson** outlines the struggle and dilemmas for the channel to get established and **Richard Naidu** backgrounds his legal challenge over a controversial minister’s directive over the Hongkong Sevens with the whimsical title HAVING FUN PLAYING GOD. In Papua New Guinea, **Robert J. Foster** researches the complicated dynamics of the country’s seesawing television policies.

Patrick Craddock outlines a new style of role playing involved in the SPICOL conference at the University of the South Pacific, which is modelled on the South Pacific Forum and has student prime ministers and cabinet members rubbing shoulders with the student radio and press.

Savea Malifa, first South Pacific winner of the Commonwealth Press Union’s Lord Astor Award for press freedom, profiles the struggle for survival and free speech against an unyielding Samoan Government. On the topic of honours, **Sean Dorney**, who headed the winners of six Walkley Awards for journalists covering Papua New Guinea affairs during the tsunami year of 1998, describes why it is so difficult to put the lid on the PNG news media. **David Robie** outlines the University of the South Pacific’s progress in online media.

In the first of three accounts of investigative journalism in Papua New Guinea, **Mark Pearson** profiles a CPU investigative journalism course which probed the University of PNG’s restructuring controversy, **David Robie** offers an exposé on a foiled attempt at crushing academic and media freedom at UPNG which eventually led to the closure of the journalism programme as part of the university’s “reforms” while Chief Ombudsman **Simon Pentanu** gives a 13 point word of caution about inquiries.

Professor Dennis Pearce, chairman of the Australian Press Council, gives an overview of election coverage, presented in Suva under the auspices of the Fiji Media Council with an eye to the Fiji general election. And finally, **Rosi Tamani** profiles a leading Fiji journalist, Samantha Magick, now turned an environmental activist.

David Robie