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# Editorial Free speech in Fiji

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Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

*Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

WHEN military strongman Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama staged his creeping coup d'état on 5 December 2006—Fiji's fourth in two decades—he was quick to declare: 'We will uphold media freedom' (cited in Foster, 2007). Barely two and a half years later, when he finished off the job with a putsch—dubbed 'coup 4.5' by some—and after having expelled three publishers, two New Zealand diplomats and five journalists over the intervening period, he told Radio New Zealand freedom of speech 'causes trouble' and must be curbed to allow the military government do its work (Bainimarama: Free speech 'causes trouble', 15 April 2009).

Initially, the news media challenged the regime with creative efforts at civil disobedience—the *Fiji Times* ran blank spaces for censored articles and a political cartoon while the *Daily Post* published satirical stories about having leftover *roti* for breakfast and catching a bus. But when this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, with the theme 'Diversity, identity and the media', went to press, journalists were facing the harsh reality of life after a censorship crackdown. Leading editors and journalists opted to be cautious following the gag and threats by authorities that they would be shut down if they stepped out of line. Not tolerating any dissent since martial law was declared on Good Friday, April 10, the regime ordered '*sulu* censors'—so-called because of the traditional Fijian garment some public officials wear—and police into newsrooms to check stories and broadcasts.

Unsurprisingly, Fiji turned its back on democracy after a Court of Appeal—comprising three Australian judges—reversed a lower court judgment and declared the post 2006 coup government illegal. The following day, the ailing President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, abrogated the 1997 constitution, sacked the judiciary, postponed elections until 2014 and imposed martial law for 30 days. Bainimarama was reinstated as prime minister. He reconstituted his cabinet and devalued the Fiji dollar by a fifth in a desperate bid to shore up the economy. Fiji was subsequently formally suspended from the Pacific

Islands Forum on May 2. Bainimarama ruled by decree, including media censorship and a legal ‘shield’ for any abuses by military and the police. Local journalists were told to cut out negative news and report ‘journalism of hope’—a strategy rejected by critics as propaganda. The regional news agency Pacnews, based in the capital of Suva and providing news on a cooperative basis to 16 countries, responded to threats by pulling the plug on all Fiji news. This prompted calls for the service to be relocated temporarily in Australia or New Zealand.

The Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), owner of Pacnews, refused to consider moving—at least not until a regional convention due in Vanuatu in July. A chorus of condemnation came from global media freedom organisations, including the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Sans Frontières (Paris) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York).

An RSF statement accused the regime of dealing a ‘mortal blow’ to press freedom in the nation of 890,000 people and ‘heading dangerously towards a Burmese-system in which the media are permanently subject to prior censorship’. (An absurd and unjust comparison with a state where journalists and civilians are killed with impunity). The Pacific Media Centre called on Bainimarama to ‘end this Orwellian era of ruthless censorship and intimidation’. Many Fiji islanders have turned to the blogs for their information (Foster, 2007), but only one—produced by former University of the South Pacific academic Crosbie Walsh—provided any serious analysis: [www.crosbiew.blogspot.com](http://www.crosbiew.blogspot.com). One local journalist told the PMC: ‘Journalism has sunk so low as a result of the rule by decree that a state radio reporter rang a leading economist and asked, ‘Can you say something positive about the 20 percent devaluation’. Isn’t that shocking?’

The remarkable simplicity and sensationalism that accompanied Australian and New Zealand reporting of the Fiji crisis with little understanding of the cultural and political complexities opened a second tier of debate about the quality—of lack of it—of foreign correspondence in the region. The Western definition of Article 19 is basically that *press freedom is freedom from government interference*. But there is another side to the coin, one that Pacific leaders, not just in Fiji, constantly toss at the media: *press responsibility*. That is equally blurred, but it does have positive attributes, such as nation-building and unity, and not sowing the seeds of ethnic dissent and polarisation, as some media are alleged to have done, such as *The Fiji Times*.

Among essential questions are about the media as a gatekeeper: Is freedom from government but not from ownership and corporate control genuine press freedom? What is too little freedom? What is too much freedom? What is the right amount of media freedom? Is freedom to consistently and systematically distort the message truly press freedom?

Some of these issues are addressed in various ways in the five commentaries of this edition. *Scoop* co-editor and former PMC chair **Selwyn Manning** examines the media's post 9/11 role in the context of diversity initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region and concludes it is no longer acceptable for media to simply report on crises and to focus on hostility. Today the demand is on journalists to give greater emphasis to the 'why and how' questions. In short, be part of the region's global solutions.

**Murray Masterton**, who founded the original journalism programme at the University of the South Pacific in 1987—at the time of Sitiveni Rabuka's first coup, reflects on the skills of being a foreign correspondent and coping with culture clash. He concludes that today's foreign correspondents face similar cross-cultural problems as they did in the past. One section deals with 'journalists' arrogance'—and he could easily have been writing about Fiji (although the article had a Singapore angle).

**Sandra Kailahi**, a journalist/presenter with Television New Zealand's digital channel TVNZ7, writes about 'Pacifinness'—and telling 'our side of the story'. Cartoonist **Malcolm Evans**, who frequently sketches on diversity issues, contributes an intriguing article called 'Drawing fire', points out self-censorship is perhaps a bigger threat than is generally realised. As he puts it: 'So just as one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, so the attitudes of cartoonists are likely to have a similar range.'

**Patrick Craddock's** 'Fragments from a Fiji coup diary' is a fascinating insight into the inner workings of the Bainimarama regime's advisers. Having lived in Fiji for 11 years in three spells, Craddock was in the unique position of seeing things from all sides from personal experience. He worked at the University of the South Pacific during both the 2000 and 2006 coups, and then later returned to Suva to join the People's Charter process as a social media educator. He also makes a personal plea to Bainimarama to return Fiji to democracy.

In the first research article, **David Robie** offers an overview of media coverage of the region and the changing face of diversity media in the light of the dramatic demographic changes facing New Zealand over the next two

decades, especially in Auckland. The transcript of a public cross-cultural diversity forum follows, featuring insights from Columbia School of Journalism's **Arlene Notoro Morgan, Ana Tapiata, Bharat Jamnadas, Taualeo'o Stephen Stehlin** and **Pere Maitai**. The forum was organised with the support of the NZ Human Rights Commission. **Grant Hannis** deconstructs the 'Asian Angst' controversy in the context of persistent negative media portrayals of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand. **Raymond Nairn, Tim McCreanor, Jenny Rankine, Angela Moewaka Barnes, Frank Pega** and **Amanda Gregory** examine 'one-sided, inaccurate, unbalanced and unfair' coverage of Māori iwi in the Lake Taupo air space issue.

Finally, in the themed section, Race Relations Commissioner **Joris de Bres** reflects on the so-called Clydesdale report on Pacific Islands migration and raises issues about media and academic responsibility.

In separate articles, **Rosemary Brewer** offers a case study from three of New Zealand's women's magazines—*NZ Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Day* and *New Idea*—about the separation of Paul McCartney and Heather Mills, and **Bill Rosenberg** provides his second—and final for the time being—New Zealand national media survey.

Happy reading for this World Media Freedom Day (May 3) edition. As this issue went to press, a group of Pacific editors and journalists were meeting in Apia, Samoa, for a UNESCO-funded workshop to work out a strategy defending diversity and dealing with authoritarian regimes.

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## **References**

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