
Editorial A viable public sphere?

THIS EDITION is the third occasion the *Pacific Journalism Review* has published several of the papers presented at an Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) Public Right to Know (PR2K) conference. The PR2K conferences, which have been held regularly since 2000, have mostly focused on how the right of people to know what is happening has been frustrated by legal, political and social constraints on the media and access to information in the Asia and Pacific regions.

While these key concerns remain, in 2007 and 2008 the conference organisers challenged participants to present papers which explored how contemporary media developments are shaping and being shaped by new relationships with the public. The 2008 conference addressed the broad theme of 'Giving the People what they Want', designed to raise questions about the relationship between the media and the public, including to what extent satisfying and stimulating audience interest can threaten legitimate demands for privacy and media accountability.

In his article, 'Let them eat cake', published in this issue, **John Carr** directly addresses the concerns of the conference organisers that giving the public what they want 'might be a core factor which disrupts this right to know'. He focuses on journalism as storytelling and suggests that television news and current affairs audiences are often being told *old stories* or narrative templates that bind citizens together in shared past and future imaginings. He reminds us that while narrative templates can be harnessed to engineer social divisiveness, he concludes that those who seek to develop a 'viable public sphere that is equipped to address critical social, political and environmental issues need to consider narrative templates which engender in people a sense of participation in shared story telling'.

Ruth Skilbeck reflects on her own practice in producing two pieces of arts journalism about two exiled writers. Focusing on the relationship between the journalist and her subject, she explores the impact of exile on the writers, the empathetic impact of their trauma on their advocates and the impacts of investigating trauma on the researcher. Her work seeks to develop new forms of journalism research beyond those of the conventional scholar.

Joy Cameron-Dow argues that easy accessibility to online media publishing has increased public access to information about crime. By removing the

gatekeeper role of the media, online communication about crime potentially threatens the privacy of victims and suspects.

Jahnabi Das, Akhteruz Zaman and Wendy Bacon, in an article on environmental journalism in Bangladesh and **Kinley Wangmo and John Cokley** (submitted directly to *PJR*), who survey media developments in Bhutan, remind us how Western media and academics' talk about the 'future of the media' often takes little account of the different media histories of developing countries. Although newspapers have a long history in Bangladesh, they are still growing in circulation, with more than 45 million people still illiterate, whereas in Bhutan the development of newspapers and online media are occurring together. While bringing Bhutanese people unparalleled amounts of information, new media can also threaten community culture and values.

The urgency in the coverage of the environment in Bangladesh (when compared to that of Australian media) and the spasmodic attention paid to the climate change threat in the Pacific reminds us that if people in Australia and New Zealand are to comprehend the perspective of those facing environmental devastation, historic gaps and neglect of most parts of Asia and Pacific by Western media, will need to change. In the region, 2009 has been the Pacific Year of Climate Change and a critical Climate Change Conference was held in Copenhagen during October. The urgent need for global policies addressing climate change highlights the responsibilities and choices facing journalists. In giving the people what they want, who are those people? And what if advertisers, media corporations or editors don't choose to tell the story?

One heartening change, however, that comes with the development of online media, is that if audiences want to know what is going on elsewhere they can, more than ever before, access online local media in countries whose stories are neglected, even if they do not speak local languages.

In April, a military backed regime imposed strict censorship in Fiji. Publishers have been expelled and journalists have been detained, threatened and harassed. **David Robie** examines two reviews of Fiji's self-regulatory mechanisms, which were completed before the Easter putsch, and compares them with an independent review by the New Zealand Press Council. He concludes that in the acrimonious debate around the Fiji reviews, there was little acknowledgement by the Fiji media that it does have shortcomings and that a strategic review could point to positive directions for a more accountable future.



MARIA TIMON/PACIFIC CALLING PARTNERSHIP

Spasmodic attention paid to the climate change threat in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. Pictured: Children climbing on dead mangroves in Kiribati.

John Roberts and **Chris Nash** come up with a different perspective on the reporting of the controversial issue of a safe injecting room by exploring the use of sources quoted by journalists in two Sydney newspapers. They find that although there were no complaints of bias, the journalists' selection of sources was aligned with the editorial position of the newspaper in relation to the introduction of the room. They explore the implications of this finding for an understanding of the role of the media in relation to political maneuverings between source organisations before the introduction of the room.

Lastly, **Marni Cordell** in her pilot study evaluating claims about the decline or otherwise of investigative journalism, finds that the ABC's *Four Corners* flagship current affairs show, which bills itself as investigative journalism, has room for improvement. The production of investigative journalism is part of the core mission of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism and it is to this theme that the ACIJ will return in its 2010 PR2K activities.

During 2009, the ACIJ has held a range of activities around conflict in the Middle-East, Sri Lanka and Burma. The International Committee of the

Red Cross (ICRC), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the ACIJ hosted a conference titled 'Reporting Wars: Challenge and Responsibilities'. Papers from this conference and a companion ICRC conference at New Zealand's Massey University will form the core of the May edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* in 2010. In August, the ACIJ also organised a sell-out Sydney screening of the film *Balibo*, about the disappearance—and murder—of six Australia-based journalists (including a New Zealander) during the 1975 invasion of East Timor by Indonesian forces. The screening raised more than \$2700 for the International News Safety Institute (INSI), which provides protection for journalists working in dangerous situations. ACIJ board member and 2008 director **Tony Maniaty** was involved in all these activities. A review of his book *Shooting Balibo*, reflecting on his own experiences in East Timor and the making of the film, is published in this edition and *Balibo* will be featured in the next issue.

Since our first joint ACIJ-*Pacific Journalism Review* issue in April 2004, the Pacific Media Centre and the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism have formed an alliance for more joint activities and research. As director of the ACIJ and a member of the board of *PJR*, I thank *PJR* editor David Robie for the opportunity to publish our papers and welcome the new, more formal relationship between our two centres.

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