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# Reviews

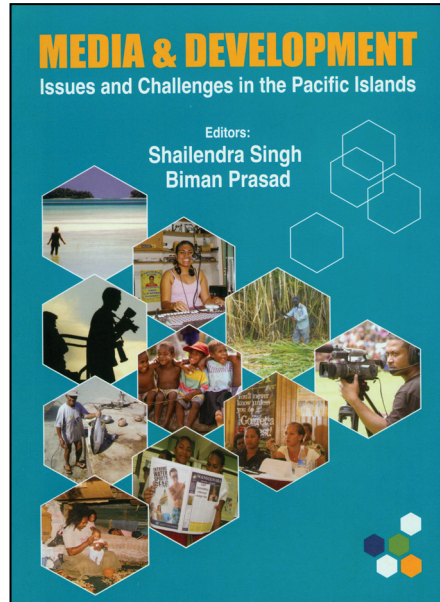
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## Achievements under diverse, sometimes impossible conditions

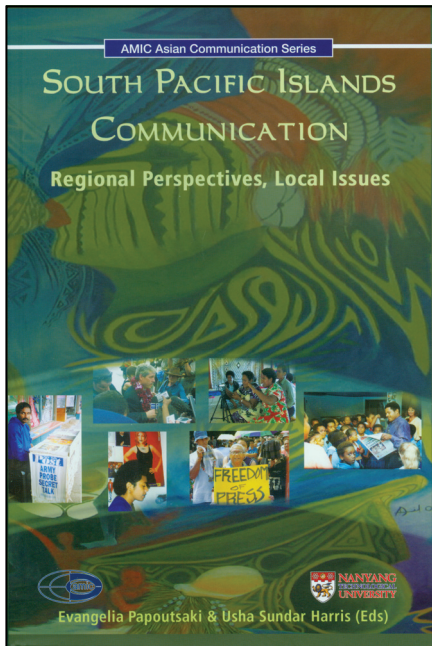
***Media and Development: Issues and Challenges in the Pacific Islands***, edited by Shailendra Singh and Biman C. Prasad. Suva and Auckland: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies and Pacific Media Centre (AUT), 2008, xii + 326pp, ISBN 978-982-301031-1 and 978-1-877314-63-3.

***South Pacific Islands Communication: Regional Perspectives, Local Issues***, edited by Evangelia Papoutsaki and Usha Sundar Harris. Singapore, Suva and Auckland: Asian Media Information & Communication Centre, Nanyan Technological University; University of the South Pacific; and Pacific Media Centre (AUT), 2008, xi + 288pp, ISBN 978-981-4136-08-2 and 978-1-877314-68-1.



WHAT is the role of the media within society? Does that role differ within developing countries (DCs)? Are dichotomous representations of societies and their media viable? These are just some of the questions thrown up by two very challenging collections of articles on the state of journalism in the Pacific Islands.

The study of DCs, as opposed to the study of journalism within DCs, has undergone tremendous change since it emerged in the 1950s focused on a trichotomous view of the world. With rapid growth rates within many DCs over the past 30 or more years (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, China), even a dichotomous



perspective (North South, First World Third World) struggled after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Second World.

Developmentally, the world became too diverse to sustain binary concepts of development.

Something of the same change can be perceived in these writings on journalism in the Pacific. The problem with dichotomous perspectives lies in the generalisations they entail. Pacific Islands are small DCs, but they are hardly homogeneous; they vary from extremely small homogeneous populations as in Tuvalu, the subject of one article (*South Pacific Islands*

*Communication-SPIC*, pp. 254-273), to larger and more diverse communities such as Papua New Guinea.

Additionally their access to resources is equally diverse. We could make much the same observation about Western countries, frequently presented as monolithic and hegemonic (*SPIC*, p. 83); certainly we could about their media.

Evangelia Papoutsaki argues that Pacific journalism tends to use Western values and principles at the expense of local knowledge and calls for a kind of journalistic protectionism (*Media & Development—MD*, p. 32) in which the West is replaced by attention to national and local development priorities that promote local interaction, participation and self reliance, and which respect traditional, indigenous and local knowledge.

This she calls development journalism and claims that it cannot afford to be neutral in the struggle against elite domination and the Western media focus on conflict and the bizarre. Instead an islander perspective would offset the disempowering consequences of Western media (*SPIC*, p. 2). Kalinga Seneviratne calls for a specifically ‘unWestern’ perspective (*SPIC*, p. 231).

However, other contributors to both publications are less concerned

with journalistic imperialism than with equipping journalists to deal with issues confronting Pacific societies. Julie Middleton wants the media to promote gender equality (*MD*, pp. 43-58), Jaap Jasperse environmental activism (*MD*, pp. 59-72), Nicole Gooch and Lisa Williams-Lahari, and Trevor Cullen an awareness of health issues (*MD*, pp. 73-84, pp. 85-98), Kevin Barr poverty (*MD*, pp. 99-110), Ron Duncan good governance (*MD*, pp. 111-128), Nazhat Shameem the rule of law (*MD*, pp. 129-136), Shaista Shameem human rights (*MD*, pp. 137-148), Biman Prasad and Paresh Narayan economic literacy (*MD*, pp. 149-160, 161-172), Carol Flore-Smrecznik Millennium Development Goals (*MD*, pp. 175-192), and Michael McManus domestic and sexual violence (*SPIC*, pp. 219-234).

These issues suggest something of the universal role of the media. As Pramila Devi and Ganesh Chand conclude in *Media and Development*, journalism is important for projecting, influencing and creating perceptions of policies (*MD*, pp. 260). Sometimes in performing that role, journalism reflects elite interests; sometimes it even becomes a pillar of oppression (*MD*, p. 263, *SPIC*, p. 60). These functions are not necessarily ones we wish to associate with journalism, but

as Shaista Shameem asks: 'Can we expect objectivity from journalists? Human beings, by nature, are not objective' (*MD*, pp. 144-145).

To prevent such outcomes, journalists should impart factual information (*MD*, pp. 137), report fairly and in a balanced manner (*MD*, pp. 149), and help open up development for its intended beneficiaries (*MD*, pp. 197). Red Batario believes this is really 'public journalism' (*MD*, p. 252).

'Whatever name it goes by', Pramila Devi and Ganesh Chand argue, 'plain journalism, development journalism, or investigative journalism—what is required is good journalism and good journalists' (*MD* 270).

This must be true for all countries, whether DCs or not. A good media helps build community; it is a tool for dynamic citizenship (*MD*, p. 253). Seneviratne claims that Western media distort news of DCs, focusing on disasters and often misinterpreting the causes of problems (*MD*, pp. 232-235). However, this is not a particularly DC-West problem but one all journalism confronts. Australian media rarely cover stories from New Zealand unless a disaster or something odd happens there.

Issues confronting more remote countries receive superficial

treatment. The media in DCs often treat other countries similarly. Sometimes this reflects editorial priorities; at other times prejudice. Invariably prejudice or inadequate reporting is the result of poor knowledge.

However, if the issue is significantly that of knowledge and competence, we might be able to tease out real media differences between countries. Wealthier countries have greater media diversity. Their media are able to specialise by addressing different audiences. Subject matter varies, quality varies, bias varies, so too the voices heard. Western media is far from monolithic. What distinguishes small and largely rural populated Pacific DCs is their relative poverty in terms of wealth, education, literacy, infrastructure, resources and interconnectivity. With that poverty, Mark Borg claims, comes unequal access to technology, high costs, inefficient bandwidth, low investment, outdated regulations (*MD*, pp. 207-220), or—as Helen Molnar illustrates—inadequate funding, few journalists and little training (*SPIC*, pp. 34-58). Size and poverty restrict diversity and other outcomes. Small islands, Ron Crocombe reminds us, will always be more influenced by outside forces than influential themselves (*SPIC*, pp. 15-33). Poverty and an

information divide are two sides of the same coin.

It is useful to remember that the role the media plays in society is not its alone; as Duncan argues—clergy, teachers, politicians, educators, health practitioners, business people and civil society can also facilitate transparency (*MD*, pp. 127) and awareness of important social issues.

The media everywhere has an important role to play. Aside from entertaining, it informs, educates and investigates. It is a watchdog. Media in DCs have the same roles, but the conditions under which they work may be very different because of poverty, illiteracy, population size and age, education and training deficits, urban biases, and poor communication with civil society. Additionally their governments may be unused to sharing power with their citizens or accepting criticism.

The goal of development might seem to be of a different order to that confronted in wealthy countries (whom we often consider as ‘developed’), but across humanity and within our single globe there are important features and issues that they share. Many of these are covered in these books—health, poverty, governance, economics, rule of law, and human rights. And everywhere, to lesser and greater extents, the

media remains torn between its target audience and the commitments of competition, ratings and commercial realities and the pressures of elites, businesses and governments.

But despite these general similarities, large differences exist between all countries, rich and poor. In many respects, *South Pacific Islands Communications* focuses more on the diversity apparent in the practice of Pacific island journalism.

David Robie reminds us that that the Pacific media is too complex to be dismissed as simply Westernised (*SPIC*, pp. 102). Shailendra Singh and Som Prakash impressively paint a media caught in the crossfire between elites using tradition, culture and the weight of the state to cling to power and their masses clamouring for political change and better living standards, all the while fending off intimidation and threats of government regulation and censorship (*SPIC*, pp. 119).

The Pacific media may be influenced by Western journalism, but many of its values such as transparency, equality and accountability should be more properly seen as universal values. Certainly they feature strongly in the work of many Pacific journalists as they confront unfamiliar conflict or post conflict situations (*SPIC*, pp. 129-131).

A similar story is told by Robert Iroga of media reporting during the Solomon Island's conflict (*SPIC*, pp. 152-174), by Kalafi Moala of the media's role in promoting democracy in Tonga (*SPIC*, pp. 175-185) and by Usha Sundar Harris in her tale of using media to draw together rural women separated by politics and culture (*SPIC*, pp. 186-205). Harris describes Fiji as possessing a vibrant media environment, and articles by Robie and Kalafi Moala also attest to the diversity that media presents even in small and isolated poor Pacific nations.

It does produce alternative voices. It does strive for greater professionalism. It can and does act to inform, educate and hold authorities to account. Contributors remind us that the media can be read in different ways; that if we focus simply on the victims of a dichotomous world, we miss the transformations and successes achieved by Pacific media, sometimes under impossible circumstances.