

---

# Reporting the Fiji coups

---

## 1. Elite sources, journalistic practice and the status quo

### ABSTRACT

In a time of crisis, when there is a significant amount of uncertainty about the means and motivations of those involved, news sources have the ability to determine how an event is represented to an entire society. But who are these sources, and what kinds of institutions do they speak for? Do elite sources dominate the news, and if they do, what is the impact? In the 20th anniversary year of the two Sitiveni Rabuka coups in Fiji, this article takes a mixed methods approach to an investigation of the Australian coverage of the coups in 1987 and 2000. Three Australian broadsheet newspapers—*The Australian*, *The Canberra Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*—provide the sample for a content analysis, which focuses on the kinds of sources used in the coup coverage. In particular, it highlights who the sources were and the kinds of institutions they represented. Fifteen journalists who covered the coups in Fiji were interviewed about the experience of covering the coups, including the task of finding reliable, credible sources. Their answers are compared with the results of the content analysis in order to gain a broader understanding of how the Fiji coups were covered.

*ANTHONY MASON*  
*University of Canberra*

### Introduction

**O**N 14 MAY 1987, a group of masked, armed gunmen, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, stormed into the Fijian Parliament. The first military coup in the South Pacific caught Fiji and the rest of the world by surprise. Rabuka must have expected this—his codename for the plot, Operation Kidacala, means ‘Operation Surprise’

(Robie, 1989, p. 221). Fiji's multiracial government had only been in power since April 13, when Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra was sworn in. The election result had not been greeted with unanimous acclaim. There were public demonstrations. The most significant, on April 24, saw 5000 ethnic Fijians march through Suva, under banners calling for 'Fiji for the Fijians' (Robie, 1989, p. 216). Opponents claimed Bavadra's government was dominated by Fiji Indians, even though their representation was limited by the Constitution. For example, Indo-fijians could only hold 22 seats in the 52 seat House of Representatives (Nandan, 2000, p. 107).

The coup happened at 10am. By 10.30am, the AAP correspondent based in Suva, Jim Shrimpton, had found out about it. He was soon sending the news out to the world, via a telex machine located in a bedroom at his house (J. Shrimpton, interview, 14 September 2005). When Shrimpton's telex made it onto the AAP wires, the media organisations went into a flurry. The rush was on to get journalists on the ground in Suva. One newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, even chartered a Lear Jet to get its reporters to Fiji quickly.

The journalists covering the coup had different levels of experience of Fiji. Some had worked extensively in the Pacific, others had covered government visits there, some had been there on holiday, and a few were setting foot in the island nation for the first time. Most had little background knowledge about Fiji and none had much time to prepare. While conflicts and civil disturbances were to become more common in the South Pacific in the coming decades, in 1987 there was no precedent for such a reporting assignment in this region. Not since the Second World War had Australian journalists covered such a serious conflict in the South Pacific. In such unexpected, unfamiliar circumstances, the kinds of sources the journalists were able to access was a critical factor in how the events would be represented. Who were the journalists going to talk to, how were they going to access the background information, and on what basis would they make their assessments of the likely future of a country in turmoil, when they had such a limited understanding of the political, social and cultural forces at work?

The purpose of this article is to examine the kinds of sources used by the journalists in Fiji and the kinds of conditions they had to operate in. A content analysis establishes the kinds of sources which were used. A series of interviews describes the kinds of conditions the journalists had to operate in and the situational factors which might have limited the kinds of sources they could

get access to. To begin, though, it is necessary to understand the importance of sources, and the role they play in helping to maintain the status quo.

### Sources

For a journalist, some of the most exciting and challenging moments are when they are witnesses to the news, when they are personally seeing or hearing an event as it unfolds. Unfortunately, this is not the case with most of the news they report. By and large, journalists rely on other people to tell them the news (Williams, 1993, p. 315). These people are often representatives of major institutions: government officials, corporate spokespersons, academics, experts and authorities on particular events or subjects. These kinds of sources have come to be known as elite sources (see McChesney, 2002; Karim 2002; Liebes 1997). News becomes, according to Gans, the information which is transmitted from these elite sources to the audience, with the journalists summarising, refining and altering what is available to them to make it suitable for the audience (Gitlin, 1980, p. 251). According to Schudson: ‘...it matters not whether the study is at national or local level—the story of journalism, on a day to day basis, is the story of interaction of reporters and officials’ (Eldridge, 1993).

The source a journalist uses has to have particular attributes: ‘...they need to be reliable, regular and credible suppliers of information’ (Williams, 1993, p. 315). They need to be able to explain and debate policy, and they need to simplify complex events and issues (McChesney, 2002, p. 96). The sources need to have authority. If a news story is to remain objective, every statement needs to be attributed to somebody, and preferably somebody in authority (Bagdikian, 1983, p. 179). Journalists need to be writing reports that have credibility—according to Herman and Chomsky, they need material that ‘can be portrayed as presumptively accurate’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 19).

It is apparent that only other bureaucracies can supply enough raw material—enough reliable, regular information—to satisfy the news bureaucracy (Herman & Chomsky, 1994). News organisations recognise this, and focus their newsgathering methods on large, information-producing organisations. These centralised sources of information—the parliaments, the courts, the chambers of commerce; the words of the ‘professionals, technocratic experts and government officials’ (Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991)—have become, according to Tuchman, ‘much like umbilical cords connecting the newsroom to the sources of its sustenance’ (Tuchman, 1978).

Of all of them, the institution which can most efficiently provide suitable information is the government (Williams, 1993). Government sources have the advantage of ‘being recognisable and credible by their status and privilege’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 19). Research by Sigal (1973) and Manoff and Schudson (1987) has shown that around threequarters of all the sources in news stories are from government or official institutions (van Ginneken 1998, p. 86). For example, Sigal showed that public officials accounted for 78 percent of the sources in 2850 front page stories from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* between 1949 and 1973 (Williams, 1993, p. 316).

So there is little doubt that powerful sources play a crucial role in determining the output of the news media (Miller & Williams, 1993, p. 139). Sigal has coined the phrase ‘beat parochialism’ to describe what happens to a journalist who is constantly exposed to and managed by powerful sources of information (Tiffen, 1989, p. 44): their reliance on elite sources leads to an acceptance of the ‘language, agenda and perspective of the political establishment’ (Eldridge, 1993, p. 326). According to Tiffen: ‘They ask the questions appropriate to their sources’ world.’ (Tiffen, 1989, p. 45). As a result, these questions may ‘reconstitute not only a topic but a world’ (Tuchman, 1978, p. 152). The journalists also become sloppy about recognising that alternative views may exist, and become less likely to dig out and include alternative views in their stories (Tiffen, 1989, p. 45).

Ultimately, the reliance on elite sources leads to ‘tight limits on the amount of dissent that can take place..., especially in a time of crisis’ (Eldridge, 1993, p. 10). Different theorists view this reliance on elite sources in different ways. Herman and Chomsky regarded it as an essential component of their propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 2). The Glasgow media group attributed the reliance on elite sources to the demands of the professional practices of journalism (Eldridge, 1993). Fishman argued that the reliance on elite sources leads to journalists treating what elite sources say or write as factual. A newsworker will recognise an official’s claim to knowledge not merely as a claim but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge (Fishman, 1980, p143).

Perhaps the most significant consequence of journalists’ reliance on elite sources is that the media becomes closely interrelated with the source organisations. The major cultural institutions—the government, the media, major corporations, the military—create a two-way process which legitimise and reinforce each other (Meadows, 2001). It is this institutional nature of news

which produces inequalities in the capacity to communicate (Tiffen, 1994). News becomes a narrow depiction of events which is presented according to the needs of self-interested organisations. The journalists and the audience are unable to see the news in any other way, and the idea of truth becomes severely limited (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987, p. 9). News becomes an important part of maintaining the status quo, by presenting a dominant way of seeing or making sense of the world in (Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991, p. 4).

This ideology, which Gramsci labeled hegemony, does involve the dominance of particular groups or interests, but it does not mean that the less powerful voices are completely silent (Pavasaris, 1996, p. 1). There is a contest to present different representations of reality. By relying primarily on elite or authoritative sources, the news favours one side in the contest. It tells us not only who has the authority to determine a representation of reality, but also what the authoritative version of reality is (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989, p. 3). At the heart of the contest are the sources—the individuals who speak for the organisations that are trying to determine particular representations of reality. As such, sources play a crucial role in the way the world at large is able to perceive an event, particularly an unexpected crisis, such as a military coup.

### **The Fiji coup sources**

So who were the sources who were defining how the Fiji coups would be represented? To answer this question, a content analysis was conducted. It provides a representative sample of the sources used and the institutions and organisations the sources represented. The content analysis does not cover all sources in all media, but it does illustrate the kinds of sources which were used most frequently. Broadsheet newspapers were chosen as the source of the articles for the content analysis for two reasons. Firstly, broadsheets traditionally pay more serious attention to international news (see Shaw 1996; Schultz 1998). Secondly, newspaper archives provide the most accessible means for compiling a database of sources. A total of 419 articles from *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times* were examined. The articles represented the first week of coverage of the coups in 1987 and in 2000 in each of the newspapers. Any story which mentioned the coups was included, and all sources mentioned in these stories formed the sample.

There is a clear relationship between the kinds of sources used and the

<b>Table 1: Category of sources</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Government	355	44.7
Military/Police	88	11.1
Tourism/Business	54	6.8
George Speight/Spokesman	47	5.9
Person on the street	41	5.2
Expert/Academic	40	5.0
Journalist/Media	36	4.5
Union/Political group	32	4.0
Relative/Friend	30	3.8
Judiciary/Legal	19	2.4
NGO/Community organisation	16	2.0
Protester	11	1.4
Sport	9	1.1
Other	7	0.9
Farmer	6	0.8
Taxi Driver	3	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>100</b>

dominant social institutions in Australia and Fiji. Table 1 shows the sources grouped according to the kinds of institutions and organisations they represented. Overall, government sources dominated, totalling nearly 45 percent of all sources. Of the government sources, 43.4 percent were Australian, 26.8 percent were indigenous Fijian and 9 percent were Indo-Fijian. Overall, Australian government officials accounted for 19.4 percent of all the sources quoted about the Fiji coups. These results establish that in this coverage of the Fiji coups, there was an obvious reliance on elite sources, as outlined in the theories of people like Herman and Chomsky, Sigal, Tiffen and Eldridge. It also suggests that there is a greater likelihood that these stories support the dominant institutions within society.

Apart from the dominance of the government sources, there are some other interesting results in this data group. It is worth noting the relatively high number of journalists and other media used as news sources. The

institutional nature of news, where the kinds of sources the media relies on help to emphasise the authority and importance of the organisations the sources represent, includes the media itself. The use of other journalists as sources is also likely to be, in this case, related to the question of availability of sources. In a situation such as the Fiji coups, where the journalists cannot always easily and quickly establish a range of reliable sources, using the most available sources is a common approach. The majority—56 percent—of journalists and other media used as sources were Australian.

At first glance, the results listed in Table 1 seem to support theories on the hegemonic nature of the news media, which recognise that alternative voices—those not representing major hegemonic institutions—do exist in the news. Clearly, alternative voices were included as sources in these stories, from taxi-drivers and farmers to protestors and people representing non-government organisations. Overall, though, it is also clear that they are an obvious minority, with the seven alternative categories—person on the street, relative/friend, NGO/community organisation, protestor, sport organisation, farmer and taxi driver—only representing 14.7 percent of the total, exactly 30 per cent less than government sources.

Theories on hegemony suggest that it is not static, that there are historical fluctuations, and that it is subject to different forces (see Pavasaris, 1996). By examining two specific, related events in the same country, with some 13 years time difference between the events, the changes in these forces can be tracked. Table 2 shows that there were only relatively minor variations in the kinds of sources used in 1987 compared to those used in 2000. Government sources were slightly less dominant in 2000. There was also an 8.9 percent decrease in the use of military sources, but this could be put down to the fact that George Speight, a failed businessman, was the leading spokesman for a coup carried out by a group of rogue soldiers. If Speight was counted as military, there would have been a 3.3 percent increase in military sources. The use of journalists as sources was nearly 4 percent greater in 1987, probably as a result of some Australian journalists becoming directly involved in the actions of coup plotters. The harassment, detention and threats of violence against journalists by the military meant the journalists involved gained legitimacy as credible news sources. The use of sources from unions or political groups increased by nearly 3 percent in 2000. Apart from these deviations, the 12 other categories registered changes of less than 2 percent.

**Table 2: Comparing 1987 and 2000: category of sources**

Category	1987		2000	
	n	%	n	%
Government	195	47.7	160	41.6
Military/Police	63	15.4	25	6.5
George Speight/Spokesperson	00	0	47	12.2
Person on the street	22	5.4	19	4.9
Journalist/Media	26	6.4	10	2.6
Tourism/Business	26	6.4	28	7.3
Relative/Friend	14	3.4	16	4.2
Expert/Academic	21	5.2	19	4.9
Judiciary/Legal	10	2.4	9	2.3
Union/Political group	11	2.7	21	5.5
NGO/Community organisation	6	1.5	10	2.6
Protester	5	1.2	6	1.6
Other	6	1.5	1	0.3
Farmer	1	0.2	5	1.3
Taxi driver	2	0,5	1	0,3
Sport	1	0.2	8	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100.2</b>

Other information about the sources demonstrates the elite nature of the people who were determining the representation of the coups. Table 3 lists the top 20 sources, their job title, and the number of times they were quoted. Of the 385 sources mentioned a total of 794 times in these stories, the top 20 sources account for 305 attributed quotations, or 38.4 percent of all appearances. Only six of these 20 sources are not government representatives. The results also reflect the regional dynamics, with the former colonial powers of Australia, New Zealand and England accounting for half of the top 20 sources.

Arguably all 20 of these sources, apart from George Speight, represent a major mainstream cultural institution. And if you accept that George Speight was merely a representative of other strong cultural forces in society, as many do, then all of the most frequently quoted sources represent such institutions. The tendency for these sources to support their own interests,



**Table 3: Most frequently quoted sources**

<b>Name and title (1987/2000)</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>2000</b>
Sitiveni Rabuka, coup leader/former Prime Minister	52	34	18
George Speight, coup leader	38	0	38
Bob Hawke, Prime Minister	29	28	1
Alexander Downer, Foreign Minister	28	0	28
Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, Governor General	27	27	0
John Howard, Opposition Leader/PM	24	13	11
Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, PM/former Prime Minister	17	4	13
Timoci Bavadra, Prime Minister, Fiji	12	12	0
David Lange, NZ Prime Minister	10	10	0
Timoci Tuivaga, Chief Justice, Fiji	8	6	2
Gareth Evans, Acting Foreign Minister	8	8	0
Neil Brown, Opposition spokesperson on Foreign Affairs	8	8	0
Dr Brij Lal, Academic	7	0	7
Sharan Burrow, ACTU President	6	0	6
Kim Beazley, Opposition Leader	6	0	6
Don Mckinnon, Commonwealth Secretary General	6	0	6
Adi Kuini Bavadra/Speed, wife of Timoci Bavadra/MP	6	1	5
Pratap Chand, Fiji Education Minister	5	0	5
Red Harrison, BBC journalist	5	5	0
Mahendra Chaudry, Finance Minister/Prime Minister	5	1	4

especially in a time of crisis, can ultimately lead to a more limited kind of news coverage. Combined with the results on the groups the sources represented, the characteristics of the top 20 sources add to the likelihood that there is a relationship between the kinds of sources used in news stories and the level of support for dominant mainstream institutions.

Overall, it is clear that in the contest to determine how an event is going to be represented, particular kinds of sources generally dominate the news. In the case of the Fiji coups, government sources, particularly Australian government sources, dominated the kinds of groups being represented. It reinforces the idea that journalists have a tendency of relying on sources they are familiar with, sources that they regard as credible, reliable and authoritative. It also underlines the likelihood of the relationship between the kind of sources used and the level of support for dominant mainstream institutions.

### **The journalists and their sources**

None of the data from the content analysis can possibly account for the actions and practices of the people involved in selecting these sources, the journalists. To explore the work of the journalists reporting on the coups from Fiji, the next stage of this research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 journalists who reported from Fiji. These journalists reported from Fiji for some of the most reliable and influential media organisations in the region, including ABC Radio and Television, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Age*, Channel Nine, Radio Australia, The Macquarie Radio Network, *The Bulletin*, *The Australian Financial Review*, AAP, Agence France Press, *Pacific* magazine, and the New Zealand newspapers *The NZ Times* and *The Dominion*.

The biggest problem these journalists initially had in finding appropriate sources was the fact that many of them were coming into the situation with little background knowledge and few contacts. Rowan Callick of the *Australian Financial Review* said: 'It's very hard just to arrive in the middle of a crisis and then develop sources who are going to trust you. You can find those people, but only through being led to them by people they already trust' (R. Callick, interview, 15 May 2005). Malcolm Brown from *The Sydney Morning Herald* agreed: 'Any intelligent person getting a foreign journalist ringing them up and not knowing the background is going to be cautious.' (M. Brown, interview, April 2005). Graeme Dobell from Radio Australia went back to basics: as soon as he arrived in Nadi, he hit the streets with his tape recorder. 'I walked down the main street of Nadi and it was completely deserted.' (G. Dobell, interview, 20 July 2005). 'There were no tourists, nothing. It was quite extraordinary for Nadi. A couple of the shopkeepers would not talk to me. Finally a copper came up to me and said, "Just piss off. Get out of here. You're not welcome".' Dobell decided he would stay a little longer and eventually an Indo-Fijian man

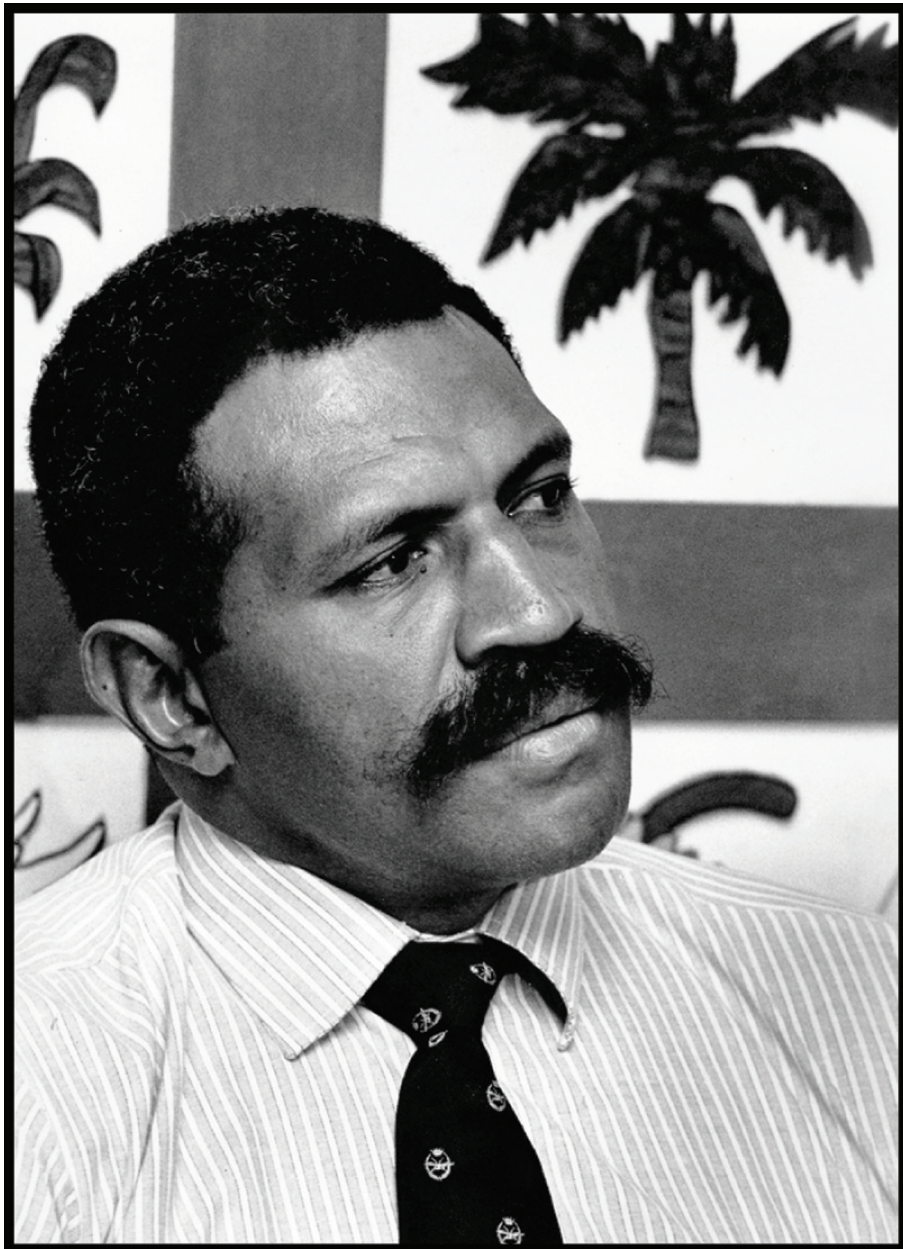
beckoned him over. ‘I was taken away to meet a leading member of the Indian community, a man who became a reliable source. It was a classic example of how if you trawl with a tape recorder, you’ll get a bite,’ he said.

In 1987, there were some obvious limitations on the journalists’ access to sources. Firstly, the Prime Minister and the other members of the government were being held hostage by the military. Secondly, within days, the military had shut down the local media, cutting off an important local information source. Some of the major players were also reluctant to talk to the media. In particular, the Governor General, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, was very unwilling to make any kind of public statement. ‘Everyone was desperate to speak to the Governor General because a lot rested on his shoulders,’ said Peter Cave of the ABC (P. Cave, interview, 25 May 2005). Cave then found out that the Governor-General had been taken to a remote island. ‘Red Harrison, the BBC journalist, was also a pilot. He and I actually made enquiries about hiring a light plane to fly to the island. We were dissuaded because we were told we would be shot down,’ said Cave.

In the content analysis, the most frequently quoted source was Colonel Rabuka. The journalists confirmed this. ‘The primary source was Rabuka, because he would have a press conference at least every day, sometimes twice a day,’ said Bernard Lagan of *The Dominion* (B. Lagan, interview, April, 2005). Although Rabuka had served with the United Nations forces in Lebanon, he had very little experience with the media. ‘The only media we were exposed to in Lebanon were our own United Nations media, who were already soldier friendly and UN friendly. The media in Fiji up to that time were also very [RFMF Royal Fiji Military Forces] friendly,’ said Rabuka (Mason, 2005). Rabuka’s lack of media training was not a problem. As Jim Shrimpton said, the force of Rabuka’s personality had an effect on the journalists: ‘Most of us liked him. He came across as a twinkling-eyed rascal.’

Others were not so impressed with the coup plotters. Peter Cave, who was later detained and put through a mock execution, thought a lot of the early military briefings were unreliable. ‘They were in a fair degree of disarray. During dealings with them, they often had arguments between themselves about what they were going to do. A lot of them were very scared—some military you were dealing with were clearly scared of other elements of the military. All of them thought if the coup collapsed they might face death,’ said Cave.

The content analysis showed that the number of Indo-Fijian sources was limited, particularly in 1987. Some journalists recognised this as a limitation



Many journalists saw Sitiveni Rabuka as a 'twinkling-eyed rascal'.

of their reporting. ‘There was a level of apprehension on the part of the Fijian Indian community, which meant that they were more constrained in talking about what had happened, particularly anyone who had any connection to the government that had been deposed,’ said Patrick Walters of *The Australian*. ‘The Fijian Indian population was very, very worried, and quite distrustful of us too,’ added Bernard Lagan. ‘The level of interaction with Indian sources in 1987 was not what it was in 2000,’ he said.

Part of the reason that the reporting in 2000 included more Indo-Fijian sources could have been that, in 1987, there were more restrictions on the movement of journalists around Suva and Fiji. There were tightly controlled roadblocks around Parliament House, the radio station, *The Fiji Times* office and the Prime Minister’s residence, where Bavadra and his cabinet were initially held. There were also curfews, which further restricted the ability of journalists to meet with sources. Additionally, many journalists were harassed and physically intimidated by the military, with some reporting that they were followed by undercover military personnel, who were openly carrying automatic weapons. These actions intimidated not just the journalists, but also potential sources.

Despite these concerns, most of the 1987 journalists felt that it was still possible to do their work. ‘I don’t think the difficulties in terms of obtaining reliable sources were what you might expect, given what was a pretty fluid and fast moving situation,’ said Patrick Walters. Indeed, he was surprised how responsive people were. ‘Even in those difficult circumstances, there was a degree of openness that you wouldn’t have found in similar situations in other countries,’ said Walters. ‘Individuals, once they got to know you, could give you a reasonable steer on the way things were moving.’

The experience of reporting on the 1987 coup was obviously beneficial for those journalists who returned to Fiji to cover the 2000 coup. While the content analysis does not reflect a significant overall difference in the sources used in 1987 compared to those used in 2000, individual journalists were convinced that the range of sources was greater in 2000. Rowan Callick said he had developed many more sources, some of whom were in higher positions of power and influence: ‘Clearly, in my view, my coverage of the 2000 coup was much better than my coverage of 1987, for that reason.’

The circumstances of the 2000 coup also had an impact on how the journalists accessed sources. Most of the government were being held hostage

in the Parliamentary buildings, with the rebels controlling the Parliamentary compound. This meant that there were no road blocks or curfews around Suva or the rest of Fiji, allowing greater access to sources in Suva and across Fiji. Even at the Parliamentary compound, the media were allowed to cross the line of control to report on the statements of the coup leader, George Speight, who became one of the main sources in 2000.

The fact that George Speight was so media-friendly was, initially, an advantage. ‘Everyone was agog with Georgie. He was the sort of star of the show, and that was understandable at first,’ said Rowan Callick. Almost immediately, though, Speight’s reliability came into question. ‘Speight was fundamentally unreliable because he loved muddying the waters with various vague conspiracy theories,’ said Hugh Riminton of Channel 9. ‘With every would-be dictator there is a degree of hyperbole. In Speight’s case, there was a hell of a lot of it,’ said Bernard Lagan. Speight’s supporters inside the compound were similarly unreliable. ‘The people with masks and guns leading the coup—it was very difficult to believe anything they said,’ said Christopher Dore from *The Australian* (C. Dore, interview, 26 October 2005).

The other significant difference was that the local media were not shut down, allowing much more contact and exchange of information between local and foreign reporters. Michael Field, of Agence France-Presse, said his relationships with local media were completely invaluable (M. Field, interview, 14 September 2005). ‘I was enormously grateful for the fact that all my years of coming to Fiji, of sharing news and contacts and resources with them, and just being plain friends, paid off,’ he said. Mary Louise O’Callaghan from *The Australian* said that her colleagues in the Fijian media helped her to gain access to particular sources (M. L. O’Callaghan, interview, 10 October 2005). ‘Sometimes they gave a name and a number, sometimes they helped with an introduction,’ she said.

Outside the Parliamentary compound, the main source was the military. Sean Dorney said he was astounded by the availability of the military and their understanding of the importance of the media (S. Dorney, interview, 30 April 2005). ‘The Fijian military actually have a far greater understanding of your needs as a journalist than, say, the Papua New Guinea military, who can be incredibly obnoxious and restrictive.’

Having access to sources is an advantage, but it is only valuable if the sources are credible and authoritative. ‘Some sources were more reliable on some areas of information than others, on some days compared to others,’

said Mary-Louise O’Callaghan. ‘Like all sources, as a journalist you needed to also assess where your source was getting their information and what their motivations were,’ she said. Doug Conway from AAP said in cases like this, the best a journalist can do is report exactly what was said and by whom (D. Conway, interview, 6 September 2005). ‘If it’s something that’s not immediately verifiable, you make that clear. Really, journalism is history at a gallop, so that’s the best you can do, I think.’

### **Conclusion**

The results of the content analysis of the coverage of the coups in Fiji is in line with other research on sources in the news: it shows that the reporting relied primarily on sources from the main institutions in society, particularly, government sources. While different situational factors imposed different limits on the journalists’ access to sources, overall, the content analysis showed that there was little variation in the range of sources used between 1987 and 2000. This reliance on elite sources increases the likelihood that the reporting reinforces the status quo. It provides a limited version of the reality of the situation.

Obviously, with the ongoing troubles in Fiji, as well as serious crises across the Pacific—in Tonga, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands—it is critical that we gain a deeper understanding of these societies on our doorstep. The media can definitely contribute to improving the broader level of understanding. Despite the best efforts of many of the journalists I spoke to, they can only have a limited influence on the overall picture presented. The front line journalists have a lot of freedom to cover the story the way they want to, but the impact of their stories—of their expertise, their understanding and their contacts—is swamped by the coverage from home and elsewhere. Half the stories studied here were written by journalists in Australia, and of the 128 journalists who had stories about the coups attributed to them, 57 percent wrote just one story and 18 per cent wrote two stories. Clearly, a more committed and focussed interest in reporting of the Pacific by the media organisations would be required if any significant improvements were to be made. If nothing else, they need to commit to giving journalists more time on the ground in places like Fiji—time to get to know the social and political structures—and not just send in crews in times of crisis.

The journalists themselves would also need to commit themselves to some new approaches. They need to understand the fundamentally cultural nature

of journalism (Karim, 2002, p. 114). As Abdul Jan Mohamed has suggested, we need more journalists who are ‘specular border intellectuals’, disengaged from allegiances to one nation, one culture or one institution (Karim 2002, p. 111). Such a journalist can, when reporting between two cultures, subject both to deeper analysis and scrutiny. Perhaps then our levels of understanding will improve to the point where countries like Australia and New Zealand can help the Pacific nations to really develop, rather than just policing the aftermath of their crises.

## References

- Bagdikian, B. (1983). *The media monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Eldridge, J. (1993). News, truth and power. In J. Eldridge, *Getting the message: news, truth and power* (pp. 3-33). London: Routledge.
- Ericson, R. V., P. M. Baranek, et al. (1987). *Visualising deviance: a study of news organisation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ericson, R. V., P. M. Baranek, et al. (1989). *Negotiating control: a study of news sources*. Milton Keynes: University of Toronto Press.
- Fishman, M. (1980). *Manufacturing the news*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching: mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Goldman, R. and A. Rajagopal (1991). *Mapping hegemony: television news coverage of industrial conflict*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Herman, E. S. and N. Chomsky (1994). *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media*. New York: Random House.
- Karim, K. H. (2002). Making sense of the ‘Islamic peril’. In B. Zelizer and S. Allan, *Journalism after September 11*. (pp. 101-116). London: Routledge.
- Liebes, T. (1997). *Reporting the Arab-Israeli conflict: how hegemony works*. London: Routledge.
- Mason, A. (2005). The media and the coup leader: Sitiveni Rabuka. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 11(2): pp. 227-237.
- McChesney, R. W. (2002). September 11 and the structural limitations of US journalism. In B. Zelizer and S. Allan, *Journalism after September 11* (pp. 91-100). London, Routledge.
- Meadows, M. E., Jacqui (2001). More than skin deep: Australia’s indigenous heritage. In S. Tapsall and C. Varley, *Journalism: theory in practice*. (pp. 115-130). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, D. and K. Williams (1993). Negotiating HIV/AIDS information: agendas, media strategies and the news. In J. Eldridge, *Getting the message: news, truth and power* (pp. 126-142). London: Rutledge.
- Nandan, S. (2000). *Fiji: paradise in pieces*. Canberra: CRNLE and Pacific Indian Publications.



- Pavasaris, S. (1996). Bringing the world back home: an analysis of *Foreign Correspondent*. *Australian Studies in Journalism*, No. 5: pp. 101-122.
- Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their banner: nationalist struggles in the South Pacific*. Leichardt, NSW: Pluto Press Australia.
- Schultz, J. (1998). *Reviving the fourth estate*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaw, M. (1996). *Civil society and media in global crises*. London: Pinter.
- Tiffen, R. (1989). *News and power*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Tiffen, R. (1994). The media and democracy: reclaiming an intellectual agenda. In J. Schultz (Ed.), *Not just another business—journalists, citizens and the media*. Leichardt, NSW: Pluto Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: a study in the construction of reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- van Ginneken, J. (1998). *Understanding global news: a critical introduction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Williams, K. (1993). The light at the end of the tunnel: the mass media, public opinion and the Vietnam War. In J. Eldridge, *Getting the message: news, truth and power*. (pp. 305-328). London: Routledge.

*Anthony Mason is a doctoral candidate at Canberra University researching media coverage of the Fiji coups in May and September 1987 and May 2000. He has interviewed many Australian and New Zealand journalists who covered the coups for organisations such as ABC Radio and TV, Radio Australia, Australian Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, The Australian, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Dominion and The New Zealand Times. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Second Joint Journalism Education Association (JEA) and Journalism Education Association of New Zealand (JEANZ) conference in Auckland, 4-6 December 2006.*

a.mason@student.canberra.edu.au

Copyright of Pacific Journalism Review is the property of Auckland University of Technology and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use. <http://www.aut.ac.nz/depts/commstud/journ/pjrsubs.shtml>