

# Course finds PNG 'mecca' for probes

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By MARK PEARSON

THE KUNDU is the Papua New Guinean drum. It is the traditional form of communication in this culturally vibrant nation of nearly five million people speaking 750 indigenous languages. Journalists use the kundu's hourglass shape to describe the unique structure of their news stories. And the Port Moresby newspaper, the *Post-Courier*, features it as the logo for its daily column of humour and rumour.

The kundu was beating all the way from London to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Australia in the lead-up the Commonwealth Press Union's course on investigative journalism held in Port Moresby in June 1998. What began as a small seminar for a few senior newspaper journalists developed into a larger meeting of journalists from a range of Pacific countries and media outlets. The course was designed to cover major issues in investigative reporting and feature writing. It was expanded on the initiative of the CPU, the PNG Media Council and the Australian High Commission to include newspaper, radio and television journalists from PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Nineteen journalists attended the five day course. A further nine editors and news directors constituted a forum on investigative journalism on the final day, with the journalists as observers. Four key public officials visited as guest

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speakers on related issues. The ambitious program tried to blend theory with practice. Theory sessions addressed topics related to investigative journalism and feature writing.

Papua New Guinean guest speakers provided a nexus with the local situation. And an ongoing practical project allowed the delegates to reflect on the theory by digging into an important local story during the course. Editors and news directors decided the controversial restructuring of operations at the University of Papua New Guinea was the story deserving deeper exploration. By week's end, journalists had produced a series of feature and news stories for a range of media exposing aspects of the university's operations which had not been revealed previously. They used leaked reports, faculty handbooks, budget documents, phone directories, statistics and interviews to dig beneath the surface of a story which had only been covered superficially to date.

Stories revealed an exodus of foreign academics fearing for their safety, drastically reduced library and research budgets, and staff and student concern at proposed curriculum changes. While editors and news directors welcomed the stories, their real purpose was to highlight the benefits of investigation beyond the press releases and news conferences which so often dominate the news agenda. Australian High Commissioner David Irvine opened the seminar, congratulating delegates on being responsible for a fearless and responsible press, a vital ingredient in a democratic system.

"It requires the Government to allow the press to operate under certain circumstances where people are not threatened for what they write," he said. Guest speakers during the week included constitutional academic Professor John Nonggorr, Chief Ombudsman Simon Pentanu, Corruption Commission instigator Peter Donigi and Anti-Corruption Squad Detective Inspector Mathew Damaru. Prof Nonggorr called for legislation to give effect to a provision of the PNG Constitution guaranteeing every citizen the right of access to official information. Pentanu spoke on the pitfalls of investigating officials and offered practical tips for investigators. He described PNG as the investigative reporter's "mecca", with numerous issues ripe for deeper inquiry. Donigi discussed the potential impact of investigative journalism in PNG.

"It may even help stave off the feeling of revolution in the hearts of many common people," he said. "Some journalists need to give their free time in researching and following an issue right through to its conclusion. Despite all our freedoms, it will also take a few very brave journalists to do this."

Inspector Damaru shared police investigation techniques with delegates

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and discussed the relationship between investigative reporters and the police. Between guest speakers and investigative research sessions, delegates learned elementary theory of investigative journalism and feature writing. Topics included media law and ethics, time management, research techniques, notebook maintenance, confidentiality, verification and attribution. The conference finale was a forum of editors and news directors where key issues and challenges facing investigative journalism in the Pacific were discussed.

Three key hurdles for investigative journalism were identified:

- Limited newsroom resources;
- The “wantok” system which involves favours and pressure from networks of contacts which might be brought to bear on reporters;
- The “payback” system which might involve retribution for exposés.

Journalists throughout the world work against time and resource constraints to produce their work within deadlines. These are even more apparent in a developing country where infrastructure and support expertise are often lacking. The PNG journalist faces the further complication of special cultural pressures of the wantok system and payback. Anti-corruption lawyer Peter Donigi summed this up in his address.

When push comes to shove, will a journalist actually go against blood lines and clan and tribal obligations, roots and ties of one sort or another, to investigate criminal conduct or conduct unbecoming of a leader ... and pursue it without fear or favour?

Journalists and their editors debated ways of minimising these pressures at the closing forum. The Australian High Commissioner returned to preside over the ceremony where delegates were presented with their certificates and all parties and sponsors were again thanked for their involvement. These included the CPU, the Australian High Commission, the PNG Media Forum and *Post-Courier* executives Tony Yianni and Luke Sela whose impeccable on-site organisation made the seminar such a great success.

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