

# Pacific rural publishing: Eastern Star case study in PNG

**Ideas have been floated around the South Pacific of setting up multiple small village-scale presses – call them micro-presses ... But computer-based desktop publishing is now a more viable option than ever... Appropriate technology does not necessarily mean low technology.**

**By MATT LONEY**

*The Eastern Star* occupied a small office, which it shared with the family counselling service, run by the same community group who ran the newspaper. People had to enter the family counselling service through the newspaper's reception area; the office where they poured out their woes was only separated from our paste-up room by a partition. The layout and packing guys could hear every word. It was far from ideal, but it was interesting.

That the newspaper was published at all was a miracle of sorts considering the resources available; three ancient Apple Mac Plus computers — the small, boxy ones from the mid 80s — and one IIsi with a vertical A4 display, let down only by the fact that the whole thing had packed up several days before my arrival. We were to put the next issue — 20 tabloid pages — together on the small Macs.

A peculiar production process seemed to have evolved since the founding editor left. Stories were written on the three Apple Macs and printed out over numerous sheets of paper in long columns down the left hand side of each sheet. The layout artist then cut these stories to fit the page, waxed the strips and pasted them down, quite often in totally the wrong order. It was not really the layout artist's fault — he had been promoted to layout artist from chief packer after his predecessor was sacked for driving the newspaper minibus off the cliff below my house while one case of SP lager over the limit. The pages did get proof-read but some always slipped

## INDEX

through with stories jumping around all over the pages like they'd been blanket-stitched down.

EXCUSE the blatant plug, but this an extract from *Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits*, my account of two years spent running a provincial newspaper in Papua New Guinea's Milne Bay Province, due to be published in the UK in August. It seemed a fitting way to introduce an account of the challenges that face anyone wishing to publish a rural newspaper in the South Pacific.

We were habitually short of everything on the newspaper; from money and skills to equipment and communications infrastructure. The only thing that there was no shortage of was challenges. This article is intended as a brief introduction to those challenges and I shall, naturally, lean heavily on my experiences at *The Eastern Star* to present the challenges and some solutions to them.

Foremost among the problems to face any rural newspaper will always be money, so let's deal with that first. Newspapers around the world have two main sources of income: advertising and newsstand sales (I include subscriptions in this). Both presume that the newspaper in question has a viable market — that is, that the readership either spends enough on the brands and in the stores that are advertised to make the advertisers keep coming back, or that the readership can afford to and is willing to buy the newspaper every issue.

### **Dancing the ad-man's tune**

Advertising revenue is notoriously difficult to generate on rural newspapers in Papua New Guinea. The fundamental problem is that the readership — the market for the advertisers — is not, on the whole, affluent.

In Milne Bay Province, where about four in five people depend on subsistence farming and fishing, there is little money to spare. In the rural areas disposable income — that most beloved term of the advertising agencies — is all but unheard of. There are trade stores throughout Milne Bay Province, and there are even supermarkets in the provincial capital Alotau, along with garages. But there are not many brands. And if there are not many brands in the stores, there are not many brands to advertise.

The advertising revenue on *The Eastern Star* came from three main sources, and I suspect it is a similar story with other newspapers in the region. Each source had its challenges, and we employed two strategies to help overcome those challenges. I'll come to the solutions in a moment.



# The Eastern Star

MILNE BAY PROVINCE



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10 pages

Print Edition

40¢ in Milne Bay Province, elsewhere 50¢

## SPECIAL INDEPENDENCE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Inside

# Sir Julius to visit Samarai festival

20<sup>th</sup> Independence anniversary supplement

Details and the full programme of events for the 20th anniversary celebrations in Aotua.

To mark 20 years of independence for Papua New Guinea, a special pull-out supplement looks at the changes that have shaped PNG and Milne Bay over the last 20 years.

Plus! 1995 Giniuba Kaihea supplement.

A special pull out section covering the Giniuba Kaihea. Visit the Samarai Pearl Festival with The Eastern Star - full programme of events and competition details; see canoes, dancing, music, you name it, it will be there, and it's in here.

The Prime minister Sir Julius Chan is expected to visit the Giniuba Kaihea on Samarai to lead this weekend.

He is due to travel to Samarai on the island on Sunday morning, but his office is keeping details of his travel arrangements secret.

The security measures - follow an incident at the end of August in which police arrested "the minister at which Sir Julius had just left after celebrating his birthday with friends and attended a woman from his party.

Sir Julius will travel to Samarai after celebrating Papua New Guinea's 20th anniversary of independence in Port Moresby.

The landmark he is due to attend is being kept secret too. All the Giniuba Kaihea organising committee chairman - Wilfred Andrew would divulge last week is that the landmark is "right on top of the summit".

"People will have to go along and see what it is", he said. "We're keeping it quiet".

Samarai has been cleared in recent months for the installation of the "landmark".

The ongoing committee of the Giniuba Kaihea scheduled the date for the festival back in May so that it would coincide with the South Pacific Forum meeting last week in Malaga.

The Forum brought 18 visiting heads of state from all over the Pacific to Papua New Guinea, and the committee is hoping news will make it to the Samarai Festival after the conference.

## Samarai Giniuba Kaihea 1995 begins today

The first Giniuba Kaihea for more than 20 years starts on the bay island of Samarai.

Chorus of the organising committee, and the main driving force behind the festival, Wilfred Andrew, said last week he was expecting anything up to 10,000 people to attend.

"We have 13 traditional houses built", said Mr Andrew, "we've brought them to put up over to accommodate everybody. The houses, he explained, are not just for accommodation, but were built by groups from all over the province to show off their traditional skills and their culture.



See the traditional dress of Milne Bay at the festival this weekend.

## The colourful tradition of Milne Bay on display

Traditional dances will join the singing on Samarai this weekend, with groups coming from all over the province.

David Kane, chief, is hoping to bring his dance group all the way from Telfer, western Milne Bay province.

Even if he does not make it, dozens of other groups will be there, from Wewak to Woodlark and Ramel in Lae.

The Eastern Star: "A miracle of sorts".

## INDEX

First, there is the adman's favourite term (disposable income aside); FMCG. FMCG, or Fast Moving Consumer Goods, is all about brand advertising — in the West this refers to anything from soap and perfume to cars and electrical goods. It is aspirational advertising; selling an image. In rural Papua New Guinea, things work on a slightly different level. It is not for me to say whether this is a good or a bad thing, but I believe it is a fact. In rural Papua New Guinea, the brand advertising is more about getting people to buy Kikkoman soy sauce or cans of Triple 7 fish in preference to the products of the competition.

The fact that it is a different type of goods that gets this branding treatment in rural Papua New Guinea is irrelevant for the purposes of this article. What is relevant is that the stores — particularly in the more rural areas where the bulk of the population lives — tend to stock only one brand of each product. People cannot be persuaded to buy something that is not there. There does, however, appear to be one (or rather two) ready sources of FMCG advertising in rural areas: cigarettes and alcohol. Producers of both see ready markets in places such as Milne Bay Province. Of course, the decision to take such advertising must be made on a case-by-case basis; at *The Eastern Star*, the management committee decided that tobacco and alcohol advertising was incompatible with its position as a community group. Brand advertising, therefore, was not common in *The Eastern Star*.

### **Business support**

So what about the second potential source of advertising revenue: local businesses? *The Eastern Star* depended heavily on the patronage of local businesses. However, I found there was an informal relationship between the newspaper and the businesses which, while not incestuous, was perhaps symbiotic. Many of the small to mid-sized local companies had an interest in keeping the newspaper going, and we took advantage of this.

There was never any question of *The Eastern Star* exploiting the goodwill of local businesses, or of “selling out” or compromising its integrity in any way. No, the reason that local businesses exhibited such goodwill was that they recognised the value of a strong, incisive, independent newspaper that covered local issues. If there is one thing we learnt on *The Eastern Star*, it is that business — sometimes even more so than government — can appreciate the value of such journalism even when it may not appear to directly benefit them. Indeed, they sometimes found themselves at the sharp end of a story.

The reason that local businesses continued to support *The Eastern Star* was

that we were first and foremost able to gather local news. No national newspaper can do this effectively in any country, no matter how good the communications infrastructure or how much money it has.

Local news is a Godsend to local businesses. Why? Because only local journalists can be truly aware of the (here's that word again) local issues, can raise those issues in a way that can be embarrassing to the politicians, and can effectively root out corruption and keep rooting out corruption at a local level. Businesses like that. In fact, I am convinced that some saw their regular advert in *The Eastern Star* as a worthwhile expense regardless of the effectiveness of the advert itself.

Big companies, which are often headquartered or at least financed from overseas, tend to be a different proposition from the smaller, local variety. Take mines for instance. Such operations, which are invariably well financed, have little affinity for the community in which they work. (That is merely my opinion, but it is an informed opinion). However, they like to be seen to be contributing to the community, to the extent that the larger mines will often employ a public relations officer. A regular advert in a local newspaper is another way for them to demonstrate their commitment to the community.

There are drawbacks in relying too heavily on big business. At *The Eastern Star*, one large mine threatened to withdraw its advertising after we reported on research that blamed the mine's itinerant workforce for the higher-than-average incidence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in the immediate area. We had no option but to print a retraction. Similarly, all advertising from a third-level airline disappeared in the wake of a tragic plane crash at the local airstrip. Despite our best efforts to cover this crash sensitively — not least because more than a dozen local people lost their lives — I was left in no doubt that the airline cancelled its advertising because it felt our coverage, which was also used by the *Post-Courier* in Port Moresby, was unfairly critical.

In both cases, the financial viability of the newspaper was put in jeopardy. Did we feel compromised in such circumstances? Of course we did. Did we do the right thing in printing a retraction after the threat from the mine? Well, the newspaper is still running, so I would say yes.

### **Walking the government tightrope**

Our third source of advertising revenue was the government — both national and provincial. Just as businesses saw the value of a healthy local press so, I believe, did many public servants. At the provincial level they were happy to

## INDEX

place adverts in the newspaper to promote local government policies, and at a national level it was not unheard of for elected politicians to donate money.

Government revenue is a source of two potential conflicts of interest in a rural newspaper, both of which have the potential to seriously damage the paper's reputation. The first potential conflict arises from the need — the obligation — to deliver information to the readership. Such is the *raison d'être* of every newspaper in existence. But on *The Eastern Star* we often found ourselves performing a delicate balancing act between providing enough government information in our editorial pages and lobbying the provincial (and sometimes national) government to place adverts that contained the information. It was an uncomfortable position, and one that would be better avoided. But with finances stretched there was little option. I believe that, on the whole, we got the balance right; we managed to keep publishing the newspaper, and the information was always disseminated — if not in advertising then in editorial.

Naturally, we tried to persuade government departments to disseminate information through advertising. But equally, we went to great efforts to make sure that if the government failed (in our eyes) to provide information to the public, we would attempt to provide it instead.

A second conflict arises from the fact that politicians everywhere are notoriously thin-skinned. Offend them and the newspaper risks losing a valuable ally in the fight for a government grant in the next budget. Tread too lightly and the newspaper can stand accused — quite rightly — of failing to perform its function. Such accusations can affect the credibility of a newspaper in the eyes of local businesses; so having the possible effect of reducing advertising income from that quarter.

The best way to deal with belligerent politicians, we found, is to build relations with them. At *The Eastern Star* we did receive occasional grants from the government or from a particular politician's slush fund. Sadly we could simply not afford to turn these down. But we made every effort to treat those who were responsible for these funds no different than any other politician or public servant. We did not set out to dig up dirt on them, but equally, if dirt was thrown up for us, we did not hesitate to investigate.

### **Credibility is key**

So there are three sources of advertising revenue. Now to the solutions. One solution has already been heavily hinted at: maintaining journalistic credibility. Without this, without hard-hitting analytical stories, businesses will quickly

lose faith in a publication, and be less willing to advertise. It does not, in my view, matter that the newspaper will continue to be printed and read, because in rural areas of Papua New Guinea the chronic lack of reading materials means that any printed material is often welcome; if not for the quality of its content then as reading practice for children. If the quality of the content is allowed to suffer, then it will take with it much of the goodwill of the local businesses. It is testament to the ability and dedication of the people who have worked and who continue to work on *The Eastern Star* that the newspaper is still published today on a regular basis, a decade after its launch.

A far more tactical approach to generating advertising revenue on small newspapers is through the use of special issues, or supplements. In Papua New Guinea, every newspaper uses this method of boosting advertising revenue. National newspapers are virtually guaranteed to be able to fill a supplement that covers a particular industry with adverts; in rural areas it is less easy to run regular supplements on individual industries, but there are opportunities nonetheless, and if handled right they can become a significant revenue generator. The key is to latch on to the smallest event and start drumming up enthusiasm among local businesses. At *The Eastern Star*, Independence Day celebrations, store openings, cultural events — all proved suitable and often profitable material. One such issue at *The Eastern Star* enabled us to run a 56 page issue with full colour centre-page spread and cover, and make a significant profit.

After advertising sales the other major source of revenue for a local newspaper will be newsstand sales. If anything, this part of the revenue equation is the more difficult to generate and to realise in rural areas.

People in rural areas of Papua New Guinea typically have low incomes, and as we have already noted many are still subsistence farmers and fishermen. The belief among the management of *The Eastern Star* was that people could on the whole afford to pay for the newspaper, but this source of revenue was stemmed by the difficulty of collecting the money from the outlets. *The Eastern Star* was distributed by boat and plane to more than 320 distribution points, which included government stations, mission stations, schools, hospitals, aid posts and islands around the Solomon Sea. Each copy of the newspaper carried a nominal cover price, but collecting this money from rural areas was impractical to say the least. Instead, we suggested that distribution points use the money for community projects.

Money from newsstand sales in provincial capitals throughout the country can be recovered, but such revenue is not likely to be significant.

## INDEX

Revenue generation has taken up a large part of this article: it takes up a large amount of time and effort in the rural publishing business. However, revenue generation is not the only challenge that a rural publishing outfit faces. There are some ethical issues, which have been touched on above, that rural newspapers in particular may have to deal with due to the necessarily tighter budget and a reliance on fewer sources of revenue than national newspapers may have to deal with.

Challenges that have not been addressed yet include those stemming from technical issues, such as maintaining equipment. Then there are those challenges that result from poor communications infrastructure — anything from problems with news gathering, to problems with distribution. And there are challenges that revolve around skill sets.

### **High technology can be appropriate technology**

Ideas have been floated around the South Pacific of setting up multiple small village-scale presses — call them micro-presses for want of a better phrase — in countries such as Papua New Guinea. I gather the idea encompasses low-tech hand-operated presses turning out newsletters. Low tech may well work for such operations, but computer-based desktop publishing is now a more viable option than ever for a modest newspaper operation. The key thing to remember is that appropriate technology does not necessarily mean low technology. I'll explain why in a moment.

For any newspaper operation considering desktop publishing, there are a few basic rules to follow. First, choose Apple Macs over PCs where budgets allow. Apples are easier to network, they are mechanically more robust, and the operating system is not only more robust than Microsoft Windows (and I count any version of Windows in this statement), but it is also easier to learn. Plus, Apple Macs are less likely to be attacked by viruses — an important consideration if the computers are to be hooked up to the internet for even the briefest of moments.

At *The Eastern Star* we published using ancient Apple Macs from the mid-80s. I still own one such machine today. It still works. And it would still be capable of designing tabloid pages — though I would draw the line at using such machines for colour work. Even for mono work, these old workhorses are increasingly unsuitable; it is not easy to find laser printers that use the old AppleTalk interface any more, and neither is it easy to find AppleTalk networking equipment. Apple iMacs would be my budget computer of choice for



publishing jobs, and I make this statement with years of writing for computer, internet and technology magazines in the UK and the US.

Aside from the benefits of Apple computers over PCs that I pointed out above, they have one other, very important feature that makes them well suited to tropical climates; they have no floppy drive. In the tropics, floppy disks have to be stored with silica gel in airtight containers if they are to be kept free of damaging mould that can not only destroy the data on the disk but irreparably damage the disk drive too.

There are newer, higher tech storage solutions that are far more appropriate; in particular solid state, or Flash RAM disks. Prices of these disks — none of which actually look like disks — are dropping continually, and some are now available as key fobs which plug into the USB port of the iMac (or almost any other computer made from about 1998 onwards).

Another instance where high technology may be the most appropriate technology for rural newspapers is in the field of photography. Every newspaper needs good photography. Traditional 35mm film cameras — even cheap ones — are capable of very high quality results. Sadly, the most finely toned prints can be ruined by poorly kept scanners at the printers. On top of this, the chemicals used for development do not lend themselves to storage in hot climates. Today, digital imaging technology has developed to the extent that reasonable cheap cameras can produce results that are suitable for print work. You don't need to buy consumables, you don't need a darkroom, and you can wrest some measure of quality control back from the printers.

### **Pressing issues**

If we're going to start talking about technology, we have to talk about communications. In the context of newspaper publishing in rural areas, communications can mean many things; from getting pages to the printers and getting the printed pages back, to distributing the newspaper and even, I would argue, to news gathering.

Throughout the South Pacific nations there are a limited number of printing presses. The capital expenditure and ongoing running costs of setting a press up specifically for a rural newspaper are likely to be prohibitive. When I worked on *The Eastern Star* we considered the idea, but only momentarily. A brief conversation with printers in Port Moresby highlighted the issues we had not thought of; particularly the problems of buying and storing newsprint, which is even more susceptible to humidity than normal paper. We concluded that such

## INDEX

jobs are best left to the professionals and best done in bulk. One thing that any rural newspaper will need is a friendly printing press. Another thing it will need is a means of transporting the finished product from the printers back to the office (or perhaps straight to the distribution points).

While pages can be flown out to printers relatively cheaply, flying bundles of newspapers back is likely to be prohibitively expensive. At *The Eastern Star* we found a ready partner in Consort Shipping, which was happy to transport the newspaper from Port Moresby to Alotau as “captain’s cargo” in return for advertising space. We had to do our own stevedoring, but it worked.

Printing and distribution logistics are going to have an inevitable effect on other factors, such as frequency of publication. If it takes several days (three on *The Eastern Star*) to get the newspapers back from the printers, and then yet more time to get those copies to the distribution points in the villages, a weekly publication does not make sense. In the case of *The Eastern Star*, where delays of a week or more were common in getting issues to some more remote distribution points, we settled on a fortnightly schedule.

News gathering in rural areas, where communications may be less than ideal, can be a testing process for the most patient journalist or editor. The whole point of setting up a newspaper in a rural area is to cover local news; any such newspaper that restricts itself to news from its immediate vicinity is failing its readers just as surely as is a national newspaper that neglects news from outside the capital.

One very important method of increasing coverage of the more remote areas is to encourage correspondents. A big letters page is a start, but there is also, to my mind, enormous potential for outreach programmes. Low-budget, rural newspapers in the South Pacific are not likely to be able either to afford or find the type of correspondents that a big newspaper would deem desirable — by which I mean people with several years of experience writing for newspapers already. You have to create them.

### **A village voice**

Recruiting correspondents in remote areas naturally has its risks for a newspaper, but the rewards for all concerned can be immense. It is difficult for an editor to verify the information provided, or even to ask questions about the copy. It may be difficult to verify the impartiality of a correspondent. Certainly during my tenure at *The Eastern Star* we ran stories from correspondents we barely knew, and sometimes found the copy to be less than partial (one piece

about a supposedly huge potato crop springs to mind), but we would always try our best to give unknown correspondents the benefit of the doubt and use submitted copy. Blatantly biased copy could always be used to fill the letters page — with a note to the author explaining why. Recruitment of correspondents can be an arduous process, requiring a great deal of time, encouragement, and even workshops.

But there are payoffs, both for the newspaper in the form of better links with the community, and for the community in that such initiatives can give rural people a voice — something newspaper editors take for granted. Sadly, for every new correspondent that is persuaded to start writing, one is likely to get bored, forget, lose enthusiasm find they are too busy or just give up. Yes, we're talking skills shortages. This is something that every rural newspaper is going to have to deal with.

Enthusiasm will always go a long way to countering skills shortages, but there are other avenues that can be explored. *The Eastern Star* newspaper took on several students from the University of Papua New Guinea's journalism course for four-month placements. I was recruited through VSO, and my predecessor and founder of the newspaper was an Australian volunteer. Such help is available, but there are caveats. I cannot speak for the Australian volunteer agencies, but VSO required the host organisation to pay the volunteer's wages — approximately equivalent to a teacher's salary. In Papua New Guinea, where housing costs are high and employers are generally expected to provide accommodation, the host organisation was asked to do so for volunteers.

Furthermore, the ethos of VSO requires that the posting be in some way "sustainable". Although we all know what "sustainability" means, it is sometimes difficult to define in terms of a job. At its lowest level I took it to mean that I should train up a replacement, but any host organisation is likely to be quizzed on how else the posting will be sustainable: training other staff, running outreach programmes, building the operation up to a self-sustaining level, for instance.

There is a lot to think about, but volunteer help can be a valuable source of skills, at least to get a newspaper started. It is obviously possible for rural newspapers to exist, if not thrive, in the South Pacific. *The Eastern Star* will celebrate its tenth birthday this year, and Papua New Guinea's national daily the *Post-Courier* is now running three regional weeklies, covering the Islands region, the Highlands and the North East coast.

## INDEX

### Future issues

There is one trick that all these publications miss, however. It is not going to be a priority for them right now, but in the long term it is something that every newspaper, no matter how small, will need: an online presence. Naturally, an online presence is going to cost money, and is likely to be at the bottom of any rural newspaper's list of priorities. But, there are some compelling reasons for considering such an initiative: an online presence is invaluable for people who have a connection with the area; it has the potential to help raise local issues in a wider arena; and of course there is potential for advertising revenue.

Now, it would be ridiculous to suggest that *The Eastern Star* for instance on its own could generate significant advertising revenue by launching an online version. But there is freely available website software available now for building news sites that can syndicate content between one another; syndicating and sharing advertising is only a small step from there.

Indeed, online many small communities in the technology sector are using such websites to report and share news and promote their agendas independently of the established, mainstream media organisations. There is no reason why other communities should not do the same; tech communities only have a head start because until very recently building such online communities took a high degree of technical knowledge. The most well-known example of such a web site in the technology sector is at [www.slashdot.org](http://www.slashdot.org). This site is part of a large network of similar sites, all syndicating news. I run a similar site at [www.kularing.org](http://www.kularing.org), which was intended to be a technology demonstrator. Once such sites are set up, they are easy to run and require virtually no technical knowledge. And of course the software is free.

□ *Matt Loney was editor of The Eastern Star newspaper in Alotau from 1994 to 1996 while working with British voluntary organisation VSO. Mercenaries Missionaries and Misfits, an account of his time there, is due to be published in August 2002 by Clinamen Press. Today he is director of news for technology news site ZDNet.co.uk, which is part of the CNET News.com, and is the founder of sustainable development news site kularing.org. Matt is happy to answer any questions raised by this article, and is keen to hear from any newspaper interested in building an online presence.*

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