

# Transparency and the Fiji news media

**'Why was there no full text of the Prime Minister's speech published prior to the media starting to defend itself, in the name of media freedom? Why was the public left in the dark, with only snippets to guide it?'**

**By IKBAL JANNIF**

WHAT is Transparency International (TI) and how did it start? TI was formed in 1994 by Dr Peter Eigen, an employee of the World Bank, who in the course of his work, noticed that a substantial amount of funding earmarked for projects went into the payment of "non-project costs" — into payoffs to officials before the project could proceed. Dr Eigen resigned and set up Transparency International as a non-government organisation to combat corruption.

Today, there are more than seventy national chapters worldwide, including Australia (founded 1996), Papua New Guinea (1997), New Zealand (1999) and Fiji (1999).

In 1994, when TI was first formed, any discussion on "corruption" issues was absolutely taboo in international circles. Corruption was seen as a "local" problem, in which international agencies had no part to play. One such organisation is reported to have said: "TI is mad, bad and dangerous to know".

How times have changed. Today, no serious discussion on aid, or funding at concessionary interest rates, are concluded without some mention of the adverse effect of corruption, and the need to guard against it.

## **TI's guiding principles**

- TI recognises a shared responsibility against corruption
- TI emphasis is on prevention and systems reform, not exposing individual cases

- ❑ TI recognises that the movement against corruption is global and overrides one's social, political, economic and cultural background
- ❑ TI observes principles of participation, decentralisation, accountability and transparency
- ❑ TI is open to all who are interested in fighting corruption
- ❑ TI recognises there are strong practical and ethical reasons to eliminate corruption.

### **Methodology**

- ❑ TI builds partnerships which embrace the state, civil society and private sector
- ❑ TI supports national chapters in their efforts to arrange their own programs
- ❑ TI collects, analyses and disseminates information and raises awareness on the impact of corruption.

### **How is Transparency International different?**

- ❑ TI is the only international movement devoted solely to the elimination of corruption
- ❑ TI has a pool of highly professional volunteers for an integrated approach
- ❑ TI empowers civil society to play a meaningful role in countering corruption.

### **Some success stories**

- ❑ Canadian experience — legislation to support the signing of OECD convention
- ❑ Nigeria experience — TI led and coordinated workshops for government leading to the formulation of a Code of Ethics for Govt ministers.
- ❑ Also recent publication of Corruption Perception Index, listing 99 countries and how the people within these countries see the incidence of corruption in their country.

### **Fiji chapter**

TI Fiji was formed in 1999 after nearly two years of planning.

- ❑ Is a not-for-profit organisation
- ❑ Is open to all with the common goal to eliminate corruption
- ❑ Promotes transparency through accountability

□ Encourages the pursuit of high ethical standards and integrity.

In other words, *absolute zero tolerance to corruption*.

### **Fiji chapter programs**

□ Educational eg. seminars and workshops to identify areas most prone to corruption, and how these can be avoided

□ Publicity on what corruption is, and what can ordinary people do about this serious problem

It is in the area of publicity that TI Fiji requires the assistance of the media.

### **Journalists and corruption**

You may well ask: how does all this relate to journalism, and what role do journalists play in the overall scheme of things?

To answer this, we must first examine the delicate inter-relationships between the three concepts of: *power, authority and influence*.

AUTHORITY lies usually in the hands of the elected politicians. They have the authority to make laws and regulations that dictate our behaviour. Politicians, however, have little or no say in the implementation or enforcement of these laws.

POWER lies in the hands of the public servants. It is they who are given the responsibility to enforce, and it is they who choose to do so, more or less, strictly or otherwise.

INFLUENCE lies with the common people — the voters. In any civilised society, the main body of influence should be the ordinary voter. It is this area of influence that the involvement of the media is crucial to our cause.

There can be no argument against the concept that media has the absolute right to question decisions made on our collective behalf. After all, media is supposed to be the watchdog of society. If media stopped questioning, then one could be excused for thinking that the media's role had changed from one of being a good watchdog to one of being a submissive lap-dog.

And none of us would want that now, would we?

But the matter does not stop there. In my view, media has another major role. Media has the obligation, indeed, the responsibility to tell the whole story — and not just those portions of the story which are supportive of the media's views or those which show the opposition in a bad light.

And it is the perceived failure by the media to do this that gets it into trouble so often.

In journalism schools, such as this one, they teach you that when “a dog bites man” that is not news. On a recent trip abroad, I read a news item about an Australian man returning home from the pub and biting off the tip of his pet Alsatian’s left ear. The dog was rushed to a vet where it was making satisfactory progress. It is this “man bites dog” syndrome that makes the headlines.

You have probably been told also that news has to sell otherwise it is not news, and in the media business, as it is in mine, selling is the name of the game.

So what makes an event newsworthy? Generally speaking, four elements are necessary:

❑ *It must be new.* Anything out of ordinary, eg. trains that collide, not thousands of others that reach their destinations safely.

❑ *It most probably has to be negative.* Crime sells better than philanthropy.

❑ *It has to have occurred nearby.* Events that occur within the perimeter of the observer’s interest.

❑ *It should have affected someone with or of influence.* The rich and powerful make news. The weak and meek, the minorities, and the underclass seldom.

### Is corruption news?

Corruption is so common today that most editors, reflecting the public mood, do not regard it as news anymore. Corruption has become the “dog bites man” syndrome. Both journalists and the public have become cynical and apathetic.

Fatalists see corruption, like death, as inevitable. Pragmatists see it as actually desirable, especially in countries where bureaucratic tangles paralyse decision-making, and graft is a lubricant that oils the machinery and keeps it turning.

So, corruption is not news, because it is not new. But what is even more worrying is that some don’t even see it as particularly negative either.

During my term as chairman of the committee investigating corruption in the Customs Department, a prominent businessman and importer told me: “Everyone accepts bribery as a necessity. It is like a tip.”

It is in fragile economies that corruption stands as a major obstacle to progress. And it is here that the power of the media and a free press is most important in making transactions and decision making more honest, accountable and efficient.

Corruption is like fungus; it thrives best in dark and secretive places. The most effective weapon against graft is information and publicity in the first

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instance, and eventually, exposure and punishment.

The role of the media is mainly that of a communicator — to make information relevant, interesting and accessible to the public, but its coverage must be balanced to be most effective. However, it seems that some journalists have lost their passion to dig. Those who have dug, are reluctant or unable to reveal without fear or favour.

I would not be revealing a state secret by saying that media itself can be corrupt. In a survey in the United States last year to find the profession with the worst image, media came second last. Only lawyers ranked below journalists.

On one local newspaper, the editorial staff went “on strike” when the management decided to kill a front page story, because of pressure from an influential client.

### **Media frustration**

My own experience with the media has been one of frustration, with stories more often than not, being incomplete or inaccurate; sometimes both. The unfortunate choice of words which suggest a totally different reason for a cause of action being taken is another one of my pet gripes. Just this morning, a news item on one of our radio stations was about the new requirements by the Reserve Bank for commercial banks to obtain proper identification from those wishing to open new accounts. As a director of the Reserve Bank, I listened carefully to the item. The item went on to say that a fine of (and I am not sure of the exact amount here but it was around) \$120,000 for those who don't comply. The final sentence of the news item said: “The fine would go into the coffers of the RB”. I am appalled at the use of the word “coffers” in this context. I can only hope that it was ignorance that led to this. If the reporter was trying to be funny, then he or she failed miserably.

Many journalists believe that their watchdog role only requires them to uncover corruption, and it is up to others to do the mopping up. Right and wrong.

Obviously media is not responsible for arrest and prosecution, that is up to other institutions such as the police and the courts.

But media can offer solutions. More importantly, it can also offer hope.

By highlighting not only the wrongs that have been done, but also the possibilities — and the mechanisms — for righting those wrongs, the media help wean citizens away from the cynicism and apathy that are so quickly and easily engendered by corruption.

By featuring interventions that have worked elsewhere, by pointing out where the system is fallible and suggesting ways of how the system can be strengthened, and by giving prominence to successful anti-corruption efforts of other communities. NGOs and also officials and bureaucrats, media can help develop a more participatory citizenry and enrich the quality of democracy.

Democracy cannot be sustainable when there is no hope and when citizens believe that change is not possible.

In my view, it is the media's role to nurture realistic hopes and to bring not only the bad — but also the good — news.

### The 'Chaudhry episode'

The next part of my address I have titled the "CHAUDHRY EPISODE": After the Prime Minister's address at the recent launching of the Fiji Media Code of Ethics, we were inundated with criticism of what he had to say. I have several questions for the media.

❑ Why was there no full text of the Prime Minister's speech published prior to the media starting to defend itself, in the name of media freedom?

❑ Why was the public left in the dark, with only snippets of the Prime Minister's address to guide it as it tried to make some sense of exactly what the fuss was about?

❑ Why did we have to wait until the weekend for the full text to be printed?

❑ What was the media afraid of?

❑ Did the media feel that we were incapable to think for ourselves, and needed to be brainwashed before having the full story put before us?

❑ Indeed, was the media afraid that some, or perhaps many, may have agreed with what the Prime Minister had to say?

And when Government took out a paid advertisement to publicise the Prime Minister's address, some of the media complained that it was a waste of taxpayers' money. One newspaper did print the full text of the address last Saturday, but then devoted just as much space defending its own position.

It seems to me that media wants accountability — for everyone except itself.

### **Media legislation**

Although no one wants media legislation, the possibility of this is now very real. I am sure that Government does not wish to introduce it. Introducing legislation is an expensive exercise, both in terms of time and money. We are told that media is also not in favour of it. No, media does not want legislation either.

Or does it?

We all know, some of us from painful experience, that if you continue to poke a stick at a hornet's nest, the hornets will attack.

### **TI's offer for Fiji**

TI Fiji says: Enough is enough. It is time for both sides to take a "time out" as they do in a basketball game. Both sides should withdraw from the field and rethink their positions.

We, the public of Fiji, deserve better. We deserve better from our Government to whom we pay taxes. We deserve better from the media whom we support by buying their products.

TI Fiji is willing to act as a mediator to bring about some sensible solution in this senseless argument. We make this offer with all sincerity, and hope that it will be considered seriously by the two sides.

Just before we came into the room to start tonight's function, one media person present here tonight said to me that some very bright journalism students are graduating from the University of the South Pacific this year. I was very happy to hear this. May I wish you luck, and hope that you be able to find employment under equally bright editors — editors who will not take your stories and change them so much that even you, the reporter who wrote it, won't be able to recognise it as his/her own work.

□ *Ikbal Jannif is Chairman of Fiji's Transparency International chapter. He gave this keynote address at the inaugural University of the South Pacific Journalism Awards prizegiving in Suva on 4 November 1999.*