

Fiji media and salaries:

News sells — but journos face ‘poverty’

‘We would all love to earn more. But taking the economic and political situation into account, I believe a number of journalists have proved that through hard work, dedication and a high degree of professionalism they can make a successful career for themselves in the media.’

By JOE YAYA

MANY young people in Fiji aspire to have a career in the media. Some go for the glamour while others do it because they feel they can make a difference.

Being a journalist is a challenging job and usually filters out the glamour-seekers.

Only the dedicated remain. But poor salaries and working conditions test even the most dedicated to the point where the rate of attrition is high.

Journalism has been traditionally regarded as a craft, a skill which could be honed over time. Something like fermenting wine.

But today, it has become a trade where big money could be made, while at the same time is demanding professionalism and a high standard of reporting.

News is a commodity, and it sells. What happens in one part of the world, other parts want to know — as instantly as possible.

Networks

Media companies have become big multinational corporations and have set up extensive networks across the globe, while the internet has also played a leading role in this revolution.

So, how important is the role of the journalist to his/her employer?

University of the South Pacific journalism coordinator David Robie says journalists are the heart of a news organisation.

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Robie, a journalist with 37 years' international experience, believes education is vital for journalists to keep up with today's news "pace".

"Gone are the old days where you went down and got a job with a newspaper with no training and if you were any good, you'd make it, and if not, they'd kick you out," Robie said. "Much higher standards are needed in today's complex world."

He added that media organisations need not employ graduates only because having a diversity of staff in a news room was healthy.

"In some cases, it's good to have people with education and in other cases, people with natural talent and diverse backgrounds offer a lot as well."

But he said education was important because journalists always needed to be a step ahead of the readers. It was disappointing that some media groups did not recognise educational qualifications.

'Exploited'

"I think journalists are exploited in Fiji and the Pacific by proprietors who say they can't afford to pay more," he said.

What journalists in Fiji get compared to those in Australia and New Zealand is a non-issue — it is parity with other professions such as secondary school teachers within a Pacific country that is important.

According to Robie, some media groups operating in Fiji and the Pacific do not comply with policies that their foreign owners are following.

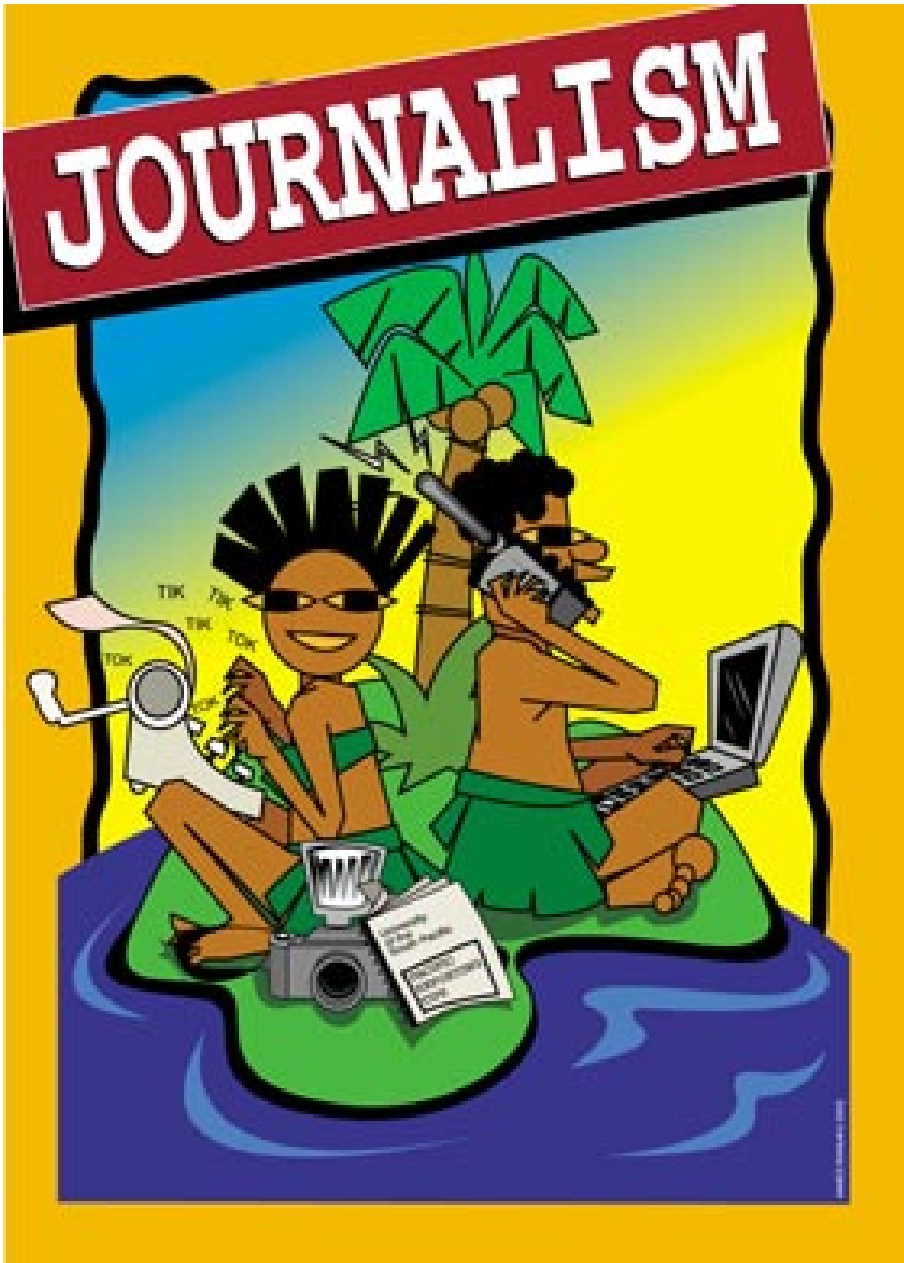
He says that the parent company of the *Fiji Times*, News Ltd, pay their staff in Australia according to a salary structure, which includes a one-year cadetship for graduates and four years for non-graduates.

"So what's the justification to do this in Fiji when they couldn't get away with it in Australia?"

The management of Communications Fiji Ltd (CFL), owners of FM96 and other radio stations in PNG, believes comparing salary levels of journalists in Australia and New Zealand with Fiji has no value because of differing circumstances.

Managing director William Parkinson said the tough economic period Fiji went through as a result of the 2000 political crisis had dampened the ability of media organisations in Fiji to pay higher.

"We would all love to earn more. But taking the economic and political situation into account, I believe a number of journalists have proved that through



HOW SALARIES COMPARE

Fiji Times: Cadets start at F\$4800 (three months' probation, then \$5600); graduates \$8500.

Radio Fiji: Non-graduates start at \$7800; graduates \$10,000.

Fiji TV: New recruits start at \$9000

FM96: Cadet reporters start at \$6000 (review after six months); graduates \$10,000.

Fiji Sun: No information provided

Daily Post: No comment. Staff policy.

Australia: (Based on News Ltd award). First-year cadet A\$25,400; graduate cadet \$32,000; grade 10 journalist: \$81,000.

New Zealand: (Based on national minimum journalists' award). First-year cadet NZ\$19,800; graduate cadet \$22,700; senior special grade journalist \$53,660.

Teachers (Fiji): Primary graduates F\$11,000; Secondary (without teacher training) \$14,988; (with teacher training) \$16,618.

Bank Officers (Fiji): Starting salary \$12,000 (teller)

Nurses (Fiji): Graduate nurse \$10,900.

Source: Wansolwara, June 2002, p 13.

hard work, dedication and a high degree of professionalism they can make a successful career for themselves in the media," Parkinson said.

CFL was recently converted into a public company and is now listed on the Suva Stock Exchange. As a result of this, Parkinson explains, the company has introduced a "staff share ownership scheme" in addition to the existing 10 percent "profit-sharing" scheme.

Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association (PIBA) chief executive Jese Sikivou agrees that journalists in Fiji are paid less for what they deserve, compared to other service industries like bank officers and teachers.

He said all the media workers in the country should "sit down and draw up a log frame exercise plotting their overall working conditions, not just the pay."

Sikivou added that experienced journalists who had no degrees were important to have around since most editors would prefer them over new graduates.

However, he pointed out that the level of professionalism locally was poor and journalists had to show improvement if they wanted increases in their pay.

Although he did not disclose any figures, Sikivou said his organisation,

Pacnews news agency, paid slightly better than other mainstream media companies.

USP's Journalism Students Association president Vicky Lepou said journalists should fight for more than what they are getting at the moment when they join the workforce.

"I don't think it's fair for someone to spend three years getting a degree and then go through a probationary period and be paid so low," said Lepou, of Samoa, who recently completed a six-week attachment on Fiji Television.

The problem for media workers in Fiji is that the industry has no legislation and therefore is not regulated. Because of this legal drawback, there are practically no formal salary structures in most media organisations.

Labour laws

Labour laws in Fiji allow employers whose workers are not covered under the Wages Regulation Order to pay them at their discretion.

The order states: "Workers engaged in businesses like security service, gas stations, bottle collectors, courier services etc do not have protection for minimum wages and the rates of pay are either determined through negotiations between individual workers and employers or fully determined by the employer."

The law tends to favour companies by leaving the issue of minimum wage in Fiji being "above poverty line" to employers.

The biggest media employer, *The Fiji Times*, is in the process of amending its salaries structures after a reporter was unfairly dismissed and reported the unfair treatment that reporters were getting to the Labour Ministry.

It is understood the proposed new structure would have reporters starting at \$6500 on a two-year cadetship, with graduates getting between \$7000 and \$7500, with the scale rising on experience to a senior reporter range of \$18,000 to \$22,000 a year.

Media educator David Robie says journalists should form a union to ensure better salaries. He says a union ought to be also vocal about professional and ethical issues.

Attempts to form a media workers union in Fiji have been unsuccessful in the past, mostly because journalists were not supportive.

Former Fiji Journalists Association president Asaeli Lave said local journalists needed to get their act together if they wanted improvements.

Lave said the FJA was deregistered in 1993 and the objectives of having the

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industry legislated and regulated collapsed because of a lack of commitment.

Now local journalists belonged to other unions within their organisations, which could negotiate only with media employers, Lave said.

“You can’t run a union by using someone else’s money. The journalists themselves must fund their own union through subscriptions and elect office bearers.”

However, William Parkinson says a media union would inevitably wipe out some small operators because they could not afford market rates set by larger companies. “I would also be concerned about possible interference in the independent operation of the media in Fiji because media legislation of any kind needs to be monitored very closely.”

□ *Joe Yaya is a final-year student journalist at the University of the South Pacific who has worked on attachment with both the Daily Post and Fiji Times. This article was originally published in Wansolwara, June 2002.*
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