

Democracy and media:

A message for the Pacific

Nobody in a democracy has the right to be ignorant. Citizens of a democracy have a duty to keep themselves informed about political developments and issues so they can vote with an informed mind. The media has a big role to play in ensuring that people are properly informed and encouraged to think for themselves.

By PHILIP CASS

FOR THE past 13 years I've been telling every first year journalism class I've had the same thing: Nobody in a democracy has the right to be ignorant.

This isn't actually very democratic in itself. After all, in a democracy people should, in theory, have the option to sit under a tree and drink grog until they fall over instead of voting. The problem with this is that if you let people escape their duties, then very soon your country will be run by an idiot who was elected by a very tiny majority of the population.

Democracy is a very precious and a very rare thing and people who live in democracies should acknowledge this by accepting that they have a responsibility to support and nurture and protect the democratic process by every means possible. That means voting, caring about how your country is run and knowing what is going on.

People have to accept that democracy brings with it tremendous responsibilities as well as rights. If you have the right to vote and determine who your prime minister is, then you have a responsibility to do so.

Democracy in many parts of the Pacific is a frail thing, beset by chiefly interests, the personal greed of politicians and the stupidity of those who think that the people's will can be continually thwarted by violence. It will remain frail as long as people refuse to care about how they are governed.

The problem is not confined to the Pacific of course: In the United States, supposedly the home of western democracy, voting figures have plummeted

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towards 40 percent in recent years. Ronald Reagan was elected by less than 30 percent of the population. The recent British elections also drew comparatively low numbers of voters.

On the other hand, 83 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots in the 2001 Fijian elections and this was only slightly less than the 90 percent who voted in the previous election which brought the Labour government of Mahendra Chaudhry to power.

This shows Fijians certainly cared enough to vote, but there was still plenty of evidence before the election that many people were completely unenthusiastic about the whole process and didn't want to hear more than they had to.

Apathy revealed

Reggie Dutt's reports for *Wansolwara Online* about the August 2001 Fiji General Election and my own research for an article for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* revealed an apparent apathy in many centres and an unwillingness among voters to even listen to politicians. This may simply mean that people had already made up their minds about who to vote for, but it might also mean that people were voting without enough information to make an informed decision. It is impossible to know for sure, of course, but it is likely that at least some people voted without thinking.

One might argue equally, however, that some people voted without knowing everything they should have. It is certainly the view of many Labour supporters I spoke to before the elections that far too many Fijians knew little and understood less about the constitutional safeguards of their rights. In their view this led many Fijians to support the putsch in May 2000 and the extremist policies of George Speight and his backers. One can forgive a villager for being ignorant of the constitution, especially if he or she has been trained to believe or worry about only what his pastor or chief deems to be worthy of his or her attention.

One cannot so easily forgive somebody who lives in an urban area, has access to the media and has been exposed to more than just traditional influences.

The problem is that ignorance is easy. Not worrying about things, believing what you are told and not making the effort to go beyond the confines of life and culture is the simplest thing to do and the most comforting. Many people like to be ignorant. Unfortunately, ignorance is not bliss and the more people stay in a

state of ignorance, the worse their decisions become.

So, what is the media's role in all of this?

Many people blame the media for the ignorance in which people live. They blame the media for filling up air time and the internet and magazines and newspapers with triviality and foolishness. Some go so far as to claim that there is a huge international conspiracy to keep people ignorant and happy with a diet of rubbish.

Tabloids and the Murdoch formula

There isn't a conspiracy, just an astute — and profitable — response to market demand. The sad fact is that many people like rubbish. Rupert Murdoch¹ famously summed it up back in 1969 when he bought *The News of the World*, a UK tabloid. Murdoch said that most people lived dull, grey, miserable lives and that they wanted to be entertained and cheered up. Working on that principle Murdoch has built a hugely successful empire on tabloid news and tabloid news values. More people read the *News of the World*, the *Star*, the *Daily Sport* and the *Sun* — all newspapers providing sex, gossip, prejudice, lies and stupidity — than any of the quality English newspapers. Murdoch and his competitors have simply realised that huge numbers of people like to be entertained, not informed, and titillated rather than being told the truth.

The English tabloids are the worst in the world. They carry some of the most sickening, racist, sexist, prejudiced, moronic drivel that has ever been seen on this planet. But England is a democracy and a free market and in those circumstances there is nothing to stop people buying this stuff if they want to. Three decades later, Murdoch's assessment of what his English market wants remains accurate. With unemployment levels reaching up to 50 percent in some areas, the highest levels of teenage pregnancy in Europe, massive hard drug problems, crumbling education and health systems and wages so low that people see no reason get off the dole, it is no wonder that people would rather look at pictures of naked women and read about football than to try to find out what is really going on in their benighted island.

Journalists who want to make a difference, to educate people and to try to build a society in which people feel it is their duty to take part in the democratic process, face an uphill battle. In England, journalists have to fight an indifference caused by decades of appalling social conditions and attitudes ingrained by the lies told by the left and the right.

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Here in the Pacific, journalists have to contend with, on the one hand, social systems in which people have been historically encouraged to leave all thinking to their church or traditional leaders and, on the other, voting habits based on clan or provincial loyalties rather than on the national interest.

The struggle is hard, but it has to be undertaken because journalists have a duty to their readers to give them something more than entertainment. Their readers are their fellow citizens and must be given the information that will help them fully take part in society. The media has a duty to educate, as well as to inform.

We are all familiar with the ideas of development journalism and the role of the media in building nations. I have argued elsewhere that the Pacific media has developed a unique version of development journalism, quite distinct from the African and Asian model, in which development stories are embedded in media which inherited their western characteristics almost unchanged at independence.² In an article in *Pacific Islands Monthly* some years ago, Fiji journalist Debbie Singh called for the Pacific media to take on an educational role as a way of empowering ordinary people.³ People who know more can take charge of their own lives more effectively and certainly know how to vote more effectively.

Democratic media also have to educate leaders, of course, about their responsibilities and the limits of their powers. The adage about a free press being the guardian of democracy and the protector of the powerless is almost a cliché, but it's still true.

Newspapers have a much broader task when it comes to education. They should educate people about how government works and what the constitution means and we are all familiar with the media's role in promoting better health services and agricultural methods.

However, newspapers and other media can also serve to broaden people's horizons. People need to know that what is going on in the outside world and, more importantly, to understand that they are part of it.

If a large metropolitan power decides that it wants to test atomic bombs or transport nuclear waste in the Pacific, then everybody in the region is visibly affected, but there are other economic and political forces that affect the way people live.

If there is a downturn in the retail industry in the UK or France, garment manufacturers in Suva who make clothes for European retailers are hurt. If fuel prices rise too high on the world market because of unrest or instability in the

Middle East, airline services between the Islands may have to be cut back because they are no longer profitable.

I long ago discovered that if you really want to know what's going in the world, you should read the business pages and any aviation and defence journals you can find. What governments say publicly is often contradicted by what businesses are doing and by the alliances of arms manufacturers and exporters condoned by those same governments.

You can still find a lot of this in the ordinary press, less on ordinary radio and television. The problem is that there really isn't enough room in any outlet to give more than an overview on any one day. Any media that relies on advertising will only print or broadcast what it thinks its readers will want, for fear of turning away its audience.

Just the way it is

Let me repeat: There is no big international conspiracy to keep the people ignorant. There simply isn't enough room or enough airtime or enough bandwidth to print all the news that is available everyday. This is nobody's fault. It's just the way it is.

The secret to finding out what is really going on in the world is simple. You have to work at it. You have to read more than one newspaper, watch more than one television station, listen to more than one radio station and look at more than one website. You also have to know what to believe and what to discard.

If you don't, you wind up with a very distorted view of the world. Let me give you an example:

I work at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. I live in Abu Dhabi, a beautiful city on the shores of the Arabian Gulf. The local press is not officially censored, but it is, shall we say, careful. It also takes a very different view on what is happening in the Middle East from the one you are probably used to.

The western media generally portrays the *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, in pro-Israeli or, at best, neutral terms. In the UAE, the reverse is true. Every dead Palestinian is a martyr and the Israelis are demonised as bloodthirsty murderers who deliberately shoot women and children. Ariel Sharon is the devil incarnate and every Israeli killed by a suicide bomber is a legitimate target of revenge.

Apart from giving the mirror image of the story, the local papers do something you almost never see in the western media: They treat the Palestinians as human beings. When Palestinians are killed by the Israelis, the western

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Philip Cass: Former USP journalism lecturer.

media tend to report them as “terrorists.” Here, they are given names and we see pictures of their wives and children. When people are shown to be human beings, the picture changes.

It’s hard for anybody who does not live here or who has not talked to ordinary Arabs, to understand the visceral hatred of Israel or the calm conviction that no matter how many deaths it takes, Allah has pre-ordained that Israel will be destroyed. People who rely on the western media may understand that the hatred exists, but they will never understand why it exists or the social, religious and historical forces that created it.

This is not to suggest that reading the Arab press will necessarily turn you from a pro-Israeli into a friend of the Palestinians, but it may allow you to form a slightly better understanding of what is going on, especially if you try to balance what you read by drawing on as many sources as possible.

I am not suggesting that we should devote our whole lives to becoming experts on everything that happens in the world. I am suggesting that it is the moral duty of editors and publishers and producers and journalists to encourage people to know as much as they can. Some news organisations already do this. The BBC’s website, for instance, always has links to outside websites and alternative views which allows the user to read a range of views and make up his or her own mind. Frankly, I think every news organisation should do something like that. Improbable as it sounds, I think *The Fiji Times* should tell its readers to buy a copy of the *Daily Post* or the *Sun* for an alternative view, just as I hope that one day the *Vanuatu Hebdomadaire* will tell its readers to read the *Trading Post*.

Liars, lunatics and opportunists

Some of what people find will be confusing. There is an awful lot of garbage out there, especially on the internet, where liars, lunatics and opportunists abound. The media has a role in helping people to pick their way through the dross.

Liars, lunatics and opportunists

People will have to be educated to use the media in a better way, to invest

an extra 10 minutes a day in looking at what's going on, to talking with their friends about politics and local and world events. Impossible? Not really. In fact you will find that people do this every day when they talk things over with their friends or family. Maybe all I'm suggesting is that we try to improve the quality of gossip and the topics of conversation.

On the other hand, that might be enough. If people know what is going, or are willing to look beyond the one newspaper or one television programme, then they can talk with more authority and more knowledge, ask better questions and demand better answers from their leaders.

Together, the public and the media can work to ensure that ignorance gradually disappears and democracy grows stronger throughout the Islands and the rest of the world.

Note:

¹ Through subsidiaries of his News Corporation, Rupert Murdoch owns the two biggest English-language daily newspapers in South Pacific countries — the *PNG Post-Courier* and *The Fiji Times*.

² Cass, Philip (1998), "I cannot photograph the adi: Self-regulation and social control in a hierarchical island society", in Allen, Holmes et al (1998), *Self-Regulation in the Media*, London: City University.

³ Singh, Debbie (1998), "Press freedom in the Pacific Islands", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, January, pg 56.

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