

REVIEWS

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Ethics, integrity — but what about the truth?

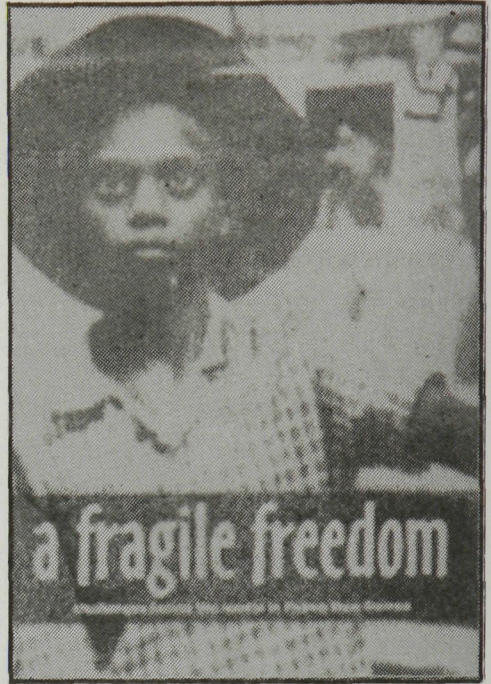
*A Fragile Freedom: Challenges Facing the Media
in Papua New Guinea*, edited by Joe Weber.
Madang, PNG: Divine Word University Press,
1999. 204 pp. ISBN 9980-85-218-6

ETHICS are not as highly valued as they were two decades ago, laments Word Publishing's general manager and publisher Anna Solomon. Although she was specifically referring to Papua New Guinea while speaking during the 1999 World Press Freedom Week activities, she could just have easily been referring to the rest of the Pacific.

And, in fact, it is a global problem.

"It has been suggested that senior journalists are writing press releases for politicians or the MPs from their electorate. I do not know how true that is, but it is a strong rumour around the newsrooms today (p 31).

"The infamous Mujo Sefa tapes recorded a government minister boasting about journalists being on the take,



something unheard of when I started working as a cadet reporter 20 years ago.

"Thus, the danger here for the media today, is that the professional standards are in danger of slipping and even being compromised if no action is taken by those in control to ensure that the code of ethics is put into practice. Once we let these things slip, we open up ourselves to government imposing laws and regulations, which will spell the end of a free and independent media in Papua New Guinea."

This is a dilemma faced throughout the Pacific today, particularly the Fiji Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. So it is timely for the appearance of this publication, A

Fragile Freedom, in addressing these issues.

The booklet has two sections, one briefly devoted to the Divine Word University Media Freedom Day on 30 April 1999, and the main one which collects papers and speeches at the Media Ethics workshop organised by the PNG Media Council and sponsored by the AusAID Pacific Media Initiative project.

The latter includes the opening address by then Prime Minister Bill Skate (published elsewhere in this journal); an insightful address on media ethics and responsibility by *Post-Courier* editor Oseah Philemon; a contribution on media control in a communist regime (a rather paranoid tone in this day and age) by DWU president Jan Czuba; a paper on the PNG Media Council's progress and its proposed Complaints Tribunal by Ms Solomon; and an amusing piece about "spin doctors" by Skate's own spin doctor Chris Hawkins.

PNG National Broadcasting Corporation news director Joe Ealedona presents his views on government pressure; a useful chapter on commercial pressure and the media is offered by *The National's* editor Frank Senge Kolma; Chief Ombudsman Simon Pentanu discusses accountability in public office and the effectiveness of the Leadership Code; EMTV's news director John Eggins takes a crystal

ball look at the future of PNG journalism; and Opposition Leader Bernard Narokobi challenges the nature of media freedom and takes a swipe at the "dormant" Media Council rather unfairly.

The refreshing feature of this welcome addition to the meagre Pacific journalism literature is the candid and diverse views of the debate which has long been characteristic of PNG discussion on the media. This has often contrasted with the frequent petty and defensive tone of media debate elsewhere in the region, notably Fiji during the controversy over Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's relationship with news organisations.

During the October PINA convention in Suva, for example, several senior PNG media executives were astonished at the limited media coverage of Chaudhry's controversial speech (admittedly not as bitter or AS newsworthy as his address at the launching of the national code of ethics later in the month).

"If this had been in PNG, all the editors would be here to listen to what the PM had to say and the issues addressed at the convention would get full media coverage," said one executive. "Why don't they do this in Fiji."

Oseah Philemon picked up on Ms Solomon's comments on the notorious Sefa tapes affair. This involved the showing on television by the Aus-

REVIEWS

tralian Broadcasting Corporation of tapes in November 1997 which detailed alleged bribery and corruption claims against the Skate government by his former adviser, Mugo Sefa (pp 72-74).

The tapes alleged, among other things, that Skate authorised K27,000 in bribes to be paid to four of his ministers and 12 backbenchers.

But particularly disturbing for the media was a further "secret" tape which showed a scene in Sefa's office in Port Moresby with the adviser and then Internal Affairs Minister Thomas Pelika discussing a payment to some unnamed person in the media. Pelika apparently put in his pocket an envelope containing K2000 for the media "collaborator".

The incident, relayed on EMTV after being shown by the ABC, and widely reported in other media, stirred a controversy about the conduct of journalists. Nobody was ever identified.

"To me, those allegations hit at the heart of media ethics, integrity and responsibility in Papua New Guinea," noted Philemon. "I am disappointed to say, that by not identifying the alleged culprits, we still have a dark cloud hanging over our heads.

"The allegations bring our integrity into question and I suggest the media as a whole must strive to correct any misconceptions or perceptions that

some of its journalists are in the pockets of politicians and can be easily manipulated or used to suppress vital information from being published for public consumption."

As journalists, our personal and professional integrity is always under scrutiny, just like the public figures we write about, says Philemon. And as he points out, this means conducting ourselves in a manner that does not bring our profession into disrepute.

His suggestion that the way we conduct ourselves — both in public and private — reflects on our profession as journalists, might well be heeded by the three *Fiji Times* reporters and editors named by a backbench MP in Parliament in Suva in November.

Along with the contributions, this volume includes news cuttings from the newspapers during the ethics workshop period and provides a valuable resource. However, the cuttings also highlight the exclusion of the university of Papua New Guinea's journalism school — the oldest in the Pacific and which has easily produced the most media graduates in the region (pp 90-96). This "shutting out" was also cited by Bond University's associate journalism professor Mark Pearson, who coordinated the workshop and wrote about it in a column for the regional industry publication *PANPA Bulletin* (p 20).

In spite of the flowery prose by Fr Czuba and others about the “closure” of the UPNG programme (it is still struggling along), and praise for DWU stepping in take a handful of UPNG students, anybody intimately associated with journalism education in Papua New Guinea knows the facts.

UPNG’s former Vice-Chancellor Dr Rodney Hills, who hated the news media and anything related to it (ie journalism education and training at UPNG — see *PJR*, 5:1:114-124), did a “deal” with DWU in 1997 which was to scrap the UPNG programme and allow DWU to fill the vacuum.

Rather than “saving” UPNG, as some at DWU would have you believe, DWU played an opportunistic role in effectively “killing off” what had been previously the region’s largest and best journalism school.

What is all this about ethics, integrity and responsibility? Isn’t it about time that the PNG news media reported the truth about this unfortunate saga? The Ombudsman Commission and some media offices have documents to verify the truth, so why hasn’t it been exposed?

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Sandline crisis thriller that fails to deliver

Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Sandline Crisis: The Inside Story, by Mary-Louise O’Callaghan. Sydney: Doubleday. 1999. 381 pp. ISBN 0-86424-786-3

THE PANGUNA copper and gold mine on Bougainville was one of the world’s biggest mines. Owned and operated by a subsidiary of Rio Tinto of Britain, the world’s largest mining transnational, it had been opened in 1972, over the strenuous objections of the Bougainvilleans.

The traditional landowners were appalled by the enormous environmental devastation, and the virtually zero level of royalties paid to them. Over the years they protested and filed huge damages claims. Finally, in the late 1980s, they started sabotaging the mine, Papua New Guinea’s biggest revenue earner.

The PNG military over-reacted and soon became bogged down in a losing war for Bougainvillean inde-