
Editorial Millennium mayhem

THE PACIFIC has entered the third millennium after a tempestuous time in the final year of the 20th Century. All the recent events have had an impact on the region's media. The fragile peace in Bougainville has continued to experience hiccups; the state of emergency in the Solomon Islands over ethnic unrest and even the historic change of government in the Fiji Islands with the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister have unleashed tensions.

But the major upheaval, of course, has been in East Timor's devastating transition to independence from Indonesia and in the resurgence of West Papua (recently "renamed" Papua from Irian Jaya by Jakarta's colonial authorities) as a news story. Along with rebuilding a shattered infrastructure, laid waste by a cynical and callous scorched earth policy by the departing Indonesians, Timor Lorosae seeks to re-establish a social and social cohesion — and part of this process involves the creation of a genuinely independent news media.

As Sonny Imbaraj reports in this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, when pro-Indonesia militias went on an orgy of killing and destruction in Dili and elsewhere in East Timor after the announcement on 4 September 1999 of the outcome of a United Nations-held ballot on the future of the territory, the building of the newspaper *Suara Timor Timur* was burnt. The outcome of the August 30 poll favoured separation from Indonesia by an overwhelming 79 per cent, against 21 per cent opting to remain with Indonesia but with broad autonomy.

"I feel very sad whenever I see my old newspaper office. It was a part of me and now it's completely destroyed," said Metha Guterres in November, as the truck with new printing machines made its way to a warehouse. But like everything else in East Timor, that must be rebuilt; reviving a printing press as a prelude to starting a newspaper in East Timor is no easy task.

On 18 January 2000, East Timor's first Tetun language newspaper, the weekly *Lalenok*, hit the streets in Dili and was distributed free. The newspaper's first editorial said 1999 had left behind a host of problems for the Timorese — ranging from political reconciliation to "rebuilding, from scratch, the country's economic, political and social infrastructure".

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The year 2000 is supposed to bring in globalisation and so-called democratisation. On the other hand, however, we have to be on guard for if we are not vigilant and fail to have time for self-reflection we might enter an era of neo-colonisation — this time by outside forces beyond our control.

Chief editor Guterres pointed out that Interfet, UNTAET, UNHCR, OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) had been in East Timor for the previous four months. But to date, in spite of the presence of these bodies and agencies, workable systems were yet to be implemented in the country.

Along with the upheavals have come dilemmas for many journalists — where do they stand as dramatic historical events unfold around them? Faced with barbarism and inhumanity, at what point does a journalist cease to be a neutral observer while washing his or her hands of responsibility? Where lies a journalist's humanity?

Susan Moeller raises such issues in her new book, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. She writes

Our commonality with the image, the fact that we can understand in part how terrible it is to have a child in distress, is tempered by the fact that we who only look at the image are not literally there. We — and our children — are exempt. And we are blameless for not taking action, for not helping that starving child. We didn't know, we weren't there. But — and this is the key hitch — now that we know the horror, we will share in the guilt if we just turn the page. We will become complicit. Our responsibility becomes not only that child — whose story is a foregone conclusion — but other children threatened. If we turn the page — according to the logic of the advertising campaign — we become part of the problem.

Photographer Kevin Carter, who took the 1993 photo of the Sudanese toddler threatened by the vulture, did not help that particular child, but his image, which was seen all over the world, became part of the global humanitarian effort to prevent apathy. A little over a year later Carter won a Pulitzer Prize for his effort. Two months after he accepted the award in New York he committed suicide. He had earlier told a friend, “I'm really, really sorry I didn't pick the child up.”

Being close enough to photograph the starving child meant being close

enough to help. The responsibility to bear witness does not automatically outweigh the responsibility to be involved.

This comment echoes the view of other journalists such as the celebrated (some regarded him as infamous) correspondent Wilfred Burchett who scooped the world on the Hiroshima nuclear devastation. In his 1969 autobiography, *Passport*, Burchett wrote:

My conception of reporting may seem somewhat unorthodox — perhaps some would say heretical. As members of human society I believe reporters should regard their responsibilities as being above contractual obligations to editors, and their personal interests. A simple illustration: a child being beaten to pulp by a bully. A reporter who rushes to record the scene with camera and tape-recorder might succeed as a journalist, but fails as a human being. The first responsibility is to rescue the child.

For Australian journalist Liam Phelan, known in the Fiji Islands for his training courses in the Fiji Islands, the choice was stark and traumatic in East Timor. While journalists were busy with their rushed exodus in the wake of the self-determination vote, an orgy of organised state destruction was being carried out in front of their noses. Phelan couldn't abandon the East Timorese and carried on reporting for *The Australian* and *The Irish Times*. He recalls:

For those of us who stayed, the situation was extremely uncertain. There appeared to be no real rules, apart from that you couldn't trust the army or police to defend you. A small group of us made it as far as the Turismo on the waterfront, where the soldiers told us we would be attacked. We spent that night hiding in our rooms as the city was burned and destroyed and gunfire echoed nearby. At one point snipers came close enough so we could hear the bullets whistling past. We were defenceless if attacked, but were counting on the fact we wouldn't be attacked because it would cause too much trouble if a group of Western journalists were shot down. It made a sort of sense, but we were pretty jumpy.

Why did we stay? Well, we felt we couldn't just walk out on the Timorese. In a cruel irony, UNAMET had told them: "we will stay to help make your choice a reality". After 25 years of being persecuted, killed and ripped off by the Indonesian army, they had been asked to vote for their futures. And now that they had, the media and the UN were walking away from them, leaving them to be deported, beaten and killed. I just couldn't walk away.

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In West Papua, an untold story of betrayal and deceit has been finally exposed by ABC *Four Corner's* Mark Davis. By stripping away the truth over the hostages kidnapped by the OPM in 1996 and exposing what really happened in the final scenes of the rescue tragedy with alleged Red Cross and other foreign involvement, Davis has helped refocus world attention on the injustices in the western Pacific colony. He deservedly won a Walkley Award for this chilling and enterprising report. As he concludes:

These people are truly on their own. In their eyes, it's not just Indonesians who want to see them dead. It's the Americans who want their gold, the British or the Dutch who send soldiers after them, the United Nations who gave away their land, and now they think the Red Cross has betrayed them as well.

Journalists of this calibre and their work restore honour to a profession tarnished over recent years by the inroads of "infotainment" and other questionable and shallow "journalism". A creeping "anything goes" malaise has pervaded the Pacific, as elsewhere in the world, in spite of the huge amounts of funding poured into media training courses by donors. Concerns about the slide in standards — some argue that this has been low in the Fiji Islands anyway, at least since an exodus of experienced journalists after the 1987 military coups — has led to politicians such as Fiji's Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry claiming that media is facing a "crisis of ethics".

News media have been quick to respond with a holier than thou attitude as if there is nothing lacking over the integrity, professionalism and qualifications of some journalists and media. This is an unfortunate and defensive attitude. Recent research has shown a marked difference between the two major Pacific Islands media countries — Fiji has 47 per cent of its journalists without qualifications and with an experience median of 2.5 years; 73 per cent of Papua New Guinea's journalists have tertiary qualifications and only 12 per cent have no qualification at all. The experience median in PNG is 5.2 years.

This edition of *PJR* publishes several perspectives on the ongoing debate between Chaudhry and the media. But the chairman of the Fiji chapter of Transparency International, Iqbal Jannif, makes perhaps the most sobering point: "It seems to me that media wants accountability — for everyone except itself."

THIS EDITION of *Pacific Journalism Review* is the second to be produced out of the University of the South Pacific. It opens on the issue of West Papua and East Timor, with a transcript of the **Mark Davis** report on the real story about the OPM hostage affair. An Argus radio interview with **Paul Brouwer** gives some insights into the Dutch connection. **Peter Cronau** reports on how Sandline's mercenaries helped the Indonesian Kopassus special forces in Papua. **Liam Phelan** gives a moving account of the media exodus from Dili while **Sonny Inbaraj** describes the rebuilding of the press in East Timor.

In a series of presentations from the Oceania subregional conference of the World Association of Press Councils in Brisbane, **David Robie** gives a n abstracted regional overview, **Daryl Tarte** describes the Fiji experience, **Luke Sela** talks about PNG's rocky route to self-regulation, **Kalafi Moala** speaks of Tonga's relationship with the media, and **Savea Sano Malifa** updates the *Samoa Observer* struggle for a free press.

Trevor Cullen provides some guidelines for reporting diseases in the Pacific, **Al Hulsen** outlines progress at the innovative *Pacific Islands Report* website, **David Robie** chronicles the attempted gag on an independent cyberspace netzine, *Café Pacific*, **Philip Cass** debates Kastom and the Pacific media, **Ian Ward** presents a paper on a "genuine free press", and **Patrick Craddock** s explores the "intelligent butterfly" metaphor with public broadcasting.

In the next section comes **Mahendra Chaudhry's** most controversial address on the media while **Frederica Delailomaloma** gives a sidebar on an interesting exchange on the speech night, *The Fiji Times* replies to the allegations, **Daryl Tarte** makes an independent case for a free media, and **Ikbal Jannif** discusses transparency and the media.

Finally, University of the South Pacific journalism students, Luisa Tora and Tomasi Raiyawa, profile two of the most accomplished journalists in the region — **Lisaleilani Williams**, of the Cook Islands, and **Oseah Philemon**, of Papua New Guinea.

David Robie