
Reviews

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Unique flavour of Pacific public radio

Radio Happy Isles: Media and Politics at Play in the Pacific, by Robert Seward. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, 234 pp. ISBN: 0-8248-2106-8.

IT IS wise to approach books on the Pacific with caution, as the definition of what countries make up the Pacific is a little like that of the international community. It means different things to different people depending on your political bias.

It may include Japan, Philippines, South East Asia, Indonesia and even China while omitting some of the Pacific Island states.

So it was a pleasure to open Robert Seward's *Radio Happy Isles* to find an excellent summation of some of the intricacies of radio media at work in



the small island countries, both below and above the Equator. It also contains references to Australia and New Zealand, as both run a regular short-wave service with programmes aimed at audiences at the Pacific region.

Robert Seward is an academic, but writes like a journalist. His easy sentences, numerous anecdotes, details of events, radio personalities and the love of radio broadcasting flow throughout this book. It is informative and easy to read. We are introduced to

a Pacific model of radio broadcasting, referred to as "Distantly from the BBC". Many Pacific stations are still under control of governments, either directly or indirectly.

Money to run the small stations is always on the agenda. Seward notes how Radio Tonga runs a store selling electric appliances and services other electronic equipment. The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) in Honiara used to repair electronic equipment to bring in money for their station funds.

There is a brief look at American influences on radio in Hawaii and the Marshall Islands with its mixture of public service radio, commercial broadcasting and automated satellite radio feeds for United States military personnel and families. Seward seems less concerned with the USA model and more interested in the countries where radio has been influenced by the colonial history of Europe, Australia and New Zealand. He says the public service model based on Britain and France is the most common in the Pacific.

The Cook Islands Broadcasting Corporation (CIBC) is given as an example of one country that incorporates public broadcasting aims into its radio objectives. As late as 1989, the CIBC aims included "to communicate useful information to all those engaged in industries or developing and

harvesting the country's natural resources and economics: to create an awareness..." (pp 41-42)

Seward has no doubt that public service radio must be financially supported. He sees the newsroom as the most expensive part of radio programming to maintain. The capacity of journalists to perform their work efficiently is hampered by lack of money. It is a sobering thought, but not a new one.

It is still the big players of Radio New Zealand International (RNZI) and Radio Australia (RA) who supply much of the up to date news on the Pacific events. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has several reporters around the Pacific. RNZI relies on a few freelancers and telephone interviews.

Even before the crash of the Asian economies, small South Pacific islands were starting to feel the pinch of money shortage. Aid money is becoming harder to obtain and donors are now asking hard questions about how their money is being spent. It was a small step in thinking to see that radio stations could follow their bigger brothers overseas and become self-reliant.

Many have been forced to try and make their own living. But can they become self-supporting?

Seward is uncertain in some cases and is blunt about the difficulties some stations face in order to survive in the market place, "... as a commercial

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venture, radio is unlikely to be sustained by market forces in the smallest of the Pacific countries, for the simple reason that the markets are simply too small and the expectations for revenue too great.”

A number of radio stations supplement their cashbox with payments for broadcasting birthday calls, up and coming events and death notices. Seward sees this family type broadcasting as reducing the money worries of the chief accountant, and also giving a unique flavour to Pacific radio through the broadcasting of personal family histories.

I doubt if there is a more detailed history of PACNEWS available to the public than in this book (pp 67-101). Besides giving the administrative background to this important Pacific daily news service, we are introduced to absorbing incidents that help to put faces onto the broadcasters and to highlight the politics of Pacific radio broadcasting. Numerous people are mentioned by name in this book, and lively anecdotes illuminate their personalities.

Meet Shiu Singh, the PACNEWS editor receiving a visit from the military coup authorities in Suva. Then we come across his name again, but this time facing another coup a few years later in Port Vila.

Meet Johnston Honimae from the Solomon Islands. We read how he lost

his job by offending the Government. At the time of writing this review Honimae is in the news again. Only this time he is with the Government commenting on media coverage of the Guadalcanal conflict.

There is a story about the expulsion from Fiji of the two German PACNEWS personnel, and the relocation of this news service to New Zealand to circumvent editorial control by Rabuka.

A PACNEWS chronology shows their history as a full cycle. It was established in Suva, Fiji in September 1987, the same month as the second army coup took place. To its credit it survived there until 1990. It was then transferred in turn to New Zealand, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands before returning to Suva in 1998. Today it is alive and well collecting news from around thirty sources. Seward's research notes that this news is now redistributed to radio stations, news agencies, the print media and a number of institutions including embassies, universities and libraries

Other controversies covered by Seward, include the banning of the Samoa opposition leader from the Government-owned Apia radio station 2AP. I also learned that rape and most other crimes are not reported on 2AP and “sensitive” news, to quote the author, is edited out (p 143).

Seward says that there is no live

news from this radio station. After the news is written, it is cleared by the Prime Minister's Office, recorded and broadcast several times during the day.

An interesting comparison is drawn between the Tongan and Samoan newsrooms. While Radio 2AP in Samoa has a staff of three serving a population of more than 170,700, Tonga with a population of about 97,800 has eight staff members involved in radio news production.

Seward believes the Samoan newsroom lacked a sense of urgency. On the weekend he got the news " ... almost twenty-four hours late."

I shrugged at this last comment, as I sensed Seward bringing his fast moving Western perceptions to a Pacific that works on a different level of concerns. There are a number of radio stations within the South Pacific and also television stations that broadcast "stale news", and not only on weekends.

The news ferret sense of urgency, to explore, document and immediately publish the news as it happens, is not in my experience, common in Pacific. To try and be the first with the news is more the exception than the rule.

Seward sees the threat to press freedoms as being vigorously alive. He outlines the story of 'Akilisi Pohiva, Radio Tonga and the Government. He records the Tongan Crown Prince saying that there is no need for democ-

racy to flourish.

The author draws no punches, saying that chiefs and politicians in the Pacific use influences drawn from tradition, custom and honour of authority as a shield for immunity from criticism and unlawful actions.

The final section of the book explores globalisation and world culture and its impact on radio media in this Pacific. Seward sees Pacific populations as rich and varied in their many cultures, and scattered over a vast geographical map of the sea. He knows the downside of this uniqueness is to make each of these cultures a minority influence in the world news scene.

As he wryly comments, when an event is to be covered for the media it is most likely to be explored by a journalist outside the region. Otherwise, says Seward, the most typical news is silence from Pacific commentators.

Robert Seward has documented a vast array of sources, including letters, personal interviews, radio news items, surveys, newspapers reports and magazine articles. He even gives a credit to the CIA for his use of their map of Oceania. Both Seward and his publisher deserve credit for conceiving, writing and publishing a stimulating and informative book about small Pacific radio stations.