

# Why the media must remain free

**'There is absolutely no need for laws to restrict media freedoms. We live in a democratic state and provided the media conforms with its Code of Ethics, it must remain free.'**

**By DARYL TARTE**

I HAVE learned from long experience that it is unwise to react in the heat of the moment. Rather, it is prudent to step back and wait until the violence has gone out of the storm, analyse carefully what has been said or done and try to get things into the right perspective.

Accordingly, I have resisted from comment on the controversy that arose following the Prime Minister's address to the Fiji Media Council's launching of its Code of Ethics and Practice.

When I studied the PM's address objectively in the quiet of my office, stripped of the emotion of its presentation, I found that there was a lot of common sense in it. There were many statements that one would expect any prime minister to utter at such a gathering. But where the PM went wrong, in my opinion, was that, instead of using this excellent opportunity to win over the media to his cause, he chose to attack some media organisations and individuals in an unprecedented fashion. The effect of this has been to seriously alienate the media and invite further close examination and criticism of his Government and its policies.

Having said that, I must add that he had a perfect right to be upset and respond to criticism and seek correction of media statements that have been made about him and his Government if he considered they were unjustified. But I would question his judgment in using the launching of the codes as the forum

for his attack. The effect has been to turn what was intended to be a very positive initiative of the Media Council into a media controversy. The launching of the Codes got little publicity.

What has not been highlighted in all the media hype since the PM's speech, was that he spoke very highly about the concept of the codes as well as their content saying his Government fully supported them. Furthermore, he chose to launch the codes when he had previously said he would not do so.

This has been overshadowed by his suggestion that Government may introduce a Media Tribunal to deal with complaints against the media. How much thought has been given to this concept is unknown. But if the tribunal is intended to deal with matters that are already covered by law such as libel and defamation, then surely, the right thing to do is improve the judicial system. If there is undue delays by the courts in dealing with such cases, then improvement is needed rather than the setting up of a new court.

This proposal is linked to a warning that if the media does not act responsibly it may face regulatory measures. I believe the media should take heed of this and ensure that it does comply with the letter and spirit of the new codes which have been specifically drawn up by a recognised world expert to serve as a guide to journalists. The codes are not intended to drive the media into monolithic conformity. Each media organisation has its own character and style and they should maintain their individualism and fulfill their appointed role as watchdog, investigator, reporter and informant within the constraints of the codes.

The Prime Minister has stated that there will be amendments to media laws. Such changes were recommended by the Thomson Foundation in a report to Government in 1998. Government has since issued a Freedom of Information Bill. These changes are needed and the Prime Minister confirmed in his address that the media will be fully consulted on any proposals. That is how it should be and the public should not be concerned that any unpalatable changes will be thrust upon them. After consultation with the media, bills have to go through Parliament. Due process must be followed and the representatives of the public can have their say.

Press freedoms are guaranteed in the Constitution and I am not concerned that Fiji will have any draconian laws forced upon its people. Governments all over the world, and I am sure the present Government is no exception, know that the media is a vital tool in the marketing of their programs and policies. A free

media is far more valuable than one that is controlled by governments.

It has been suggested that *The Fiji Times* maybe seditious and somehow promotes a Murdoch agenda, whatever that may be. I don't accept that any media organisation in Fiji has seditious intentions. Mistaken maybe. Inaccurate perhaps. But seditious — no. If *The Fiji Times* chooses to take an anti-Chaudhry Government stance it has every right to do so. Similarly, the *Post* or the *Sun* may choose to take a pro-Government stance. That is the prerogative of free newspapers the world over. Many newspapers in the United Kingdom promote or oppose political party agendas and they are far more vitriolic about politicians than any media organisation in Fiji.

The fundamental obligation of all media organisations is to be fair, accurate and honest and they must provide an avenue for reply. In Fiji, any person can write to a media organisation pointing out errors in reporting and if that organisation has any integrity, it will insert a correction. People may send letters to the editor. They can complain to the Complaints Committee of the Media Council. Or they can take action through the courts. The rights of the public and Government are protected in these ways.

There is absolutely no need for laws to restrict media freedoms and I am disappointed that the Prime Minister has issued his threat. It becomes incumbent on me as chairman of the Media Council, which has an obligation to safeguard the freedom of the media, to respond to the Prime Minister. The council, which is made up of industry and public members, will vigorously oppose any moves that breach constitutional rights and freedoms and, where necessary, call on its international affiliates for support. We live in a democratic state and provided the media conforms with its Code of Ethics, it must remain free in accordance with the provisions of the constitution.

But let me not end on a threatening note. Many of us have been exposed to the media of other countries. We have seen how good or bad they are. We have seen how some are Government-controlled while others are free. Fiji is fortunate. We have a multitude of newspapers, radio stations, television and magazines, mainly commercially owned. We have good training facilities. Our media organisations cater effectively to the needs of a complex population spread throughout many remote places and islands. We live in a beautiful and free country which is ruled by a freely elected Government. We enjoy a quality of life that is the envy of many. Government has a vital role to play in the life of the nation and any criticism of it must be fair and accurate. Equally, the media

has an important role and it must be responsible. Let each of them get on with their work. Let us put this unfortunate episode behind us.

□ *Daryl Tarte is Chairman of the Fiji Media Council which was established in 1994 to self-regulate standards in all sectors of the news media and to promote a free press. This article was first published in The Fiji Times on 4 November 1999.*




For more information: Media Centre,  
The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji Islands  
Tel: (679) 212129, Fax: (679) 305779,  
Web: [www.usp.ac.fj](http://www.usp.ac.fj) Email: [Austin\\_L@usp.ac.fj](mailto:Austin_L@usp.ac.fj)

- Photography
- Online design
- Audio recording
- Design of books, posters, brochures, displays
- Multimedia presentations
- Video production
- Writing skills
- Software and speciality training
- Scanning services
- Instructional technology and Distance
- Education Design

We are the regions leading media production and consultation agency.

**Good communication starts with good planning**

 The University of the South Pacific