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# Pacific

Journalism Review



## GOVERNANCE, DISINFORMATION AND TRAINING

EDITED BY DAVID ROBIE AND PHILIP CASS

- + Government loudspeakers: Indonesian media and West Papua
- + Intersections of media influence: 'Alt right' and climate crisis
- + Media ethics in the Pacific: Marshall Islands case study
- + Democracy and media in Australia, Fiji, New Zealand and Malaysia
- + Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and Pacific churches

PLUS

SPECIAL REPORT: The world according to China

PHOTOESSAY: Refugee migration *Kasun Ubayasiri*

FRONTLINE: 'Voice of the voiceless': PMC case study

**DOUBLE EDITION**



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# EDITORIAL: He waka eke noa

**O**UR ROOTS are firmly based in the Wansolwara—the Pacific—but this edition truly reflects our global range of interests, with contributions from authors in Indonesia, Malaysia, Fiji, Hawai'i, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. We are delighted to bring you a range of global perspectives on the media and journalism and to connect scholars and practitioners, covering everything from conspiracy theories and corruption to newsroom practice, employment, training and much more in between.

Although we are separated geographically we all share common interests and common concerns. As this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, once again produced under the auspices of the Asia Pacific Media Network, goes out, the world continues to face threats from war, climate change, disease and the resurgence of rightwing regimes. Journalists are faced with far more dangerous working environments and uncertain employment, while academics are faced with closures of departments, cuts to funding and research and an apparent lack of understanding about the value of tertiary education from those who hold the purse strings. As we went to press, news came of the closure of a 50-year-old journalism degree course—at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, which has produced some of Australia's top journalists (McCutcheon, 2023).

Despite these threats, we can take comfort in knowing that as journalists and academics we are not alone and that through this journal's own global forum we can continue to share ideas and insights and strengthen our contributions to industry, society and the academy. There is a Māori saying: 'He waka eke noa,' which means 'We are all in this together.' *Pacific Journalism Review* is our waka—our canoe—and we are proud to have you along, whether as a contributor or a reader, on the voyage.

As usual we have a strong focus on the Pacific, with articles about media ethics in the Marshall Islands, issues of social media and political governance in Fiji and questions of how free media really are in the Islands in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also have a strong contribution from Australia, with examinations of a successful capstone project at Curtin University by **Kathryn Shine** and an unpacking of post-COVID-19 media freedom in Fiji, Palau, Solomon Islands and Tonga amid challenges over disinformation with a team of panellists led by Australian National University researchers Amanda Watson and Shailendra Singh. From the University of Sydney, Sanjay Ramesh applies democratic deficit theory to explain why the failure of political governance has been commonplace in Fiji where lack of media freedom, democratic bargaining, political transparency and accountability has led to political dysfunction and political strife.

Once again we include a Photoessay, featuring the work of Queensland



academic **Kasun Ubayasiri** from Griffith University, who presents a portfolio of photographs of members of a community who worked for the release of 120 refugees locked up in an urban motel in Brisbane.

From Aotearoa New Zealand, we have a historical study by Radio New Zealand executive editor **Jeremy Rees** on the way journalism education and training used to be carried out in this country. Drawing on the records of the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) and local journalism training bodies, he shows how training used to be tied to the needs of the industry rather than being dominated by more theoretical and academic interests.

**Gavin Ellis** argues in ‘Media, the courts, and terrorism: Lessons from the Christchurch mosque attacks’ that the way the judiciary and the New Zealand media cooperated on their coverage of the terrorist attack on the two Christchurch mosques offer valuable lessons on balancing the right to a fair trial and a desire to stop the courts being used as a forum for white supremacist propaganda.

Conspiracy theories have continued to play an unwelcome part in political and social life in New Zealand, the Pacific and Australia and we have several articles touching on this theme, including a review of **Byron Clark’s** new book, *Fear*. Clark himself has partnered with **Emanuel Stoakes** from the University of Canterbury to analyse the 2021 ‘Groundswell’ protests, in which locally-based influencers and ‘alt-media’ platforms disseminated conspiracist, unscientific narratives on COVID-19 and global warming. Elsewhere, editor **Philip Cass** examines the role such ideas and the churches played in influencing Pacific Islander communities in Auckland about vaccination.

In our Special Report ‘The world according to China: Capturing and analysing the global media influence strategies of a superpower,’ **Johan Lidberg** from Monash University leads a team of researchers analysing Chinese strategies seeking to influence global media through surveys of officials from journalism unions in 87 countries.

In ‘Government loudspeakers How Indonesian media amplifies the state’s narrative towards the West Papua Movement,’ **Justito Adiprasetyo** shows how six Indonesian mass media organisations have reacted to the government’s labelling of West Papuan pro-independence groups as terrorists.

In other coverage of the Pacific, **Ann Auman** from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa examines the role of ethical values and practices among Marshall Islands journalists, which also provides insight into their perception of their role in society. This is based on a case study of a journalism workshop organised in June 2022 by the new Pacific Media Institute established in Majuro, hosted by the College of the Marshall Islands, with funding by the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS).

From ANU, Jope Tarai provides a study of the impact of social media on the 2022 Fiji General Election, expanding on his previous work with the 2014

and 2018 elections. Also examining the impact of social media on the public sphere, Sara Chinnasamy and Ingrid Volkmer of the University of Melbourne share the results of research involving news journalists of both traditional media and digital news portals in Malaysia.

In our Frontline section, founding editor **David Robie** looks back on the work of AUT's Pacific Media Centre as the 'Voice of the voiceless' in his study of its academic and research advocacy and activism. It highlights the role the PMC played in nurturing young Asia-Pacific student journalists and providing them with the opportunity and encouragement to become confident community advocates.

Our Review section covers a wide range of titles, including examinations of two new books on Radio Australia, Australia's public voice in Asia and the Pacific. We also examine a biography of iconic New Zealand peace campaigner and researcher Owen Wilkes, who gained fame in New Zealand, Australia and Scandinavia for his investigation into American military bases and communication facilities.

And finally, this edition also has its moments of sadness as we mark the deaths of three remarkable women, **Tui O'Sullivan**, **Jill Jolliffe** and **Shirley Shackleton**.

Tui O'Sullivan (Te Rarawa) was a founding member of the Pacific Media Centre advisory board and an advocate for *Pacific Journalism Review* from 2007 until she retired in 2018. She was the first woman and the first Māori appointed to a permanent position at what is now Auckland University of Technology in 2000. At AUT, where she worked for more than 40 years, she developed the first Women on Campus group. She helped establish the newspaper *Password*, a publication introducing new English speakers to New Zealand society and culture. She taught courses on the Treaty of Waitangi when the treaty was a subversive idea. Outgoing PMC chair Professor Camille Nakhid said in a message to Tui's whānau:

AUT will never again see the likes of a person with the mana of Tui O'Sullivan. The Pacific Media Centre will never know again the unwavering support of a kuia like Tui. The strength, guidance, and sincerity that Tui brought to the Centre made it a beacon of advocacy for Pacific peoples and nations in Oceania. From the very beginning, Tui's wisdom and fierceness have led the way for the Centre to survive and to thrive at AUT, and to be respected in Aotearoa and around the world. Tui stood up against policies and practices that would have compromised the mission of the Centre. (Nakhid, 2023)

Former PMC chair Isabella Rasch added, 'Tui advocated passionately for all equity groups; it was Tui at the lead of many of our now embedded traditional equity events . . . [She] established scholarships for Māori and Pasifika students that did not exist before.' Founding *PJR* editor David Robie recalled, 'Tui was an extraordinary and very special person. I felt really privileged to have

her watching our back in the struggle for diversity equity. Her enthusiasm and dedication were an inspiration for us all. She was especially supportive to our students on projects or internships, whether in Beijing, Jakarta, Manila, Suva or right here in Aotearoa.’ Aroha mai, aroha atu Tui.

Journalist and author Jill Jolliffe’s work took her around the world, including 16 years in Portugal, reporting on corruption and injustices, including the killing of five Australian, British and New Zealand journalists at Bálibo on the eve of the Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste in 1975. Her commitment to East Timorese independence endured over decades. Paying tribute, Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão, said: ‘Jill was an activist, a rebel and a fighter . . . She is one of us.’

Shirley Shackleton’s journalist husband Greg was killed by Indonesian special forces in Timor-Leste in October 1975 and she became a campaigner for justice for the journalists murdered—the Bálibo Five. She saw the Australian government’s treatment of the killings as a litmus test of Australia’s East Timor policy. She continued to pressure the government for a Federal Police investigation of those responsible for the deaths, culminating with Australian politicians and diplomats being put in the dock and scrutinised under oath in a Coronial Inquiry in 2007.

Next year *Pacific Journalism Review* celebrates 30 years of publishing, a remarkable milestone. Watch our website for news of our plans.

*DR PHILIP CASS*

*Editor*

*Pacific Journalism Review*

[www.pjreview.info](http://www.pjreview.info)

## **References**

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# MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS ALLIANCE

# JOURNALIST CODE OF ETHICS

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## GUIDANCE CLAUSE

Basic values often need interpretation and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.

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Authorised by Paul Murphy  
CEO, Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

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- 1 Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis. Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply.
- 2 Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.
- 3 Aim to attribute information to its source. Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motives and any alternative attributable source. Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances.
- 4 Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit, to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.
- 5 Disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism. Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.
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- 9 Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed.
- 10 Do not plagiarise.
- 11 Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.
- 12 Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors.

# Intersections of influence

## Radical conspiracist 'alt-media' narratives and the climate crisis in Aotearoa

**Abstract:** This article explores a neglected, but important aspect of the misinformation challenge posed by some alternative media platforms in Aotearoa: namely, the spread of denialist or denialist-adjacent discourse on climate change, featuring messaging which aligns with the broad themes of medical misinformation and anti-vaccination propaganda seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will demonstrate through a case study of Aotearoa New Zealand's 2021 'Groundswell' protests, locally-based influencers and 'alt-media' platforms have disseminated conspiracist, unscientific narratives on both COVID and global warming to audiences likely to be receptive to these associations. The authors identify some of the tropes and narratives circulated by influencers during the demonstrations as bearing the fingerprints of radical right-wing discourse originating in the United States. The case is made that there is a high degree of cross-pollination of ideas at play within the phenomenon of anti-authority, conspiracist protest movements in Aotearoa, of which 'Groundswell' was an instructive example (uniting rural protesters with anti-vaccine demagogues); the discourse is infused with emotionally potent falsehoods and American-style 'culture wars' language. While these narratives remain relatively fringe, their toxic messaging may become more influential as more people turn to 'alt-media' sources for news. Indeed, the extent to which some of the influencers and language from this movement are edging closer to the outer boundaries of mainstream media and politics may represent an early warning sign for the future trajectory of this phenomenon. Finally, the authors tentatively pose some recommendations for professional media engagement with the growth of 'viral' content that misrepresents critical social challenges.

**Keywords:** alternative media, case study, climate change, climate emergency, climate refugees, conspiracy theory, culture wars, disinformation, fake news, Groundswell, New Zealand, protests, social media, toxic politics

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## Introduction

**T**HE CLIMATE crisis in 2023 is evident everywhere. From the disastrous Cyclone Gabrielle in the northeast of Aotearoa New Zealand in January to the impact of severe weather events in Vanuatu, its effects are being felt with a vengeance in the Pacific region. Indeed, Pacific Island Nations (PINs) have been described as being on the ‘front lines’ of the battle against climate change (Parsons, 2022). Yet even at this late stage, there are voices inside Aotearoa New Zealand, some of whom enjoy a growing political profile, that are at variance with the overwhelming majority of scientific opinion on climate.

The trends of climate decline suggest that, over coming years and decades, the South Pacific will be faced with cascading social and political challenges as a result of a permanent emergency of environmental destruction. These may, for some Pacific states, rise to the level of an existential challenge, producing outflows of refugees, many of whom may seek to find a new home in Aotearoa.

A sustained flow of asylum-seekers to New Zealand’s shores could elicit a radical nativist politics that seizes, in part, on the ‘alt-right’ style foundations of an increasingly influential, albeit fringe, political discourse currently purveyed by some of the groups that will appear in this research. The seeds that are being sown in the public sphere at present by these actors, their polemics and ersatz networks, could function as communicative preconditioners for a future toxic politics that could move more deeply into the mainstream.

A major ingredient for this kind of embryonic resentment politics would be the instrumentalisation of the injustice of climate destruction, especially as it begins to dramatically affect the lives of privileged New Zealanders. The reality that modest-sized Pacific countries, including Aotearoa New Zealand, are set to face a turbulent and difficult future due to the failure of the international community to reduce their emissions, is a frustrating state of affairs. Like much of the world, New Zealanders are set to bear the burden of a crisis chiefly not of their own making.

An anti-science politics that looks for scapegoats rather than solutions could capitalise on storytelling around ‘globalists’ engaged in sinister plots, tying this to immigration and asylum-seeking, as has been the case in parts of the far-right for decades (for example, the idea of a Jewish conspiracy to flood Europe with Muslim migrants in a bid to weaken the hegemony of the ‘white’ race, see Winston, 2021). In Europe, relatively mainstream conservative political parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and ex-UKIP leader Nigel Farage’s successor project, the Brexit Party, have come close to laundering some of the tropes of this narrative (Walker, 2019b), while engaging in various degrees of climate denial. Farage, who has denied being a conspiracy theorist, has nonetheless appeared on far-right talk shows such as Alex Jones’ *Infowars*, (Walker, 2019a) a programme that has links to the New Zealand-based conspiracist platform, *Counterspin* (Clark, 2022).

While it is not possible to predict whether or not Aotearoa's politicians will succumb to the temptations of populist expediency in precisely this manner, it can be reasonably expected that the accompanying social, economic and mental health stresses of a worsening climate crisis will provoke a search for answers and some form of a politics of blame. We contend that the likelihood of a future toxic political response to the social and economic shocks wrought by protracted climate disruption is increased by the presence of ready-made stories about elite conspiracies that are themselves highly derivative of long-standing paranoid themes that have been amplified across swathes of social media, particularly during the COVID pandemic.

For this reason, we argue that more critical attention should be directed at this phenomenon, especially the messaging alignment and network intersection that our case study reveals; further research is needed on this topic and in related fields. The authors of this article believe that sunlight will be the best disinfectant: dangerous conspiracist lies need to be addressed robustly in the here and now, their networks (and funding streams) investigated; any overseas links need to be exposed, with their claims debunked rationally and comprehensively in open access forums—long before a movement based on anti-science demagoguery establishes itself further.

## **Background**

The roots of climate denialism on the radical right run both deep and shallow. Shallow, because they are based on polemics that lack any serious intellectual foundation; and deep, because the ideas that, as we shall see, have become the staples of the movement, have some historical legacy. Our research suggests that much Anglophone right-wing opposition to action to minimise climate damage can be traced to paranoid right-wing campaigns against the United Nations by groups such as the John Birch Society in the 1960s. Much contemporary discourse on 'globalism' in anti-vaxx and climate-rejecting communities appears to echo many of the themes developed during that period (Dickinson, 2021). An ideological 'chain of custody' can also be traced from the Birchers to the Trumpists in contemporary American political life (Mann, 2022). The lines of continuity between the past and present suggest that conspiracist thought of this kind is largely a socially constructed phenomenon, in which key ideas recur across periods of time, not because of their veracity, but due to their emotive appeal to marginalised individuals and groups that share a common distrust of authority, turning certain tropes and terms into shibboleths that are loaded with social meaning. The algorithmically-enabled echo chambers of social media likely play a role in making these ideas more visible to people who might otherwise not have accessed such content in the analogue era of mass communication.

The John Birch Society (JBS) appeared on the American political scene in

the late 1950s (Mulloy, 2014). The emergence coincided with a period of intense cold war anti-communism among parts of the US political right, which had found expression in events such as the Army-McCarthy trials earlier in the decade. JBS's opposition to the United Nations (UN), which included a campaign to get the US to leave the organisation, was based on the belief that the world body was part of a covert Communist plot to establish a one world government that would culminate in a tyrannical international police state (Mulloy, 2014, p. 142). Among the claims used to bolster this narrative was the suggestion that accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss's involvement in the setting up of the United Nations was somehow evidence that the organisation was deeply infiltrated, or even controlled, by the Communists (Mulloy, 2014). More generally, the JBS expressed opposition to the United States joining supranational organisations—not just the UN, but also security structures such as NATO—dubbing these actions as America willingly limiting its ability to pursue its own national interests on the global stage. (Mulloy, 2014).

The John Birch Society outlasted the Cold War, yet continued to promote the conspiracy theory of a covert campaign by the UN to establish a one world government that would administer tyranny over the sovereign peoples of the earth. In so doing, the group seized on relatively obscure agreements, such as 'UN Agenda 21', a highly aspirational, non-binding blueprint for international cooperation on future environmental security, which emerged out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, as evidence of such grand conspiracies (John Birch Society: Agenda 21 is stealth plot, 2011).

The group persisted in their promotion of this claim for decades, while seeing other far-right movements borrow their narrative on the subject, for example, campaigner Tom DeWeese, who would host annual conferences on the issue which brought together influencers on the American radical conservative side (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). 'There is nothing on, in, over, or under the Earth that doesn't fall within the purview of some part of Agenda 21,' read a 2011 article in the JBS magazine, *The New American* (Hahn, 2022). In the early 2010s the right-wing populist Tea Party movement echoed these polemics, with spokespeople describing Agenda 21 as an 'an all-encompassing prescription for regulating every aspect of human activity' that will 'cause fuel prices to rise, businesses to leave the United States, remove you from your land, take your property, manipulate our economy, take away our Constitutional Rights and depopulate our planet' (Berrey, 2020). The influence of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party led to anti-Agenda 21 legislation being introduced in 26 states (passed in five) and the party adding an anti-Agenda 21 position to its presidential platform. In 2012, the Republican National Committee (RNC) produced a resolution that attacked the putative dangers of the initiative, decrying its 'insidious' nature, aimed at a 'socialist/communist redistribution of wealth' (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014).



Berrey (2020) describes this mainstreaming of the Tea Party movement as ‘indicative of both the taking of American conservatism to the extreme right and the burgeoning transnational far-right backlash against multilateralism and multiculturalism’, which would find amplified expression in the Trump campaign and Presidency of later years. (The former President was himself a vocal climate sceptic during his time in office). But Trump was apparently merely building on, or exploiting, the shifting ground of increasingly mainstream ‘alt right’ currents.

Agenda 2021 has been superseded by Agenda 2030, a new UN initiative that was adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. Agenda 2030 outlines 17 ‘sustainable development goals’. Like its predecessor, the project is aspirational; these goals are not legally binding and there are no consequences for nations that fail to meet them. All UN member states, including New Zealand, have ratified these goals (World Bank, 2019).

In Aotearoa, conspiracy theorist and aspiring politician Billy Te Kahika built a sizable following on social media in 2020 with live streamed videos promoting narratives that incorporated Agenda 2021 and Agenda 2030 into his public messaging on coronavirus, a prominent example of the importation of paranoid US political rhetoric into this country (Te Kahika, 2020). Some early media coverage of Te Kahika portrayed these concerns as legitimate, with the possible effect of laundering the information through these portals. In June 2020 *Te Ao Māori News* (Nathan, 2020) published an article headlined: ‘Calls for independent overview as concerns mount over legislation fast tracking’ that quoted Te Kahika extensively, describing Agenda 2030 as a foreign programme being implemented without proper consultation. Te Kahika called it

a complete challenge to our Kiwiana. It’s a complete challenge to the Treaty of Waitangi, it’s a complete challenge to Māori as tāngata whenua with inherent cultural practices and cultural rights to exercise those cultural practices. (Nathan, 2020)

This interpretation posits the implementation of Agenda 2030’s sustainable development goals in opposition to Tino Rangatiratanga; in the process, appropriating the language of indigenous resistance to globalisation through the filter of American far right discourse.

Te Kahika’s view was challenged by other Māori media. In July 2020, *Waatea News* (UN 2030 agenda fears based on nonsense, 2020) spoke with Tahu Kukutai from the University of Waikato’s National Institute for Demographic and Economic Analysis, who criticised ‘people in positions of power who willingly and knowingly feed mistruths into our community’, such as Te Kahika. Kukutai noted that if there is criticism of Agenda 2030 from Indigenous peoples ‘it is that it does not give them space to advocate solutions based on their own knowledge and world views’. The article represented an example of media

discourse engaging critically with the narratives propagated by Te Kahika in a manner that is arguably antidotal to the previous case; nonetheless, the existence of such conversation in Māori media represented a problematic encroachment of conspiracist discourse into mainstream media.

After the political party co-led by Te Kahika, Advance New Zealand, failed to enter Parliament in the 2020 election, two new organisations were formed by former Advance candidates. Voices for Freedom initially focused primarily on spreading misinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccine (Clark, 2023), but has expanded to other conspiracy theory discourse, including on the topic of climate change; a practice which has found a dedicated platform with the launch of the online media outlet, Reality Check Radio (The climate agenda, rural crime, truancy & ballooning govt departments, n.d.). During the same post-election period, Agriculture Action Group (AAG) (which has since disbanded) produced conspiracist content, aimed at rural New Zealanders, with an agenda explicitly denying climate change and opposing environmental regulations (Clark, 2023). AAG were founded on election night 2020 by a group of rural South Island residents who had all been involved in Advance New Zealand.

While it is difficult to estimate with precision the following that each of these movements attracted, it is reported (Davison, 2021) that meetings of the now defunct AAG drew hundreds of attendees at some of its events across locations in various parts of the country, suggesting a not insignificant constituency for the views that they were disseminating. This research has been unable to access data on the size of Reality Check Radio's audience. However, as we shall see, phenomena such as the 'Groundswell' movement indicate a degree of disparate political alignment, or even cooperation, between political sympathisers and fellow-travellers from either group.

### **Groundswell as a case study of denialist narrative intersection**

The Groundswell event was one of the largest political protests in recent memory by New Zealand's agricultural community, which occurred at a period of time in which the Labour government, led by then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, was beginning to see poor poll performance, as its initially popular public health response to the COVID pandemic was drawing a growing backlash. For this reason, it occurred at an advantageous time for conspiracist agitators to appeal to growing public frustration and seek common cause with other groups.

The measure of relative success in achieving an alignment between these causes marks Groundswell out as a significant example, and thus a good case study, of the ways in which a convergence of interests led to apparent cooperation between disparate protest groups, some of whom employed the language of US-style 'culture wars' and anti-government rhetoric when promulgating their views. Groundswell also contained elements of a 'red-brown-green' (far-left/far-right

/'hippie') alliance that was reportedly on display in the parliamentary occupation that followed in early 2022, and the gathering of protesters in support of visiting British anti-trans activist Posie Parker in March 2023, with accompanying partisan media debate following each of these events, which magnified social media furore. In this respect, Groundswell was, arguably, a harbinger of things to come. It may prove to be a predictor of yet further developments.

It should be noted, however, that these relationships did not form spontaneously. Prior to Groundswell, there was evidence of message alignment and cooperation between the aforementioned Agriculture Action Group (AAG) and alternative media, which continued during the event. For example, AAG co-founder Heather Meri Pennycook appeared on ANZAC Day, April 2021, on the first episode of *Counterspin Media*, a New Zealand based talk show originally streaming on GTV, a network known for disseminating disinformation (Clark, 2022). Pennycook made the claim that climate change was 'theoretical' and alleged a sinister motive behind environmental regulations. 'What's the hidden agenda to decimate the agricultural industry?', she asked. 'Stalin did it, look at your history. You want to bring in communism; you take out farmers first,' she added.

In so doing, she echoed the catastrophising, sensationalist language of her hosts, while stressing, in contradiction to the overwhelming majority of qualified climate experts, that there was no proof of global warming, adding that AAG would be putting out 'evidence' to support this on their website. No evidence that disproves the scientific consensus on climate is yet to emerge (Clark, 2023). She augmented this misinformation by claiming that the government was imposing (non-existent) emergency provisions targeting the agriculture sector (Clark, 2023) in an attempt to tackle climate change. From there, she pivoted to make the assertion that such actions were typical of governments that wanted to impose communism, with farmers being thus on the implicit frontline against the threat she was evoking. Adding to the misinformation, during the interview, host Kelvyn Alp made the claim that New Zealand's 2020 election was 'rigged', as there was supposedly no way 'South Island farmers' would vote for a government doing the things that Pennycook claimed. This incident represented an acute example of the intersection of misinformation and denialism on several related themes; at least one of which echoed Trumpian rhetoric (on rigged elections) seen in the United States.

As already noted, when active, AAG hosted meetings throughout the provinces, at times attracting attendance of up to 200 people (Davison, 2021). Mainstream media coverage of the group correctly portrayed them as an outfit promoting disinformation. For example, *The Otago Daily Times* (Davison, 2021) quoted Otago Federated Farmers president Mark Patterson, who attended an AAG meeting, as saying: 'Pretty early on there were some wild conspiracy theories being peddled, regarding the United Nations' Agenda 21, and that organisation's

leading of a shadowy global cabal dictating to our government.’ Patterson noted that the group was playing on rural residents’ concerns and grievances while pushing their own agenda (Davison, 2021). The *ODT* also quoted Pennycook as saying: ‘Some of the facts we present can cause a cognitive dissonance because they sound so insane. That makes it easy for people, like Mr Patterson, to twist what we’re saying and label it as “conspiracy theory”.’ These quotes represent further evidence of not only the appearance of AAG discourse in parts of the media landscape (albeit with a more critical framing), but the way in which the AAG were appearing to link conspiracy themes to more specific domestic popular concerns among the rural community.

In commentary published in *The Southland Times*, Clutha mayor Bryan Cadogan, who had also attended an AAG meeting, commented on what he described as the ‘careful manipulation’ of the audience by AAG, in which the speakers sought to connect ‘legitimate issues to extreme political agendas, and spicing things up along the way with calls that undermined the very fabric of our society, deriding virtually every institution that upholds law and order’. A damning assessment.

Andy Thompson, host of *The Muster*, a rural news programme broadcast on Hokonui Radio, dedicated airtime to criticising the group for the disinformation that they were promoting after ‘going through their Facebook page and chasing up some of the nonsense they’re spouting’, which included ‘anti-climate change nonsense, COVID conspiracy nonsense, anti-vax nonsense...talking about the fact that meat is going to be banned and Bill Gates is buying up as much farmland as he can so he can stop the production of meat, y’know, this is just nonsense.’ (Clark 2023). These examples, cited by Thompson, suggest the infusion of narratives popular in the US conspiracy scene imported into discourse about the New Zealand rural experience.

The AAG’s inciteful activity went beyond mere talk. They threw their support behind the ‘Howl of a Protest’ event organised by Groundswell in July 2021. The organisation had been formed to oppose government regulation around freshwater and biodiversity, as well as winter grazing rules, and, in particular, the government’s vehicle emissions ‘feebate’ scheme, a plan for discounts on low emission vehicles that would be offset by levies on those with high emissions (branded a ‘ute tax’ by opponents, (Clark, 2023)).

In the lead up to the protest event *The Spinoff* questioned Groundswell co-founder Bryce McKenzie about AAG, and quoted him as saying:

They’re involved in spreading the message about [the protest], we certainly know who they are, but we’re not aligned with them. They say a lot of good things, it’s just some of the things [they say] that we probably stand a wee bit distant from. (Braae, 2021)

While McKenzie made an obvious effort to project distance from the group, he also acknowledged their influence within the movement. On a similar (and less conciliatory) note, *The New Zealand Herald* (Ryder, 2021) reported Federated Farmers national president Andrew Hoggard as saying there was a real risk of the agricultural sector being made out to look like ‘a bunch of fringe nutters’, observing that a big concern was offensive signage being brought to the protests, which would do more harm than good. (That concern turned out to be well-founded, as protesters turned up with signs reading ‘Free NZ from bitch rule’, ‘Cindy→Stalin’, ‘Black utes matter’, and ‘Jacinda Kiwis do not want Communism!’ Members of Voices for Freedom also turned up at the Auckland demonstration with signs advertising their website.) The extent to which the group was apparently influencing demonstrators embedded within a wider protest movement, suggests that Hoggard had a solid basis for his concerns.

During the nationwide event, Chris Miles, organiser of the Hastings protest (who has no known close ties to AAG), made a speech with rhetoric comparable to some of the more controversial placards, telling the crowd that New Zealand is on the brink of ‘being taken down a socialist plug hole’. His speech, which claimed that New Zealand may ‘end up like Zimbabwe or Venezuela’ if the country was not on its guard, was quoted by Stuff (Sharpe, 2021). While it is unclear what prompted these comments, the overlap with AAG narratives could be indicative of the disinhibiting force of extreme language on relatively mundane local issues.

While mainstream media provided the organisers of Groundswell with the opportunity to distance themselves from AAG, disinformation channels provided coverage of the ‘Howl of a Protest’ in a way that suggested common goals and beliefs between the disparate groups involved, a suggestion that will have furthered the impression of a common cause. *Counterspin*, in a broadcast covering the event, interviewed Rural Advocacy Network chairman Jamie McFadden, who was also one of Groundswell’s national coordinators, and Grey District mayor Tania Gibson. In the conversation, McFadden appeared at times to be unsure what he had gotten himself into by agreeing to the discussion, yet ended up reinforcing the *Counterspin* narrative with some of his answers. When host Kelvyn Alp asserted: ‘You are the industry most at risk of being completely obliterated’, McFadden hesitated before saying: ‘it is being obliterated’ and, stating that that ‘traditional farming families’ are being pushed off the land in favour of corporate farms, overseas owners and carbon forestry (Clark, 2023). ‘It’s almost as though they want to get the traditional farming families off the land, and they want to, I don’t know, do they want to turn the whole country into a conservation park or something?’ With this statement, by a sleight of rhetoric, the speaker may have inadvertently advanced the appearance of a sinister conspiracy.

In a pre-recorded interview at the Whangarei demonstration, played after an

interview with mayor Gibson, a farmer (introduced only as Linda), who the host identified as a fan of the show, stated that she was not there because of the ‘ute tax’ but because of the ‘the loss of freedoms’, adding that ‘the sooner that the whole of New Zealand wakes up to find out what’s really going on [the better]’. The hidden agenda was not vouchsafed by the speaker. Statements such as this were interwoven with claims by *Counterspin* presenter Kelvin Alp asserting that the 2020 election result was fraudulent, with AAG co-founder Rob Wilson then reinforcing this. Wilson argued, without substantiating his claims:

There’s no doubt in my mind that the election here was rigged, as it was in the US and we’re starting to see come out over there- y’know, AAG’s always been at the forefront of the information battle that’s going on in the rural sector, just as you guys are in the overall media sector, we’ve said from the start that this election was rigged.

The saddest thing is most people don’t even realise they’re slaves, they have yet to wake up to that degree, it’s coming and it’s happening, and we’re seeing it first hand with what we’re doing, but there’s a long way to go yet. (*Counterspin Media*, 2021)

He provided another example of denialism that ties together overseas misinformation with inflammatory language about local events.

The next guest was Sue Grey, leader of the Outdoors and Freedom Party; a lawyer known for her legal work opposing vaccine mandates and promoting numerous conspiracy theories. Grey added to the misinformation by suggesting, without providing evidence, that the government was set to borrow money from Chinese banks, using water as collateral, before moving on to the topic of the COVID-19 vaccine, which Alp claimed was being used to commit ‘genocide’ (*Counterspin Media*, 2021). The existential threat narrative here, communicated to what would likely have been a larger-than-average audience for *Counterspin* due to the coinciding protest event, marked a pitch of irresponsibility. Through their explicit support for Groundswell and tacit support of the Groundswell-affiliated guests, *Counterspin* provided a means for these conspiracy theories, and the extreme narratives associated with them, to reach a wider audience.

The wider significance of the Groundswell event lies not only in the alarming discourse on display, including the wholly fabulistic claims of AAG spokespersons or Grey and Alp on *Counterspin*, but the fact that the movement also received mainstream political support, which may have had the inadvertent effect of legitimising, by association, some of the more extreme language used by protesters and alt-media commentators. The risk of such slippage in the nexus between mainstream politics and radical protesters was again apparent in events such as the parliamentary occupation, the ‘baby blood dispute’<sup>1</sup> and the visit by British anti-Trans provocateur Posie Parker. In each of these cases, the far-right

and conspiracist narrative was present on several alternative media and social media channels, concurrent with expressions of support for protesters from some mainstream politicians (for example, former deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters visited the parliamentary protest (Coughlan, 2022), spoke in support of the rights of the family of the child needing urgent medical care (Stoakes, 2022) and fans of Parker (Newshub, 2023).

In April 2023, Peters went further, sitting for a filmed interview with conspiracist Liz Gunn for her alternative media outlet *Free NZ Media* (Gunn, 2023), which was shared on the video streaming platform, *Rumble*. While he stopped short of directly endorsing her views, the former deputy Prime Minister, intentionally or not, lent his mana to this media event. As yet, no major New Zealand politician, including Peters, has explicitly backed the claims of the movement with which Gunn is linked, but the risk of reputation laundering-by-association is a matter of concern because of the ways in which it enhances the visibility of the conspiracist politics associated with the platform Peters appeared on; supporters of the politician who watched the broadcast may have found themselves exposed to new ideas that could influence them. It is not impossible to foresee that, as more of the same occurs, the line between fringe ideas and politically admissible narratives may grow thin in the future. The movement of ‘Agenda 21’ conspiracism from the American far-right to the Tea Party movement and into RNC resolutions, as noted above, serves as an instructive example of the ways in which misinformation can be effectively recycled among disparate groups to the point where it is smuggled into the political mainstream.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Our case study demonstrates that explicit references to US narratives about stolen elections, communist plots and existential dangers to society—many of which bear the hallmarks of American far-right narratives, such as those of the John Birch Society, their co-thinkers and ideological heirs—are present in aspects of discourse on climate here in Aotearoa. Tellingly, these were often linked in with wider sets of issues into which the climate challenge was crudely bundled and about which similar stories were being told, such as the COVID-19 vaccine.

This demonstrates the extent to which complex matters of national importance, such as climate change or public health emergencies, can be seized upon by alternative media and conspiracist influencers and incorporated into emotionally potent, reductive stories that are apparently designed to elicit outrage and protest. Examples from our Pacific neighbours demonstrate the ways in which vaccine disinformation can play a role in prompting public disorder, for example in Papua New Guinea, where ambulance crews were assaulted by anti-vaxxers who believed falsely that the staff were administering inoculations, to which they were opposed (Robie, 2022, p. 32). This example demonstrates the potentially

life-and-death consequences of this phenomenon.

As already noted, the authors of this article suspect that a danger exists that, over coming years and decades, the appetite for this kind of story-telling could increase in tandem with growing social disruption caused by the climate crisis, including a large-scale refugee influx on our shores. As has been discussed in previous editions of this journal (Cass, 2018), such a scenario would need to be covered with a high degree of journalistic ethics and professionalism to avoid amplifying hateful, dehumanising narratives. The authors anticipate that, during a crisis of this kind, conspiracist tropes may occupy meaningful space in public discourse in a manner that echoes the COVID-19 experience, building on established story-telling concerning putative elite plots. The risk exists that the persistence of such fabulist speech, as mediated through social media nodes and alternative news ecosystems, may have grown in its appeal with the cumulative effect of increasing the receptivity of a wider audience, seeking to make sense of sudden hardships.

In circumstances of prolonged, severe social distress, sophisticated communicative actors could further exploit public feeling to move opinion in a radically disorderly political trajectory; in these future scenarios, shifting public sentiment could catalyse the emergence of new voting blocs which could be moved toward a yet more destructive direction. As Robie and Krishnamurthi (2020) have touched on, the potential for conspiracist disinformation to become even more of a force on social media during future elections remains an acknowledged issue.

Indeed, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that hostile foreign actors might seek to take advantage of such a situation. (As noted by New Zealand's intelligence community, the risk of foreign state manipulation of parts of New Zealand's media landscape is already a live issue (Kitteridge, 2019).) In other words, the snowball effect of viral misinformation could be accelerated by both overt and covert manipulators and leveraged for political effect; today's fringe narratives could become tomorrow's populist political discourse.

While these are worst-case scenarios that seem far off, complacency is no answer to the trends we have identified in their inchoate form in this article. Policymakers and stakeholders in the community should be mindful of these embryonic threats and adopt a proactive response to prevent future scenarios in which social media and other informational channels become a vector for yet more politicised misinformation that could be used to foment societal division. The authors believe that civil society groups and communities, ranging from those working in the agricultural sector, Iwi organisations and activists on the right and left of the political spectrum (though these are, of course, not mutually exclusive groups), are well-placed to offer their own solutions to these problems through self-organisation in accordance with the principles of autonomy and rangatiratanga.



In addition, the media can play an important supporting role in meeting this challenge, whether independently or through collaboration, by conducting investigations into the phenomenon; dedicating resources to debunking its falsehoods; exploring any foreign connections (including financial ties) to conspiracist influencers; and demonstrating the origins of their narratives and their lack of basis in factuality, and so on. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Above all, we recommend that media outlets provide representation to critical voices in locations where conspiracist misinformation has taken hold and seek to visualise social effects of online harms through the stories of individuals, whānau and communities, so as to provide real-world, relatable moral clarity about the nature and consequences of the issues at play.

It is also worth re-emphasising that, while the case study focuses on a relatively limited pocket of the media scene, the cross-pollination to which we have already referred—namely, the spread of ideas and narratives across parts of the alternative media ecosystem, between disparate fringe groups, permeating elements of popular protest movements—may continue in ways that eventually create the space for a rupture into the mainstream. This is an abiding concern for the authors.

Indeed, there are hints of this, arguably, in the recognition afforded by some high profile politicians to certain alt-media *cause célèbres*, as in the case of the former deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters. (As we have already made clear, we do not mean to imply that politicians such as Peters endorse the ideas, groups or movements that function as proponents of dangerous misinformation, only that the risk of perceived legitimisation, or inadvertent message laundering, exists.)

Finally, readers of this article with far more expertise in relevant fields than the authors will have their own suggestions about the issues raised; we welcome that *kōrero*. Our argument is chiefly that the national conversation on climate change, conspiracy theories and misinformation needs to be upscaled, and to fall within easier reach of those who might otherwise fall prey to the spread of toxic falsehoods.

## Note

1. A controversial case in which the parents of a critically ill child were refusing to use vaccinated blood in his surgery; Sue Grey was again directly involved. For more information see, for example, Crimp.L. (2022, December 7). Parents refusing vaccinated donor blood case: What you need to know. Radio New Zealand (RNZ) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/480213/parents-refusing-vaccinated-donor-blood-case-what-you-need-to-know>

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# Media, the courts, and terrorism

## Lessons from the Christchurch mosque attacks

**Commentary** Court proceedings against the alleged perpetrator of the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019 led to what may be ground-breaking cooperation between the judicial system and the media to balance fair trial rights and a determination to (a) avoid retraumatisation and (b) prevent the court being used as a platform for white supremacist propaganda. The case, and the willingness of media to honour these imperatives, demonstrates the centrality of publicity in acts of terrorism known as ‘propaganda of the deed’. The research outlined in this article suggests that institutional cooperation can avoid ‘giving oxygen’ to perpetrators and their causes without sacrificing journalistic integrity or a duty to bear witness in the interests of open justice. A change of plea resulted in proceedings being limited to a sentencing hearing. A lengthy trial may have tested the robustness of the measures put in place but, nonetheless, the planning processes employed in New Zealand lead to a conclusion that they could provide a basis for similar cooperation in other judicial jurisdictions, such as Australia.

**Keywords:** Australia, Christchurch mosque attacks, court reporting, fair trial rights, judge’s orders, Media and Courts Committee, media cooperation, Media Freedom Committee, media law, New Zealand, propaganda of the deed, terrorism, *R v Brenton Harrison Tarrant*

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### Introduction

**T**HE ACTIONS and reactions of the New Zealand media in the wake of the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks and subsequent court proceedings demonstrate the value of institutional cooperation and mutual trust.

That conclusion is drawn from research conducted in conjunction with my colleague, Dr Denis Muller of Melbourne University. To date two papers have been published from our study. The first examined New Zealand and overseas coverage of the attacks themselves (Ellis & Muller, 2019). The second related to the sentencing of Brenton Harrison Tarrant in 2020 (Ellis & Muller, 2022). A third paper will follow a coronial hearing into the attacks (for which a date has yet to be determined), and Tarrant’s appeal against conviction and sentence (filed in November 2022).<sup>1</sup>

This article addresses issues in media reporting of terrorism, in the context of the Christchurch attacks.

It is useful to first consider the nature of terrorism itself. It is a violent crime where the victims are not the end, but the *means* to an end. They are the means by which a message can be sent to the public in a way that cannot be ignored. French journalist Paul Brousse in 1877 coined the phrase *Propaganda par le fait*—propaganda by the deed.

It became the war cry of militant anarchists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period that saw exponential growth in mass circulation newspapers (Kassel, 2019).

After he assassinated the Empress of Austria in 1898, anarchist Luigi Lucheni was reported as having said: ‘*I would like to kill someone, but it would have to be someone important, so that it gets in the papers!*’ (Van de Meer, 2015).

It was, and ‘propaganda of the deed’ has found a ready media platform over the following 125 years.

Each advance in media technology has provided ever more graphic means of publicising the deed—from large front page drawings depicting the assassination of US President McKinley in 1901 to live tv coverage of the second aircraft smashing into the Twin Towers a century later. And, in the age of social media, a terrorist live-streaming the killing of 51 people in two places of worship in Christchurch.

Media not only bear witness to these actions. They are an essential component of the deed itself. The publicity they provide achieves the objectives of the terrorist, magnifying and spreading the trauma. Editors are presented with the classic Hobson’s Choice. It is not a question of *whether* to cover these events: They cannot ignore them despite publicity achieving the terrorist’s objective. The dilemma is not lost on most of them as they turn their attention to *how* the events are covered.

However, the theatre of terrorism (Weimann, 2008), as it is also known, is so gripping that some media organisations put spectacle ahead of principle. I recall, for example, a British tabloid describing the sound of bodies hitting the ground after falling from the World Trade Centre on September 11. Others unwittingly ‘enhance’ the notoriety of perpetrators and give oxygen to their messages.

### **A moderating factor—the Proximity Filter**

In our 2019 paper, my colleague Denis Muller and I have found a moderating factor that may even stay the hand of a tabloid editor. The closer media outlets are to the site of the crime, the greater the consideration for the audience and, thereby, the victims. We termed this effect the Proximity Filter.

It was certainly present in coverage of the attacks on the two Christchurch mosques and we detailed that in that paper. We concluded a proximity filter was used by New Zealand media who identified the victims as part of their own community (and tailored coverage accordingly), but the events were seen as

‘foreign’ by Australian journalists who used perceived distance as justification for extremely graphic content and images of the gunman that white supremacists would view as aggrandising. Those extremists have lionised the mosque shooter on the more clandestine social media platforms.

The filter has been present in other terrorist attacks. For example, while the aircraft crashing into the second tower became the stock image of 9/11 for media *outside* America, *within* the United States—amid an upswelling of patriotism—it was more likely to be a picture of three dust-covered firemen securing an intact *Stars and Stripes* to a post protruding from the rubble. It became the Heroes 2001 postage stamp.

In Australia, the Joint Commonwealth-New South Wales Review of the Martin Place Siege in 2014 found the media coverage was ‘measured and responsible’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). The emphasis was on the victims, not the attacker.

However, the filter should not be seen as all-powerful. In Britain, for example, some tabloid coverage of domestic terrorism attributed to Muslims has been Islamophobic, motivated by a desire to provoke strong emotional responses in readers (Ivanic et al., 2019). Other British coverage has been at pains to distance extremists from the Islamic faith.

After the massacre of staff of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* following publication of the Muhammad cartoons, values collided. The republication of the cartoons by others in the name of press freedom added fuel to the extremists’ fire (Jenkins & Tandoc, 2017).

However, my colleague and I were satisfied that, in a general sense, proximity has a moderating effect on news media coverage.

And it operates beyond news reportage. It is also evident in interactions between media and government agencies in relation to terrorist actions within their borders.

During the Martin Place siege in Sydney, media ensured the gunman’s attempts to secure media attention and make demands were unsuccessful:

- Calls claiming to be from hostages were not put to air;
- Inflammatory callers to talkback radio stations were taken off air by radio hosts;
- Media contacted by the gunman or hostages sought police guidance before responding;
- The gunman’s posts on social media were not repeated in mainstream media.
- And media took care to avoid revealing police tactics during live coverage at the scene.

The gunman, Man Haron Monis, died in the police assault on the Lindt Café. The perpetrator of the Christchurch mosque shootings, on the other hand, *was* brought to justice.

Dutch security and terrorism researcher Professor Beatrice de Graaf has developed a typology of terrorism trials (de Graaf, 2011), based on the performative strategies that can be in play:

- A not-so-dramatic show
- A show run by the terrorists and their lawyers
- A show run by the executive and the prosecution
- A media show
- A performance of justice.

The institutional cooperation that took place in the planning for media coverage of Brenton Tarrant's court appearances, in order to achieve the last of those typologies, is laid out in our second paper. We believe the processes were ground-breaking.

### **The impact of two cooperation bodies**

Two bodies had fundamental impacts on the pre-trial process and facilitated the high degree of cooperation between the justice system and media to prevent the case becoming the sort of platform that was exploited by Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik (one of the Christchurch shooter's role models) during his trial in 2012.

Breivik attempted to use the trial to push his idiosyncratic white supremacist views but the academic consensus is that he failed for a number of reasons, including the ability of the Norwegian people to read coverage of the proceedings that explained how justice was being done. His attempts to use the court as a platform were also subverted by his counsel's attempt to argue an insanity plea (Bangstad, 2017).

The first body that should be recognised in the Tarrant case is New Zealand's Media Freedom Committee, which represents all mainstream press, broadcasting and online media outlets.

Almost two decades ago, discussions with police and security services led to the development of a set of protocols for engagement between senior media executives and government agencies in the event of terrorist and national security events.<sup>2</sup> It was in force when the Christchurch attacks took place and committed both sides to enter into and maintain high level dialogue at the earliest opportunity through to the resolution of the event.

It set out protocols for dealing with various aspects of a terrorist event, including efforts by terrorists to contact media (which Tarrant attempted in the lead-up to the attacks). It recognised that editorial control stayed in the hands of editors.

Apart from one fleeting use of a short segment of the initial part of the perpetrator's live stream of the attacks, New Zealand media concentrated wholly on the victims. The protocol has now been updated to include provisions relating to live-streaming via the internet, which had not been anticipated when the



original agreement was reached.

Two months after the attacks, the five core media organisations represented on the Media Freedom Committee decided to limit their reporting of the impending trial to prevent dissemination of the perpetrator's white supremacist beliefs and the re-traumatising of victims and their families. Court officials were shown the guidelines and made one suggestion—that only senior reporters would cover the proceedings—before they were made public (*The New Zealand Herald*, 2019).

It is important to note that this committee communicates in two directions—with government agencies and with member organisations. This facilitated rapid decision-making despite the fact that COVID-19 imposed restrictions on newsrooms. Two of its representatives, including its current chair, played leading liaison roles in the planning for the Tarrant trial then during the sentencing hearing.

The other body that played a significant role in those processes was the Media and Courts Committee, made up of five judges, two officials and six senior media executives. Its genesis lay in discussions over the introduction of cameras in court during the 1990s. Established in 2001, the committee has overseen the preparation of comprehensive guidelines for media in-court coverage. It provides an informal forum in which issues of concern to either party can be aired and resolved. It is fair to say it has the capacity to handle robust discussion.

Its current chair, High Court Justice Simon Moore, sees the committee—and its evolution over more than two decades—as central to the building of trust between media and the justice system in New Zealand.

Members of this committee played a pivotal role in overcoming inherent tensions in planning for what was initially to be a lengthy trial. These were proceedings that:

1. Needed to balance the rights of the accused against re-traumatising of victims,
2. Potentially challenged principles of open justice, and
3. Carried the potential both for misappropriation by white supremacists, and flouting of court orders by media situated outside the jurisdiction of the New Zealand court.

These challenges remained after Tarrant changed his plea to guilty.

Of course, the trial-then-sentencing judge, Justice Cameron Mander, had jurisdiction over his own court but it was clear to my colleague and I that his decisions relating to media coverage—set out in a series of minutes before the hearing—had the benefit of not only significant input from a variety of state agencies but support from the senior media executives on the committee who were consulted by officials during the planning process. Those media executives were also briefed by police, victim support personnel, and a Muslim expert advisory group.

This last group assisted throughout the planning process and during proceedings. Measures were taken to ensure the needs of the Islamic faith were met. The

court—and the media—were acutely aware of the potential for retraumatising victims and, indeed, the wider community.

The relationship between media and the court was assisted in no small measure by the fact that the judiciary employed highly respected former journalists in media liaison roles and one—Cate Brett (now Director of the Office of the Chief Justice)—sat on the Media and Courts Committee.

A combination of trust and the proximity filter led New Zealand media to accept conditions on coverage that were possibly unprecedented, including limited reporting ‘windows’.<sup>3</sup> Their foreign counterparts, through innovative registration and distribution systems, had to accept the same conditions.

I believe that the Hobson’s Choice dilemma over coverage of terrorism played a part. These arrangements tipped the balance away from media serving the terrorist’s ends.

And I might also add that media executives are much more open to solutions on which they have been consulted than to those that have been unilaterally imposed.

Our second paper stopped short of presenting the Tarrant case as a complete model to prevent misappropriation of proceedings by extremist defendants or, indeed, by retraumatised victims in court. A lengthy trial may have exposed unanticipated issues. We did say it provided ‘a starting point and some robust suggestions’. We were being cautious.

## Conclusion

Could the model work in other jurisdictions such as Australia?

The relationship between Australian media and the courts may at times have been tense. We instanced the case against the late Cardinal Pell in our second paper. That tension may be why we found relationships between judges and the media in Australia tended to be at the court reporter level but in New Zealand they also existed at the senior editorial executive and institutional levels.

On both sides of the Tasman, journalists—who perceive their role as providing a check on power—are sensitive to attempts to control their activities, whether it be by government, the judiciary, or illegitimate agents. They bridle at the very suggestions of prior restraint and are not averse to criticising the courts.

However, proximity and a strong aversion to becoming a terrorist’s pawn are powerful drivers that could be used to draw Australian media and representatives of the judiciary into a dialogue.

Australia’s federal and state judicial structures complicate that dialogue. However, there are bodies that might facilitate discussions. Judges and magistrates have their own collective organisation in the Australian Judicial Officers Association. Could it invite the major Australian publishers and broadcasters to discuss coverage of future proceedings against terrorists? Alternatively, the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (the primary forum for

developing and coordinating approaches to countering terrorism, and which emphasises interoperability across jurisdictions) could be asked to bring the parties together.

Denying oxygen to those who create propaganda of the deed on home soil is an inducement to sit around the table. It might also lead to an enduring forum—with a wider brief—for the judiciary and the media. New Zealand has demonstrated that both are possible.

## Notes

1. A convention has developed on limiting use of the name of the person convicted of the Christchurch attacks. His name is used here only in connection with his court appearances. That approach recognises that there was no suppression of the name of the accused. Media minimised its use in other contexts but reported his name in relation to court appearances to avoid de facto suppression that was at odds with the position of the court. A similar approach is used here.
2. Disclosure: The author chaired the Media Freedom Committee during discussions with government agencies that led to the terrorism protocols.
3. The conditions governing media coverage were set out in a minute by Justice Mander on 2 August 2020. <https://www.courtsofnz.govt.nz/assets/cases/r-v-tarrant/R-v-Tarrant-20200806.pdf>

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# Media ethics in the Pacific

## Ethical challenges in the Marshall Islands

**Abstract:** Media ethics in the Pacific Islands varies considerably among nations in practice, as shown in scholarship. This case study of 16 Marshall Islands journalists aims to provide evidence of ethical decision-making in practice in one Pacific Island nation, and demonstrate the intersection of imported journalism values and local culture. It builds on survey work of Pacific Island journalists' roles by Singh and Hanusch (2021), the *Worlds of Journalism* study by Hanitzsch et al. (2019) and works by David Robie (2003, 2004, 2014 and 2019). Responses from 16 journalists in the Republic of the Marshall Islands who made ethical decisions during a journalism workshop facilitated by the newly established Pacific Media Institute at the College of Marshall Islands in June 2022 were analysed. First, the participants identified ethical conflicts in carrying out their professional duties. Next, they applied standard ethics codes from democracies (absolutism), to local scenarios. Discussion centered on how to address the core value of independence because of dominance of the church and the strongly influential chiefly system in RMI. Personal relationships were also factored in their ethical decision-making because the journalists considered the perspectives of all stakeholders in reporting on Marshallese culture and society. They were keenly aware of the consequences of their reporting on their community. They offered unique, locally derived solutions from different perspectives. They often exhibited an 'ethics of care', prioritising humanity and sometimes societal harmony.

**Keywords:** case study, cross-cultural journalism, culture, ethics codes, Indigenous, journalism ethics, journalism methodologies, Marshall Islands, Pacific Media Institute, talanoa journalism

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### Introduction

**M**EDIA ethics in the Pacific Islands varies considerably in practice among islands because journalism is shaped by the political structure, laws, culture, religion and society in each country. Ethical decision-making among journalists in the Pacific is grounded in values that have been shaped by history, including colonisation, which has defined the roles of journalists. Scholars have studied journalists' perceptions around the world of their roles and ethical values, but it is difficult to generalise because of the complexity of each nation, region or group. This study focuses on ethical values and practices among

Marshall Islands journalists, which also provides insight into their perception of their role in society.

Singh and Hanusch (2021, p. 132) conducted a survey of 206 Pacific Island journalists from nine countries to provide profiles of Pacific Islander journalists and their professional views, such as their ‘role conceptions, ethical views and perceived influences’. Their study (p. 143) and previous studies have noted the difficult situation that many Pacific Island journalists find themselves in, facing pressure from governments to help build the nation while acting in a watchdog or monitorial role on the government and the powerful at the same time (Hanusch & Uppal, 2015; Robie, 2004, 2019).

Robie’s influential body of work (2003, 2004, 2014 & 2019) on journalism and media education, particularly in the South Pacific, examines the impact of economics, politics, legal frameworks, culture and education on South Pacific journalism and media (2004, p. 8). His extensive work compares the education and training of journalists in the Pacific (2004, p. 219), and in particular, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, including their perceptions of their roles. He has demonstrated from a thorough review of scholarly literature and his own research that journalism is perceived as too ‘Western’ and not the ‘Pacific way,’ noting cultural insensitivities, the challenges to journalists’ watchdog role and the calls for more regulation (2004, p. 9). His research also suggests that journalists sometimes misuse culture as an excuse for self-censorship and restriction of freedom of speech (Robie, 2004, p. 30).

In his 2019 article, Robie explained that some scholars argue there is little difference between Pacific and Western approaches to journalism (2019, p. 2). Some journalism schools are too focused on Western media education, while others assert there is a distinctive style of journalism in Oceania with cultural variations based on the country where it is practised. This study of Marshall Islands journalists provides evidence of the latter—perhaps not of a distinctive style, but that culture has a strong impact on journalism. He argues ‘for a greater appreciation of the complexities of media cultures in Pacific nations’ and proposes ‘a more nuanced, reflexive approach to journalism and journalism education in the Pacific region.’ This is reflected in a ‘talanoa journalism’ model that he advocates as a more culturally appropriate benchmark than monocultural media templates (Robie, 2014, pp. 332-333; 2019, pp. 3-4). The ‘talanoa model’ is represented as a five-legged tanoa kava bowl used for ceremonial and informal dialogue. Each leg is one of five ‘estates’ or four pillars representing a normative democratic structure—Executive, Parliament, Judiciary, Press, and one called Cultural Hegemony, representing indigenous traditional *kastom*, a Tok Pisin word (Papua New Guinea creole language or Pidgin) (Robie, 2019, p. 4).

Journalists in the North Pacific also share the need for culturally based training to help them cover political, economic and increasingly environmental change.

Singh and Hanusch (2021) also note a desire among respondents to support cultural diversity among island journalists as well as bring awareness to and possibly advocate for social change. Respondents to their survey were less enthusiastic about support for national development, however. Singh and Hanusch noted that while respondents wanted to be watchdogs on the powerful, ‘they are not always able to, either due to cultural reasons that respect authority and authority figures, lack of whistleblower protections, punitive media laws, or even the lack of training, experience and qualifications. Younger and less experienced journalists may perhaps be more risk-averse in this context’ (2021, p. 143).

Robie (2014, p. 322) notes findings by Fiji-born journalist and researcher Christine Gounder that it was ‘difficult for many Fijian journalists to remain professional in their jobs because of strong cultural or ethnicity ties’ with supporters of a prominent failed businessman, George Speight, who led the 2000 attempted coup and has been in prison for more than 20 years for treason.

The ambitious *Worlds of Journalism* study by Hanitzsch et al. (2019), gathered evidence from journalists in 67 countries—but the Pacific Islands were not included, perhaps because of their diversity and remoteness. In that study, they noted that many studies reflected Western bias, which tends to connect journalism to democracy, and journalists as independent verifiers of fact-based information. They concluded, based on their results, that Western-style journalism within a democracy is actually experienced by a minority of the world’s population (2019, pp. 24-25).

*The Worlds of Journalism* study, however, is helpful in analysing this case. Hanitzsch and his colleagues (2019) advance a common understanding of three essential conceptual areas that underpin their study:

1. Journalism as a discursive institution. It exists in institutions in different societies, and is created through discourse that creates meaning.
2. Journalism culture, which is meant to embody the forms of journalism, differs depending on societal contexts.
3. Contextual influences on journalism culture are important.

The authors explain that attempts ‘to accommodate the local’ may make it theoretically difficult to do a meaningful comparative analysis among nations. However, there is value in studying individual countries, regions or groups to note the cultural, societal and contextual influence on journalists. This study of Marshall Islands journalists demonstrates the influence of culture, society and context on ethical decision-making practices. Journalists in the North Pacific also share the need for culturally based training to help journalists cover political, economic and increasingly environmental change.

### **Theoretical framework**

This case study examines local journalism values by providing empirical evidence

of ethical decision-making values and practices, gathered through discourse among Marshall Islands journalists participating in a journalism ethics workshop. It is through discourse that these journalists are articulating their boundaries and standards of journalism ethics. This study documents the challenges these participants face and how culture and society influence ethical decisions.

The evidence in this study of Marshall Islands journalists supports Robie's 'talanoa' model that includes a 'Fifth estate'—a traditional cultural pillar, 'which is the counterbalance to all other forms of power, including the news media, or the Fourth Estate' (Robie 2014, p. 332).

Hanitzsch et al. (2019) also note that 'judgments about the extent to which journalists adhere to professional standards can be made meaningfully only from within their respective societies, based on criteria defined by local cultural expectations' (2019, p. 28), and not from a bias of a democratic Western perspective.

Hanitzsch et al. (2019, p. 204) identified four ethical orientations that were measured by survey participants who responded to four statements. These are ranked here from highest to lowest mean score:

1. Absolutism—adhere to codes of professional ethics regardless of situation and context. Highest mean score.
2. Situationism—What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation.
3. Subjectivism—What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment.
4. Exceptionism—It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.

Even though most respondents in the *Worlds of Journalism* study followed universal principles (absolutism), there was less consensus and more flexibility on the other three—that the specific situation and sometimes personal judgment were also taken into account. Also, sometimes moral standards could be set aside in extraordinary circumstances. (2019, p. 206).

Journalists' perceptions of their role in society also underpin their ethical decisions—whether they see themselves in a monitorial role, social responsibility role or participatory role. Preservation of harmony and respect for authority may be important in influencing their decision-making.

### **Research questions**

Which ethical orientations do Marshall Islands journalists follow? What do their responses to ethical cases demonstrate about how they see their role as journalists?

### **The Republic of the Marshall Islands**

This case study of ethical decision-making and values among Marshall Islands



journalists builds on the survey work and theories by Singh and Hanusch (2021), Hanitzsch et al. (2019) and Robie (2004, 2014, 2019). It focuses on Marshall Islands journalists' approach to ethical decision-making through an analysis of scenarios they created themselves as well as ones they responded to in a journalism workshop setting in 2022. It demonstrates the complexity of island culture and society, all of which affect their journalism practice, depending on the situation

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is one of three Pacific Island countries with a special relationship with the United States, and thus RMI has free speech and free press protections in its Bill of Rights in its constitution (Comparative Constitutions Project, 2023). By comparison, Fiji has a Media Industry Development Act (2010) that restricts press freedoms, yet it enjoys a robust free press in which journalists resist the limits (Singh, 2010; Robie, 2019). Differences among 206 Pacific Island journalists in their role perception—as watchdogs or development advocates—show up in the results presented by Singh and Hanusch (2021), but the authors do make a strong effort to generalise their results. This study shows the difficulty of generalising because each nation is so different, but it is still valuable to compare nations and groups to better understand their challenges and what they have in common as island nations.

Just three journalists from RMI were included in the 2021 study of Pacific Islands journalists, which demonstrates the difficulty of carrying out such research in a vast and diverse area. It's not clear whether these journalists were Marshallese, American or from other nations, such as the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati or Fiji, which could help or hinder their ability to follow standard Western codes of ethics (absolutism) guidelines, such as impartiality and independence, in practising journalism.

For example, an interesting finding of this study is that journalists working in the Marshall Islands who were not Marshallese had more freedom and independence to do stories that might involve personal conflicts of interest because they did not have genealogical (matrilineal) connections to chiefs and the power structure.

### **Culture, society and political structure**

The Marshall Islands, one of three Freely Associated States, holds a special relationship with the United States deriving from its own Compact of Free Association. The Compact gives the US responsibility for security and defence for RMI, including military access to the islands and a US base on one of the islands. The US also provides grants. Citizens of RMI can enter the US without a visa to work, to live, attend schools, seek healthcare, or join the military.

Religion and church leaders are also a force in the islands, which has been primarily Protestant Christian (98 percent) since Christianity was introduced in 1857, most prominently by the United Church of Christ and the Assemblies of God. Some atolls, however, have strong Roman Catholic populations. There are

also other religious groups and schools, including Roman Catholic, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Muslims, Jehovah's Witness and others (US Department of State, 2022)

The chiefly system, in which status is tied to land ownership through matrilineal connections, also influences journalism, particularly the power and authority of the paramount chiefs. These chiefs lead in a customary system that exists alongside a modern Western-style democratic government. The paramount chiefs remain influential today and in 2022 celebrated the coronation of a paramount chief for the first time in 50 years (Johnson, 2022). Journalists produce stories by negotiating standard Western values and practices (absolutism) within this traditional system (situationism and subjectivism).

### **Purpose and method**

This study evaluates journalists' responses during a journalism workshop to ethical case scenarios they created, as well as scenarios presented to them for discussion and decision-making. In the exercises, they applied an ethical decision-making model and the five core values of journalism shared globally in codes of ethics and in practice in democratic nations (absolutism). These are: Accuracy, Independence, Impartiality, Humanity, Accountability (White, 2015).

US-based codes of ethics were also discussed with the participants: Society of Professional Journalists, Radio Television Digital News Association and the National Press Photographers Association. All of these codes of ethics include the five standard ethical values

Sixteen journalists and public information officers attended a two-week journalism workshop at the Pacific Media Institute in Majuro in June 2022, hosted by the College of the Marshall Islands with funding from PACMAS (Pacific Media Assistance Scheme—ABC and the Australian government). Trainers were on Zoom, two from Hawai'i and one from Australia.

In the ethics section of the workshop, the first exercise focused on self-awareness of the individual's professional journalism role, shared by telling stories about their ethical dilemmas. Participants were asked to create scenarios in which they found conflicts between their personal and professional values in doing their jobs as journalists. The purpose of this exercise was to illuminate the influence of culture and society on ethical practice.

In the second exercise, participants were placed in pairs, with an older and younger journalist in each pair, and asked to select a scenario to discuss and make a decision. This also illuminated cultural and societal norms, as well as status relationships between elders and younger people.

The outcome of these exercises revealed that the journalists faced the most challenges in applying the core values of independence and impartiality in reporting while balancing cultural and societal norms. Participants discussed

anonymous sources, but not other investigative journalism techniques. Samples of most of the responses from each of these exercises were analysed, and themes discussed.

Results: Common themes are illustrated in individual examples.

*Exercise #1: Self-awareness*

What conflicts have you had between your personal and professional values in doing your job?

1. *Awareness of relationships at church:* Relationship with pastor. In this case, the journalist who was on a small island saw his pastor purchase some ‘Grizzly’ chewing tobacco, something that was considered unethical for clergy. The journalist was uncomfortable. The pastor simply slid money on the counter, and the cashier knew what he wanted without speaking. The journalist wrote:

On this point, I thought wow this is a really interesting story...I didn't talk about it...He is a pastor and a good one. However, others (might) take it the wrong way and involve the church or the community. So, I did not share the story, but somebody did. So, he was being questioned and got into a counselling by the other pastors.

*Analysis:* In this case, the journalist saw a potential story, but cared about the pastor and was concerned about accuracy if he shared the story. But he was also worried about what others would think of him.

Important values evidence in this case are: Accuracy, Independence, Impartiality, Humanity (caring). Subjectivism (personal judgment) may have also underpinned this.

2. *Awareness of one's status in a class society.* Not wanting to speak truth to power. ‘The Monarch (Iroij) class makes you mindful of what you say.’

Being a journalist is a profession that can put you in the very centre of a society where all the different classes of people look and hear you—there is always one or two classes that makes you mindful of what you are going to say. Here in the Marshall Islands, it is the MONARCH class.

Iroij is the Monarch...at the very top of the food chain that employs almost everything that is happening within and outside this island nation. The Iroij is involved in almost every issue on land, in politics, and social activities, including the Christian faith at every island. So, the CONFLICT situation for a journalist is often confronted by and with the Iroij class, whether it is directly or indirectly. The Iroij class is a PUPPET that influence the government to execute *whatever* and *however* policies and movements that are established and implemented in RMI.

The respondent explained that at the last Constitutional convention in RMI the outcome of a vote by the public's delegate members on the president's election was denied.

This scheme has indicated how the Iroij class was able to stimulate the outcome, and how most of the members of the ConCon were easily swayed to the interest of the Iroij class.

Then, everyone was aware of what had happened, and yet not one raised it, even the media.

*Analysis:* Culture and situational context influenced coverage of ConCon. The media deferred to tradition and the Iroij class. Absolutism in adhering to standards gave way to situationalism and possibly exceptionism. In an extraordinary event, culture and the traditional power structure took precedence. This is also clear evidence of talanoa—Robie's traditional cultural pillar.

3. *Confronting royalty*, the chief leadership system and the custom of *kòkkunāna* (giving; donations to the chief).

One conflict that I am aware of is the lack of voicing our concerns regarding the leaderships of chiefs. This is due to the fact that we are heavily cultural-based and that our society is male-dominated. For generations, we are taught to indefinitely respect the royalty. As a result, we do not have the ability to express our concerns....

Culturally, as a Marshallese society, we have to abide by the rules the people of royalty give, one of which is *kòkkunāna*. This term refers to the people giving or donating whatever the chief wants for a special occasion (expensive gifts) . . . If I were to speak against this practice, as a journalist, I would be chastised by my fellow Marshallese due to our culture and beliefs. On the other hand, I would come up with a solution by working with the community to host fundraisers to accommodate the chief's expenses.

*Analysis:* Culture and tradition again are dominant forces in shaping journalism. Personal relations and a fear of being criticised would also be a factor. Rather than write about the issue and give voice to those suffering because of this cultural practice, the journalist sought solutions.

4. *Conflict of interest in leadership position:* A participant was asked to take a leadership position at an institution, but was also doing media for a student club that discussed politics and climate change. The student realised the conflict, and stopped doing club activities; was aware to be careful about posting on social media about the institution and not using a personal account to share any school activity.

5. *Conflict of interest at student newspaper:* A student became a student council leader but was also editor of the school newspaper. The student

saw the conflicts and resigned as newspaper editor.

*Analysis* of Nos. 4 & 5: In both cases absolutism prevails, and the individual followed the ethics guideline of independence in both situations to avoid a conflict of interest.

6. *Personal relationship*: This is a small island. The reporter is at a beach party with friends. After the reporter leaves, a close friend's two-year-old daughter wanders away from the family after dark and drowns.

As a journalist that was a story. It was a good story—a story that would have taught readers to pay extra attention to kids on the beach; learn the basic first-aid skills to prevent tragic events like this. Although it was a good story, I worried about the mental (health) of the mother, because I knew that society would have blamed her. Had I [written] up the story and had it published, I would have made it harder for her . . . I know as a journalist it is my responsibility to report, but I couldn't bring myself to do the story.

*Analysis*: The journalist saw the importance of doing this story, but realised she had a conflict of interest (independence) because of her personal relationships with the family. She demonstrated humanity and an ethics of care by considering the harmful consequences of publishing a story. Solutions discussed included writing a story on keeping kids safe at the beach; or having someone else do the story, although the mother may have been harmed by that story too. Situationism and perhaps subjectivism (personal judgment) prevailed, but absolutist values of independence and humanity were also honoured.

7. *Journalism is not an easy job*. It takes courage.

It takes a lot of courage and risk putting out your work in public for the whole world to hear and see . . . it is very crucial to know not only the images but to think about both sides of each theory before putting it out in the open because there are consequences . . . It is the journalist's duty to protect the people and not harm, meaning they have to be very careful not to upset the audience.

*Analysis*: In this case the core value of humanity takes priority over other absolutist values. Consequences of one's actions are key.

8. *Threats to the journalist's life*. This journalist is not Marshallese. A journalist was covering a stabbing and a few days later he realised his family's security was at stake. The perpetrator was a Marshallese man who was deported from the US back to RMI after serving his sentence. He stabbed someone in Majuro and was immediately arrested.

I was the first to report on the stabbing issue and especially highlighting deportees as a stigma that may not go well with some of

them, in particular the one who was arrested and locked away in police custody.

Later, the police advised them to be careful. ‘Not only that, but we are foreigners in the Marshall Islands and we could be in danger here.’ The perpetrator was released. The reporter was afraid for his family’s safety and didn’t want to continue to cover the issue, but decided in the end to keep covering it. ‘The concerns and safety of the community outweighs my other personal values.’

Later still, the issue was laid to rest after the government and responsible authorities took on the matter, perhaps because of the reporter’s tenacity. Another journalist also mentioned this incident, and people were worried about their safety.

*Analysis:* In this case the reporter adhered to the standard values (absolutism) despite fearing for himself and his family. His personal values took a backseat to his professional values. It’s possible that because he was not Marshallese, he had more freedom to be independent.

9. *Pressure of religion on Marshallese families:* A journalist wanted to discuss the pressure that church leaders put on families to donate beyond their means to support church events. The journalist’s conflict is that a family member is a church leader. He is driven to give a ‘voice to the voiceless.’ He wants to write about this conflict, ‘but to do this is suicide.’

*Analysis:* This is similar to No. 3 in which donations to the chief are expected. However, the church has similar power to extract from its members. The journalist wants to speak out because he believes this practice is hurting families financially, but faces a personal conflict.

10. *A journalist learns of political corruption and misuse of funds:* The consequences of revealing this are broad as well as personal.

With these issues, a plethora of eye-opening stories can be put out to the public. I could put pen to paper and write, but since this is a very tight-knit community, everyone knows each other, and most of the time, that person is a relative or friend. There’s that issue, but then again, because of the proximity of the situation, you come to find out that there are other players involved, also related. Not only that, but when you start gathering information, that information could affect a number of people. People you once had good relationships with, start to turn their back on you. And you could be labeled as unreliable because of the “gossip” you are spreading.

Do I publish and break those bridges, or let it slide? How will it affect the community whose been suffering because of these actions?

*Analysis:* In this case, the reporter, like others, is concerned about the consequences of the story on the community. This is an ‘ethics of care’ situation, and the power of a close-knit community greatly influences journalism. Situationism and subjectivism are also relevant because of the personal relationships . . . fear of people ‘turning their backs’ on the reporters.

11. *Photos of dead people.* Should a TV station show the body of a missing fisherman who died? The journalist felt sick when he saw the video of the dead fisherman and felt very conflicted about running it.

I was given photos of the deceased body, and it felt very wrong. I don’t know if it was my moral compass or because of my religious beliefs, but working on a video knowing the public would later see just felt wrong; it just made me sick to my stomach that we had to show his condition on which he was found.

*Analysis:* The issue of showing a dead body is common in any newsroom. Considering different perspectives—victim, newsroom, society etc. can help journalists make decisions about whether to publish. Is a published image necessary to tell the story? Probably not. The codes of ethics include humanity—caring for the victim and the public unless there is a justifiable need to see. In this case the journalist decided that showing it wasn’t justified.

*Conclusion:* The first exercise above, as well as the next exercise in ethical decision making, demonstrated the following:

The word ‘courage’ was mentioned frequently. It takes courage to follow ethical standards (absolutism) in a small community where the consequences of one’s actions will be felt and known. However, culture, context and situation enabled these journalists to effectively produce journalism.

Personal and professional relationships could cause conflicts when applying Western standards, but they also shaped journalism that supported this community. Journalists understood their social responsibility, and followed an ethics of care in order to maintain harmonious relations.

### *Exercise #2: Scenarios*

#### *Application of ethical decision-making steps or process*

In the second exercise at the end of the workshop, participants were asked to choose one scenario from a list of five cases discussed with their partner. Some teams came up with different answers for the same case. This gave them an opportunity to share with the group and make connections. They realised that they had shared common struggles and could learn from each other.

Here are some examples of possible scenarios, followed by the responses of the participants.

*Case #1: Releasing the name of the dead*

A former president of the country (a chief) dies in a small plane crash flying to Majuro from Kwajalein. The pilot survives, but the former president's son also perishes in the crash.

Visiting foreigners near the crash area take photos with their phones and send them to the *Marshall Islands Journal*, hoping to make some money. The newspaper is about to go to press that day, but still has time to remake the front page and add this news story and photographs. The family members have not yet been told by the police about the accident. Bodies have not officially been identified.

Do you publish the photo? Also, would your decision be different if you chose to publish this information immediately on social media? Or if you worked in TV or radio and received a photo or video?

*Decision-making process*

1. Define the ethical issue(s): Whether to a) publish the photos and b) whether to name the victims before the police have notified the family and forensics officials have confirmed their identities.

- *Do you immediately post the information/photo on social media suggesting the identities of the victims?*

*Responses:* 'I will not post or publish any information or news even if I have a few on hand from individuals. I would gather all confirmed information from relevant sources, i.e. hospitals, law enforcement, and immediate members of the deaths (dead) before posting/publishing. Any false and hurtful information published will not benefit any news media for the community, and readers/viewers will be offended as well since the victim(s) are society's leaders and people respected.

Other participants said they would also wait for details from authorities and then gather, update and correct information. They wanted to protect the privacy of the family.

- *Should you publish the photos in the Marshall Islands Journal?*

*Responses:* 'Only the photos of the aircraft and the scene, but no bodies. 'Yes, I believe publishing some kind of visual aid will help explain and tell the story better, therefore I would publish photos in the *Marshall Islands Journal*.'

- *Do you include in your story previous child abuse allegations about the former president from 10 years ago?*



*Responses:* ‘... wouldn’t add more to his or her story because I would respect the current situation and wait until the right time to do further stories if needed, and if previous allegations are valid and did hurt members of the society.’

‘I would not publish previous child abuse allegations about the former president from 10 years ago because I think that the president’s past life and decision has nothing to do with the incident; rather support the family using kindly manner... ’

2. *Who are the stakeholders who will be affected by your decision? List them and describe their perspectives.*

*Response:* Participants listed family members of the former president, who probably wouldn’t want the images published; news organisations that would confirm the information but then publish it but maybe not images; the public, and people from the president’s home island; their church pastor, and the council of chiefs, who might think it’s disrespectful.

3. *What would you do and why?*

- Apply guidelines from the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>), the National Press Photographers Association (<https://nppa.org/resources/code-ethics>), or the Radio Television Digital News Association (<https://www.rtdna.org/ethics>) and any conflicts with traditional and personal values.
- ‘I would not publish any information to the public. I would first gather all the accurate information. Even though publishing pictures would be a problem for some, I would just do it accordingly.’

*Summary:* In this case, participants agreed to hold off on reporting, be cautious and not report anything that isn’t from an official source and can be confirmed, out of respect and support for the president and his family. Hold off until the officials contact the family. There’s no benefit to the news media or community. They don’t want to offend readers/viewers. Yet one said if he knew the victims, and the police weren’t on the scene yet, that he would contact the family. Either way, the family is put first before the rush to publish. The value of humanity was the most important among most of the participants.

Not all agreed on publishing the images. One participant said that even though publishing pictures would be a problem for some people, ‘I would just do it anyway.’ They recognised that this was a balance between releasing information that could cause harm and the public’s want or need to be informed.

*Case #2: Anonymous sources: Verification of information*

- You are the editor/owner of a popular Marshallese language blog about life in the Marshall Islands. Readership is growing quickly, and you are

becoming one of the most powerful social influencers in the country. You are also in talks with a number of companies about significant sponsorships of the blog. If that happens, you'll finally be making a lot of money from the three-year-old blog.

- You receive an email from an anonymous source alleging that the pastor of the country's largest UCC Protestant Church, who is well known for his Sunday sermons warning sinners of a life in hell, has a second family in a small city in the US mainland. The email includes an attachment of the smiling pastor with his arm around a woman (who appears to be Marshallese), surrounded by three young children. The woman is named, as are the children in the photos.
- This pastor, whose Sunday sermons have become popular as podcasts, has openly criticised your blog as being sinful because it shares salacious gossip. You have developed a strong personal dislike of the pastor, whom you consider to be sanctimonious. Everyone knows that you and the preacher dislike each other.
- Participants were asked: What do you do when you receive the email from an anonymous source? Is it newsworthy? How do you prove the allegation is true?
- Apply SPJ, NPPA or RTDNA guidelines and discuss any conflicts with traditional and personal values.

Participants offered these solutions: Verify the photo from other sources, such as social media. Ask the source to give you other sources who might be able to go on the record. 'I will verify the email first just to make sure the photo or email is not manipulated by asking my connections in the states who know the pastor's so-called second family to investigate them.'

Another said she would find other sources who may be linked to the photo. 'Check relatives/friends of the woman in the photograph, and find out her occupation, then check with co-workers.'

One participant would be vigilant in fact-checking. 'First, I would make sure the email sent to me isn't a virus, and after, check if people in the photos are legit. Secondly, I would ask the anonymous source what his intentions are and also ask how he know about his alleged second family. Thirdly I would take advantage of our Marshallese tradition of knowing everyone in the Marshallese community and ask my sources in the States to investigate and confirm if it's true.'

Participants also said they thought this story was newsworthy because the pastor is an example for his followers and the community. One commented that the pastor 'himself is sinful for engaging in extramarital affairs. His morals are not superior to that of his followers. If it's true, I'd publish giving the pastor the same treatment as the criminals or convicts whose names are published in the *Marshall Islands Journal*.'

*Q. Is your well-known personal feud with the pastor a factor in decision-making?*  
Participants were mixed on whether a personal feud with the pastor would be a factor in the story:

My personal feud with the pastor won't be the primary factor in my decision; it will be common sense and critical. By hitting him back with the doctrines he preaches by telling my readers that he doesn't live by what he preaches and blinding his followers to provide personal fundings that are for his personal benefit.

Another said it would be a factor because his criticisms would be answered, and gossip would become facts. Yet other participants said that from a moral standpoint, should the wife and church followers be told? What would the community think of this? They were worried about harm to the community.

Other cases were also presented for discussion. These issues were covered: When is being 'objective' irresponsible because one side won't comment; dilemmas faced by journalists in the midst of disaster coverage when victims need help; reporting on crime and corruption; reporting where everybody knows your name.

## **Conclusions**

Journalists in this workshop demonstrated the role of culture and society in their daily decisions about how to do journalism. Rather than culture being seen as an 'impediment' to journalism (Layton, 1995, p. 119) when an absolutist standard is applied, this group showed how they navigated ethical decision-making within the context of their society, cultural norms and institutions.

In this workshop, the young learned from the older participants, even when they had different perspectives and approaches, as demonstrated in their responses to the last two cases.

As Hanitzsch et al. 2019 (p. 29) noted: 'Young journalists mostly learn and understand these rules in terms of a cultural consensus as to 'how we do journalism,' rather than as an explicit code of conduct.' It's less about their personal value, and more about doing journalism that's natural to their culture.

Workshop participants were dedicated to fact-based reporting in an effort to get to the truth. They valued accuracy through verification of information, and demonstrated this in their approach to decision-making in the cases.

Independence—freedom from influence—was difficult because of close relationships in the community. As a result, it might be assumed that these journalists would find it hard to be impartial and neutral; however, they found ways to be fair by reporting multiple sides to a story and verifying information. However it depended on each situation (situationalism). Age was also a factor, with older journalists being more willing to challenge authority than younger ones. Young journalists were more risk-averse, particularly the females. However, one young

male participant was particularly bold.

The journalists in this study were Marshallese, but they also came from other island nations or had experience living in the United States. Being Marshallese is more challenging when doing stories about people they know or are related to, so some suggested that the solution to a conflict of interest might be asking a non-Marshallese reporter or someone not related to do the story.

Practising an ethics of care: Many of the journalists were concerned about humanity and protecting chiefs and people they knew, but how far they would go in protecting someone depended on the case and the newsworthiness of the story. They suggested that the best way to report on powerful individuals who were engaged in corruption was to verify information, check facts using multiple sources, or ask a foreign reporter to do the story if they feared retaliation or being blacklisted.

Where the church is the subject of the story, Marshallese journalists found themselves facing a conflict of interest; however, they were willing to expose corrupt or unfaithful pastors who were not practicing what they preached; not adhering to Christian morality.

They also believed in being accountable for their work by putting their bylines on stories.

### **Dimensions of journalism culture**

In the Worlds of Journalism study, Hanitzsch and his associates (2019) use four dimensions to test key differences against broader contexts of journalist culture: politics, governance, socioeconomic development and cultural values systems (p. 285). Their comparative analyses yielded four models of journalistic culture: monitorial, advocative, developmental and collaborative.

RMI journalists face the biggest challenges in implementing Western-based core values of journalism (absolutist) when carrying out their monitorial role, but have managed to negotiate journalism practices within their Marshallese cultural value system and governance structure. This is evidence that supports Robie's 'Pacific Way' tradition (2019), which introduces 'indigenous tradition or *kastom*, to use a Tok Pisin term, as a critical agency.' The influence of the chiefly system on political coverage played a role, with journalists possibly unwillingly in a collaborative role. Future research could include surveys of these journalists and a broader sample.

Through the discourse in this workshop, journalists of all ages shared their challenges and experiences. They agreed to meet more often and continue the conversations; this would ultimately forge a collective professional identity about what it means to practise journalism ethics in the Marshall Islands.

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# Pacific media freedom since the pandemic

**Commentary:** This article discusses the status of media freedom in the Pacific region and the impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. It primarily draws on informed comments made by experienced Pacific journalists during an online discussion in December 2021. Further, it updates the situation in several Pacific countries, based on reflections made by the same journalists in March 2023. There have been two major developments in 2023: the newly elected government in Fiji has repealed the country's controversial media law while the government of Papua New Guinea considers introducing a media law. The article highlights the importance of ongoing vigilance with regard to media freedom in Pacific Island countries.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Fiji, media freedom, Pacific journalism, Palau, pandemic, Papua New Guinea, political influence, Solomon Islands, Tonga

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## Introduction

PACIFIC ISLAND countries have varied levels of media freedom, which differ between countries. In addition, media freedom can vary over time, fluctuating in response to political developments and crises. This article considers media freedom challenges in the Pacific during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the experiences and viewpoints of journalism veterans. An ability for the mainstream media to conduct enquiries without hindrance or fear of reprisal is an important element of a democracy (Greste, 2017, p. xii). To what extent are journalists able to carry out their work in the Pacific? Did emergency measures designed to address the COVID-19 pandemic create obstacles for reporters on the ground? Economic downturns occurred due to pandemic response measures, such as slowdowns in commerce, closure and/or downsizing of businesses and the sudden halting of inbound tourism, a major source of economic activity, foreign exchange and revenue in the region. Did news media outlets experience decreases in advertising revenue? If so, to what extent did the economic downturns and national lockdowns affect news media organisations' finances



**Figure 1: Panel discussion participants: Bernadette Carreon, Georgina Kekea, Kalafi Moala, Dr Shailendra Singh, Dr Amanda H A Watson and James Batley.**

and news-gathering capabilities? This article presents insights about the challenges on the ground with respect to the operations of the Pacific news media sector. It also considers the impact of media freedom in Pacific Island countries during the unprecedented health crisis.

The Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University hosted an online panel discussion with experienced Pacific journalists in December 2021.<sup>1</sup> Facilitated by the first author of this article, the panel consisted of: Bernadette Carreon, a journalist based in Palau and a member of Pacific Freedom Forum;<sup>2</sup> Georgina Kekea, freelance journalist in Solomon Islands, president of the Media Association of Solomon Islands and member of the Melanesian Media Freedom Forum; Kalafi Moala, editor of the *Talanoa 'o Tonga* website; and the second author, Dr Shailendra Singh, the head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific. The event began with an introduction from James Batley, Distinguished Policy Fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs (Figure 1).

This article highlights the main insights that emerged during the discussion. It contains four sections: discussion of the definition of media freedom; description of the situation with regard to media freedom in the Pacific Islands region prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; reflections on the challenges of reporting of COVID-19 by the Pacific media sector; and examination of the impacts of the pandemic on Pacific media. The fourth section provides updates from the panel members. The article also briefly explains the latest developments



in Fiji and Papua New Guinea at the time of writing. Unless indicated otherwise, direct quotes were made by panel members during the online seminar. Given the backgrounds of the panel members, the article tends to focus on Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Fiji, although some trends described may resonate with experiences elsewhere in the Pacific region.

### **The concept of media freedom in the Pacific**

Most would agree that media freedom in the Pacific is important (for instance, see Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, p. 65; Watson, 2022, pp. 231-234). But how did panel members define media freedom? Georgina Kekea defined media freedom as a circumstance in which media workers can conduct themselves ‘freely, [and] without fear’ and suggested that media freedom allows for an environment in which journalists ‘thrive’. Bernadette Carreon warned that media freedom can be restricted when authorities do not answer journalists’ telephone calls and do not provide information to journalists. Therefore, she argued that ‘uninhibited access to information’ is essential to media freedom.

The second author, Dr Shailendra Singh, suggested that media freedom can be a complex concept that must be assessed with respect to the relevant national context. In a situation in which there is a history of political instability, ‘governments use stability as an excuse to curtail criticism and even hide corruption’. He described debates that had occurred in conflict-prone countries like Fiji about which scenario would be worse: tolerance for ‘a certain level of corruption’ for the sake of stability or the risk of an ‘implosion’ due to unrestrained media coverage in an unrelenting pursuit of the ‘truth’. In Fiji’s case, Fijian political scientist Professor Steven Ratuva, director of the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand, believes that hyper-critical coverage of the Chaudhry government encouraged the 2000 coup plotters (Robie, 2001). While the media did not cause the coup, the nature of the coverage inflamed a tense situation and emboldened nationalist rebels to roll on with their plans (Robie, 2001).

The suggestion is that the burden to make judgments falls on the shoulders of journalists in fragile settings or during moments when instability is looming. As Singh put it, in fragile situations, media freedom is tied to ‘journalistic responsibility’ more strongly than in mature democracies, which can withstand robust aggressive coverage. In at-risk societies, there is a greater consideration about the implications of how certain subjects are reported because of the potential for violence. It is plausible that in such situations journalists are more circumspect and through their work, they may seek to contribute towards a more peaceful and cohesive society, especially when they are part of the same society. Solomon Islands journalist Robert Iroga’s (2008) research into his country’s media after ethnic violence in the 1990s found that media complemented the state’s reconstruction efforts, even while free to criticise government. Senior reporters

who were interviewed stated that the country had suffered and as responsible citizens, they did not want to see further derailment (Iroga, 2008, pp. 166–172).

### **The status of media freedom before the pandemic**

Before turning to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media sector, panel members were asked to describe the status of media freedom prior to the pandemic. Both Carreon and Kekea referred to the issue of ‘smallness’ and associated challenges. As Cullen and Hassall have explained elsewhere, many of the Pacific Island countries can be thought of as small island developing states (2017, p. 4). As such, they ‘have certain vulnerabilities, some related to economic ‘shocks’ and natural hazards and others as a consequence of their geography’ (Cullen & Hassall, 2017, p. 7).

For Carreon, the idea of ‘smallness’ is felt in Palau in terms of the number of media workers and the amount of advertising revenue available to the media sector. She described the key challenges of small newsrooms and limited numbers of journalists. She referred to a tension between, on the one hand, freelance journalists needing to make sufficient money to live and, on the other hand, media houses constrained by a limited advertising market. In her estimation, most pre-pandemic advertising revenue came from tourism businesses and government departments.

While Kekea similarly referred to a small media industry and small newsrooms in Solomon Islands, her main concern was with the way that the country’s small population impacts her work. She explained that it is difficult to cover a story when someone involved is related to her. Because it is a frequent experience that people know one another, culture and traditions can have a bearing on the ways that journalists carry out their work. Kekea also referred to geographical challenges, such as the difficulties of travelling to outer islands to cover stories.

Kalafi Moala emphasised the impact of the entrance of social media. He said that 10 or 15 years ago print media was the primary source from which people in Tonga sought news and information. He argued that nowadays print media ‘is irrelevant’ in Tonga. He mentioned that radio broadcasting remained important, but that social media has caused major changes in the communicative landscape. At present, he said, ‘traditional media is suffering financially because they’re still trying to operate the way they were operating 20 years, 10 years ago’ (see also Panapasa & Singh, 2018, p. 137).

In the case of Fiji, a recent change of government following an election late in 2022 has had a major impact on media freedom. The new government initially announced that it would review the media laws (Kumar, 2023; Nasiko, 2023). On 29 March 2023, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka announced in Parliament that cabinet had approved the tabling of a bill to repeal the controversial *Fiji Media Industry Development Act* ‘as a whole’ (Anthony, 2023). Rabuka stated:

I am proud to stand here today to make this announcement, which was key to our electoral platform, and a demand that I heard echoed in all parts of the country that I visited. (Anthony, 2023)

The potential significance of this change is highlighted by the fact that when speaking in the online seminar in December 2021, Singh's assessment was that the main turning point regarding media freedom was the year 2006 when Fiji experienced its fourth coup. The Fijian media sector was hit soon after the coup by a number of restrictions (Robie, 2014, pp. 324-325) before the punitive *Fiji Media Industry Development Decree* (later transformed to 'Act') was introduced in June 2010 (Kumar, 2023). Singh said that prior to 2006 media freedom in Fiji was on a par with, or close to, the media freedom in Australia and New Zealand. The media restrictions after the 1987 and 2000 coups were short-lived, whereas the post-2006 coup restrictions were the most prolonged and pervasive in Fiji's history. Before it was repealed, Fiji's media act loomed over the media sector like a guillotine (Morris, 2015, p. 37), because of the serious financial penalties and jail terms contained therein (Robie, 2016, pp. 96-99).

### **The reporting of COVID-19 in the Pacific**

During 2020 as the pandemic commenced, concerns were raised about whether Pacific governments were using the need for health restrictions as an opportunity to curtail press freedom (Aualiitia, 2020; Press freedom in the Pacific: Coronavirus spurs media crackdown, 2020; Robie, 2020). Such concerns contributed to the impetus to organise the panel discussion on media freedom in the Pacific region.

In Palau, the media industry chose to treat the COVID-19 pandemic as a health issue and avoid politicising it, according to Carreon. She spoke of a positive working relationship between health officials and the media sector, with a joint WhatsApp<sup>3</sup> communication group for the sharing of information and questions. She described how media workers were able to check the accuracy of what they were writing. In her view, the media coverage contributed to high COVID-19 vaccination rates in Palau.<sup>4</sup>

Moala said that from early in the pandemic Tonga's media sector established a close working relationship with the health authorities, which allowed the media to gain accurate information. A flow-on benefit of this relationship was that health authorities brought advertising revenue to media outlets, in their efforts to disseminate public health messaging. Kekea's experience in Solomon Islands was not as positive. She explained that government departments were establishing communication officer roles, which she felt created obstacles for journalists. She argued that such officers could make it difficult for journalists to gain access to the people they wanted to interview.

Although there were lockdowns due to COVID-19 in both Tonga and Fiji, Moala and Singh said that media workers were able to continue working during those periods. As Dr Singh described in the case of Fiji, ‘media were considered essential service and reporters could move freely’. Nonetheless, Singh expressed some concerns about negative impacts of the pandemic on media freedom in Fiji. He explained that “after a while the health ministry press conferences were replaced by media releases” and pondered whether the Fijian government used the emergency situation to curtail media freedom (see also Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

As it turned out, curtailing mainstream media was counterproductive. Research indicated social media platforms became fertile grounds for misinformation in Fiji, with anti-vaccination material proliferating online, threatening to increase vaccine hesitancy (Kant & Varea, 2021). Although there are complex dynamics at play (Newman et al., 2012), news media are generally viewed as having more credibility than social media. For example, research in Papua New Guinea found that citizens were more likely to trust the media than social media platforms (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 6). Thus, the mainstream media may be able to assist governments to counter misinformation. Further, the media could be supported by fact-checking initiatives, training to improve fact-checking expertise (Robie, 2022, pp. 31-39) and training in use of ‘reflective practice’ (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020, p. 187).

Moala described an ongoing battle against misinformation in Tonga, including in relation to COVID-19 vaccinations. Singh argued that the mainstream media was best placed to provide accurate information to members of the public. He acknowledged that there had been some instances of inaccurate reporting by media outlets in the Pacific Islands region. Singh posited that professional lapses in Pacific journalism had deep causes. In part, such lapses stem from ‘uncompetitive salaries’ offered by media businesses due to slim profit margins, meaning that turnover of journalists is high, which makes it a challenge to build and sustain newsroom capacity. These issues are not new. For instance, salaries and staff turnover came up during discussions at a meeting of the Pacific news media industry in 2018 (Panapasa & Singh, 2018, p. 136). Research by Singh and Hanusch (2021) shows that Pacific journalists are among the youngest, most inexperienced and least qualified in the world. The structural weaknesses in the Pacific media landscape can become pronounced in crisis reporting, such as covering the pandemic. Singh suggested that ‘capacity building’ of journalists may help to reduce the likelihood of inaccuracies emerging from mainstream news media coverage of complex issues. The capacity-building should be proactive rather than reactive.

### **Impacts of the pandemic on the media sector**

In December 2021, during the online seminar, Carreon described major impacts

of the pandemic for the media sector in Palau, including a shortage of advertising revenue, cash-strapped media outlets and rapid turnover of journalists. Singh had observed similar trends in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. He drew an explicit ‘link between financial viability [of media businesses] and media freedom’. He said that the pandemic may have brought some media outlets to the brink of collapse. Singh pointed out that the advertising market in the Pacific Islands region was ‘small to begin with’, that ‘digital disruption’ had begun to dent the funding model and that the pandemic may prove to be ‘the final nail in the vulnerable Pacific media coffin’. He predicted that financially weak media businesses would close or downsize. The Pacific media industry was small, he said, but it did have much strategic value.

In March 2023, the panellists were asked about developments since December 2021. Carreon reflected that pandemic border closures meant that foreign reporters were unable to travel to the Pacific, which allowed local journalists to receive more recognition than they had in the past. Her impression was that this had led to a flourishing of the Pacific media sector, with increased work opportunities for freelance journalists and the establishment of several new media organisations, some of which are receiving external funding. Carreon has the sense that there is now greater attention on the media sector in the Pacific Islands region, coupled with additional media development initiatives.

In Solomon Islands, a recent change has been the advent of weekly government press conferences since about the start of February 2023. Kekea explained that journalists were able to send in questions in advance to the Prime Minister’s office. If a question related to the work of a specific government department, a relevant senior bureaucrat would be invited to the press conference to respond. For example, if a question was submitted about agriculture policy, the head of the department that handles agriculture would attend the press conference.

It is important to note here that typical practice for media conferences in democracies is that written questions are not sent in advance. The drawbacks of sending questions, as opposed to stating off the cuff questions during media conferences or one-on-one face-to-face interviews, are well-known in the field of journalism. Among them, the disadvantages include the opportunity for authorities to provide crafted responses, to be selective as to which questions to answer, and to avoid follow-up questions.

Moala said that misinformation remained a challenge facing the media sector in Tonga. Those opposed to vaccination, including religious leaders, claimed that COVID-19 shots had led to deaths and suggested that there had been a spike in the death rate. Health authorities countered that any rise in the number of deaths would be due to COVID-19 itself. Media outlets continued to publish information from the health authorities in a concerted effort to counter misinformation.

Moala mentioned that Tongan media houses met recently to discuss their

experiences. One topic of conversation was the relationship between the media industry and the government. Moala said that there was a need for the media to remain vigilant in monitoring and reporting on government activities even while the government was the main source of advertising revenue.

While Papua New Guinea was not discussed in detail during the event in December 2021, it is important to note that the government of Papua New Guinea released a draft media policy in early February 2023. This raised concerns regarding media freedom because the draft included the idea of licensing journalists and revoking licences for breaches (Harriman, 2023). In addition, there were other aspects of the draft policy that caused alarm (Anthony & Hawkins, 2023; Pacific Media Watch, 2023a; Waide, 2023). Following calls for an extension of the initial short consultation period (Harriman, 2023), an extension was granted (Vincent, 2023) and a consultative workshop was held early in March (Watson, 2023). Late in March 2023, the Minister for Information and Communication Technology, Timothy Masiu, indicated that a report on the consultation process would be released shortly and a revised policy would be released in late April 2023 (Kenneth, 2023). At the time of writing, no revised version had been made available but an online survey was accessible on the website of the Department of Information and Communications Technology so that members of the public could contribute their views. Pacific Freedom Forum and others continued to call for the process to be abandoned, arguing that no media policy was required (Hawkins, 2023; Pacific Media Watch, 2023b).

## **Conclusion**

While there are diverse contexts across the Pacific Island countries, Pacific journalists, news editors, media organisations and media scholars remain convinced of the need to discuss media rights because of the links with freedom and democracy. When he announced the repeal of Fiji's media act, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka described media freedom and freedom of expression as the 'oxygen of democracy', adding that these 'fundamental freedoms are integral to enable the people to hold their government accountable' (Anthony, 2023). It remains imperative to highlight the value of media freedom and the need to protect it. In this regard, COVID-19 has been a stark reminder about the link between media freedom and the financial viability of media organisations, especially in the Pacific, where the advertising markets are relatively small and profit margins correspondingly limited. Although media businesses faced challenges during the height of the pandemic due to revenue downturns, the media industry across the Pacific continues to strive to conduct impartial reporting, for the benefit of citizens and the societies in which they live. Media professionals and businesses face various challenges and thus it is important to support their work and ensure that they are able to operate without fear of violence or any other forms of reprisal.

## Notes

1. A video recording of the panel discussion is available at <https://youtu.be/UjxfIAT9xUg>
2. At the time of the panel discussion (December 2021), Bernadette Carreon was a freelance journalist in Palau and chair of Pacific Freedom Forum. At the time of writing (March 2023), she was a Pacific investigative reporter with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and coordinator of Pacific Freedom Forum.
3. WhatsApp is a smartphone application that allows for chat groups such as the one referred to here, as well as one-to-one communication.
4. In October 2021, Palau had one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world (IFRC, 2021).

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# Training journalists in New Zealand

## The industry view of training 1979-2002

**Commentary:** What skills should student journalists and then working journalists be taught? This paper is an analysis of two decades of reports by editors in the New Zealand media on what they wanted to see. The reports were part of the annual Commonwealth Press Union review of the year. They show a focus by editors on the practical, craft skills of journalism, even as academics and teachers were questioning what was best. The reports cover the years 1979-2002. Many of the same issues then are still being faced; how do you ensure training is up to standard, what do young journalists need to know, how to deliver training to journalists during their careers, and how to ensure that a diverse range of people enters the industry? These questions remain today.

**Keywords:** Commonwealth Press Union, cadetships, critical thinking, history, inverted pyramid, journalism education, journalism methodology, journalism skills, journalism training, journalism unit standards, Journalists Training Board, Journalists Training Organisation, New Zealand, NZ Institute of Journalists, Public Interest Journalism Fund

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### Introduction

**M**EDIA people have always argued about the best way to train journalists. Is it a profession or a craft, or both? Is it more important for a young reporter to learn the inverted pyramid or critical thinking? It is a contested question.

In 2021, I stumbled across two decades worth of writings from one point of view on the issue; it was the views of largely New Zealand newspaper editors discussing training. What follows is not a full treatise on journalism training; nor a history of media efforts to train staff. Rather it is a summary of how one group viewed what was important for training over more than two decades.

I read some 22 years' worth of annual reports from 1979 to 2001, by the then Commonwealth Press Union, which included its views on the state of training in New Zealand (Commonwealth Press Union New Zealand section reports 1979-2001). I came across this trove of reports by accident. When I left a job

at *The New Zealand Herald*, a leading New Zealand newspaper and website, I packed up my belongings in a box but, in a mix-up, picked up the wrong one; I discovered later I had saved dozens of industry reports meant to be shredded and thrown out by the *Herald* Library. They were filled with reports on how training was being organised, debates about what makes good training, and were the industry's needs being met. They also recorded the quite remarkable amount of on-the-job training that companies offered their journalists; something which has diminished significantly.

Some of the same arguments are still playing out today. New Zealand's Public Interest Journalism Fund, a fund set up by the NZ government during COVID to help journalism, has one pillar solely for industry development like cadetships and up-skilling. How best to attract young people into journalism and then train them was a topic of discussion for applicants to the fund (*New Zealand Herald*, 2022).

The CPU reports give some insights into how one group, albeit a powerful one at the centre of the media industry, viewed the needs of journalism from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. It is important to remember these are the thoughts of editors, speaking to other editors and journalists about what they expected. The views of journalism schools and students are not captured.

The reports can also be frustrating. The editors of the training board may report on one issue in depth one year and then drop it the next. But they remain a fascinating fragment of the industry, certainly before digital change engulfed journalism.

By and large, the industry group was focused on what should be taught in journalism schools—and, largely, that meant the teaching of craft skills that could be applied in the newsroom. The inverted pyramid was more important than critical thinking. And, at least until it became too onerous, training also meant a large number of on-the-job refresher courses.

The views are contained within the pages of the annual (and at times bi-annual) reports of the New Zealand section of the Commonwealth Press Union, the industry body largely representing newspapers both in Aotearoa and the countries of the Commonwealth. The Training and Education of Journalists committee would file a report for the NZCPU section. They were reporting the work of the industry's training body of the time. The body changed over the period. First, it was the Journalists Training committee, then the Journalists Training Board, and finally the Journalists Training Organisation. Newspapers made up the bulk of the members but did, at times, include magazines and broadcasters.

### **The historical background**

Journalists in newspapers in 19th century New Zealand learned on the job in newsrooms. However, the impetus for training grew with the establishment of the New Zealand Institute of Journalists in 1891. Among its goals was raising

the professional status of journalists, by controlling entry to the industry through formal qualification tests (Elsaka, 2004).

A Diploma of Journalism was introduced at the Canterbury University College around 1911. But the preferred place for journalism training remained the newsroom until the 1960s when ‘trade school’ courses began to appear. A year-long polytechnic programme began at Wellington Polytechnic in the mid-1960s. It was followed by a six-month programme at the then Auckland Technical Institute (ATI), led by tutor Geoff Black. Former newspaper manager and journalism trainer Ruth Thomas describes it as ‘solely influenced by the industry it served, training journalists using methods which Black brought from that industry’ (Thomas, 2008). By the 1980s and 1990s—the decades covered by my trove of training reports—there were a number of training courses available for students wishing to be journalists. They ranged from courses at Canterbury University to those at institutions which had come from polytechnic backgrounds like the now Auckland University of Technology, as well as courses that arose and then disappeared at some business schools. In-house cadetships carried on into the late 1980s in some newsrooms, but the training of reporters had largely shifted to journalism schools.

This shift in training to journalism schools raised the question of what graduates should be taught. Recently there has been a steady rise in academic studies examining this question. Researcher Nadia Elsaka (2004) in a doctoral thesis, *Beyond Consensus? New Zealand Journalists and the Appeal of ‘Professionalism’ as a Model for Occupational Reform*, examined the push for ‘professionalising’ journalism. She tracks over a century of cultural, economic, and political currents that led to a push for journalism to be seen as a profession.

To gain a legitimate place within the university and thus in society, the New Zealand Journalists’ Association (along with those journalists who aspired to the status as a ‘recognised profession’) supported the notion of journalism as a serious academic discipline, and not simply vocational training. However, journalists were also aware of the necessity of learning the practical skills required for journalistic working order to be marketable in the eyes of employers. Standing somewhere in between these two views have been the journalism teaching institutions themselves. (Elsaka, 2004)

Others have examined this area of tension between teaching ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ In her doctoral thesis, *The Making of a Journalist: The New Zealand Way* Ruth Thomas (2008) argued that the history of journalism education had been a struggle between the academy and media industry. ‘On the one hand, the media industry favour journalism students learning practical skills and support standards-based training, while on the other the academy esteems the teaching of general contextual skills and liberal arts courses’ (Thomas, 2008).

Thomas charted her journey from a community newspaper editor and member of the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation, strongly supporting training standards in set skills for a newsroom, to a teacher increasingly steeped in very different thinking on adult education and pedagogy. Her thesis was a call to debate what should be taught to budding journalists.

Thomas' thesis was completed just a few years after my cache of CPU documents ran out. She concluded that New Zealand journalism education too much resembled 'old-style apprenticeship training' and hardly equipped students to be questioning professionals.

Unsurprisingly, the editors in the CPU disagreed. Their reports showed editors strongly in favour of a skills-based, craft, practical style of training; both within journalism schools and in on-the-job training.

At the same time, influence over what should be taught in journalism schools shifted decisively to the industry (Thomas, 2008). The *Industry Training Act 1992* established a New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) focused on unit standards to measure a student's competency. The JTO became the accrediting body.

Universities balked at the system on the grounds of eroding academic freedom. But, according to Thomas, 'while there were often heated words over the implementation of the journalism unit standards, the degree of opposition from the polytechnics never went any further' (Thomas, 2008).

You can see this play out in the CPU documents—but from the industry side. There is a distinct pivot. During the 1980s, the Journalism Training Board saw itself as liaising with Journalism Schools on pre-entry training but was also heavily involved in organising training workshops for working reporters. During the 1990s, the Journalism Training Organisation took on the role of moderating the standards of Journalism Schools. It stopped organising so many workshops; these moved in-house for media companies. Instead, it ran a diploma for working journalists who would receive tuition and mentoring at their work.

### **Setting the standards**

So, what did the editors and media managers say about this system? Looking back in 2001, the JTO executive director Bill Southworth said it put the JTO in the 'driver's seat' for all pre-entry journalism training. 'It has proved to be a great improvement from the old days when industry was relegated to being a (sometimes) grumpy back seat driver . . . Rather than on-the-job cadet training (the old way) the focus has shifted to ensuring that training is competently done by journalism schools. Overall, it is a highly cost-effective system' (CPU, 2001).

In 1997, the CPU's training committee convenor, Don Milne, explained that the JTO 'sets the national standards for training. It determines the units required and their standards, and moderates courses, in cooperation with the Qualifications Authority, to ensure that they are maintained.' This was a far better system, he

argued, than ‘the unsatisfactory confusion before the JTO and other industrial training organisations were set up’. Industry oversight He said, meant employers could be sure the graduates had reached an agreed minimum standard (CPU, 1997).

A year later, Southworth wrote that quality control was ‘no sleigh ride’ (CPU, 1998). Every year industry training providers would have their work checked to ensure the training was reaching the right standards. And as the 1990s ended, the Journalism committee congratulated itself on how ‘this control of industry over school standards has produced good results everywhere and the days when a bad school could turn in a poor performance year after year (with industry effectively impotent on the side-lines) are gone.’ Southworth explained to the industry that ‘every three years all graduates at all schools must sit exams designed by industry. The exams check that graduates are up to scratch and that their work is being marked according to national standards’ (CPU, 1998).

When a green paper in 1997 suggested changing this system, the JTO was aghast. ‘The most objectional aspect of the green paper was the suggestion that schools might be able to create their own journalism qualification without having to get them approved by the industry,’ it said (CPU, 1997).

Each annual report would summarise how the committee felt journalism training was faring; during the 1980s it also gave an overview of what it felt were the standards of each intake. In the 1980s the focus was on a handful of providers; Wellington, Auckland, and Canterbury. In 1980, it pointed out that the Auckland Technical Institute felt ‘the standard of men applicants was disappointing’ (CPU, 1980). Three years later, it pronounced the ‘demand from young folk for places in journalism is greater than ever before’ (CPU, 1983).

In 1981, the committee noted it was ‘uneasy’ at the quality of the Wellington Polytech and set up a sub-committee to draft guidelines for pre-entry courses. But in the end, it pulled back saying ‘it would be bad psychology to impose its will on teaching institutions’ (CPU, 1981). It did, however, request copies of the syllabus and timetables from course leaders each year. A year later, things had improved. It reported that several members had been ‘very active in encouraging improvements’ at Wellington Polytech; ‘the portents for a better course are most promising’ (CPU, 1982).

In 1992, when the JTO had begun moderating courses, the committee recorded that ‘the previous year Waikato failed to meet industry standards’ (CPU, 1992). A second failure would have seen the JTO applying to the qualifications authority to conduct an academic audit. Six years later, it recorded that a course at Taranaki had failed to meet ‘the required standards’ and would need to be tested again (CPU, 1998). However, generally, the reports of the 1990s explain the moderating system and note the institutions which had met the standards. Where an institution was struggling to meet them, it would spell out the steps being taken to rectify it.

The growth of communications courses and degrees was often noted darkly. In 1994, Milne complained that ‘the proliferation of so-called communications and media studies courses at universities and polytechnics (most of them taught by academics rather than experienced journalists) continues’ (CPU, 1994). There were regular complaints that institutions were becoming academic-focused and centred too much on communications courses and degrees, at the expense of the vocational teaching of journalism.

At times, the industry seems to have felt, there were far too many courses. By the late 1980s, the Journalism training committee wondered about the growth of journalism courses beyond the original institutions. Aoraki, Northland, and Southland all launched courses. So, too, did Manukau Polytech and the Auckland Business School. The committee voiced its concerns about the ‘apparently unrestricted’ growth of courses offered in small private schools, especially the starter access courses. ‘Few of these offer any prospects of employment to their graduates and the standards seem generally abysmal,’ it pronounced (CPU, 1988).

More practically, the committee worried whether it had the resources to measure standards in many of these new communication courses—and whether it even should. By 1990, the committee was worried everyone seemed to be running media courses of some sort—there were 220 graduates, most destined for ‘niches in the fast-growing communications industry’. But a year later, the economy had begun to solve the issue. There would be a shake-out in the number of courses largely due to ‘the moribund job market’, the committee warned (CPU, 1990).

The committee also reported assiduously on the number of Journalism School trainees who got jobs—and usually where they ended up. It was a mark of success that graduates were good enough to be employed.

Overall, what is remarkable is the extent to which the industry body was engaged in monitoring the standards of the tertiary course, first through liaison in the 1980s and then directly in monitoring standards through the 1990s and into the 2000s. No such system exists today. The Journalism Training Organisation merged in 2008 with another printing industry group to create the Communications and Media Industry Training Organisation and that in turn became part of a training provider, Competenz. In 2017, Competenz decided there was little revenue in journalism training and closed its journalism section. Today most Journalism Schools have some form of an industry liaison committee, but they are more a sounding board than an examiner of standards. These rigorous reports to the media industry on the standards of training are a reminder of the extent to which the media was once involved in the direction of journalism training, for better or worse.

### **On-the-job training**

Perhaps as remarkable was the extent the media industry in New Zealand once

organised on-the-job training courses for its journalists, at least in the 1980s. Now training as an industry experience has largely disappeared. But in 1982, for example, the CPU Training Committee recorded that the Journalism Training Board had organised:

- A two-day Tutors and Chief Reporters seminar in Wellington
- A three-day mid-grade Photographers' course in Wellington
- A two-day media hui at Hoani Waititi Marae, West Auckland
- A two-day media hui at Hinemoa Point Marae in Rotorua
- A week-long introductory journalism course for Māori and Pacific students in Auckland
- And one in Rotorua

But that was only the first six months of the year. In the second half, it organised:

- A four-day sub-editing course in Wellington
- A two-day course on local body reporting in Auckland
- A two-day librarians' course in Wellington
- A three-day financial reporting course in Wellington
- A writing course in Hamilton
- A three-day photography course also in Hamilton
- An interviewing course in Auckland
- And another interviewing course in Wellington.

It did note that a two-day course for industrial reporters 'had to be postponed because only seven applications were received' (CPU, 1982).

It also recorded its thanks to *The New Zealand Herald* for running its annual week-long sub-editing course for staff from any newspaper; course fees were paid by the CPU.

In other years the committee recorded similar courses, but there were also workshops. They included feature writing courses (two days, 1979), an 'innovation' of a sub-editors course in the South Island (1981), a three-day course in basic news photography (1981), a three-day course in staff management for news executives (1981), three-day courses in agricultural reporting (1981), election coverage (1990), interpreting statistics (1990), media law (1998) and health reporters courses (1998, with a total of 60 attendees).

Courses were run often by journalists and photographers from within the industry who volunteered to train others.

The Journalism Training Board would regularly survey its members on what were the greatest needs for training. In 1980, the board undertook a national survey of journalists; it had 844 returns but said this was a 'little disappointing although sufficient' for analysis by the *Auckland Star's* new computer (CPU, 1980). Once it knew what was needed, it would organise courses. There were further surveys in 1986 and 1994.

The volume of courses declined after 1988. The board noted that surveys of



the industry showed managers preferred in-house programmes because of travel costs and the difficulty of releasing staff for block courses. As part of its shift, the board announced in 1992 a new National Diploma of Journalism (later a Graduate Diploma) for working journalists; it would focus on ‘the higher skills needed for them to perform better’ (CPU, 1992). Skills would be taught remotely with chief reporters on-site as tutors. Rather than industry-organised get-togethers, training would be delivered to workers at their work site. ‘Distance learning will allow editors and chief reporters to organise training according to their needs and the needs of staff, and to their own time schedules’ (CPU, 1992). By 2001, the Graduate Diploma had 100 students studying, though the board was often concerned to attract more (‘there are, after all, about 2500 journalists in New Zealand’) (CPU, 2001). Once the diploma was in place for the industry, the number of block courses steadily declined although some, like a chief reporters hui, continued.

Over time, the board produced books and materials on better journalism. The number increased steadily through the 1990s to fit in with the courses and unit standards of the Graduate Diploma.

One early milestone was the production of five videos in 1979 on the law of newsgathering and publishing. ‘It is claimed that no more effective and valuable teaching aid in this field has ever been produced,’ wrote industry training convenor Allan Cole. ‘The industry is indebted to Mr Brian Priestley and Professor John Burrows, both of Canterbury University, who conceived the idea, prepared the scripts and enacted the series in front of South Pacific Television’s cameras’ (CPU, 1979).

The board sent copies of the video cassettes around the country, along with printed notes. Media outlets could buy their own set for NZ\$550 (around \$3400 in today’s dollar, according to NZ Treasury calculators). Later, the board noted that 300 people in Auckland had been to the *Auckland Star* to watch the tapes using playback equipment provided by *The New Zealand Herald*. There were problems, though. The board struggled to find a ‘regular operator’ to run the tapes and ‘competent journalists’ to chair the sessions and take questions, it noted. Further, the tapes had been recorded on Sony Umatic  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch colour cassettes; most media companies only had  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch tape players. But, on the whole, the board believed the industry had benefited immensely.

It also set out to produce books for reporters. In 1980, it asked Professor Burrows to produce a ‘ready reckoner’ on law, based on a publication it had seen for *Yorkshire Post* staff. It became the ubiquitous *A Journalist’s Guide to the Law*, a staple in every New Zealand newsroom. It went through several editions; in 1990 it was updated due to changes in defamation laws. A year later, the training board produced a compilation of political election reporting essays from some of the most senior Press Gallery reporters including Ian Templeton, Colin James, Warren Page, Neale McMillan, and Bruce Morris. Seven years later,

it announced *Business Reporting* by Allan Lee from AUT, and *Digging Deeper, A Guide to Investigative Reporting* by Amanda Cropp. ‘As a sign of the times, *Business Reporting* was sponsored by Brierley Investments and *Digging Deeper* by Merck Sharp and Dohme,’ one report notes.

In the mid-1990s the JTO even began to publish its own bimonthly magazine with a circulation of 2,500 carrying book reviews, training opportunities, and articles. In 1998, it published a 540-page textbook *Intro* with chapters on journalism skills; it was labelled the single biggest commitment of industry funds that year (CPU, 1998). As well, the JTO produced a book on financial reporting, *Reporting Economics*, and a *New Zealand Journalist’s Guide to Asia*. An MMP handbook edited by Colin James ‘proved a best seller’, the committee noted (CPU, 1999). And there was a handbook by historian and journalist Michael King, *Kawe Korero—A Guide to Reporting Māori Activities*. This was followed in 2007 by *Pou Kōrero: A journalists’ guide to Māori and Current Affairs*, by Carol Archie.

All these materials, courses, and organisation cost money. In the 1980s, journalism’s training body employed an executive training officer; later the JTO had an executive director. The training committee’s annual reports sometimes detail where the money came from. An industry levy was one source. In 1982, it noted it received \$6145 from the industry of its total income of \$32,205 (CPU, 1982). The largest stream was government money, but the sources changed over time depending on which government department oversaw industry training—and its importance. In 1982, the Journalists Training Board received from the government’s Vocational Training Council, a grant of up to 90 percent of its operating costs. It also received one-off grants. In 1992, it received a \$48,950 Education and Training Support Agency grant to carry out a proper analysis of needs. The board also received sponsorship money. Businesses sponsored some of the publications; for example, in 1996 the Hong Kong Bank gave a grant to a *Journalist’s Handbook on Asia* (CPU, 1996).

All of this activity did require buy-in from the industry; it was not always forthcoming. There were occasional grumbles at the disinterest in some newsrooms. The standard of on-the-job tutoring was variable. And the training board sometimes worried people in the industry did not seem to understand what it was doing. Or were not sufficiently interested. In 1981, training chair Allan Cole chaired a panel on training journalists at the 14th Commonwealth Press Union conference in Melbourne. He ended up fielding orders from around the world for the legal videotapes. He added tartly, ‘I gained the distinct impression that the thirst for training was keener in these places (developing parts of the Commonwealth) than it is in some newspaper offices’. Interestingly, he noted that a resolution to do more training for developing countries dropped the term ‘journalist’ because it was felt that news managers need as much training as reporters (CPU, 1981). In 1980, the committee noted that in-office training was

not being carried out well in some newspapers and said that local tutors did not have sufficient ‘status, incentives and time’ to conduct effective training. Instead, it would investigate hiring travelling tutors (CPU, 1980).

What is remarkable in all this activity is its scale; in the 1980s the board organised a large amount of training for working journalists across media companies, with some government funding. When the role of the JTO shifted to supporting training rather than running it, the organisation produced a plethora of books. Today, there is very little pan-industry training in the New Zealand media. Individual companies do internal training for staff, but industry-wide courses are largely absent and there is no industry training body in existence.

### **A pipeline for journalists**

New Zealand journalism is currently involved in a debate on how to get people from different backgrounds into newsrooms. Is journalism, which has seen jobs decline over the last decade due to digital disruption, attracting good people to become reporters? Further, is it able to attract Māori, Pasifika, and Asian people into newsrooms so that the media reflects the ethnic diversity of the country? These questions have formed part of the discussions between the media industry and the government funding agency, NZ on Air through its Public Interest Journalism Fund. (*New Zealand Herald*, 2022) One of its three funding pillars is industry development, including cross-industry cadetships and upskilling reporters.

It is interesting to look back at the 1980s and 1990s to see a similar discussion. The industry was involved in discussions to encourage people from diverse backgrounds into journalism training. Especially, throughout the 1980s it reported on the gender breakdown of trainees—usually more women than men were entering courses. It occasionally commented on the ‘disappointing’ standard of male applicants.

The training board produced several brochures for schools encouraging students to take up journalism and explaining how a career in the media might unfold. (It also produced a pamphlet for mid-career journalists setting out career steps). In the mid-90s it drew up unit standards for school journalism courses in the hope that journalism would be approved as a bursary subject. The aim, it reported, was to improve the standing of journalism as a career.

But, perhaps most notably, the committee was involved in ongoing discussions on attracting more Māori and Polynesian young people into newsrooms. This was a real focus for the committee after it hired Gary Wilson as executive training officer in 1979. He had taught English at St Stephens, been a journalist at the *Auckland Star* and *New Zealand Herald*, and later a tutor at the then Auckland Training Institute. He was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2019 for his services to Māori and Pacific journalism. A year after his appointment, the training committee recorded his first success; it noted that the Department of Māori Affairs was keen to look at ways to interest more Polynesian young people

in journalism. It would finance a special introductory course for senior high school students with ‘apparent aptitude’ (CPU, 1980). A year later, the committee notes that he had gone to Fiji for the Pacific Island News Association conference to advise the Commonwealth Press Union on what might be done to help train journalists in the Pacific. His advice was to send good journalists to work with Pacific journalists ‘on their home ground’ (CPU, 1981). One example was an annual course run in various parts of the Pacific by *The Herald’s* Bob Pearce on sub-editing. For several years, the committee would record Wilson’s ‘major role’ in organising pre-entry courses for Pasifika. At the end of 1981, it noted that a good number of the ‘young folk’ at the introductory courses had gone on to take journalism courses. Wilson left the role in 1988.

This may have been the peak of trying to change the pipeline of journalist recruits. There seems to have been a resurgence of interest in pre-enrolment courses after the closure of a course at Manukau Polytech which had been aimed at Māori and Pasifika. In 1995, the committee noted that the task of training was beyond that of one tutor. But it did note that local graduates had made a mark in the industry and overseas graduates had found jobs across the Pacific. Because of the closure, the JTO turned again to the idea of starter courses to help. ‘Convinced there is still a need for Pacific Islanders in New Zealand journalism, the JTO backed an initiative by two leading practitioners to organise induction courses, aimed at preparing able students for mainstream courses,’ it reported (CPU, 1995). The next year it noted it had run a 14-week Pacific Island introduction to journalism course in Wellington with ten students and aimed for a further two courses the next year (CPU, 1996). After that, the discussion fades away.

The committee did take regular note of two courses aimed at Pasifika and Māori; Waiariki and Manukau Polytechs. In 1991, it reported approvingly that Waiariki would run a special course to train Māori for iwi radio stations, ‘where there is an increasing demand for journalism and other skills’ (CPU, 1991). There have been further initiatives to foster Māori and Pacific journalism, such as AUT’s Pacific Media Centre, established in 2007. But these fall outside the scope of my trove of documents, 1979-2002, and their planning was not mentioned.

## Summary

These reports, spanning two-and-a-bit decades, give some insight into how at least part of the industry viewed journalism training. What stands out is the energy of those setting up the training then, their achievements, and the ideas they were working with. Backed by some government money for vocational training and levies on members, they produced an array of industry-wide training. During the 1980s there was roughly one course a month for people in the industry. They produced brochures for schools. Under Gary Wilson, they set up training schemes to encourage Māori and Pacific students to take up journalism. The committee

did discuss expanding the pipeline of people into journalism. During the 1990s, the industry took on the role of moderating journalism courses to ensure they met national standards. It also set up a graduate diploma for working journalists who would do unit standards remotely and receive tutoring from their chief reporter. Much of that infrastructure has now gone. Training and mentoring are carried out within companies. The Journalism Training Organisation was wound up after its role was absorbed by a training provider, Competenz. The News Publishers Association, a successor to the Newspaper Publishers Association and a distant relative to the Commonwealth Press Union, does not appear to mention training on its website. But many of the same issues are still being faced; how do you ensure training is up to standard, what do young journalists need to know, how to deliver training to journalists during their careers, and how to ensure that a diverse range of people enters the industry? These questions remain today.

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# Failure of political governance in Fiji

## Dysfunctional policy and the media

**Abstract:** Failure of political governance is commonplace in Fiji where lack of media freedom, democratic bargaining, political transparency, and accountability has led to political dysfunction and political strife, including military coups, suppression of rights of journalists and media organisations, suspension of freedom of expression, lack of democratic accountability, including draconian media rules and laws that encourage media self-censorship and political oversight over media content. Democratic deficit theory highlights that so-called democratic governments such as Fiji fall short of fulfilling the principles of democracy in their practices and operation because of its history of suppressing media rights, including fundamental freedoms of citizens to express themselves freely. Under such circumstances, Fiji citizens have taken to social media, especially after the 2006 military coup as the future of media freedom remains uncertain.

**Keywords:** accountability, case study, democracy, democratic deficit, elections, Fiji, FijiFirst, governance, media freedom, media law, media policy, media self-censorship, social media, transparency

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### Introduction

**F**AILURE of political governance in Fiji was commonplace under Fiji First where lack of media freedom, democratic bargaining, political transparency, and accountability led to political dysfunction and often political strife in this Pacific Island state. Democratic deficit theory highlights that so-called democratic governments such as Fiji under FijiFirst fall short of fulfilling the principles of democracy in their practices and operation, and these failures were at multiple levels of governance, including a controlled media, an electoral system that is partisan and imposed without consultation, and in favour of the political class that came to power following the 2006 military coup. Following the 2014 election, parliamentary committees were stacked in favour of FijiFirst with a lack of public oversight on policy and legislative processes or any meaningful integrity institutions and standards, even though there existed

a highly politicised Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) which was under the political control of the FijiFirst Party, including a poorly defined and non-implemented Transparency and Accountability Commission.

In addition, policy and legislative-making processes were more a tick-box exercise with policy debates often subject to political control with standing orders of parliament manipulated to suit the FijiFirst agenda. The political system did not allow for effective engagement from the civil society, or the NGOs, and with media freedom severely proscribed, major political issues were discussed mostly by the opposition parties exclusively on social media and forums hosted overseas. Parliamentary debates in such an environment were usually symptomatic of reactionary partisan discourse, aimed at reducing, marginalising, silencing, and compromising alternative opposition views and ideas. The Fijian state under FijiFirst was characterised by bureaucratic authoritarianism where media (Cass, 2022), everyday political discourses, and free speech were controlled by the party functionaries, including restrictions on the press and the granting of excessive power to the Fiji Elections Office, the Supervisor of Elections, and the FICAC (Lamour, 2008; 2020).

### **Democratic deficit**

Pippa Norris (2011) argues that many citizens in ‘democratic countries fear that democracy is suffering from a legitimacy crisis because there is a disconnect between the promise of democracy and its actual practice. In her analysis, Norris analyses more than 50 societies worldwide, ‘challenging the pervasive claim that most established democracies have experienced a steadily rising tide of political disaffection during the third wave era of democratisation since the early 1970s’. The analysis diagnosed the reasons behind the democratic deficit, including demand (rising public aspirations for democracy), information (negative news about government), and supply (the performance and structure of democratic regimes). Finally, Norris examined the consequences for active citizenship, for governance, and ultimately, for democratisation (Norris, 2011).

The demand side theory of Norris focused on cultural shifts among mass societies. While rapid diffusion of education, technology, and affluence in Western societies have promoted democracy, at the same time demands for greater transparency and accountability against the political class have led to a loss of trust in the democratic system (Norris, 2011). Digitally connected communities have enabled the democratisation of the grassroots (Chandler, 2015) where deliberative citizens engage in digital grassroots democracy of connective action, challenging not just contemporary notions of democracy, but repurposing activist democracy to highlight climate issues, challenges facing minority communities and women, and most importantly, arguing for transparency, accountability, free press, and integrity in all public institutions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).



There exists a dialectical tension between the democratic systems led by the political class or the elite which attempts to stay relevant through legitimacy discourses on one hand and the grassroots connected activities via digital social media on the other where digital anti-hegemonic social forces demand more deliberative forms of political discourse and engagement (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

In Fiji, control of the media and suppression of freedom of expression led Fijians to move to social media to discuss general news and political events, and in particular growing use of Facebook as a medium for exchanging political views, especially during the 2014, 2018 election (Tarai et al., 2015; Tarai, 2019; Tarai, 2020). These kinds of critical anti-hegemony forces via social media forced the realignment of people-centred democratic systems including deliberations on electoral systems, parliamentary committees, public integrity institutions, ethnic participation, free press, indigenous rights, and standards authorities as central tenants for constructive political change and deliberative media reforms. In line with the supply side theory propagated, media policy and structural accounts of political governance inform civil society participation in polity. According to Norris, 2011 process accounts emphasise that rational citizens can judge how democracy works or does not work in their own country; it follows that public satisfaction should reflect the quality of democratic governance existing in different countries with a more deliberative and participatory focus that circumscribes the structural and relational power of the political class over public policy including media policy.

Policy performance explanations emphasise at times public dissatisfaction with the capacity of governments to manage the delivery of public goods and services and lastly, structural accounts emphasise that democratic deficits are conditioned by the constitutional arrangements in any state, especially by power-sharing arrangements' (Norris, 2011). Power-sharing arrangements are not complementary and as we have seen in the case of Fiji, power-sharing can lead to an amplification of political conflict with communal political parties jostling for influence and hegemony (Coakley & Fraenkel, 2017). According to Trzciński (2022), the power-sharing arrangement under 'the 1997 constitution had neither a full consociational system nor an extensive centripetal one, but only selected important institutions of both models, which, however, were mutually exclusive', but did not foster any meaningful power-sharing leading to the demise of the 1997 Constitution in 2009 and the removal of power-sharing arrangement in the new 2013 Constitution. The 2013 Constitution assumed that the non-ethnic approaches of FijiFirst would be sufficient to discount any power-sharing anomalies available under the 1997 Constitution. These assumptions were extraordinary since it assumed that Fijians— Indo-Fijians and Taukei Fijians—had expunged their communal identities in favour of a singular national non-ethnic one.

One of the major challenges in the policy area had been in the realm of media

and freedom of expression. While these challenges existed in Fiji since independence, the issue came head-on following the April 1977 election when the Alliance government accused overseas media of ‘threatening racial order’ (Alley, 1977). This trajectory of attacking the media continued following the 1987 coup when the elected Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party Government were deposed by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. After the coup press releases were censored and journalists were harassed and intimidated from carrying out their duties. Media freedom deteriorated further with the introduction of the *Internal Security Decree*. With the general elections in 1992, media freedom improved, and this was confirmed in 1996 when two British media consultants argued ‘against curbing media independence’ (Robie, 2002). However, concerns were raised by local media following the sale of the *Fiji Daily Post* in February 1999 to the Fiji government and Robie (1998) quotes the late *Fiji Times* columnist Sir Vijay Singh who rightly noted:

The deal is out of the ordinary. It flies so flagrantly in the face of the government’s privatisation policy—was completed with such unseemly haste, and that too on the eve of the end of this government’s life; and Parliament was so blatantly bypassed, that it sprouts the persistent thought that there has to be much more than meets the eye. (Robie, 1998, p. 5)

Tensions continued between the Fiji government over media freedom, professionalism, and accountability after the May 1999 election of the Fiji Labour Party-led Coalition government (Chaudhry, 2000), but a larger media question emerged during the 56-day siege of the Fiji Parliament by the George Speight group.

There was a growing consensus among Pacific Island journalists that overseas media, in particular the Australian media, is only interested in covering the Pacific if it involves a coup, a conflict, or a natural disaster (Mason, 2001, p. 58). David Robie referenced a Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) statement calling gung ho journalists from overseas in particular ‘parachute journalists’ (Robie, 2000, p. 9) where overseas media focused entirely on the racist diatribe of George Speight while missing much more important news of Indo-Fijian families forced to flee to the Lautoka Girit Centre following a spate of violence in rebel-held areas of Fiji. Robie (2014) was also critical of inexperienced local journalists in his seminal book *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face* where he observed that ‘one media organisation that came under early criticism was the state-owned Radio Fiji, which seemed to suffer from a combination of confusion over who was in power or who was going to end up in power, and lack of newsroom discipline and leadership’ (Robie, 2014, p. 293). The 2000 coup brought to the surface the question of responsible journalism and the part media played in fulfilling the objectives of the 2000 coup. By 2003, the newly formed Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua Government passed a bill to control the Media Council by allowing

the minister to significantly influence the Council outcome. As Richard Naidu (2003) noted, 'The Minister gets to appoint the Chairman; the Media then appoints its 13 representatives; then the Minister gets to appoint another 13 members.'

Following December 2006, the dark days for journalism and media in Fiji returned as the military imposed censorship on news materials and monitored anti-coup blog activities in Fiji. Military media control agents were placed in newsrooms and editors and contributors were taken into questioning by the military and the police if they breached strict censorship guidelines. In reality, the policy discourse was premised upon the overt approaches of the 2006 coup makers, who indulged in the control of media and silencing critical journalism by initiating the fire sale of *The Fiji Times*, enabling a local business, Motibhai Group of Companies, to take over the reins of the newspaper. However, *The Fiji Times* maintained its political and editorial independence and continued with its fight against media control and censorship. As Russell Hunter noted the situation of the press deteriorated rapidly after the 2006 Coup:

A team of soldiers was to be posted in the newsroom to vet all content. Courageously and rightly, *The Fiji Times* declined to publish under such circumstances. The paper's senior management declared that it would cease publication until the soldiers were removed. A military team also visited the offices of the *Fiji Sun* on the same evening but arrived only as the last truck was leaving the premises with the next day's issue, giving the *Fiji Sun* an advantage over its rival, which did not publish. (Hunter, 2009, p. 279)

The media found itself facing censorship with journalists not reporting any information critical of the interim government (2006-2014) and later of any news critical to the FijiFirst (Hooper, 2013). Only the *Fiji Sun*, the mouthpiece of the FijiFirst government, was allowed to disseminate disinformation on behalf of FijiFirst. A draconian media decree was drafted and imposed by the interim government following an inquiry into the media industry by James Anthony (Robie, 2009, p. 86). However, following the 2014 election, the 'fine stipulated for journalists was removed from the *Media Decree* in 2015, but the penalties for editors and publishers remained intact' (Singh, 2020).

Fiji's media policy is often compared with Singapore but the way the *Media Decree* was formulated by the interim government and implemented highlighted the apparent fear of the regime of any negative information on the political class that came to power following the 2006 coup. Proper policy consultation provides a useful tool for exploring how policy decisions are made and implemented. For example, it flags the importance of issue identification and suggests the need to examine how interest groups or other actors organise and compete to assert control over the way issues are defined as a problem requiring action by the

government (Ward & Stewart, 2010).

While Fiji replaced ethnic-based policy with partisan-based policymaking, knowing very well that the Fijian population remained divided along ethnic lines with political dichotomies fairly pronounced between the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban and the indigenous and the non-indigenous, including those living in squatter settlements and those in the urban gated communities. Under such circumstances, control of the media became a necessity and as Shailendra Singh noted, *The Fiji Times*, in particular, ‘faced flak from the two most powerful men in the country—FijiFirst Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and FijiFirst Attorney General Aiyaz Saiyed Khaiyum over the reporting of government plans to prioritise rural students at state boarding schools and an opinion poll indicating some public disdain about government plans to redesign the national flag’ (Singh, 2020).

According to Ward and Stewart (2010), policy is a word that can be used in very different ways to describe the government’s actions and goals. The policy provides the basis for what government does. It should not be seen as a sole preserve, interest, or concern of ministers, senior officers, or those who work on policy units. The policy is to some degree everybody’s business. However, policy matters are also highly contested and rarely settled, and as such different opinions on policy often can cause community dissent, leading to a deficit in the policy-making process and hence a democratic deficit. Theoretics aside, policy engagement in Fiji, such as the debate on the national flag, was highly controlled and proscribed and discussions on policy items were only available to those who were permitted to participate, and this created what is often called a highly ‘tiered’ and ‘controlled’ society.

There were groups within the society that were labelled by the FijiFirst government as incapable of rational thought, and these groups were excluded from policy discourses through political selection. However, others are considered as political ingroup and they could participate fully in all policy deliberations without interference, but behind closed doors and under the strict supervision of FijiFirst Attorney-General and his many cronies that kept a watchful eye on anyone going off script. The selective framework for Fiji’s policy participation, under FijiFirst, highlights serious and unforgiving problems with its dysfunctional political governance, despite the rituals of democratic elections (Lawson, 2012).

The structural approach to evidence-based decision-making has fundamental foundations: a favourable political culture can allow substantial elements of transparency and rationality in the policy process, and this may facilitate a preference by decision-makers for increased utilisation of policy-relevant knowledge, and the associated research culture will encourage and foster an analytical commitment to rigorous methodologies for generating a range of policy-relevant evidence. In Fiji, evidence-based decisions did not exist, and policy agendas were

aimed at ensuring anti-opposition themes, carefully orchestrated to muzzle the participation of opposition parties.

As Fiji headed towards general elections in 2014, there were several information strategies in place including the use of information consultants Qorvis and Vatis for disinformation and information re-engineering in favour of the FijiFirst Party. In addition, media both television print and online already heavily censored their news so as not to offend the FijiFirst political class that rose to power after the 2006 coup. The leader of the FijiFirst Party Voreqe Bainimarama campaigned on the theme of equal rights and equal citizenry while other parties including the Social Democratic Liberal Party championed indigenous Fijian rights.

According to David Robie, media policy ‘restricted freedom of the press’ by firstly placing too much executive power in the offices of the Prime Minister and the Attorney General as they controlled nearly all appointments to the judiciary and independent commissions’. Secondly, the Chief Justice and the President of the Court of Appeal are political appointments with the risk of abuse of power. Thirdly the Bill of Rights is weakened using a ‘claw-back-clause’ that limits the rights of journalists and media organisations and fourthly, there are few avenues to participate in ‘good and transparent government’ (Robie, 2016, pp. 84-5).

### **FijiFirst hegemony and entrenchment of democratic deficit**

Elections are a measure of democracy and in the post-December 2006 coup in Fiji, elections took eight years to conduct under a constitution designed and implemented hastily by the 2006 coup masters to secure and strengthen the positions of coup sympathisers within a new legal-constitutional framework and a restrictive media policy. Fiji went to the polls on 17 September 2014 the first democratic election since the government of former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was deposed in a bloodless coup on 6 December 2006 by the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

The 2014 election was held under Fiji’s 2013 Constitution that required the election of a single chamber 50-member Parliament under a proportional voting divisor rule of modified D’Hondt where political parties and independent candidates had to win more than 5 percent of the vote to win any seats in parliament (Ramesh 2015, p. 9). Unlike other proportional systems, Fiji has a single national constituency without any regions or districts as was the case under the 1970, 1990, and 1987 constitutions. The ballot paper consisted of numbers from 135 to 382 and each number was randomly allocated to a candidate who represented a registered political party. There were two independent candidates, Rashika Deo, and Umesh Chand but the proportional system favoured larger political parties, especially those with popular political leaders (Nanau, 2015).

The new *Electoral Decree 2014* provided information on the conduct of elections, the role of the Supervisor of Elections in managing the election process, and the code

of conduct for media and overseas observers. Media was under strict instructions not to publish material that could inflame ethnic tensions and social media users in Fiji were urged to follow pre-election campaign blackout rules (Robie, 2016, p. 87). Some 92 international observers from 13 countries oversaw the election, which was contested by seven political parties including FijiFirst, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji Labour Party (FLP), One Fiji, and Fiji United Freedom Party.

### **Consolidating FijiFirst**

The FijiFirst party was led by retired Rear Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama, who has been the Prime Minister of Fiji since the military coup in December 2006. Following the 2006 coup, Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) for not progressing with general elections under the 1997 Constitution in 2009. Fiji, in response, conducted its regional meetings called 'Engaging with the Pacific' which mutated into the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013 (Tarte, 2014). Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, European Union, and the United States saw Fiji's PIDF initiative as a countermove against a recalcitrant Pacific Islands Forum led by Australia and New Zealand which spearheaded smart sanctions against members of the Bainimarama regime between 2006 and 2014 as diplomatic tensions deepened after Fiji sought closer cooperation with China.

The FijiFirst party, led by Voreqe Bainimarama, was modelled along the principles enshrined in the People's Charter of 2008 which laid out a non-ethnic political and social foundation for Fiji. FijiFirst called for the separation of state and religion, a common name of 'Fijian' for all Fiji citizens, allocation of state resources based on community needs instead of race, fair agricultural leases, land bank for indigenous landowners, anti-corruption measures spearheaded by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption, reducing violence against women, affordable housing, national employment scheme, infrastructure investment plan, agri-business diversification, reducing bureaucratic red tape, modernising the legal framework with greater access to legal aid, encouraging women in the workplace, lowering youth unemployment, tough on sacrilege and other criminal acts, free water, reasonable rates for electricity and gas, fee free education, investment in higher education, subsidised milk for primary school students and equal citizenry (Norton, 2015).

The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) was led by Rewa chief Ro Teimumu Kepa and the support for her campaign was provided by former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. SODELPA criticised 'Fijian' as a common name, wanted Fiji to be declared a Christian state, preferred changes to land lease money distribution in favour of indigenous chiefs, return the political role of the Great Council of Chiefs, reinstatement of Fijian Affairs Board scholar-

ships, a restructured Taukei Land Trust Board, possibility of bringing back the 1997 Constitution, reforming the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, establishing Indigenous Fijian foreshore rights via a Qoliqoli legislation, a review of all decrees between 2006 and 2014, and implementation of the social justice and affirmative action programmes for indigenous Fijians, similar to what existed during the reign of the former SDL government (2001 to 2006).

The Fiji Labour Party, the Peoples' Democratic Party and the National Federation Party supported the reinstatement of the Great Council of Chiefs but criticised SODELPA on their stand against 'Fijian' as a common name and on the introduction of a Christian state. The Fiji Labour Party was led by former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, who was disqualified from standing in the September 2014 election due to his conviction for breaching Fiji's foreign exchange laws. The party continued to campaign for the rights of workers and farmers. However, the Peoples' Democratic Party also had workers' rights as part of its election manifesto. Led by a former Fiji Labour Party member and trade unionist, Felix Anthony, the Peoples' Democratic Party criticised the Essential Industries Decree with claims that the Decree had diminished the rights of workers in specific industries such as tourism, infrastructure, and emergency services (Nanau, 2015).

The National Federation Party (Madraiwiwi, 2015) was led by Professor Biman Prasad, who resigned from the University of the South Pacific as a professor of economics to lead the party. The National Federation Party vowed to reduce Value Added Tax (VAT) and address poverty, unemployment, and inflation. The party called for 99-year leases so that there was some certainty for tenants with agricultural leases.

One Fiji party was led by Filimoni Vosarogo, and the party planned to boost Fiji's economy by creating more local jobs and investing in education. The party highlighted that the issues of economic development require a 10-year development plan. The Fiji United Freedom Party was led by Jagath Karunaratne, and the party has plans to provide a platform for Fiji's youth to voice their issues. In 2011, Karunaratne, a Sri Lankan-born Fiji citizen, was accused of painting anti-government graffiti.

The media in Fiji was highly circumscribed by the *Media Decree 2010* and it made critical journalism very difficult. Journalism students at the University of the South Pacific were advised that they had to be extremely careful while expressing their opinion on any political event. Except for the *Fiji Sun*, which chose to support FijiFirst, all other media outlets, including those online, imposed self-censorship and discouraged any critical analysis of the election (Cass, 2022).

Most of the discussions on party candidates and party policies were conducted on social media sites with no critical analysis from the local media, and on some anti-government blog sites, highly charged racial comments led political parties to

caution their supporters from stirring ethnic emotions. Race-based issues dominated past elections, but the September 2014 election was designed in such a way that forced political parties to address national on ethnic issues as part of the national political engagement. Some political parties criticised the electoral process including the ballot paper for being too complex and designed in a way to favour the incumbent FijiFirst Party. Brij Lal noted that the 2014 campaign was carried under the shadow of the military strongman Voreqe Bainimarama who was both a feared and revered leader in Fiji (Lal, 2014). Lal's observation was spot on. The election was conducted under a constitution that was designed to ensure the continuity of the government that came to power following the 2006 coup and, more importantly, the constitution ensured that future governments enacting ethnic-based policies may find themselves being deposed by the military.

The fears of political parties not only stemmed from the 2013 Constitution and the new order under FijiFirst but a conscious effort by the Bainimarama government to ensure coup loyalists in key strategic positions such as the Commander of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces, the Commissioner of Police, the Commissioner of Prisons, the Human Rights Commissioner and Constitutional Offices Commission and the President enabled continuation of the FijiFirst government. The most pressing issue is the role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces under section 131 of the 2013 Constitution (Kant, 2017; Lal, 2014). Moreover, FijiFirst Party donors and benefactors were guaranteed plum positions overseas at Fiji's diplomatic missions, international organisations, and regional bodies and on the government-owned constitution, confirming patrimonialism and extreme forms of patronage in official appointments and recruitment.

Fiji went to the polls on 17 September 2014 as overseas anti-government blog sites ramped up their anti-FijiFirst commentary, even though there was a 48-hour political campaign blackout. Blog sites accused FijiFirst of manipulating the election, planning curfews, buying votes, suppressing media, and threatening non-FijiFirst participants, but the international observer group found no evidence of such activities. Some disgruntled political candidates defacing party posters, made prank calls, and threatened journalists.

FijiFirst established its political hegemony in Fiji, but the 2014 election also highlighted that there were ongoing restrictions on media and free speech, and some journalists were arrested or intimidated, leading to concerns about freedom of the press and freedom of speech during the election period. There were restrictions on political parties with political parties not allowed to campaign freely, and some opposition parties and leaders banned from participating in the election. Mosmi Bhim notes that the media invariably favoured FijiFirst, particularly the *Fiji Sun* and the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, which gave extensive and preferential coverage to the FijiFirst party and negative or little coverage to other parties' (Bhim, 2015). In addition, there were allegations of vote rigging,



and some opposition parties and international observers raised concerns about irregularities in the vote-counting process. In addition, there were concerns about a lack of transparency in the election, particularly in the funding of political parties and the management of the voter roll.

Additionally, there have been allegations of corruption in the awarding of government contracts and the management of government-owned enterprises. Some have claimed that government contracts were awarded to companies with close ties to the FijiFirst party, while others have accused the government of mismanaging state-owned enterprises and failing to hold those responsible accountable. While FijiFirst denied any wrongdoing, there was growing discontent among Taukei Fijians who saw FijiFirst as promoting Indo-Fijian domination instead of political equality as highlighted during the 2014 political campaign, and as a result, Taukei Fijians started to abandon FijiFirst.

### **2018 General Election: Ethnic realignment and discontent**

The year 2018 started with the usual superstitions with the number 666 excluded from the Fijian ballot. Fiji's political candidates were identified by a number on the ballot paper and for the 2018 election the number started from 508 and candidates were elected under a proportional elections system in a single 51-member parliament (666 excluded from Fiji ballot paper, 2018). Under the 2013 Constitution, there is no Senate or Upper House, as is the case in many Westminster systems and political parties must achieve a threshold of 5 percent to elect any member. The ballot numbers are drawn at random by a civil servant who is blindfolded and then the numbers are entered against the party list candidates.

A Fiji Tebbutt-Times poll conducted from 5 to 8 February 2018 sampled 1000 eligible voters. According to the results of the poll on the public's voting intention, 34 percent were not sure who to vote for, 8 percent declined to answer the question and half a percent did not intend to vote. '32 percent said they would vote for FijiFirst, 22 percent for Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), 3 percent for National Federation Party (NFP), and 1 percent for Fiji Labour Party (FLP). When looking only at the percentages for those who selected a party (removing the undecided voters), 56 percent selected FijiFirst, 38 percent SODELPA, 5 percent NFP, 1 percent FLP, 0.2 percent Unity Fiji Party, and 0.1 percent independent (Tebbutt-Times poll result, 2018).

Analysing the results, the University of the South Pacific economist Dr. Neelesh Gounder stated that the support for FijiFirst had reached an all-time low since the 2014 election when it received almost 60 percent of all the votes cast. Voreqe Bainimarama's popularity increased by 20 percent in February 2018 compared with February 2017, and FijiFirst party as the preferred choice decreased by 5 percent during the same period (from 37 percent in February

2017 to 32 percent in February 2018) according to the poll.

By September 2018, SODELPA's new leader Sitiveni Rabuka was confident of winning the 2018 Fiji general election. According to *Asia Pacific Report*, Rabuka stated 'I'm looking at, at least 28 seats, which gives us a majority. I have calculated based on the 18 seats that we held. We won 18 seats but then lost three—two to debt and one to imprisonment,' said the enigmatic leader of SODELPA. Rabuka further highlighted that he disagreed with the interim government's decision to abolish the Great Council of Chiefs, a concerted push by the government of Fiji to discard cultural protections accorded in the United Nations Declarations on Indigenous People of 2007 and further moves to suppress debates on the future of the indigenous community in Fiji (SODELPA's Rabuka confident of winning power in Fiji election, 2018).

In early October 2018, it was disclosed that Australia would co-lead the Multinational Observer Group, alongside India and Indonesia, as it did in 2014. The Group stated that it would monitor processes from pre-election preparations, through the campaign period, to the announcement of official results (Australian support to Fiji's 2018 election, 3 October 2018). The Australian Electoral Commission was also flagged to provide technical assistance to the Fiji Elections Office. New Zealand followed Australia, led by former Labour MP Ross Robertson who had already commenced his observation role in Fiji. He was joined by MPs Darroch Ball, Poto Williams, Louisa Wall, and Michael Wood, and several New Zealand officials.

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama, leader of the ruling FijiFirst party, finished off on a strong footing after an early scare in a challenge from the 1987 Fiji coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka's SODELPA, raking in 167,732 votes in the results by candidate tally to have the highest personal vote. FijiFirst has narrowly won the 2018 general election in Fiji, raking in 227,241 votes (50.02 percent) from 2173 stations counted and securing a second four-year term in office. FijiFirst dominated the polls in the later counting ahead of the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) in an earlier tight contest. SODELPA finished in second place with 181,072 votes (39.85 percent).

The National Federation Party (NFP) finished in third place with 33,515 (7.38 percent) followed by Unity Fiji with 6,896, Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality with 2,811 votes, and Fiji Labour Party (FLP) with 2,800 votes. After the election, there were concerns about the state of media freedom in Fiji during this period. Some journalists and media organisations faced harassment, intimidation, and censorship, with reports of journalists being arrested or having their equipment seized. There were also allegations of government censorship and interference in the media, including the removal of critical content from websites and social media platforms.

On the legislative front, FijiFirst Attorney General passed laws that provided

excessive powers to the Supervisor of Elections to pursue opposition parties and their candidates and established FICAC as FijiFirst's political prosecution arm distinct from the Fiji Office of Public Prosecution. These developments caused alarm with the international jurists, but Australia remained circumspect after investment in the \$100 million Black Rock complex in Nadi which was designated as the peacekeeping hub of the South Pacific (Blackrock camp to be completed this month, 2022).

### **2022 election and the demise of FijiFirst**

The 2022 election was conducted under the cloud of repressive legislation under which one of the aspiring opposition candidates was disbarred from contesting the election due to the FijiFirst Attorney General's interpretation that Solicitor Richard Naidu in suggesting emendation to a legal judgment on social media had acted in a manner that constituted a breach of public interest.

The international Mission Observer Group led by Australia was set in place with the assistance of the Australian High Commission in Suva which was confirmed by the Fiji's Supervisor of Elections, Mohammed Saneem (Fiji announces election date after months-long wait, 2022). The abuse of the legislative majority was not only restricted to Fiji parliament as opposition candidates and parties were subjected to harsh requirements of fully costing their election promises to the satisfaction of the Fiji Elections Office including any polling after the Fiji Sun Western Force poll, showing support for the FFP government slipping away. Key candidates of the opposition were summarily referred to FICAC, which became the political prosecution arm of the state with opposition figures Lynda Tabuya and Sajjal Narayan of the People's Alliance Party (PAP) charged with breach of electoral laws (Where is the justice?—Tabuya, 2022).

Even the leader of the National Federation Party, Professor Biman Chand Prasad, an economist by profession was charged by the Fiji Police for violating the modesty of a person, only to have the charge dismissed by the Office of the Public Prosecution. However, the former Fiji Police Commissioner questioned the decision of Fiji's Department of Public Prosecution and published the complaint in full (Fiji opposition leader Prasad escapes charges over complaint, 2022).

The Mission Observer Group (MoG) under the co-Chair of Australia failed to see fundamental problems with the electoral system and the electoral process by endorsing the official version of the electoral count. The Terms of Reference for the Ministerial Observer Group were written by the former Attorney General of Fiji and signed by all parties, India, Australia, and India, on 22 October 2022 (Terms of Reference, 2022).

The counting of the votes was marred by a 'glitch' on 14 December 2022 and for two and a half hours, the Results Management System (RMS) had IT issues that were not explained properly by the Supervisor of Election (SoE) and

for some reason during the ‘glitch’, FijiFirst resumed its lead in votes, leaving many opposition parties questioning the integrity of the vote counting process. It was alleged that the Fiji elections NADRA platform could be remotely accessed, and results changed in favour of FijiFirst (Khan & Akhter, 2016).

The opposition parties wrote a letter to the SoE, the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, and the President of Fiji and initiated a voters’ petition, arguing significant discrepancies between what was reported by ballot invigilators and the Results Management System. The SoE protested that there was no law in place for a vote recount and continued with the manual count much to the concern of opposition parties. There are vote count issues that require auditing including some 20,000 votes incorrectly allocated to FijiFirst. Was it innocent misallocation or deliberate since electoral projections suggested the People’s Alliance and National Federation Party victory (Fiji military says will not intervene over election, 2022).

When the country thought that they were ready to install the new government, SODELPA General Secretary, Lenaitasi Duru, resigned from SODELPA and wrote a letter to the President of Fiji stating that some of the members of the SODELPA Management Board who voted were no longer members and a new vote was warranted. The President responded that he was in no hurry to convene Parliament (President responds to Duru, 2022). But a bigger issue was emerging when the Commissioner of Police and the General Secretary of the Fiji First Party accused the opposition of targeting Indo-Fijians (The West Australian, 22 December 2022). However, it soon became evident that rumours of attacks on Indo-Fijians were orchestrated by a fake Facebook account as members of the public confirmed to various media outlets that there were no such attacks as alleged (Fiji General Election of 2022, 2022).

The FFP Military Council along with the Commissioner of Police approached the military commander, but by then the SODELPA Management Board met again on 23 Dec and reaffirmed their support for the PAP-NFP Coalition. After a razor-thin vote for the second time in a week, the President convened parliament on Christmas Eve where Retired Major General Sitiveni Rabuka won the secret ballot by 28 votes to become Fiji’s Prime Minister. The former Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama became leader of the opposition and a new Rabuka cabinet was sworn in in the afternoon on 24 December.

In the 2022 election, the ruling FFP and the PAP had 55 candidates contesting the election, while the NFP and SODELPA had 54 candidates each. The Fiji Labour Party had 42 approved candidates, Unity Fiji 38, We Unite Fiji 20, All Peoples Party 14, and New Generation Party 5. There were two independents, but independents could not get the five percent threshold required to win any seat in parliament (*Fiji Elections Office*, December 2022).

In this election, there were 56 females, and 287 males who contested the

election under the D'Hondt proportional system, and ethnic bloc voting was a glaring feature with Indo-Fijians supporting FijiFirst Party and Taukei indigenous Fijians supporting the Peoples' Alliance Party and the National Federation Party. Unity Fiji and the Fiji Labour Party polled less than five percent of the total votes.

With retired Major General Sitiveni Rabuka back at the helm, there is hope that the indigenous Taukei population's concerns on land and resources, including rampant poverty and unemployment in their community will finally be addressed. Indo-Fijians voted for FFP following a concerted campaign of fear in which the community was warned of further coups and bloodshed under PAP were guaranteed. However, Rabuka has reiterated that he will embrace all Fijians and ensure that he governs over a united country where fundamental freedoms are respected and enforced.

The new coalition government promised freedom of the press and a more consultative approach to political governance and policy making. Investigations were conducted into the affairs of FijiFirst with several FijiFirst appointed Permanent Secretaries suspended, and inquiries were initiated against many allegations of fraud, corruption and abuse of public funds. More serious were allegations of abuse of office and incitement against the former Prime Minister and the Attorney-General. The SoE, the former Commissioner of Police, and the Prisons Commissioner were suspended as the Constitutional Offices Commission proceeded with investigations.

Media in Fiji has had a rough ride with various restrictive media decrees and legislations since 1987 and there remains a fear among the newly elected Coalition government that too much media freedom may lead to political instability or, as the Alliance government envisaged in 1977, contribute to racial tensions. These fears and concerns will drive media policy in the future in Fiji, but for a moment, there appears to be a pause and hope for a consultative framework, following the repeal of Fiji's *2010 Media Industry Development Act* (Pacnews, 6 April 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Failure of political governance in Fiji has led to serious corruption, fraud, and mismanagement under FijiFirst, including suspension of media freedom, suspension of freedom of expression, and interference in the judiciary and the executive. Since independence, Fiji has had a tenuous and often conflicted relationship with the media, and suppression of media freedom became a norm following the military coup in 1987. Attempts to restore freedom of the press were short circuited by the 2000 coup where 'parachute journalists, from overseas and experienced local media organisations ensured that the objectives of the 2000 coup were met. Tensions with the media continued following the 2000 coup and the political class that came to power following 2006 formed the Fiji-

First party and won the 2014 and 2018 elections, but ongoing media censorship forced Fijians to use social media to discuss political and current affairs, and many Taukei Fijians started to abandon the party from 2018 and by 2022, the PAP polled the highest percentage of Taukei votes to form a government with SODELPA and NFP. The new coalition government promised a free press as it embarked on the process of establishing transparency and accountability over the abuse of public funds. There is hope that the coalition government in Fiji will implement sound political governance, ensure civil and NGOs are consulted on policy matters, and media outlets are free to publish without fear of prosecution, harassment, or intimidation.

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# Social media and democracy

## The Fiji 2022 National Election

**Abstract:** Since the 2014 Fiji General Election, social media political campaigning has continued to be a consistent feature in the country's politics. This was evident in the 2022 National Election with many more political parties engaging in creative and innovative ways to campaign and engage voters. Since the 2018 elections, there have been a number of developments that led to the formation of new parties and declining popularity of the ruling FijiFirst party. This has provided a new context for social media political campaigning. Building on reviewed work around social media political campaigning from the 2014 and 2018 national elections, this article examines social media use in the 2022 General Election. It discusses some of the emergent trends and patterns of campaigning that are likely to prevail in social media use and Fiji elections.

**Keywords:** analytics, case study, digital ethnography, digital media, elections, Fiji, framing, mixed methods, politics, social media

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### Introduction

Fiji's 2022 General Election date was set for December 14 with an announcement made by the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission, Mukesh Nand on October 30 (Nand, 2022). There were nine registered political parties: All People's Party, FijiFirst (FFP), Fiji Labour Party (FLP), National Federation Party (NFP), New Generation Party, People's Alliance Party (PAP), Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Unity Fiji and the We Unite Fiji Party. With a total of 693,915 registered voters as of 31 October 2022, the stage was set for the third election under Fiji's 2013 Constitution. Since the 2018 national election, there had been a number of noteworthy political developments that helped set the stage for the 2022 national elections. These developments affected social media political campaigning through the formation of new parties, approaches and outcomes.

The shifts in political actors began with internal tensions in Fiji's main opposition party, SODELPA. Internal personality and political clashes against the then party leader, former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, led to his departure from the party, at the end of 2020 (Tarai, 2021). A few days after his departure as a SODELPA party member and leader of opposition, Rabuka, announced his

intention to form a new party for the 2022 national election (Tarai, 2021).

He subsequently registered his new party, the People's Alliance Party (PAP) in 2021 (Waqairadovu, 2021), which saw major politicians shift from SODELPA to this new group. These included Lynda Tabuya, Ro Filipe Tuisawau, Filimoni Vosarogo, Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu and Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. These shifts in political actors not only divided opposition party votes, but amplified broader opposition fractures. Evidence of these broader fractures can be seen in the formation of smaller parties such as the New Generation Party, All Peoples Party and the We Unite Fiji Party. The COVID-19 global pandemic exposed FijiFirst's governing capabilities, debt management and health public sector management structure (Tarai, 2020, 2021). The recovery efforts saw legislative measures such as an 'No Jab, No Job' policy and airline worker layoffs among other measures that pressured the wider society. The government was hamstrung by its authoritarian, non-bipartisan and heavy-handed approach that weakened the FijiFirst's political standing in the lead up to the elections in 2022. In early 2022, the FijiFirst government was vague about the election date and appeared reluctant to go to the polls. Their reluctance was fuelled by Prime Minister Bainimarama's declining health condition and this was compounded by the party's declining popularity in the opinion polls. All of these developments created conditions that reshaped the social media political landscape.

As such, these developments framed the context for social media use in political campaigning for the 2022 national elections. The given context provides for an examination and discussion of the how social media was used in political campaigning and how it had changed from the 2014 and 2018 national elections in Fiji.

### **Methodology and methods**

The methodology undertaken in this research article is digital ethnography, which is facilitated through the two methods of onsite field observations and quantitative social media analytics. Digital ethnography is an iterative-inductive research approach, which accommodates the role of theory and the researcher, in mediated contact or connection with the human actors involved (Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016). An iterative process of qualitative data analysis is underpinned by inductive reasoning (Barbour & Barbour, 2003). Inductive reasoning examines observable patterns that relate to a tentative hypothesis and subsequently a theory (Neuman, 2000). Mediated contact typically refers to the digital technologies serving as a conduit and mediator between the human actors and interactions observed (Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016). Sustained mediated contact and observations are focused on the human actors' contexts or daily lives, cultures and realities (O'Reilly, 2009; Pink et al., 2016).

This underscores the importance of observing and understanding the context

which constitutes the field site. In this case, the political, media and societal context of Fiji, especially in its current state is crucial. As such, field observations were undertaken during the elections period, during the months of December 2022 and January 2023. In addition to field observations, social media analytics was used to derive publicly accessible social media data from political party campaigning pages. Social media analytics is understood as the process of capturing and examining social media data to draw inferences that provide actionable insight (Dawson, 2020). The social media analytics were used to observe and collate data from the political party pages during December. This was because, the announced election day was in December and because the social media campaigning began to peak closer to the polling day. Social media analytics is pre-dominantly a quantitative method, while field observations undertaken were more qualitative in observing online and offline interactions and instances during the elections period. Therefore, the research was informed through a mixed methods approach within the methodology of digital ethnography.

### **Background: ICT, undersea cables, media and social media in Fiji**

The expansion of the information communication technology (ICT) sector in the Pacific was predicated on the deregulation and reform of telecommunications in the early 2000s (Cave, 2012; Minges & Stork, 2015). This opened up the market to greater competition and accessibility for consumers with varying conditions in the Pacific (Watson, 2021a). For Fiji, its first undersea cable launch in 2000 saw the initial stages of cable related internet access (Minges & Stork, 2015). Undersea cable access has since flourished across a number of Pacific countries, resulting in wider internet access and use (Watson, 2021b). Social media uptake was immediately evident across the Pacific and especially in Fiji. Facebook was and continues to be the most accessed and used social media platform in the Pacific and in Fiji.

The foremost seminal work on social media use in the Pacific was undertaken by Cave (2012), in a report titled 'Digital Islands: How the Pacific's ICT Revolution is Transforming the Region'. The report surveyed the emerging digital landscape at the time and its varying implications. These implications included the increasing use of mobile phones and a rise in social media use. First, the report detailed a 60 percent mobile phone use rate across the Pacific (Cave, 2012, p. 1). Second, the rise in social media use was speculated to have significant impact on democracy and governance, with what was termed as the emerging 'digital generation' (Cave, 2012, p. 1). Third, it highlighted the hidden potential in crowdsourcing, which Pacific governments, the private sector and donors could invest in, to usher in better service delivery (Cave, 2012, p. 1).

In many ways, the report captured the ongoing governance issues unfolding at the time. A range of these related considerations were highlighted by Logan

(2012). Logan (2012) critically highlighted the potential impact of ICT on politics in Papua New Guinea. These impacts included ICT access being instrumental in facilitating information flows, increasing efforts towards transparency, the emergence of collective identities and wider political participation of new actors (Logan, 2012). Finau et al. (2014) examined instances of social media use and civic engagement in politics. The article examined social media use on Facebook specifically for Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands (Finau et al., 2014).

In Fiji, the use and expansion of social media began in the 2010s. This was predominantly due to Fiji's most recent coup d'etat of 2006, led by former head of the armed forces, Voreqe Bainimarama. The coup severely restricted and constrained the mainstream media. This constraint was facilitated initially through direct military censors in newsrooms, controlling and dictating what was deemed appropriate for publication. This constraint and control was later facilitated through legislation, which effectively cultivated a culture of self-censorship. The constrained political context saw the emergence of blogging as a means of disseminating restricted information that would have conventionally informed news reporting. However, it was not long before blogging became contentious as questions were raised about its accuracy, credibility and evidence. As a result, the impact of blogging as an alternative to the restricted media environment, waned not long after. In addition, the script format of blogging platforms, which were pre-dominantly desktop-based, limited the demographic reach. This was in stark contrast to social networking sites like Facebook, which was more interactive, accessible via handheld devices and instantaneous.

Around 2010-2011, the prominence of blog sites began to diminish as social media uptake in Fiji began to rise, especially with Facebook as a key platform (Tarai, 2019). This led to the formation of Facebook groups and conversations that were more or less an outlet for views and discussions opposed to the regime at the time (Tarai, 2018, 2019). In spite of these developments, the regime was more focused on regulating the media industry in order to regularise positive Voreqe Bainimarama regime publicity. As such, the regime formulated the *Media Industry Development Decree 2010* to regulate the media while amplifying its positive publicity (Singh, 2010, 2017; Singh, 2020). Four years since direct military censorship, the transition to legislative control was secured by the *Media Industry Development Decree*. The decree at the time had legislated significant ministerial powers with threats of fines of close to F\$100,000 for media organisations and close to F\$25,000 for publishers and editors (Perrottet & Robie, 2011; Robie, 2014; Singh, 2010, 2015). Sweeping ministerial powers emphasised 'content regulation' in pursuit of maintaining the public interest, public order and national interest, which effectively limited investigative and independent journalism. Media organisations were operational without military censors but were toeing a fine line with the Media Industry Development Decree

2010, hanging over them (Robie, 2009; Singh, 2010, 2015). This resulted in the practise of media self-censorship, which diminished the value and availability of critical journalism and balance (Morris, 2017; Singh, 2015, 2017).

At this point, blogging content and activity began to transition to other platforms, especially onto Facebook (Walsh, 2010). This culminated in online groups forming within Facebook that were pre-dominantly focused on freedom of expression, especially in political discussions around 2011. Earlier instances of these were Facebook groups called *Letters to Editor Uncensored (LEU)* and *The Fiji Free Speech Experiment*. These groups were initiated by civil society and media personality actors that were passionate about creating online spaces for free, open and responsible speech. For instance, LEU as a group was focused on publishing materials or information that would have been suppressed as a result of the media laws and subsequent self-censorship (Tarai, 2018; Letters to the Editor Uncensored, 2011). LEU was also very particular about harmful online content that was deemed aggressive or non-constructive by the administrators. In a way, *The Fiji Free Speech Experiment* became something of a response to the LEU's rules for online decorum by encouraging its members to post whatever they wanted, just as a long as they were not fake or unidentifiable accounts.

The expansion of internet access through undersea cables, ICTs and social media was operating within and outside of Fiji's constricted media environment. The period from the 2006 coup to 2010 saw the transition from direct media censors to the practice of self-censorship marked by the introduction of the *Media Industry Development Decree (later Act) 2010*. This saw the emergence of social media from 2010-2011, specifically on Facebook as the alternative avenue for expressing free speech and political discussions.

### **Social media political campaigning in Fiji**

Political campaigning through social media began in 2014, when Fiji was due to have its first national elections under the then recently promulgated 2013 Constitution (Tarai, 2018, 2019; Robie, 2022). However, before 2014 there was a gradual but steady increase and frequency of social media activity and engagement. This was mainly underpinned by two political sagas. First, the 2012 Yash Ghai draft process that abruptly came to an end with the Bainimarama regime accused of burning the constitutional draft and deporting Professor Yash Ghai (Ghai, 2017). Second, in the following year in 2013, the Bainimarama regime quickly fast tracked processes and superficially subsumed public submissions to construct and promulgate the 2013 Constitution (Madraiwiwi, 2015). These two instances unfolded in a highly pressurised and constricted media and political environment, saw many Fijians take their frustrations and concerns to social media. As such in the buildup to the 2014 national elections, the Fiji social media user total rose steadily (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015).

While Facebook in Fiji was the only most populated and active social media platform in 2014, Twitter had a considerably lower level of user interaction and engagement. In January 2014, there were an estimated 260,000 active users in Fiji, which rose to 298,000 in the polling month of September (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015). Close to 18,000 new Facebook accounts were created in the space of a month from August to September. These escalating figures were predominantly underpinned by the constrained and pressured media and political environment. More and more people in Fiji were actively creating Facebook accounts to access more political information and content. In addition to this, more than 70 percent of the active online users were young people or people who were stipulated in Fiji's youth policy to be within the ages of 15-35 (Tarai et al., 2015).

Some political parties were adapting to the changing communication landscape and were already equipping themselves with social media marketing teams, strategies and eventually campaigning. These included Bainimarama's own FijiFirst party, which was the most well financed and resourced social media campaigning team. Bainimarama's offline populism and rhetoric about his 'coup to end all coups' and rooting out corruption translated well onto the party's online social media strategy. As a result, FijiFirst compared to all other parties and independent candidates had the largest social media audience with an estimated 63 percent of Fiji's total estimated social media audience (Tarai et al., 2015).

In contrast, other parties, such as the main opposition party, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) had only 15 percent of the estimated total social media audience. It was evident that the main opposition party at the time had struggled with understanding and adapting to the social media landscape. A number of candidates did not have any social media presence, which in a highly restricted media and political environment, further diminished the effectiveness of their publicity and campaigning during the election period. Other parties such as the longest operating party in Fiji, the National Federation Party (NFP), Fiji Labour Party, One Fiji Party and Fiji United Freedom Party had well below 15 percent of Fiji's collated social media audience at the time (Tarai et al., 2015).

FijiFirst's social media approach in 2014 resulted in what appeared to be a multiple page and personification strategy. The party organised a variety of Facebook pages that personified Bainimarama as their party leader in a variety of roles. This included one page depicting Bainimarama as something of a statesman and a serious looking politician in formal attire. Another page depicted Bainimarama as a fatherly and grandfatherly figure embracing his family and grandchildren. Perhaps the cleverest social media portrayal was the depiction of the former coup leader as a common, everyday Fijian, wearing a bula shirt at a local corner store setting. In contrast, the other parties appeared monotonous in their social media portrayals. The main opposition party, SODELPA relied heavily on its traditional

and cultural representation and as such, most if not all of its social media aesthetic was saturated with formal indigenous settings of hierarchy that lacked multicultural diversity (Tarai et al., 2015). Other parties projected a formal working professional attire and posture in their online aesthetic, which had little common connection with the electorate.

In 2018, the total estimated social media users in Fiji was estimated to be a little over half a million active accounts (Tarai, 2019). Facebook was still the most popular and populated platform, with at least 60 percent of its estimated audience being situated in the Central Division. Once again, the youth were the largest social media audience, constituting more than 50 percent of the total estimated social media users (Tarai, 2019). The FijiFirst party once again dominated Fiji's social media landscape with greater creativity and coordinated engagement not only on Facebook and a variety of platforms. These included a coordinated social media campaigning effort on Twitter and YouTube. On Twitter and YouTube, FijiFirst was adamant about repeating its offline religious rhetoric titled 'Embrace Godliness. Reject racism and bigotry' online (Tarai, 2019; Ryle, 2020). It was evident that FijiFirst's social media approach was expanding to encompass multiple social media platforms beyond multiple Facebook pages, as it did in 2014. In addition, it was amplifying an issue based social media focus, for this case a religion against racism issue, expanding beyond the 2014 Bainimarama personification of the FijiFirst party. In spite of this evolution, the social media reactions were predominantly negative for two main reasons. First, FijiFirst's Facebook popularity was not shared or holistically cultivated on the other platforms. This was specifically the case for Twitter. Twitter in Fiji is estimated to have around 24,000 active accounts, with key influential figures being ardent critics of the FijiFirst establishment (Tarai, 2022). These include the likes of prominent lawyer, former journalist and political critic Richard Naidu, civil society actors and media personalities. As such, Twitter as a platform in Fiji was littered with more FijiFirst opposition and criticism. Second, FijiFirst's messaging and campaign frames around religion against racism, exposed a significant contradiction (Ryle, 2020). This contradiction was because of the fact that the FijiFirst government has often promoted and asserted the need for secularism but was campaigning using religion in its rhetoric. Thereafter, YouTube campaigning for FijiFirst did not do much more than compiling snippet videos of campaign rallies.

SODELPA, as the main opposition party, had, by 2018, begun to appreciate the utility of social media in expanding publicity and access. More and more of their candidates not only had individual Facebook pages, but also had expanded onto Twitter with personalised accounts. However, in spite of the wider adaptation of and adoption of social media by Fiji's main opposition party, it still trailed significantly behind the ruling FijiFirst government at the time, in terms of social

media audience. Despite this, it is instructive to note that the main opposition party did not build on the party's Facebook page, but focused on branding and promoting candidates' own individual Facebook pages. This led to significant rates of engagement from prominent party figures such as Lynda Tabuya and Sitiveni Rabuka (Tarai, 2019). In fact, Lynda Tabuya had the highest recorded rate of most loved content during the campaigning period, compared to any other candidate or party on social media (Tarai, 2019). This trend marked a shift in social media engagement through specific reactions. It highlighted that social media reactions were a form of active engagement on specific content beyond passive social media audience behaviour.

Interestingly, FijiFirst's most actively engaged reaction was angry emoticons. This was a startling revelation that for the first time a section of FijiFirst's own audience were expressing active discontent. However, FijiFirst's social media support and campaigning on Facebook was still comparatively more significant than any other political party.

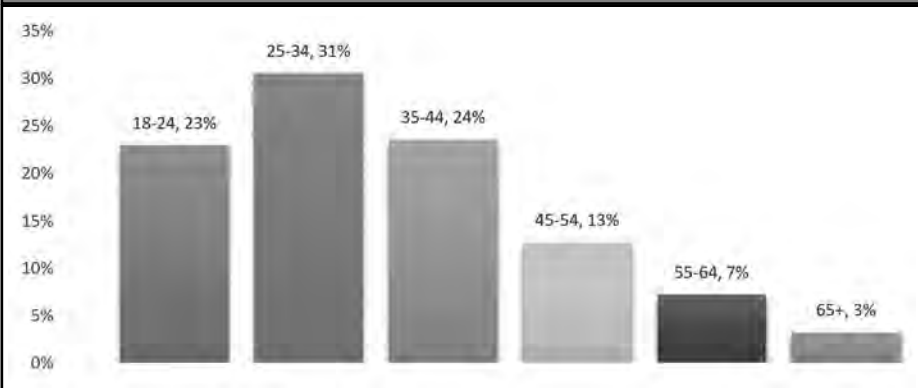
## **Fiji social media landscape and 2022 national elections**

### *Social media landscape and registered voters*

In the early part of 2022, Fiji's total estimated social media users numbered just over 649,000, with around 556,000 active Facebook accounts (Tarai, 2022). The other 93,000 accounts were collective estimates of social media accounts on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat and YouTube. Once again, Facebook continued to be the most popular and heavily populated social media platform as Fiji was gearing up to its third elections under the 2013 Constitution. As in previous years, young Fijians constituted the majority of social media users, with more than 53 percent being estimated to be within Fiji's voting age of (18-35) (Tarai, 2022). In terms of specific location, the highest estimated accounts were recorded around the capital city of Suva, within the Central Division of Suva, followed by the city of Lautoka in the Western Division. An interesting trend that was noted earlier on in the year was the surge in the number of female identified accounts. In fact it was noted that female identified accounts were estimated at around 51 percent, to 49 percent male identified accounts (Tarai, 2022). This marked an intriguing turning point because in the history of Fiji's social media, male identified accounts had always outnumbered female identified accounts.

The Fijian Elections Office released the national register of voter statistics as of 31 October 2022. The register indicated that at that point, there were a total of 693,915 registered voters, with the Central Division registering a total of 297,649 voters (FEO, 2022b). This was followed by the Western Division with 260,801, Northern Division with 99,658, Eastern Division with 26,359 and the Overseas Division voters at 9,448 (FEO, 2022b). The distribution of registered voters



**Figure 1: Fiji Facebook - Age % distribution**

Source: Adapted from Audience Insight

indicated that the majority of the electorate focus for campaigning was within the country and saturated within the major divisions of the Central and Western Division. Interestingly, these two divisions are also noted divisions with the highest estimated totals of social media use as previously mentioned (Figure 1).

Since there were around 549,000 estimated active Facebook accounts and 693,915 registered voters, political campaigners could easily access more than 70 percent of their registered voters via social media (Tarai, 2022). The challenge was going to be how politicians and parties could engage with the registered voters in the lead-up to polling day. This was especially important considering the varying levels of political apathy and low youth voter turnout in the 2018 national elections. The varying levels of political apathy was revealed in the 2022 pre-election voter survey report, which highlighted around 52 percent taking ‘a little’ interest in politics (FEO, 2018, 2022a). The 2018 General Election Voter Turnout and Survey Report, released in 2021, was more telling in highlighting that the two main youth age cohorts 18-20 and 21-30, were among the lowest in voter turnout percentages (FEO, 2018, 2022a).

### *Social media campaigning*

All of the nine registered political parties primarily situated their social media campaigning on Facebook. The ruling FijiFirst government continued to prove its dominance in commanding the largest estimated social media audience of 40 percent of the total online users. This was followed by prominent parties such as the National Federation Party (around 25 percent), the People’s Alliance at 16 percent and SODELPA at eight percent as shown in the following table and graph. The inclusion of more recent parties such as We Unite Fiji, All People’s Party and New Generation Party saw a greater distribution of the social media audience (Table 1).

However, despite FijiFirst’s social media audience size, the two main

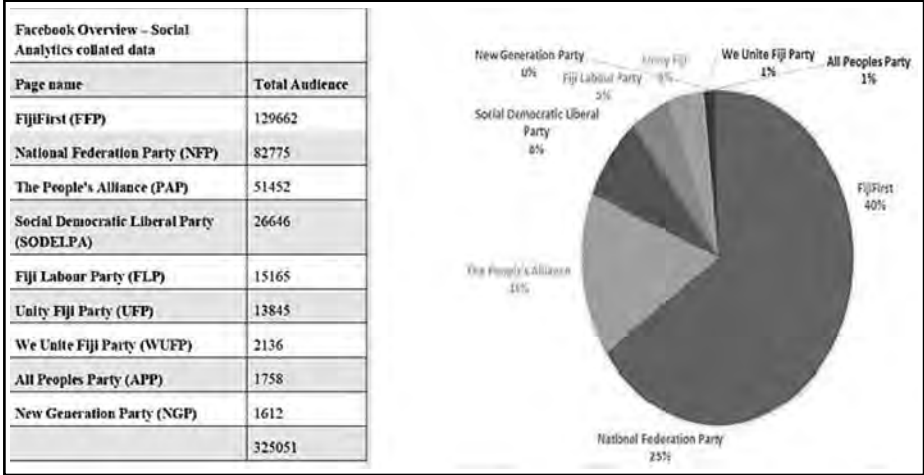
**Table1: FEO national register of voter statistics, 31 October 2022**

Ages	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
18-20	17,745	18,340	36,085	5.200205%
21-30	78,661	77,402	156,063	22.49022%
31-40	81,927	76,855	158,782	22.88205%
41-50	65,317	61,048	126,365	18.21044%
51-60	52,508	51,262	103,770	14.95428%
61-70	34,563	37,084	71,647	10.32504%
71-80	13,731	17,515	31,246	4.502857%
81+	3,897	6,060	9,957	1.434902%
Total	348,349	345,566	693,915	100%

opposition parties, the National Federation party and the People's Alliance, were engaging more active reactions and online interaction. As shown in the following tables, the two key opposition parties at the time garnered considerably more interactions than the then ruling FijiFirst government (Figure 2, Table 2). The sum of online interactions is a referenced average of the sum of comments, page posts, post shares and the specific reactions from respective online users (Table 3). These reactions can be expressed through the use of emoticons indicating, a like, laughter, sadness, anger and love. On the category of sum of interactions and comments, the National Federation Party and the People's Alliance stood above all the other parties in engagement. This indicated that both of these party's Facebook content engaged significantly more comments and reactions. Furthermore, the National Federation Party and the People's Alliance accumulated the most number of posts, most liked and most shared content during December 2022. In terms of the emotive reactions which ranged from *love*, *laughter*, *sadness*, *wow factor* and *anger*, the three main political parties of FijiFirst, The People's Alliance and National Federation Party featured prominently.

However, interestingly the two main opposition parties of the People's Alliance and the National Federation Party appeared to garner the most positive emotion. For instance, the People's Alliance accumulated the most love reactions online, followed by the National Federation Party. Likewise both these parties garnered significant sympathy in terms of the sum of sad reactions. The ruling FijiFirst party page appeared to have significant comic entertainment value, as

**Figure 2: Fiji Facebook social media landscape overview**



it attracted the most laughs with a considerable margin of difference compared to the other parties. Likewise it also attracted significant angry reactions.

**TikTok and YouTube**

The rising prominence of TikTok, especially among first time voters in their late teens and early twenties, was observed during the 2022 national elections. In late November, early December, the political party leaders of FijiFirst, the

**Table 2: Facebook overview - sum of interactions and comments**

Page name	Sum of interactions	Sum of comments
National Federation Party	237491	30772
The People's Alliance	194637	25053
FijiFirst	112140	18001
Social Democratic Liberal Party	26554	3198
Fiji Labour Party	15509	2552
Unity Fiji	4589	538
All Peoples Party	835	399
We Unite Fiji Party	722	36
New Generation Party	9	0

**Table 3: Facebook overview - sum of shares, likes and posts**

Page name	Shares	Likes	Posts
The People's Alliance	15801	85801	268
National Federation Party	11658	141833	251
FijiFirst	4436	65681	80
Social Democratic Liberal Party	1859	11978	73
Fiji Labour Party	1031	10248	76
Unity Fiji	726	2292	46
All Peoples Party	91	230	16
We Unite Fiji Party	48	422	14
New Generation Party	1	5	3

People's Alliance, the National Federation Party and the Labour Party began escalating their TikTok use in campaigning. This was a first for Fiji in social media campaigning and it created an avenue for the politicians to fully express their personality beyond the confines of political formality. Since the social media app platform format is more video, music and dance based, it provided avenues of creative expression and personalised campaigning. For instance, the People's Alliance leader was often seen dancing with party supporters at events or doing chores in his home while casually addressing the electorate with short messages. As these videos began circulating, it instigated a TikTok video response from the FijiFirst leader, who retorted, 'I'm not here to dance ... leadership is serious business, it matters to young people who want better jobs in high tech industries' (Fennell & Faa, 2022).

Based on digital ethnographic observations, TikTok use as a platform for campaigning is still in its infancy. It has yet to grow to the extent that Facebook has within Fiji. However, its accessibility and appeal towards much younger voters was evident. In addition, politicians were having to adjust to the medium because it involved a more creative, casual and entertaining format than Facebook or most of the other social media campaigning platforms. As TikTok use grows in Fiji, it is likely to become added and a dynamic platform for social media political campaigning in the future.

Another notable trend was the use of YouTube to launch political songs or remixed songs. This was done by National Federation Party general secretary

and candidate Seni Nabou (Nabou, 2022). Releasing five YouTube audio tracks in the lead up to December, 2022, Nabou's message targeted two specific aspects of Fiji's politics. The first is the sense of empowerment for the voter in tracks titled 'We Can, We Will, We Must', 'The Power Is in Your Hands' and 'When We Say No' (Nabou, 2022). The second was a specific reminder for the voters, regarding the ruling FijiFirst establishment and its draconian and authoritarian tendencies. This can be heard with the two tracks aptly titled 'Dagger to the Neck' and 'Drunks in The Club' (Nabou, 2022). Seni Nabou's tracks and use of YouTube marked a new beginning in social media political campaigning in Fiji. The use of YouTube has often encompassed formal political speeches, gatherings or discussions. However, it may be that Seni Nabou has opened up a new creative arena for social media political campaigning, considering the youth affinity for social media and music.

### **Conclusion**

Social media use within Fiji's political landscape has come a long way, since the early days of the 2006 Bainimarama coup. It has been a tool that enables space for engaging in political discourse. The 2014 National Election saw the first use of social media in political campaigning. This was followed by the 2018 National Election. Both of these national elections saw a similar political landscape because of the main political parties that actively engaged social media. In these instances, FijiFirst, National Federation Party and SODELPA were the main parties that cultivated Fiji's social media political campaigning ecosystem. However, this shifted in 2022, with the addition of a new political party, the People's Alliance, established by the former SODELPA party leader, Sitiveni Rabuka. In addition to this major shift, there were broader fractures of division that saw new smaller parties emerge and engage for the first time. This underlying political context marked a distinction in the 2022 national elections, which saw its implication play out on social media. In addition, the rise of other social media platforms such as TikTok has created alternative and expressive avenues for political campaigning. This gave way to three overarching trends in social media political campaigning. The first trend is the expansive adoption of social media by all nine political parties, especially for the recently established parties. Second is the creativity and expression that platforms like TikTok have enabled and also obligated formerly rigid politicians to embrace. The final trend is the decline of the FijiFirst party's social media dominance that was held throughout the last two national elections.

All nine political parties appeared to understand the utility and accessibility provided by social media, especially for the recently established parties. All nine parties had active Facebook accounts with varying degrees of versatility and access. The three dominant social media political campaigning parties were FijiFirst, the People's Alliance and National Federation Party. These three parties

had an extensive and consistent social media presence and also a diversity of platform access spanning across rising platforms such as TikTok.

The rise of expanding creativity in social media campaigning, has been underpinned by TikTok and initiative of certain candidates like Seni Nabou on YouTube. This has demonstrated the diversified platform approach to social media political campaigning. In addition, it has also indicated the obligation of politicians to articulate political issues subject to the creative currency of specific social media platforms. For instance, TikTok overwhelmingly requires politicians to be less formal, casual and witty while allowing them to creatively express themselves through dance. The use of YouTube and TikTok indicates the need to creatively engage a much younger and often disaffected set of voters in Fiji's contemporary political landscape. This area of creative engagement on multiple social media platforms may expand within Fiji's politics in the coming years.

Finally, FijiFirst has been the most funded and well-resourced party in Fiji's contemporary political landscape. It has been reported that in 2018 the party spent F\$1.9 million on advertising and a little over F\$80,000 on social media political campaigning (Tarai, 2019; Krishnamurthi, 2019). The majority of these costs are paid to the international public relations company—Qorvis, with its local communications counterpart—VATIS (Davis, 2020a, 2020b). The social media efforts of the VATIS team was so valued that the general secretary of FijiFirst and FijiFirst government Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, in a parliamentary speech, openly acknowledged VATIS self-titled 'information architect' Damien Whippy (Parliament of Fiji, 2018). Whippy ran FijiFirst's social media campaign in collaboration with Arnold Chanel (Davis, 2020a, 2020b; Parliament of Fiji, 2018). During the 2022 national elections, political party sources revealed that for running social media accounts they were paid F\$28,000-\$30,000 each per month in the lead up to polling day. Despite these lavish sums, FijiFirst's social media profile and performance have been declining since 2018. This has been due to the somewhat vitriolic and at times naïve outbursts projected by the FijiFirst social media handlers. In addition, it was revealed that the social media managers were purchasing online likes and fake comments to boost the FijiFirst government's presence online (Naidu, 2022). This validated the declining appeal and rigour of the party's social media strategy. As discussed in earlier sections, the quantitative data indicates a massive audience for Bainimarama, but Facebook reactions in the month of December 2022 indicated significant angry reactions from online users. In addition, the party's social media frames and messaging became a source of comic relief for users that expressed a significant amount of 'laughing' reactions.

In sum, social media use in politics continues to grow in Fiji and is likely to expand with the versatility of emerging platforms such as TikTok. How this impacts or influences voting behavior is yet to be seen but it has proven to be a useful advocacy and campaigning tool in a media constricted environment like Fiji.

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## WOMEN TALKING POLITICS

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# Government loudspeakers

## How Indonesian media amplifies the state's narrative towards the Free West Papua movement

**Abstract:** In early 2021, the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud M D, made a statement that all armed actions in West Papua carried out by individuals or groups with the aim of liberating themselves are 'acts of terrorism'. This was the moment when the Indonesian government formally labelled the Free West Papua Movement as 'terrorist suspects' and 'terrorist organisations'. Indonesian online media responded by providing extensive coverage of Mahfud MD's statement and the excesses after this statement. Indonesian online media tend to use the term 'terrorist' in their reporting to label 'separatist' West Papua movements, those seeking independence or self-determination. The term 'terrorist' replaces Armed Criminal Group—*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata* (KKB). This study shows how six Indonesian mass media organisations frame cases of labelling terrorists against West Papuan pro-independence groups. This study, using quantitative framing analysis, examines framing conducted by six national online media which are dominant in Indonesia and have the most audience share: *Okezone*, *Detik*, *Kompas.com*, *Tribunnews*, *CNN Indonesia* and *Tirto*. This study also elaborates the experiences and perceptions of journalists who write on the issue of West Papua, particularly in terms of labelling West Papuan 'separatist' groups as 'terrorists' by the government and how the media frames West Papua. The findings of this study show that the media tend to only be a 'loudspeaker' for the government, use all discourses issued by the government, and even participate in using the term terrorist to replace the KKB.

**Keywords:** balance, digital media, discourse analysis, fairness, frame analysis, Free Papua Movement, independence, Indonesia, labelling, separatist, terrorist, terrorism, West Papua

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### Introduction

ON 29 April 2021, the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud MD, made a statement that all armed actions in West Papua carried out by individuals or groups with the aim of liberating themselves are acts of terrorism. This was the moment when the Indonesian

government formally labelled the armed Free West Papua movement as ‘terrorist suspects’ and ‘terrorist organisations’. Indonesian media, especially online media, responded by providing extensive coverage of Mahfud MD’s statement and the excesses that occurred after this statement. However, as was the case with previous issues regarding West Papua, Indonesian media tends not to side with the West Papuan community, even reinforcing the colonial practices that occurred in West Papua and deepening the wounds for the West Papuan people (Tapsell, 2015; Anderson, 2015; Supriatma, 2013). The Indonesian media does not use a balanced frame, for example, in terms of explaining why and how acts of violence are the chosen path to fight for West Papuan independence. A genealogical explanation of the crisis in West Papua is almost absent in the majority of reports regarding the terrorist labelling of the Free West Papua Movement group (Adiprasetyo, 2020; Firman, 2019; Remotivi.id, 2014)

After being labelled as ‘terrorist’ by the Indonesian government, most Indonesian online media tend to use this term in their reporting to label West Papuan ‘separatist’ movements. The term terrorist replaces the term Armed Criminal Group—*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata* (KKB), which the government and the media routinely used. Previously, Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy chairperson Hendaridi (Indonesians often have a single name) has criticised the Indonesian government’s move against the KKB because he argues it would spark even greater human rights violations in the future. ‘Terrorists’ and the KKB build a pejorative tension, not only to the movement of the West Papuan people trying to fight for their independence, but also on Papuan society as a whole.

The West Papua movement is not a monolithic movement, but diversified and involves many wing organisations. The paths taken by the West Papua movement spanned from armed movements to diplomacy. In the *Mubes* and Papuan Congress in 2000, it was decided the Papuan People’s Assembly (*Majelis Rakyat Papua*—MRP) would be formed. This was a form of accommodation provided by the Indonesian government for the West Papuan people. In addition, another institution formed was the Presidium of the Papuan Council (*Presidium Dewan Papua*—PDP). This momentum then changed the resistance strategy, endorsing non-violent movements which use political lobbying, a more recognised and tolerant approach. The United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) was also established abroad. This momentum also provided more space for the communities, especially for West Papuan leaders, to be actively involved in the struggle for West Papuan independence through foreign channels (Pamungkas & Rusdiarti, 2017). After 2000, several large organisations emerged, and they declared themselves as the political wing of Free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*—OPM). In addition to the Free West Papua Movement, there are the National Committee for West Papua (*Komite Nasional Papua Barat*—KNPB), West Papua National Liberation (*Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat*

—PNPB), the Federal Republic of West Papua (*Negara Republik Federal Papua Barat*—NRFPB), and West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL) (Ondawame & King, 2002).

The Indonesian media, which uses government statements as the primary reference in their reporting, reinforces the government's message to confront efforts to find a way for independence for the West Papuan community. Indonesian media participates and plays an active role in voicing a 'war on terror' against the West Papuan 'separatist' movement, and tends to ignore the context and the long struggle of the West Papuan community.<sup>1</sup>

The term KKB is not the first to be used by the Indonesian government to describe separatist groups. It is noted that KKB is a term that emerged in 2014, but only a few media outlets use that term. Meanwhile, the forerunner to the term KKB came from one of the separatist movements in Indonesia, namely the OPM (Irawan, 2019). The government at that time classified OPM based on their acts into KKB and KKSBB (Armed Separatist Criminal Group—*Kelompok Kriminal Separatis Bersenjata*) (Alfianto, 2019). KKB is more commonly used by the police, while KKSBB is more commonly used by the Indonesian National Army—*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI). However, these two classifications are now more commonly known as KKB. They identified groups that were active in the 'separatist' movement, especially from media coverage of crises or conflicts in the West Papua region.

The government's move to label the West Papuan separatist movement has received a response from many parties. Amnesty International, National Human Rights Committee—*Komite Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia* (Komnas HAM), many NGOs and academics state that labelling West Papuan separatist groups as terrorists will not only not solve the problem, but that it also has the potential to prolong the human rights violations that have been taking place in West Papua (Chaterine, 2021a; 2021b; Yahya, 2021; Robie, 2021)

The history of Indonesia itself has recorded acts of labelling terrorists against the independence movement, in the case of the Free Aceh Movement—*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) under the government of Megawati Soekarnoputri. At that time, the government, through the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, stated that GAM was a terrorist group that needed to be fought through military means (Ronnie, 2016). Later, there was a soft diplomacy or non-military approach that accompanied the military approach. There were indications of serious human rights violations after the military pressure that was carried out during that period. President Jokowi admitted severe human rights violations on 11 January 2023 (Setneg, 2023).

The careless labelling of terrorists has significant implications, as happened when the United States raised the 'war on terror' flag after the 9/11 attacks and was later followed by other countries in the world, sparking negative sentiment

towards Islamic groups as a whole (Appleby, 2010). An imaginary relationship is created between a specific entity and terrorists, which has implications for alienating groups from the majority.

### **Indonesian media and West Papua: Under the shadow of the state**

Previous studies have revealed how Indonesian media are very unequal in representing West Papua and the West Papuan community. An incident occurred on 16 August 2019 in Surabaya, when the Islamic Defender Fronts (FPI), Communication Forum for Retired Children of the Indonesian Military/Police (FKP-PI) and Pancasila Youth (PP) attacked the West Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya, and resulted in days of demonstrations. The Indonesian media failed to give a proportional voice for the victims, and the West Papuan community (Adiprasetyo, 2020). What happened in 2019 is a casuistic example of how Indonesian media rely on the primary source of information for their news from the government, its apparatus, and the police.

The imbalance of representation that occurs in relation to reporting on West Papua cannot be separated from Indonesia's treatment of ethnic groups and the region of West Papua. Many scholars have shown how Indonesia has implemented various approaches that require violence in overcoming the various resistance of the West Papuan community, including the intention to hold a referendum on their independence (Brundige, et al., 2004; Elmslie & Webb-Gannon, 2013). Examples of genocidal acts are listed: killings, causing serious bodily and mental harm, the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to cause the destruction of a group, and the forcible removal of children to another group. Whereas previous examinations of the issue have failed to prove intent on the part of the Indonesian government—a necessary prerequisite under the Convention—this article finds that such intent exists. The authors show that West Papua has suffered a military occupation since 1962–63 under which the West Papuan people have been treated as the enemy by the Indonesian armed forces. Explicit and implicit government policy has been consistently directed towards countering and eliminating Papuan attempts to create an independent state for their nation or enjoy political freedom on a par with other Indonesians. In this tightly controlled situation genocidal acts have been undertaken as government policy, effectively thwarting the Papuan nationalists in the era when information was emerging from the provinces (King, 2004; Kirsch, 2010; Lawson, 2017). The approach taken to succeed in exploiting natural resources and implementing the Indonesian 'developmental' project in Papua with a centralised economic vision is to support the economy of Java (Macleod, 2016; Supriatma, 2013; Robie, 2012).

To hide its militaristic approach, the Indonesian government imposes strict restrictions on Indonesian and international journalists covering West Papua (Leadbeater, 2008). Journalists are not given access to cover crises, especially

those related to separatist movements and local politics (Perrottet & Robie, 2011). Perrottet and Robie (2011) highlighted in their notes from a decade ago that reporting in West Papua was extremely dangerous. This was reaffirmed by Robie (2017) in a report from the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day conference in Jakarta. West Papua is a media 'blind spot' mostly because international journalists have extremely restricted access to the region (Perrottet & Robie, 2011; Leadbeater, 2008; Robie, 2014, 2017, 2020).

As a result, news that stigmatises and frames the West Papuan community is unconsciously ingrained in public thinking. This news changed the readers' mindset, and they thought that West Papua was a region full of problems (Chao, 2021). This kind of reporting creates a lot of stereotypes and framing without raising the actual issue of West Papua. This labelling is increasingly ingrained along with the official statement by the Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud MD, regarding the designation of the KKB as a terrorist group or organisation (Anakotta, 2021).

### **Frames and media issues**

Until now, studies on West Papua, especially how the Indonesian media covered the West Papua crisis, have never been a study that is considered important by Indonesian communication scholars (Adiprasetyo, 2022b). It was recorded that there were only two Indonesian-language articles in Indonesian-based communication scientific journals that discussed West Papuan media (Adiprasetyo, 2022a).

Unlike the previous study conducted by Adiprasetyo (2020), this study elaborates on the experiences and perceptions of journalists who write on the issue of West Papua, particularly in terms of labelling West Papuan separatist groups as terrorists by the government and how the media frames West Papua. It is hoped that in-depth insight into the experiences and perceptions of journalists in writing about West Papua issues can answer why Indonesian media tend to report on the issue of West Papua unequally. This study also examines how much influence the government's point of view has had on media reporting after the Indonesian state-labelled West Papua "separatist" groups as terrorist organisations.

Frame analysis is commonly used in conflict and racism analysis (Adiprasetyo, 2020; Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010; Poindexter et al., 2003). However, the initial studies and explorations of framing analysis were focused on politics, such as those carried out by Iyengar (1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and Entman (Entman, 1993). However, the study of framing analysis has been elaborated by many social, communication and media scholars in various fields, such as terrorism (Norris et al., 2003; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008), disasters (Merry, 2015; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Entman, 1991) and public health (Adiprasetyo & Larasati, 2020). Framing analysis can also show the sentiment towards the government in crises (Adiprasetyo & Larasati, 2020).

This study uses quantitative frame analysis. Quantitative frame analysis is divided into holistic and device-oriented techniques (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2016). Device-oriented techniques rely on indicators based on frame elements containing certain words (Entman, 1991) or structured arguments (McComas & Shanahan, 1999). This study extends the investigation of the previous crisis framing on depictions of the West Papua issue in Indonesian media (Adiprasetyo, 2020). It is intended that by continuing to use the analytical tools from research conducted within the area of West Papua, the findings of this study could be compared with previous studies that demonstrate how the Indonesian media portrays the West Papua problem in terms of its dynamics.

There are limitations in this study, mainly because it does not adopt a qualitative approach in framing analysis. Qualitative framing analysis with systematic techniques (Dijk, 2011; Pan & Kosicki, 1993) can capture the details of the framing process in syntactical, thematic, rhetorical and script structures dimensions. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic-qualitative procedure analysis provides more space for interpretation in frame analysis. However, this study did not adopt qualitative analysis due to its limitations in dealing with large amounts of data. In addition, qualitative frame analysis cannot capture the big pattern of an event's number of frames in a certain period.

By analysing the news regarding the labelling of terrorists against the West Papuan separatist group and a series of events within one week after the statement, we can see how the Indonesian media choose what they show and what they remove from the story, as well as whom they use as sources in their news, and who or what they do not show (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Using quantitative framing analysis, this study will examine framing conducted by six national online media which are dominant in Indonesia and have the most audience: *Okezone*, *Detik*, *Kompas.com*, *Tribunnews*, *CNN Indonesia* and *Tirto*. The selection of these six media was also based on previous studies (Adiprasetyo, 2020) so that the dynamics of each media in framing the West Papua crisis were obtained.

## **Methodology**

This study uses quantitative framing analysis with in-depth interviews with six informants and Indonesian journalists who have regularly written about West Papua issues in the last five years in Indonesia. The selection of informants was not only based on the quantity of news reports on the West Papua issue. It was also considered based on their understanding of the West Papua issue and how the media reported it. The identity of the informants is made anonymous in this article because some of their statements will be sensitive and will put them at risk in covering West Papua onwards. Interviews were conducted in the 2021-2022 period:

- A. Indonesian online media journalist
- B. Indonesian online media journalist
- C. Indonesian online media journalist
- D. Indonesian online media journalist
- E. West Papuan local media journalist
- F. West Papua correspondent

This study uses quantitative framing analysis with the combination of holistic and device-oriented techniques, with the following variables:

#### *News sources*

Framing is the consequence of how news sources frame an issue, with journalists and news organisations adapting to the frame, renegotiating it, or reframing it depending on logic and the content that will be shown (De Vreese, 2004). In this study, the percentage of news coverage originating from news items relating to West Papua issues that appeared in six Indonesian online media, seven days after the moment that the Indonesian government formally labelled the armed Free West Papua Movement as terrorist suspects and terrorist organisations.

#### *Point of view: Indonesian government and West Papuan community*

Several studies show that in any conflict-related news reporting, there will be a dominant tone, depending on the choice of media, habits and the influence of the media system in the production of the news text (Pfau et al., 2015; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Dunaway, 2013; positive, or neutral tone in campaign news coverage. Much of the extant literature suggests, to some extent, the negativity bias often seen in political news stems from profit making objectives. This article asserts that news outlet ownership structures and economic incentives, coupled with political context, influence the likelihood of positive, neutral, or negative tone in campaign news. The findings presented herein suggest that corporate, chain, and nonlocal ownership all have consequences for campaign news tone. (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007). In this study, the news will be examined on how the point of view of the government or the West Papuan community has been adopted in Indonesian online media coverage after the statement by the Indonesian government labelling West Papuan separatist group terrorists.

The scale of 1 (Indonesian government's point of view), 0 (neutral), -1 (West Papuan community's point of view)

#### *Topic clusters*

Topic clusters are used to find specific discussion groups thematically. The frame of topic clusters is determined based on the words (Entman, 1991) and the structure of the arguments (McComas & Shanahan, 1999) in the news. The codification process is carried out inductively.



### *Crisis frame*

An and Gower (2009) demonstrate what frames are included in the news and used by newspapers in the news from national media on crisis communication throughout 2006. Previously, several sources have examined the prevalent news frames. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) explore many sorts of frames primarily used in American newspaper news: conflict, economic implications, human effect, and death. The study of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found five main news frames: attribution of guilt, conflict, economic implications, and human interest in five kinds of national newspapers and television news during the 1997 Dutch presidency of the European Council. Meanwhile, An and Gower (2009) accepted five frames that Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) had previously discovered.

This study used the typology frameworks that An and Gower (2009) developed to analyse crises and has also been used by Adiprasetio (2020) to research the issue of West Papua in media.

### **Frame of human interest**

This frame focuses on the emotional responses of individuals to an event, topic, or problem (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). This frame explores the psychological effect on individuals in a crisis scenario, prompting the reader or audience to demonstrate a variety of wrong actions (Padin, 2005). Cho and Gower (2006) demonstrate that this framing affects the reader's emotional reaction, affecting the reader's determination of guilt and responsibility in a crisis scenario.

### **Frame of conflict**

This frame depicts disputes and conflicts between people, groups, or organisations. According to Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992), the US news media often employs conflict. According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), this frame is the second most often employed in the news.

### **Frame of morality**

This frame situates events, situations, or challenges within moral, social, and religious teachings. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) demonstrate that moral frameworks are typically employed indirectly by journalists via quotes or inferences rather than directly due to the varied objectivities associated with journalistic activities.

### **Frame of economy**

This frame describes an occurrence, crisis, or issue that has economic ramifications for a person, group, organisation, or nation. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) define it as a broad framework in the news. The enormous effect of an event is a significant news value, and economic ramifications are often regarded as significant (Graber & Dunaway, 2018).

### **Frame of attribution of responsibility**

This frame is defined as connecting responsibility for finding solutions or solving problems by the government and individuals or groups (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), this frame is the most prevalent among serious publications.

### **The existence of each frame in the news will be measured on a nominal**

The scale of 1 (any) or 0 (none).

### **Population: Corpus of news**

This study's population comprises 273 news items relating to West Papua issues that appeared in six Indonesian online media seven days after the moment when the Indonesian government formally labelled the armed Free West Papua Movement as terrorist suspects and terrorist organisations.

### **Coding practices**

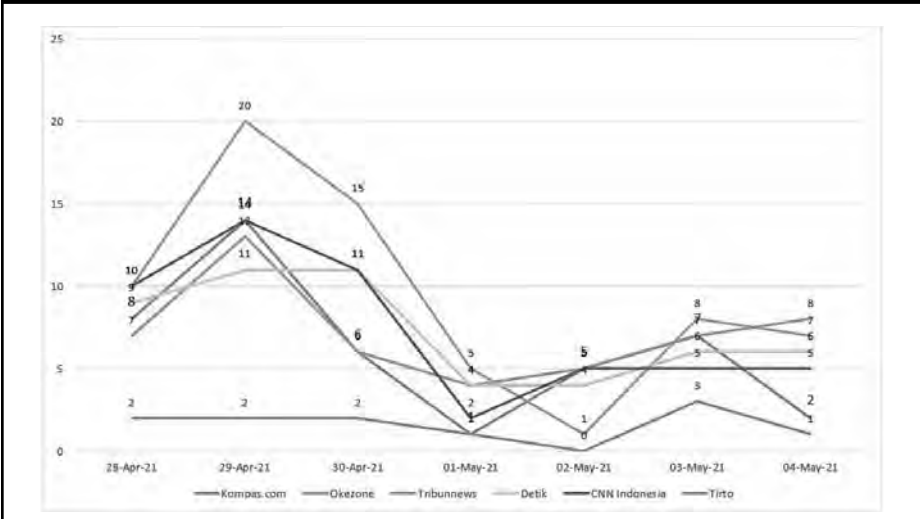
This study used two coders to conduct a reliability test (with the person who did the coding to determine the reliability of the test results). Each coder separately coded every article.

Due to its greater adaptability, the Krippendorff alpha (Krippendorff, 2011) procedure was used to check the reliability of the content analysis. Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) can account for chance agreement, various coding levels (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio), numerous coding categories, varying sample sizes, and missing data (Krippendorff, 2005). In order for Krippendorff's alpha to be considered trustworthy,  $q = 0.0125$  and the alpha must be greater than 0.7000 (Krippendorff, 2011; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The calculation for the frames variables' dependability using version 25 of the SPSS application software reveals an alpha of 0.8255. Based on the findings of the reliability test, it is possible to infer that the study's coding procedure is trustworthy. Every coding difference is discussed to get a definitive decision.

### **Discussion**

*Tribunnews* has reported the most on the West Papuan independence movement, a week after the statement by the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud MD. *Tribunnews* published 66 news, followed by *CNN Indonesia* with 52, *Detik* with 51, *Okezone* with 50, *Kompas.com* with 43, and *Tirto* with only 11 (Figure 1).

Based on previous studies, *Tribunnews* is the most excessive media in Indonesia in providing events or incidents about West Papua (Adiprasetyo, 2020). *Tribunnews* itself has a track record of producing an excessive number of reports on issues, presenting shallow reports, and even trivialising their news (Adiprasetyo & Wibowo, 2019). So it can be understood that Mahfud MD's statement and the

**Figure 1: Dynamics of number of WPM terrorist labelling reports**

excesses given after the statement were used as much as possible by *Tribunnews* to gain publication. Conventional online media in Indonesia, including *Detik* as its pioneer, generally have publication characteristics that rely on quantity. So even though, in general, the number of reports is slightly behind compared to *Tribunnews*, it can be seen that the quantity of news related to the labelling of West Papuan separatist movements as terrorists is relatively high.

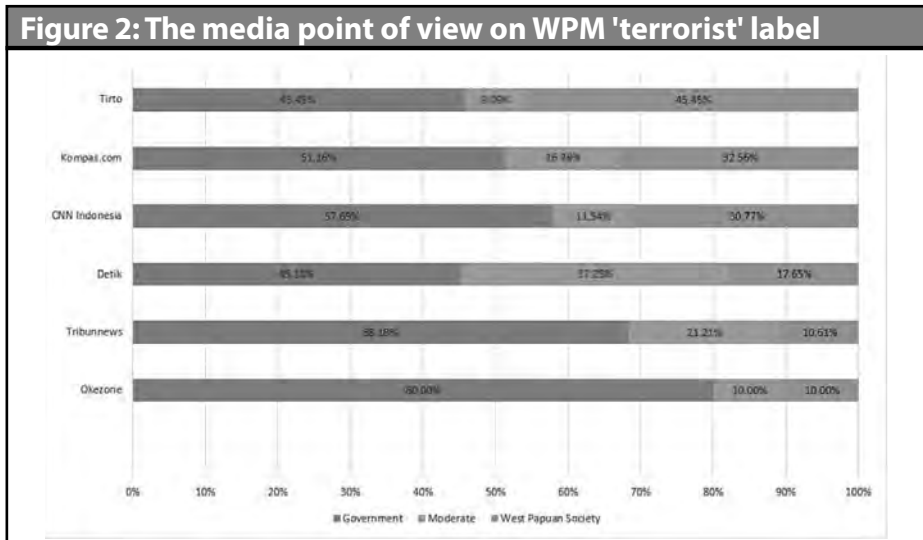
Online media in Indonesia are very thirsty for publication, the majority of them, especially media such as *Tribunnews*, *Okezone* and *Detik*, are really after quantity. It is very understandable that the news is quite massively reproduced on the issue of the Menkopolkam (Mahfud MD) statement. However, we can see how the quality of the news. The majority only rely on official government statements, they are very one-sided, and many journalists do not even really understand the situation in Papua, but they still write the news. (A, interview)

In general, including in other reports, media editorial has a certain hierarchy in prioritising sources. Many media, especially those pursuing quantity and relying on fast journalism, prioritise sources from the government and ministries. So when there is news such as the Papua issue and Mahfud MD's statement, they tend to abuse the minister's name as a title. In the end, they also tend to ignore other sources. (B, interview)

Unlike other media, *Tirto* still relies on editorial characteristics that they echo, relying on 'precision journalism'. The implication is that the articles produced by *Tirto* tend to be longer than other media news publications related to the West Papuan separatist movement. However, the reports produced by *Tirto* are far behind in quantity compared to other media.

There are several media, including *Tirto*, which provide space for reporting on Papua, although this can only be done with limited resources. We can also understand this, considering the limited amount of funds, access and quality correspondence in the field. Covering the Papua issue is expensive. Not only that, not many journalists know and understand the issue of Papua well. (E, interview)

## The media point of view



Based on the six media analysed in this study, in proportion, *Okezone* (80.00 percent) reports most on the issue of labelling a terrorist from the government's point of view. In second place are *Tribunnews* (57.69 percent) and *CNN Indonesia* (both 57.69 percent). While the media that reported the most with a moderate point of view is *Detik* (37.25 percent) (Figure 2).

Despite having the least coverage, *Tirto* gives the most significant proportion of the West Papuan community's point of view compared to other media. *Tirto's* reporting, which took the West Papuan community's point of view (45.45 percent), had the same percentage as *Tirto's* reporting, which took the Indonesian government's point of view (45.45 percent). *Tirto* is the most balanced media.

*Tirto* has a pretty good track record in reporting on Papua issues. There used to be people like Zen RS, Fahri Salam, and Dieqy. Even though they have moved from *Tirto*, their legacy to the journalists in *Tirto* is still felt in the editorial room. They also have access to quality journalists in Papua with good standards. What other media and journalists do not have . . . *Tirto* also has a track record of being very critical of the government, especially in guarding human rights issues. (A, interview)

*Kompas.com* ranks second as the media that reports the most terrorist labelling of the West Papuan separatist movement from the point of view of the West Papuan community (32.56 percent). The gap between the reporting and the point of view of the West Papuan community owned by *Kompas.com* and *Tirto* is quite wide for nearly 13 percent of the total coverage. *Kompas.com* provides space for the government's point of view in more than half of its total coverage (51.16 percent).

*Kompas* as a group company was able to survive for decades in the landscape of the Indonesian media industry, passing through various regimes and even surviving the very repressive New Order era, one of which was due to a compromising strategy. Indeed, if we look at the analysis conducted, the focus is on *Kompas.com*, a different media than its parent, *Kompas* daily or *Kompas.id*. However, we can see that the compromises still exist. They do not want to be too vis a vis the government on a sensitive issue like Papua. (C, interview)

*CNN Indonesia* is in third place, under *Tirto* and *Kompas*, with 30.77 percent of all news being from the point of view from the West Papuan community. Compared to *Tirto* and *Kompas.com*, *CNN Indonesia* provides the most space for reporting from the government's point of view (57.69 percent).

Three media at least provide space for the West Papuan community's point of view in their reporting, namely *Detik* (17.65 percent), *Tribunnews* (10.61 percent) and *Okezone* (10.00 percent). *Okezone*, which provides the least space for the West Papuan community's point of view, provides a huge space for the government's point of view, which is as much as 80.00 percent of the total coverage. While *Tribunnews* provides space for the government's point of view as much as 68.18 percent.

Media such as *Tribunnews* and *Okezone* are very unreliable. In fact, they can produce news from only one source. Regarding the issue of Mahfud MD's statement, it is not much different. They only re-narrated the minister's statement. Just pointing at the recorder, transcripts are cut into pieces and made into the news. So there is a lot of news with the same viewpoint as the government. Their journalism standards are shallow. (D, interview)

The media is not critical, normalising Indonesian society to call the struggle for Free Papua terrorists. Some of them decided to do aggressive physical attacks (rather than diplomacy), but we can see minimal effort from these media to carry out the real problem with the big picture. So that people also do not understand what the dynamics are like. (E, interview)

Even though *Detik* provides little space for reporting from the point of view of the West Papuan community, the space he gives for reporting from the government's point of view is not as much as *CNN Indonesia* and *Kompas.com*. *Detik* gives 45.10

percent of its total coverage space for reporting from the government's point of view, the lowest percentage compared to the other five media. *Detik* provides quite a lot of space for reporting with a moderate and neutral point of view between the two parties, namely as much as 37.25 percent of the total news. The percentage of reports with a moderate point of view from *Detik* far exceeds the number of moderate and neutral reports from other media.

### Distinction between frames: Topic clusters

Media	State sovereignty and Indonesian nationalism	West Papua condition	Terrorism and KKB threat	Human rights and democracy	Autonomy legislation	Verification of disinformation	Others
Kompas.com	9.30%	20.93%	27.91%	23.26%	11.63%	4.65%	2.33%
Okezone	4.00%	16.00%	70.00%	4.00%	0.00%	4.00%	2.00%
Tribunnews	6.06%	19.70%	42.42%	25.76%	0.00%	0.00%	6.06%
Detik	19.61%	17.65%	25.49%	25.49%	0.00%	3.92%	7.84%
CNN Indonesia	13.46%	26.92%	48.08%	9.62%	0.00%	0.00%	1.92%
Tirto	0.00%	0.00%	54.55%	45.45%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

It is straightforward to understand that *Okezone*, which provides the most space for the government's point of view, is very focused on the topic of 'terrorism' and the threat of the KKB against Indonesia in 70 percent of its coverage. In general, the other five media also raised the topic of 'terrorism' and the KKB's threat to Indonesia as their dominant topic in their reporting. Successively *Tirto* (54.55 percent), *CNN Indonesia* (48.08 percent), *Tribunnews* (42.42 percent), *Kompas.com* (27.91 percent) and *Detik* (25.49 percent) provide space for topics related to terrorism and the KKB threat.

*Tirto*, even though it has significant coverage on the topic of 'terrorism' and the threat of the KKB, it provides ample space for the topic of human rights and democracy, namely as much as 45.45 percent of the total coverage. This number places *Tirto* as the media that pays the most attention to human rights and democracy compared to the other five media. Although it certainly has to be considered, *Tirto* itself only has a limited coverage compared to other media.

*Tirto's* great attention to the West Papua issue in this study resonates with the findings of Remotivi's study, which ranks *Tirto* as the most inclusive media in 2020 (Remotivi, 2021). *Tirto* is recognised as media advocating for the rights of marginalised groups in Indonesia (Adiprasetyo & Larasati, 2018).

Despite having a good track record, *Tirto* itself has recently experienced a decline in the quality of its publications. This is evidenced by the fact that

*Tirto* did not discuss the questions of sovereignty or the underlying causes of conflict and violence in West Papua in the issue of ‘labeling terrorism’ by the Indonesian government. Hypothetically, this is caused by several things, namely changes in media ownership and management, which result in changes in the editorial vision; progressive and experienced journalists such as Zen RS, Fahri Salam, Dieqy Hasbi Widhana, Mawa Kresna have moved to other media such as Project Multatuli, *Narasi* and *Detik*; also limited resources, especially for coverage outside Java.

Five media apart from *Tirto* also provide space for the topic of human rights and democracy, but with less significant percentages. *Tribunnews* with 25.76 percent of the total news, *Detik* 25.49 percent, *Kompas.com* 23.26 percent, *CNN Indonesia* 9.62 percent, and the least is *Okezone* with only 4.00 percent. The topic of human rights and democracy in the West Papua issue is a sensitive matter considering repeated human rights violations. In Catahu Pusaka’s 2021 final records, there were 30 cases of human rights violations in the Land of West Papua (Catahu, 2022). One example that has caught the public’s attention is the torture case of Steven Yadohamang. This 24-year-old disabled youth was yelled at and his head was stomped on by two members of the Air Force (Pomau) military police in Merauke Regency, West Papua, on 26 July 2021. Another case also happened to environmental defenders and indigenous people’s rights. This was experienced by Markus Baba Wehu (31 years) with his brother Finsensius Katamote Wehu (24 years) in Jair District, Boven Digoel Regency, West Papua, on 25 January 2021 (Laia, 2022). Violence and human rights violations occurred in line with the presence and expansion of investment and the project’s economic and industrial development dominated by corporations and capital owners. These activities directly affect the living space of indigenous and local communities (Catahu, 2022).

*CNN Indonesia* raised the main topic of the West Papua conditions are more dominant compared to other media. A proportion of 26.92 percent of *CNN Indonesia*’s coverage regarding the labelling of West Papuan terrorists raised the topic of West Papua conditions. Only *Tirto* did not raise the topic of West Papua conditions on the news of their labelling West Papuan terrorists. After *CNN Indonesia*, *Kompas.com* (20.93 percent), *Tribunnews* (19.70 percent), *Detik* (17.65 percent) and *Okezone* (16.00 percent) raised the topic of the West Papua conditions in their reporting.

*Detik* (19.61 percent) and *CNN Indonesia* (13.46 percent) are two media that provide space for reporting on the labelling of West Papuan terrorists on the topic of state sovereignty and Indonesian nationalism, which is more than 10 percent. Only *Tirto* did not raise the topic of state sovereignty and Indonesian nationalism in their news of labelling West Papuan terrorists, while other media only gave minimal space or just under 10 percent.

*Kompas.com* is the only media that provides space for the topic of the regional autonomy legislation process in reporting on the labelling of West Papuan terrorists. Meanwhile, three media provide space for news containing verification of disinformation spreading on social media related to the labelling of West Papuan terrorists by the government, namely *Kompas.com* (4.65 percent), *Okezone* (4.00 percent) and *Detik* (3.92 percent). Other topics colour the reporting on the labelling of West Papuan terrorists. However, they are not too significant and are partial information, not integrated into other discourses produced by the media coverage.

Soeharto's regime ended in 1998 and in 2001 the Indonesian government granted exceptional autonomy to a number of provinces, including Papua and West Papua. Since 2002, the special autonomy funding for West Papua has increased by a factor of five, from IDR 1.38 trillion (US\$95.5 million) to IDR 8.3 trillion (Malik, 2019). However, the discourse of the correlation between autonomy and conflict has never been a mainstream topic in news coverage about West Papua, including the path of violence taken by several organisations demanding West Papua independence and the labelling of terrorists by the Indonesian government.

The most fundamental problem with the poor media reporting on the issue of Papua is that there are not many, or even no, journalists dedicated to covering the issue of Papua. Understanding of the issues and conflicts that occur in Papua is very low. The thing that makes them greatly simplify issues and conflicts and is very much reflected in how their news is written. (F, interview)

The allocation of funds, time and energy to understand the Papua issue is quite high. They need to read a lot of literature. This is because the issue of Papua is not transparent, so they have to access information and study the conflict carefully. This is difficult because the Indonesian media tend not to be able to provide that space and time for journalists. So even if there are journalists who dedicate themselves to the issue of Papua, it usually comes from their personal encouragement. (D, interview)

### **Crisis frame**

The most dominant crisis frame in the news regarding the labelling of West Papuan terrorists is the conflict frame (Table 2) All of *Tirto's* news has a conflict frame in its reporting. Consecutively the most significant percentage after *Tirto* in the conflict frame are *Detik* (96.08 percent), *CNN Indonesia* (94.23 percent), *Tribunnews* (90.91 percent), *Kompas.com* (90.70 percent) and *Okezone* (86 percent).

Attribution of Responsibility is the second most dominant frame, where *Tirto* is also the most dominant media in percentage (90.91 percent) compared to other media. However, this was greatly influenced by the amount of *Tirto's* coverage, which was very limited. Consecutive the largest percentage after *Tirto*



**Table 2: Crisis frames in the news of WPM terrorist labelling**

Media	Human Interest	Conflict	Morality	Economic	Attribution of Responsibility
Kompas.com	37.21%	90.70%	74.42%	6.98%	69.77%
Okezone	24.00%	86.00%	54.00%	4.00%	50.00%
Tribunnews	33.33%	90.91%	68.18%	12.12%	74.24%
Detik	29.41%	96.08%	54.90%	3.92%	70.59%
CNN Indonesia	9.62%	94.23%	36.54%	3.85%	73.08%
Tirto	18.18%	100.00%	63.64%	9.09%	90.91%

in the Attribution of Responsibility frame are *Tribunnews* (74.24 percent), *CNN Indonesia* (73.08 percent), *Detik* (70.59 percent), *Kompas.com* (69.77 percent) and *Okezone* (50.00 percent).

*Kompas.com* reporting has a large morality frame when compared to other media, with 74.42 percent, successively after *Kompas.com*, *Tribunnews* (68.18 percent), *Tirto* (63.64 percent), *Detik* (54.90 percent), *Okezone* (54.00 percent) and *CNN Indonesia* (36.54 percent). *Kompas.com* also provides ample space for Human Interest frames when compared to other media, with 37.21 percent, successively after *Kompas.com*, *Tribunnews* (33.33 percent), *Detik* (29.41 percent), *Okezone* (24.00 percent), *Tirto* (18.18 percent) and *CNN Indonesia* are the only media that have a human interest frame in reporting related to the labelling of West Papuan terrorists below 10 percent (9.62 percent).

The lack of a Human Interest frame shows that not many perspectives are used in framing that accommodates the local West Papuan community. The perspective tends to use the helicopter view in reviewing the conflicts and violence in West Papua. There is no adequate explanation from the point of view of the local community regarding the long history of the independence struggle of the West Papuan separatist movement.

Only *Tribunnews* provides space for an economic framework above 10 percent of the total news relating to the labelling of West Papuan terrorists, with 12.12 percent. Successively after *Tribunnews*, namely *Tirto* (9.09 percent), *Kompas.com* (6.98 percent), *Okezone* (4.00 percent), *Detik* (3.92 percent) and *CNN Indonesia* (3.85 percent).

Based on economic statistical data, in the big picture West Papua is enjoying significant economic development. Statistics indicate that the yearly economic growth of the then two provinces<sup>2</sup> in West Papua is greater than the national average of 5.27 percent in the third quarter of 2018. Papua Province increased by 6.76 percent during that time span, and West Papua Province by 6.89 percent. Even so,

in Papua Province, 27.62 percent of the population, or around 917,681 individuals, are poor. Currently, 25 percent of the population of West Papua Province, or around 214,000 people, are poor. This figure is quite manageable, considering that from 2012 to 2017, the government lowered the poverty rate in Papua Province by 3.4 percent and West Papua Province by 1.94 percent. The national poverty rate increased by 1.84 percent during the same time frame. The perspective that tends not to be elaborated by the media on the economic aspects of West Papua limits public understanding of the conflicts that occur in West Papua. Many parties tend to blame economic disparities as the starting point of the conflict (Malik, 2019). However, the problems that seem real are not only related to this but mainly to the haunting track record of violence and militarism, ethnicity and racism, and other horizontal issues. Issues that are also not well elaborated by the media.

### Conclusion

The labelling of West Papuan groups as ‘terrorists’ fighting for their independence by the government certainly has severe implications for the current and future situation and conflict in West Papua. However, the findings of this study show that the media tend only to be a loudspeaker for the government, use dominant discourses issued by the government, and even participate in using the term terrorist to replace the KKB, which is no less problematic, shows how the media in Indonesia is under the shadow of the state.

We can see exceptional cases where media like *Tirto* try to elaborate and problematise Mahfud MD’s statement by explaining the context of the conflict in West Papua. However, *Tirto*’s coverage is not the most dominant. Reporting on West Papua after Mahmud MD’s general statement is dominated by reports with partial facts, without explanation with sufficient context.

Looking at the hierarchy of influence theory described by Shoemaker & Reese (2014), various variables can influence how an event is framed in the news (Adiprasetyo, 2015). Apart from individual journalist factors, there are other layers, namely media routines, patterns of media organisation, and other social institutions linked to the media and our social system, that influence why the media has certain patterns in producing content.

The Indonesian media are very concerned about the number of reader clicks, which makes them very focused on the quantity of news (Adiprasetyo & Wibowo, 2020), which can be seen in this case in media such as *Tribunnews* and *Okezone*. These media simply quoted statements from government sources without questioning them and naively made them a major part of the story.

This is exacerbated by media editorial in Indonesia tending to place high priority on statements from government officials. Things that are part of their unwritten editorial policy. They often ignore or do not provide proper space for other sources, especially the voices of the West Papuan community.

The concentration of reporters in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, also leads to reporting from reporters not located in or never having visited West Papua, potentially reducing empathy and understanding of human rights or economic aspects in their reporting. The quality and ethics of journalists are an issue in reporting on West Papua, considering that journalists do not tend to cover the issue of labelling a ‘terrorist’ comprehensively. Elements that form the background of violence in Papua, such as militarism, racism and other horizontal issues, are not properly discussed in the news.

The government also severely restricts media access in West Papua, outside of the position of the national media, which is highly concentrated in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. Hence, the media and journalists must take significant risks while expending considerable resources to cover West Papua.

It is necessary to develop a more systematic and consolidated strategy for the national media to cover West Papua better. Continuing the banality of journalism in reporting on West Papua will only worsen the condition of democracy and deepen the wounds of the people of West Papua.

## Notes

1. The term ‘separatist’ is contested in a Pacific context because many researchers and journalists argue that Indigenous Melanesian people cannot be ‘separated’ from the Land of Papua. They prefer to use the term ‘pro-independence’ (See for example: Cass, 2023; Robie, 2014, 2021; O’Sullivan, 2021). O’Sullivan stresses the right to self-determination was reaffirmed on 13 September 2007 ‘when the UN adopted the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, confirming the human rights affirmed in all previous international declarations, covenants and agreements belonged to Indigenous peoples as much as anybody else. It confirmed the right to self-determination belongs to everybody . . . At the time, 143 UN member states voted for the declaration, including the major European colonial powers of Britain, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands [and including Indonesia]. There were 11 abstentions, but four states voted against—Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. They were especially concerned about the scope of Article 28(2) which deals with compensation for confiscated or other dishonestly acquired land:

Unless otherwise freely agreed upon by the peoples concerned, compensation shall take the form of lands, territories and resources equal in quality, size and legal status or of monetary compensation or other appropriate redress.

‘New Zealand was worried this article would justify returning much more Māori land than was already occurring under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840 Treaty of Waitangi) settlements.’

2. On 25 July 2022, three laws regarding the establishment of new provinces in Papua were enacted. These laws are *Law Number 14 of 2022*, concerning the Formation of South Papua Province, *Law Number 15 of 2022*, concerning the Formation of Central Papua Province, and *Law Number 16 of 2022*, concerning the Formation of Papua Pegunungan Province. With the enactment of these three laws, Papua now consists of five provinces, namely Papua Province, with its capital in Jayapura, West Papua

Province, with its capital in Manokwari, South Papua Province, with its capital in Merauke; Central Papua Province, with its capital in Nabire, and Papua Pegunungan Province with its capital in Jayawijaya.

The Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) and the Indonesian government argue that there are several urgencies in the establishment of these three new provinces in Papua, including providing alternative accelerated services to the communities in each prospective province, enabling more focused development with closer control, efforts to create effective and efficient governance, strengthening the existence and role of indigenous and cultural areas as social capital, considering the land area of each prospective province in relation to the suboptimal level of services, resulting in development disparities and inequalities, and the presence of new autonomous regions to address development challenges and improve the welfare of the people (Setkab, 2022).

However, many parties, including civil society organisations (CSOs) and academics, argue that the division of Papua's territory did not involve the participation of Papua's societies. They argue that the decision was solely based on Jakarta's point of view and interests (Iswinarno, 2022). Protests against the division of Papua took place in various cities, including Jayapura, Wamena, Yogyakarta, and Denpasar, and were met with excessive use of force by the police. There were even some protesters who were injured due to the use of water cannons. Seven activists were also arrested and taken to the Jayapura Regional Police Office for interrogation (Amnesty International, 2023).

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# Public actors in new spaces

## A case study of digital Malaysia in transnational public deliberation

**Abstract:** This article examines the role of new transnational public actors and their influence on public deliberation processes in Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the world's most social media-connected countries where online platforms greatly influence the Malaysian public sphere. Our study suggests considering digital news portals as specific 'public actors' since they enable new political debates in an otherwise fragile national public sphere. While national media are controlled by the state, digital news portals offer not only an alternative news perspective but are a stage for a diversity of voices. Furthermore, they link the Malaysian civic discourse to transnational political debates, such as human rights and ethnic interests. Results from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with news journalists and editors of traditional media and independent digital news portals provide insights into their perceptions concerning the implications of digital news portals for new aspects of public discourse in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** alternative news, case study, civil society, digital media, direct democracy, gatekeeping, Malaysia, news portals, political communication, public sphere, social media

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### Introduction

DIGITAL media are increasingly influencing political debates and how opinions are formed—not only in Western countries but also throughout much of Southeast Asia. Now that smartphones are affordable for large swathes of Southeast Asian societies, it is not surprising that social media platforms now constitute key hubs for political/civic interaction in the region (e.g. Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020). The term 'Southeast Asia' reflects a large geographical area but one in which the cultures of countries are very diverse. This diversity has been caused by historical circumstances and events, societal structures, cultural and political practices among the 11 countries that are commonly

grouped under the term ‘Southeast Asia’.

While social media networks constitute key platforms for political communication *across* the region, the implications for political communication and deliberation are different in each country as highlighted in recent scholarship. Regional studies reveal, for example, given the recent events in Myanmar, that social media platforms take on key roles in promoting ethnic violence against the Muslim Rohingya minority, sparking further ethnic conflicts and contributing to the country’s political instability (see The-Thitsar, 2021; Fink, 2018). Other studies (Saud & Margono, 2021; Saud et al., 2020) perceive social media in Indonesia as enablers of more inclusive political participation during presidential elections. However, despite this popularity at elections, recent developments reveal that social media are today used as influential political campaign tools not only by the government but also by various Islamic groups. Processes are leading to the increasing polarisation of political debates (Tapsell, 2021; Salahudin, 2020). In the Philippines, the massive increase in the number of social media users over the past few years—Facebook now has 83 million users among a population of 111 million—had huge ramifications for the 2019 election outcomes (Arugay, 2019). It was predicted that social media would have even more power in the 2022 election. As argued by authors from the region, social media might potentially cause a polarisation of debates simply by sparking conflicts through the spread of misinformation. Concerns are that ‘patriotic trolls’, infiltrated by the government but also by political groups into digital space will weaken civil society in the Philippines (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). This in turn will lead to the silencing of the regime’s critics.

This article builds on these debates by offering a different perspective through a focus on the rising number of digital news portals in Malaysia. We argue that digital news portals have the potential to encourage and advance political debates. We consider these digital news portals broadly as ‘public actors’ who enable political perspectives in the digital public of Malaysia. The first part of this article looks at the broader context by outlining the emerging transformation of the Malaysian public sphere. In the second part we discuss the role of public actors. The third section presents empirical insights based on qualitative interviews with professionals of mainstream media and independent digital news portals who reflect on their roles in transforming digital public spheres in Malaysia.

### **The digital public sphere in Malaysia**

While in Western countries and especially those in Europe the rights of the digital citizen—the ‘data subject’—are high on the digital policyagenda because it has long been part of the democratic process, this is not the case in Malaysia

where the social media landscape is a completely open space and exposed to a multitude of influencers. It is therefore important to first provide some background on the Malaysian digital public context before addressing the influence of independent digital news portals on the broader public debate.

There are three intertwined dimensions which should be considered as they reveal the broader ‘metrics’ of the digital public in Malaysia. First, Malaysia is among the top five of the world’s most digitally connected countries, and 87 percent of its population of 31 million can access the internet using mobile smart phones (MCMC, 2018). Malaysians prefer to spend more time online than watching television or listening to the radio (Chinnasamy, 2017). Video streaming is one of the people’s favourite online activities with 51 percent of online users having an active YouTube account (MCMC, 2018). A second dimension to consider when addressing the ‘metrics’ of digital publics in Malaysia is that especially young citizens engage in digital political debate. Like other Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia is a young society. The youth segment—youth is defined as the age group between 15-30 years—ranges in Southeast Asia from about 60 percent in Indonesia to 45 percent in Malaysia (ASEAN, 2017). About 99 percent of youth in Malaysia own a smart phone and 71 percent access news via social media platforms (Yusop & Sumari, 2013). As some market studies reveal, young citizens often consume news which is ‘opinion-based’ news, i.e. produced by ‘influencers’ or by peers as personal comments (Nielsen, 2019).

The third dimension that characterises digital public spaces in Malaysia, is the fact that the degree of digital literacy is high. According to the report *Digital in Asia* (2018), 75 percent of Malaysian citizens would accept social media being banned in the event of a national crisis. They feel that being digitally literate they know of many ways to navigate around such a ban. Based on these intertwined dimensions—high penetration of smart phones, a national youth ‘bulge’ and considerable digital skill sets—it is not surprising that digital civic engagement is already influencing election outcomes. As recent election studies reveal, elections are no longer based on broad national debates but on ‘tribal nationalism’ and ‘algorithmic enclaves’ (Lim, 2017), processes which have already determined the outcomes of recent elections in Malaysia (Chinnasamy, 2013, 2018; Tapsell, 2018; Leong, 2015).

It is not surprising that scholars from the region are beginning to conceptually address regional specific civil societies and public sphere norms. These are discussed in current scholarship from the region with two perspectives in mind. The first perspective identifies public/civic interaction in contexts of Muslim public spheres (Abd Malek, 2018) or minority youth in Indonesia and Singapore (Yue et al., 2019). Other conceptions focus on city spaces in Asian mega cities (Douglas et al., 2008). Furthermore, public spheres are

addressed in spheres of activism (Gilson, 2013), democratisation processes (Abbott, 2011) and elections (e.g. Chinnasamy, 2018).

The second conceptual perspective includes ideas incorporating the Western public sphere, echoing the Habermasian (1999) model with a focus on national citizens and rational debate (e.g. Koo, 2007; Abadi, 2015). This Western model of public deliberation—where rational discourse in national spheres among a collective national citizenry who equally share common interests in the nation and engage in deliberation based on rational discourse ethics—cannot be directly translated to the Southeast Asian context. Decades of colonial and post-colonial politics have left their marks and have produced different processes and phases of ‘rationalisation’. As Shah notes, ‘Malay rationalisation occurred not only under conditions of colonisation, but also under conditions of feudalism, class-consciousness, and also nationalism’ (Shah, 2007, p. 218). The control of public life by colonial powers and once they left, their successors who took control of the administrative structures when independence was achieved, followed certain rules and patterns (e.g. Jayal, 2013; Dirlik, 2012).

As has been argued in the case of India, ‘The colonisers left, but their canons of controlling people remained almost intact. Fresh rules, curtailing freedom, were very often thrust upon people even in the newly-born nations in South Asia experimenting with democracy’ (Chaudhury, 2021, p. 210). However, in the Habermasian model the concept of citizenship and public deliberation is related to a European national identity and the aim to generate rational debate among citizens in an established national territory (Habermas, 1999). Public deliberation is seen as a democratic force such as the process of European nation-state building in the 19th century. Instead of establishing a national citizenry based on historical values of national and cultural identity, Malaysian citizens were exposed to post-colonial ‘bargaining’, i.e. the somewhat forced integration of many ethnic groups into an ‘artificial’ state by colonial powers which was perceived as a crucial step towards—and actually a condition of—independence. Citizenry and public life were now influenced by post-colonial governments who simply carried on with the rules set by the colonial powers.

These are the important underlying structures, narratives, and influences which need to be reflected on when addressing the deeper structures of today’s digital public sphere in Malaysia. The reliance on control of public life is a direct inheritance of colonialism. For example, although a new elected government has been in power since 2018, it still oversees state-owned national television and has even legal powers to threaten journalists based on the grounds of publication of ‘fake news’. It is not surprising that within these historical public trajectories, social media networks are seen as a ‘liberation technology’ (Singpeng & Tapsell, 2020), creating a new joint political discourse territory for citizens from a variety of ethnic communities. In particular the transnational scope of these digital spheres

produces new potentials of transnational public life. At the same time, however, it is increasingly observed and governed by ad hoc policies in Malaysia.

### **Public actors and digital public spheres in Malaysia**

While a number of regional studies address national nuances regarding the role of social media for political debates and election campaigns, only a few scholars raise concerns about new roles of digital actors within all kinds of social media publics. What is meant are not the commonly used roles of ‘influencer’, i.e. so-called YouTube ‘celebrities’ attracting millions of followers to address political issues. Instead, recent scholarship (Chinnasamy & Anida, 2019) identifies actors within the fragile digital public in Malaysia, ranging from public relations agencies to all kinds of bots and trolls who deliberately aim to shape or change political opinions. While in established Western democracies these processes in times of crisis fracture societies, this process is especially influential in some Southeast Asian nations where civic debates are not protected (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). As observed by Tapsell (2021) the ‘influencers’ of extremist groups use political social media debates to ignite already existing tensions and, during elections PR professionals and ‘sole-trader entrepreneurs’ are operating on many social media platforms to influence voters (Tapsell, 2021, p.119).

While these studies address those actors who disrupt political debates, we argue that it is equally important to assess those ‘actors’ who take on roles in enabling and sustaining civic debates. We suggest the term ‘public actor’ to identify actors who enable the discussion of civic debate. ‘Public actors’ are now emerging as digital news portals to compete with Malaysian mainstream media owned by the government and government-linked individuals while independent digital news portals are owned by business-oriented individuals. Mainstream media coverage is normally likely to support the government and its leaders and does not pay much attention to oppositional or contrary perspectives held by minority groups. The majority of mainstream media discourses are shaped by self-censorship including tight media legislation and as a consequence media gatekeeping.

However, digital news portals are currently shaping different discourses in the country. For example, as a result of independent digital news portals such as Malaysiakini.com and Freemalaysia.com, coverage of the government’s mishandling of finance issues has generated public awareness and subsequently, led to protests by individual and pressure groups. Digital news portals covered these protests and implemented critical coverage incorporating many voices in the aim to encourage more online participation and discussion. In this sense they are taking on a role as a ‘public actor’ to enable critical voices to be heard, and encourage civic debate regarding the legitimacy of government action.

There are currently two phenomena occurring. The first is that the Malaysian government is trying to minimise the role that specifically independent digital

news portals take which are—in the government’s view—mainly promoting oppositional perspectives. Second, besides digital news portals other types of public actors emerge which are not just radically ‘oppositional’ in nature but act as supporters and proxies for the state, thus serving as obstacles to, rather than agents of, political reform. For example, various pressure groups played an important role in the victory of the opposition coalition in the 2018 general election (Chinnasamy & Manaf, 2018). This influence has fostered democratic development by strengthening the space between the state, political society, market (for-profit sphere) and the private space of society at large.

Overall, these processes are monitored and sometimes ‘cracked down’ on by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) which—despite an open internet policy—is legally empowered to remove material deemed to be ‘subversive’ (Chinnasamy, 2017). One might even go so far as to say that new norms are taking hold in Southeast Asia due to transnational digital communication, whereby it is more common to find states undermining democratic efforts and voices than trying to support them. Consequently, most countries in Southeast Asia have more often than not been trying to undermine democratic efforts (Thompson, 1993).

Influential digital actors are conceptualised in a framework of internationally linked ‘connective action’ (Bennett, 2013), as operators within transnational social movements (e.g. Leong, 2020) with an emphasis on the network structure of activism and more recently what is known as ‘hashtag’ activism (e.g. Wang & Zhou, 2021). Referring to Southeast Asia only a few published studies examined the role of transnational social media actors who contribute to rising tensions against religious communities, such as in Myanmar and Malaysia (Osman, 2017). However, rarely addressed are new phenomena of public actors who provide a platform to significantly influence local digital political debates in Malaysia. These types of public actors who are able to gain a voice through, for example, independent digital news portals in order to engage the Malaysian public in broader transnational debates, such as climate change, promote environmental organisations, advocate for meaningful electoral reforms, demand ethnic equality, promote LGBT issues and promote women’s rights under Islam. In other words they expand political debates, i.e., civic deliberation through such a transnational broader perspective.

In this sense, our conception of public actor is based on Nancy Fraser’s term of ‘interlocutors’ (Fraser, 2007a). Interlocutors are related to her conception of transnational publics. Hence interlocutors are, so Fraser argues, ‘neither nationals nor fellow citizens’ (Fraser, 2007a, p. 16) in a national and transnational context. She argues that ‘empirically’ the national framework is being ‘surpassed’, and so ‘the public sphere will simply be disempowered unless it is reconstituted on a different scale’ and that the ‘addressee of communication, once theorised as

a sovereign territorial state . . . is now an amorphous mix of public and private transnational powers that is neither easily identifiable nor rendered accountable' (Fraser, 2007b. p. 19). In this sense, independent digital news portals act as public actors, as 'interlocutors' encouraging civic interaction. They do this by generating links to broader transnational discussions through interactive elements and relationships to all sorts of social media platforms in several languages such as Malay, English, Tamil and Mandarin.

### **Research Questions**

In order to assess this new dimension of civic engagement, we conducted qualitative interviews with media professionals in Malaysia, the objective being to assess their perception of the roles of public actors. Interviews were guided by two main research questions:

RQ 1: How do media experts understand the public deliberation process in Malaysia?

RQ 2: How do media professionals perceive transnational public actors in their influence on local political opinions held by citizens?

### **Methodology**

This study is based on eight in-depth interviews with media experts and builds on Luckmann's work (1996) concerning the social construction of reality. We adopt this soft conceptual approach when assessing how public actors are perceived by media professionals. More in-depth insight is required about how news professionals strategically engage with civic deliberation. In other words, we assess how media professionals perceive alternative voices, public debate and public engagement within their professional reality. Media professionals are defined as those individuals who work for mainstream media and independent digital news portals in Malaysia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents. The final sampling includes eight professionals from mainstream media and independent digital news portals. We included journalists of executive ranks. Mainstream media outlets relate to mainly print and broadcast formats which are owned by the government, while independent digital news portals are owned by individuals who are funded by international organisations.

The sample of respondents was identified based, firstly, on their journalistic experience in the news organisation, and secondly, their professional seniority. The non-random sampling procedure has been chosen given the focus of the study as a specific group of professionals (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Neuman, 2014). Miles and Huberman (1984) and Patton (1990) concurred that most sampling techniques in qualitative research depend not on principles of random probability, but on purposeful selection. The total number of necessary

professionals to be studied was based on points of data saturation. Saturation which relates to qualitative research is a guideline and a limit where a researcher considers having reached the analysis objectives when no more new themes emerge (Saunders et al., 2018). This research noted a pattern of repetition in interviewees' answers so in effect the point of data saturation had been reached. Prior to gathering interview data, the reliability and validity of the research must be assessed to ensure the integrity and quality of the findings.

Each interview session lasted about 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. For the process of analysing the collected data, specific processes were executed. In Neuman's (2014, p. 487) view, data analysis involves examining, sorting, categorising, evaluating, comparing, synthesising, contemplating the coded data as well as reviewing the raw and recorded data. Interview questions addressed the overall understanding of public deliberation and, second, their perceptions of transnational public actors within such a deliberative sphere, types of deliberative issues and types of public actors.

## Findings

### Perception of public deliberation dimensions

#### *(1) Public deliberation is traditionally related to ethnic contexts*

As pointed out earlier, in Western countries 'the nation' is the traditional key domain of public deliberation among all citizens, while public deliberation is traditionally related to ethnic spheres in Malaysia. Within a national public, understood as a 'balanced' overarching sphere that embraces various ethnic communities, regulated by the government in order to maintain this balance, ethnic groups understand ethnic communities as 'their' space for deliberation. Relating to this specific type of national public, respondents understand the civil society in Malaysia as a space to: (1) aggregate and articulate ethnic interests; and (2) challenge state power by garnering attention for these specific interests. Respondents outline this process as a specific political 'circuit of networking' taking place between spheres of deliberation of ethnic groups, independent digital news portals and the state:

Deliberation is to aggregate and articulate the interests of specific groups. This is the way to strengthen the civil society movement. It is important to distinguish civil society from political society. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

The traditional media sector is seen as a core component of such a public domain. Respondents specifically understand media overall as a 'development tool' for society in order to unify the post-colonial and ethnically diverse society. They argue that the process of constructing civic identity has been a long struggle since independence. To achieve national sovereignty across such ethnic



diversity requires tight control by the state in order to create ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’ between ethnic groups. In this sense, traditional media outlets perceive sovereignty as ‘togetherness’ across ethnic diversity. As one respondent notes:

Mainstream media has distributed information to the people as a developmental tool and change agent to build and re-construct Malaysia identity as a sovereign nation state. This has been continued by traditional media today, which seems to play the role in bringing together the multi-racial society to a diverse ethnicity to create ‘Bangsa Malaysia’. (Interview 6, independent digital news portal)

*(II) Mainstream media associated with historical and post-independence development*

Respondents see this role of mainstream media from a historical perspective. In their view, the national media’s role was—from the early days of independence onwards—to help build the unity of Malaysians, ‘Bangsa Malaysia’—which reflected a sense of national belonging and community, despite the existence of several other ethnic communities and their strong sense of identity. Existing research suggests that the country’s mainstream media functioned as a tool for developing the state since independence. It is also argued that journalists in Malaysia adopt the traditional development journalism approach, favouring the government and political leaders (Chinnasamy, 2017). However, this role is now challenged by the rise of independent digital news portals, operating across all types of online platforms. Respondents from independent digital news portals see these as a key hub for new public actors—such as ‘pressure groups.’ Respondents from portals such as Malaysiakini.com argue they are more popular than mainstream media because these online portals highlight issues ignored by mainstream media and especially ethnic issues.

Respondents from independent digital news portals are very critical of the mainstream media and argue that the ignorance of various types of political conflicts by national media which citizens today pick up from independent digital news portals has led to a deep distrust of national media. Citizens today turn to independent digital news portals not only in times of crisis. Respondents from the independent digital news portals feel that mainstream media fail to address issues related to today’s citizens’ interests.

*(III) Independent digital portals are democratic spaces in Malaysia*

Independent digital portals are indirectly providing democratic spaces for new types of national and transnational public actors emerging. These public actors are representatives of pressure groups that were not getting the attention of government-linked mainstream media. Independent digital portals provide voices

to the voiceless, especially to the public actors who are not being heard through government-related communication channels. While this process destabilises the balanced multi-ethnic public discourse which was maintained and controlled by mainstream media (especially government broadcast media and publications) since independence, the independent digital portals established new spheres for deliberation and debate among public actors.

Especially the dimensions of transnational digital connectivity are perceived by respondents as a cause for the emergence of new public actors. Public actors, for example pressure groups, are linked to international politicians, non-government organisations (NGOs) and foreign media. They operate on a transnational scale, targeting specific political debates in Malaysia and also include expatriates. It is very interesting to note that the interviewed media experts perceive civil society as no longer limited to civic engagement in Malaysia; it now includes Malaysians living overseas who participate via digital media.

Respondents from mainstream media note that social media platforms—especially those operated by independent digital news portals—have mobilised pressure groups to move to a bigger and more international level and become a reference source for international pressure group networks. Independent digital news portals are seen as major hubs in such an enlarged perception of a transnationally connected Malaysian civil society. Digital news portals provide information regarding protests locally as well as news sources for international news agencies and promote democracy movements abroad. Overall, respondents argue that this process has further strengthened the emergence of a new type of civil society in Malaysia in today's digitally connected sphere:

The present situation in Malaysia is the development of civil society. Most of the pressure groups have also international links such as Bersih. We could see how many series of protest they have organised, including protests of Malaysians overseas through social media platforms. (Interview 1, mainstream media)

Pressure groups are seen as new political actors specifically with reference to independent digital news portals in order to mobilise support from citizens, participate in their reform agenda and attempts, and to mobilize their support from international leaders.

### **New forms of public agency in national issues deliberation**

#### *(1) The rise of pressure groups is associated with ethnic/critical issues*

Respondents are fully aware of attempts by the government to suppress certain independent digital news portals. The most common method is to crack down on criticising the government and addressing political leaders' weaknesses or alleged corruption. However, pressure groups can still circulate critical content.

Over time, independent digital news portals use specific techniques to circumvent suppression. For example, independent media portals publish political news faster compared to mainstream media's online versions. They use the factor of speed of digital technologies to provide critical information quickly and offer spaces for direct interaction with users of their portals.

The emergence of independent media portals seems to offer challenging and contradictory perspectives and new transnational perspectives compared to mainstream media:

You can see how the street rallies were reported in details in independent media portals. Everyone sees it in different angles. This is not only viewed by Malaysians but also from overseas. Some international news quoted the independent digital news portals as news sources in highlighting the pressure group movement news as massive street protest. (Interview 2, mainstream media)

Respondents are well aware of emerging new dimensions of public communication and civic deliberation enhanced specifically by independent digital news portals which are taking on a key role in directly engaging citizens in political participation, such as posting comments, 'liking' specific news and sharing news. However, independent digital news portals provide information (and details of date and time) about the unfolding of political unrest and take on roles as a 'pressure group information hub'

### *(II) Increasing popularity of independent digital news portals*

Based on these new roles of independent digital news portals, their subscription rates are rapidly increasing. Subscribers are not only citizens residing in Malaysia but also expatriates overseas who subscribe to digital portals, for instance Malaysiakini.com, FreeMalaysiaToday.com and a few others. Specifically, respondents who work for independent digital news portals argue that Malaysia needs to more fully recognise the political role of a functioning civil society:

The civil society movement changed with the phase of political development. Now we have the era of New Malaysia under the new government. Street rallies organised by the civil society becoming crucial in entrenching and sustaining democratic rule in the country. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

In our respondents' perspectives, public actors such as pressure groups, challenge the state and the political agenda. The government was expected to offer a new form of leadership that resulted from the resistance of pressure groups.

### *(III) Virtual activism has led to direct democracy*

Virtual activism or digital deliberation has triggered the rise of direct democracy

not only locally but also at the international level:

Civil society is a space that is populated by all kinds of organisations, not just those inclined towards democracy. (Interview 6, independent digital news portal)

It seems that in the perspective of respondents, digital spaces constitute a democratic ‘blueprint’ for open public spheres, especially giving voice to the voiceless; so that no one is left behind in accessing their rights of citizenship:

It has given voice to voiceless. That is the most visible one. The internet had given voice to the voiceless, more capacity to civil society movement, pressure groups, cultural minorities demands becoming visible’. (Interview 8, independent digital news portal)

As well, it is thought that independent digital news portals target mainly minority groups while mainstream media, as is noted by some respondents, are perhaps too focused on specific groups and not others, such as the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups:

We don’t read Tamil and Mandarin news, but the portal covers issues in Tamil and Chinese and even in English, too. (Interview 1, mainstream media)  
They are giving voice to the voiceless where we are not covering it such as church was torn down and temple demolitions issues. (Interview 4, mainstream media)

Overall, respondents perceive digital spheres as taking on a vital role in enhancing democratic political discourses whether it is related to ethnic groups or government failures and driving a transformation that is leading to a civil society.

### **Emerging youth online deliberation and types of participation**

As respondents note, social media has greatly changed the role of young citizens in society. Young people engage frequently with new actors and they interact through independent digital news portals:

Social media and youth are very much connected. The power of technology and the internet, especially social media are a major power and a strong platform for waking up the whole Malaysian society . . . For instance, the Hashtag Bersih 3.0 (2012) on social media had been spread rapidly to inform about protest movements. (Interview 1, mainstream media)

The majority of respondents feel that the new types of political actors, such as the pressure group movement made possible by social media, indirectly in-

creased the sense of national belonging among youth as they take on a new responsibility as citizens to criticise the government. The pressure groups' agenda aims to establish critical political discourse and relate this to activities, such as street protests. For instance, the *Bersih* rallies which were protests for free and fair elections were the most intense protests that Malaysia had. In Malaysia, political discourse did not stop as a space of social media deliberation. Due to the important factor of digital publicness, independent digital news portals are becoming hubs for providing information and connecting public actors locally and internationally so that agendas and activities are closely aligned.

Malaysia is a multiracial and multi-religious society, with a complex relationship between the different ethnicities, religions, and the state, which is often politically, socially, and legally 'loaded' (Steiner, 2018). At the same time, Malaysia has long been viewed as a model of moderate Islamic rule (Weiss, 2013). Muslims and non-Muslims have enjoyed civil and political rights. Growing domestic political volatility has led to questioning the viability of political moderation in digital deliberation. One respondent from the mainstream media believed that citizens have equal freedom to express themselves on digital platforms:

We can say what we want for as long as we keep within the laws of the land. I know what I can and cannot say. As a relatively young internet user (I am 39), I have also had experience in breaching very sensitive issues about Islam once on my social media page. But, I learnt from that that my friends on the social media may or may not agree with my opinions. So, it has been a learning experience and a bit of trial and error. Judging from many cases of people being charged in court for posting religiously sensitive comments on social media, I have learned that everything I say on social media will have repercussions if I am not careful and if I break any law. (Interview 2, mainstream media)

There is a strong sentiment of connectivity between ethnic youth and their community. Youth from minority groups are specifically focusing on their community's development, and also beginning to act as a 'watchdog', checking if the state is treating their community well or otherwise. As one respondent notes:

These guys are taking a good care of their community. They want to serve their own community to create mutual benefit for everybody. Minority group's media also are more to the development of their community. At the end, youth became news informers to news agencies. There was also a strong movement between youth and minority non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who initiated a great deal of work on the ground not only locally but also internationally'. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

Respondents feel that a broader context is required to understand these processes. They state that young people's involvement and actions are most likely

caused by what they have experienced and lived through during the previous government. It seems that the complaints and the voices of Malaysian youth had generally been ignored by previous governments. For them, previous governments only offered a false hope and dreams in education, freedom in information and media, economic prosperity and social equality.

## **Conclusion**

The ‘vertical’ dimension of transnational deliberation has inspired new and innovative ways of examining the emergence of Malaysia’s current public arena of digital interaction, and its role in the national media space. As the number of internet users worldwide continues to grow, it is becoming more local (Postill, 2008). As the digital sphere becomes the dominant place for political debate, a focus on new ‘influencers’ of public deliberation is now important. Although acting in a digital national sphere, public actors are transnationally connected but still able to address local issues. Such a ‘vertical’ type of transnational deliberation can be considered as a new public sphere, enabling discursive spaces for information, debate, and participation. We argue that such a process has the potential to invigorate democracy and increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas.

The discursive process of negotiating individual and collective judgement as reason-based agreements no longer relates to a bounded civic collective. Instead, it fluctuates across thematic spaces and loyalties of broad unbounded communication spheres which requires new normative structures. For instance the rise of political activism among youths in Malaysia greatly influenced the 2018 general election results. As has been argued, democracy and free speech go hand-in-hand with free media (Milosevic, 2017; Alvarez, 2014).

The media professionals interviewed in this study were fully aware of the influence and power of independent digital news portals in Malaysia, and how they can transform public spheres. In their view, independent digital news portals are the only medium that can be relied on and trusted to set a new critical agenda regarding minorities and religious matters. The sphere of deliberation enabled by independent digital news portals has the potential to unify citizens across ethnic communities, include non-governmental organisations, bloggers groups, independent digital media portals and religious groups as well. Furthermore, independent digital news portals enable virtual activism and intensify publicness of otherwise dispersed local discourse across transnationally accessible platforms. The public interdependence between citizens seems to reposition civic deliberation in larger transnational contexts—embedding the local community in new ways as the case of digital Malaysia reveals (Frere & Kiyindou, 2009, p. 85; Volkmer, 2014).

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# Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories

## Pacific islands communities and the media

**Abstract:** This article is intended to provide an overview of the role of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in Pacific Islands communities in New Zealand, setting it within the broader context of the Pacific and among Pasifika communities in Australia during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of their key roles in Island communities and communicating information about COVID-19, it focuses on the role of churches, drawing a contrast between evangelical/Pentecostal and mainstream religious bodies. Research findings suggest that much of the language used to oppose vaccination derived ultimately from the United States and that an inclination towards End Times eschatology was likely to have been key to the spread of conspiracy theories. However, the article also suggests that in spite of the presence of conspiracy theories and the media's concentration on the controversial behaviour of Bishop Brian Tamaki, most mainstream Pacific churches were highly alert to the reality of the virus and supportive of their communities.

**Keywords:** Anti-vaxxers, Australia, conspiracy theories, churches, COVID-19, Destiny Church, Fiji, news media, New Zealand, protests, Pacific diaspora, Papua New Guinea, religion, Samoa, Tonga

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### Introduction

RESEARCH and reports by Sapkota, Hannah and Clark and others in *Pacific Journalism Review* (2022) have highlighted the presence of a core of anti-vaccination campaigners in Aotearoa New Zealand. This has been accompanied by research showing the influence of online conspiracy theorists of American origin in the Pacific, particularly in Fiji (Kant, Vanea and Titi-fanue, 2021). This article attempts to provide an overview of how COVID-19 conspiracy theories manifested themselves in Pacific communities, both within the diaspora and 'at home.'

This article focuses on the role of churches because they play an absolutely vital role in Pacific communities. A very high proportion of the total Pacific

population in New Zealand has at least one church affiliation (70.8 percent or 270,390 people) (Stats NZ, 2018).

Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in the United States have been important sites of opposition to vaccinations, masking and bans on gatherings. This places them at odds with the mainstream churches which enjoined their flocks to get vaccinated and generally encouraged adherence to government health regulations.

## Oceania

Opposition to vaccinations and associated theories from these and other sources have been copied and spread in the Pacific. Opposition to vaccines was already a problem in Samoa, where anti-vaccination sentiment had been widespread during a measles epidemic in 2019. By the end of 2019, 70 people had died, most of them children. (United Nations, 2019) In many cases medical staff discovered that the dead had not been vaccinated because of anti-vaccination conspiracies circulating on the internet. *The Washington Post* quoted Dr Sheldon Yett, UNICEF representative in the Pacific, as declaring: ‘People who are spreading lies and misinformation about vaccinations are killing children’ (Gerson, 2019). The United Nations noted in June 2020 that opposition to a vaccine had already emerged online, even before such a vaccine existed (United Nations, 2020). Discussing the situation in Fiji, the Asia Foundation’s 2021 report *COVID-19 Awareness, Online Discourse and Vaccine Distribution in Melanesia*, said:

Large Facebook groups in Fiji are promoting false narratives relating to COVID-19 that reconfigure foreign disinformation to explain local events and confirm locally-held beliefs. Despite the fact that the technology does not exist in Fiji, local Facebook communities seized upon anti-5G misinformation originating in US and European media ecosystems and drew a connection between 5G networks and local COVID-19 infections, lockdowns, and unrelated natural phenomena. In addition, while awareness of the importance of handwashing and quarantining is nearly universal, a lower but still substantial number of respondents appeared to believe in false or pseudoscientific ‘protective measures’ that have spread widely on social media, such as avoiding mobile phone towers or avoiding cold foods and cold temperatures. (Asia Foundation, 2021)

The report continued:

Information ecosystems, including modes of online messaging by public officials, shape the flow of misinformation. Papua New Guinea’s information ecosystem is particularly affected by public distrust and confusion about COVID-19 messages, likely contributing to the finding that one in six respondents in the country believe COVID-19 is a ‘hoax’ or not real. (Asia Foundation, 2021)

MacDonald (2021a) described vaccination campaigns in Papua New Guinea in 2021 as being the subject of violent attacks and death threats, driven by fear and the powerful influence of Pentecostal and evangelical churches. These churches have a strong orientation towards the End Times, a period of tribulation and suffering they believe is outlined in a literal interpretation of the final book of the New Testament, Revelations.

Crucially, the imminent return of Christ is heralded by the world's rapid moral decline and humanity being branded with the mark of the beast—a process mandated by Satan. As such, many Papua New Guinea Christians continuously and fearfully scan the horizon for this definitive sign. Years ago, some Papua New Guineans . . . declared barcodes were the mark. More recently, they insisted it was the government's national ID card initiative. Now, in a completely different order of magnitude and intensity, it is the COVID vaccine. One group protesting a vaccine drive chanted, 'Karim 666 chip go!', or 'Get out of here with Satan's microchip'. (MacDonald, 2021a)

Elsewhere in the Pacific, 11 Fijian Methodist ministers resigned from their positions in 2022 rather than be vaccinated. The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination in Fiji, with 36.2 percent of the total population (300,000) including 66.6 percent of indigenous Fijians. A total of 10 ministers of the Christian Mission Fellowship Church also quit over their refusal to be vaccinated (RNZ, 2022).

In 2021, senior Methodist leaders were warned against influencing people not to be vaccinated. The church's general secretary, the Reverend Iliesa Naivalu told church ministers to stop circulating what he called 'baseless videos' and 'wild claims' on social media. He said they were 'aiding the dark intents of those that created these lies' (RNZ, 2021).

In the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare attacked a small group of health workers who he said had promoted misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine safety and effectiveness. He said it was 'extremely sad' the group had ignored evidence about the important role vaccines played in keeping the pandemic under control and instead spread disinformation (Blades, 2012).

An anti-mask video by UK conspiracy theorist David Icke had been translated into multiple languages including te reo Māori and Pacific languages and shared widely (Broughton, 2020). Icke is best known for his claim that the world is controlled by lizard people from another planet (Icke, 2023)

In Australia, this kind of anti-vaccination conspiracy has also taken hold among the diasporic Islander community. The best known conspiracist is Australian-Samoan Taylor Winterstein, whose anti-vaccination rhetoric has been described as 'irresponsible' by the Australian Medical Association and a 'public

health threat' by the Samoan Ministry of Health for her comments during that country's measles epidemic. She once claimed a jar of ground-up rice would cure autism and has continued to propound anti-vaccination myths during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bedo, 2021).

During the second year of COVID-19, many Pacific community leaders in Australia said they were worried about how widely misinformation about the virus was being spread. Reverend Matagi Jessop Vilitama, a Uniting Church minister in Sydney, told the ABC it was sad to see conspiracy theories growing within religious groups.

I'm very concerned, because if religion is about life, and it's about life sustenance . . . then we will do our utmost best to preserve life. There's an element there that [Pacific Islanders] are vulnerable, especially through social media, to misinformation. (Faa, 2021)

### **Aotearoa New Zealand**

Conspiracy theories also exist among the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. Among the conspiracies in circulation in New Zealand have been claims that vaccines contain microchips, that they can alter human DNA, that they contain cells from aborted babies, that they contain software that can be updated remotely via 5G mobile networks and they are the mark of the Beast mentioned in Revelations (Satherley, 2021; Revelation, 13:17).

Recent investigations by *Kaniva News* into the phenomenon show that the Tongan diasporic community in New Zealand is also vulnerable to such anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. In 2022, *Kaniva News* reported that Tongan anti-vaxxers were still circulating a two-year-old video whose claims had long since been debunked. The video, featuring Indian-born American entrepreneur Dr Shiva Ayyadurai, claimed COVID-19 could be treated with hydroxychloroquine and vitamins.

Ayyadurai, who is not actually a medical doctor and who was briefly linked to disgraced American President Donald Trump, also claimed there was a giant global conspiracy to make everybody have a chip, destroy the American economy, and make everybody the slave of a network of powerful figures, including the Chinese Communist Party, Bill Gates, the Clintons and the United Nations (Cass, 2022).

Research has shown a number of reasons for the spread of anti-vaccination conspiracies in the Pacific communities. Research by the New Zealand Ministry of Health and others suggests this may be because of lack of education, mistrust of government sources, uncertainty and cultural isolation.

In some Islander communities, conspiracy theories around COVID-19 and vaccination became quite aggressive, even targeting community leaders. Fa'anānā Efeso Collins, who stood unsuccessfully for the mayoralty of Auckland against

Wayne Brown in 2023, said he had received threats and calls for his excommunication from his church for supporting a call for vaccinations in South Auckland in 2021. The area was deemed to be at high risk of infection. Fa'anānā told *The New Zealand Herald* that conspiracy theories had been circulating since the start of the pandemic, many coming from small breakaway churches (Satherley, 2021). Government research showed that some micro churches were supported by only 10 to 40 families.

Religious historian Peter Lineham, who is based at Massey University, argued that conspiracies could make people feel as if they had discovered the truth that nobody else had. He said conspiracy theories arose among people who did not have the education or cultural background that would allow them to connect with scientific evidence.

I think that's where the problem comes—people who have got reason to be suspicious of the experts then start thinking, 'they're hoodwinking us, they're telling us something that isn't true'. What happens in religious communities is kind of a whispering game, where people pass information from one to another and suddenly there's a whole lot of people verifying something on no information at all. Once you've got that extra information, you feel 'enlightened'—you feel as though you see through the things that have been deceiving the world overall. (Satherley, 2021)

Fear also seems to have played a part in how some people reacted. In the United States a large scale study of online communication by Stanford University found discussion around COVID-19 fell into two broad areas. In one, the virus was described as a hoax or exaggerated threat (with claims that testing gave false positives or hospitals were secretly empty), In the other, the epidemic was described it as a bioweapon spread on purpose by Bill Gates, the Chinese, or some super-conspiracy of people who really controlled the world. The research showed that people were likely to read and share such ideas when they felt threatened by the virus (Suciu, 2022).

Elsewhere in the US, research has linked support for conspiracy theories to membership of evangelical churches and support for the Republican Party, especially Donald Trump. Jackson (2021) argued that white Republicans and white evangelicals formed 'a particularly toxic anti-vax stew' and said they were among the most likely groups in the United States to refuse vaccination.

According to Jackson, 84 percent of white evangelicals believed that God controlled everything that happened in the world and were more likely than any other Christian group to believe that God would punish nations for the sins of some of its citizens and that natural disasters were 'a sign from God'. Such ideas have been expressed by Bishop Brian Tamaki, leader of New Zealand's pentecostal Destiny Church. Research conducted by the *Journal of Psychology*

*and Theology* had found that some evangelical Christians rationalised illnesses like cancer as ‘God’s will’ (Jackson, 2021).

The overwhelming nature of the events surrounding us may simply have made the COVID-19 epidemic too much to comprehend for many people. Coupled with the threat of climate change, uncertainty over China’s intentions in the Pacific (and Russia’s later invasion of the Ukraine in 2022) may have prompted people to seek simpler or more simplistic pseudo-solutions. These may take a variety of forms, which may rely on ideas that the virus was the result of deliberate action rather than an accident, or the application of a framework that sees it in terms of the End Time eschatology favoured by fundamentalist churches for whom the Book of Revelations (like the rest of the Bible) is seen as the literal word of God.

The first broad interpretation of events is that the COVID-19 virus is part of an enormous plot of the kind described by Ayyadurai (Cass, 2022) in which a group of conspirators want to take over the planet and establish a new world order. Pursuing ideas such as this online plunges the researcher into an enormous tangle of claims about Davos, the CIA, the Illuminati, lizard men in the moon and a secret tunnel from a pizza shop in Washington into the White House.

The other is based on a particular interpretation of the Book of Revelations and sees COVID-19 as a sign of the End Times and vaccination as the mark of the Beast. In New Zealand, for instance, the pastors at the evangelical Christchurch church Celebration Centre, Murray and Nancy Watkinson, have preached that humanity is in the End Times (Broughton, 2021). Murray Watkinson is reported to have talked about things that were ‘going to happen in the End Times,’ such as mandatory vaccinations. He suggested the COVID-19 vaccine could be the ‘mark of the Beast’ Citing Revelations, he said those without the mark would not be able to buy, sell and trade. ‘What if you’re not vaccinated, and they won’t allow you to go into a supermarket to actually shop?’ he asked (Broughton, 2021).

Many of these ideas can be seen reflected in the behaviour of Bishop Tamaki and his followers. (MacDonald, 2021) As self-appointed Bishop of his own pentecostal Destiny Church, Tamaki, his wife Hannah, and their followers have been involved on the fringes of New Zealand politics for several years. They have attracted notoriety for blaming the Christchurch earthquake on ‘gays, sinners and murderers’ (MacDonald, 2021b). As a pentecostal organisation, Destiny Church is driven by the same obsession with the End Times that apparently occurred at the Celebration Centre. Fraser MacDonald explained Tamaki’s behaviour:

Pentecostals are deeply concerned with the end of human history as the precursor to Christ’s return and the establishment of God’s paradisaical kingdom. The Tribulation is a seven-year nightmare of evil and suffering featuring the rise of a nefarious ‘new world order’. Within this end times scenario, all humanity is branded with the mark of the beast, a process authorised by Satan. An apocalyptic plague and Satanic mandates for

vaccination provide further prophetic justification for a pro-healing, anti-vaccination position.

Pentecostals are not huge fans of worldly entities and human rules. They prefer divine authority, spiritual inspiration and Biblically sanctified morality. The Kingdom of God is juxtaposed with the debased platforms of government and capitalism. Translated into the pandemic context, the continual legislative and policy directives of the government are, by virtue of their human origin, tainted with iniquity. (MacDonald, 2021b)

At the beginning of the epidemic, Tamaki described COVID-19 as a sign that the world had ‘strayed from God’, but claimed that his followers would be protected, a message the Reverend Dr Helen Jacobi, vicar at central Auckland’s St Matthew-in-the-City, described as dangerous and offensive (Neilson & Collins, 2020). Tamaki decided to put his views on COVID-19 into action and led several illegal rallies in Auckland’s Domain to protest against masking mandates and restriction on gatherings. He was arrested three times for his behaviour and, briefly, barred from the Domain. He was supported by another Auckland-based pastor, Peter Mortlock, who runs the City Impact Church (Tan, 2021).

In December 2021, Tamaki threatened to blow up mobile vaccination vans if they went near schools. He was quoted as telling his congregation in a sermon: ‘If you go in there with your wagon, I’ll tow your wagon away and I’ll get the boys to blow it up and all your syringes, we’ll run you out of town’ (Pearse & Leaske, 2021).

While media and academic attention has focussed on the evangelical and pentecostal churches and their role in opposing vaccinations and nurturing conspiracy theories, it is worth noting the broader role of churches during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which appear to have been far more benign on both a local and international scale. Mainstream churches consistently backed vaccinations, with Pope Francis describing being immunised as being an ‘act of love’. ‘Getting vaccinated is a simple yet profound way to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable,’ the Pontiff said (Watkins, 2021). He later described vaccination as a moral obligation and said everybody on the planet should have equal access to the drugs (VoA, 2022).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has a large following throughout the Pacific, urged people to be vaccinated. The church’s elders said a war was being fought against an unrelenting pandemic and issued a number of statements during 2021 saying that they supported immunisation (Walch, 2021).

While an obsession with COVID-19 as a sign of the End Times was common among evangelical and pentecostal churches, there were many moderate voices from the conservative spectrum of Christianity in the United States who did not see it this way. Jarrett (2020), for instance, cautioned:



While COVID-19 is likely not one of the seven last plagues of Revelation, nor a sign of the end times, it is still very real. And as Christians, we need to respond appropriately to it. The first thing that we should do is to follow the directions of our government and medical experts.

Robertson (2020) argued:

It won't be long before someone is publishing an End Times book, showing how Revelation prophesied COVID-19 and is a sign of the End. I don't believe that—in fact, I regard that as an irresponsible use of Scripture in direct defiance of John's warning at the end of this book, not to add anything to his words.

David Jeremiah, leader of a Southern Baptist megachurch, had this exchange with a parishioner:

**Q.** I'm trying to make sense of this vaccine. I believe it is a prelude to the mark of the Beast. What's your opinion on the vaccine? Should we be afraid of it?

**A.** Without a doubt, prophecy casts its shadow on current events. What we are seeing now is an example of how the Antichrist could operate during the Tribulation period. This does not mean the COVID-19 vaccine has anything to do with the Antichrist—it merely provides an illustration of how his mark might be applied after the Lord comes for His Church.

Research carried out by the New Zealand government after the first phase of the epidemic revealed some interesting data that make it appear that the conspiracy theorists and protesters may not actually have had a widespread effect among Pacific communities in New Zealand.

A survey of the role of Pacific churches during the 2020 lockdown by the Ministry of Pacific Peoples states unequivocally that they were vital in holding Islander communities together and providing support. Based on an investigation of four Protestant churches in the North and South Islands, one Methodist (Tongan), one Assembly of God (multicultural), one Assembly of God (Samoan) and one Congregational (Samoan), the report noted:

It became evident that many churches were actively contributing to support the needs of their church communities and ensuring key messages were delivered to the wider Pacific community. Many adopted new ways of communicating and engaging with their members via digital platforms, holding online services and providing digital daily encouragements. All these were demonstrations of the significant role that churches play in Pacific communities and the resilience of Pacific communities to navigate and adapt to change during times of crisis.

Further, despite the protests and the conspiracy theories, a survey by Kantar Public on behalf of the Ministry of Health in the wake of the first phase of the epidemic, reported that during the first major lockdown, Pacific peoples had some of the highest rates of COVID-19 testing in New Zealand. The report went on to say:

Although it is clearly recalled as a time of uncertainty, difficulty and worry, it is also a time when churches and community leaders . . . demonstrated real leadership and initiative with their responses, prioritising the wellbeing of the community, providing support to many . . . when people were facing hardships and being part of the information cascade and action. The Pacific community took pride in having among the lowest rates of COVID-19 infection, showing the prevalence of solidarity in the community, and acting in the best interest to protect elders and fanau. (Kantar Public, 2021)

The report went on to provide an interesting view of the role of the media in providing accurate information that somewhat contradicts the image of everybody being led astray by conspiracy theories. It argues that most people were happy to rely on the government for information and regarded it as trustworthy at the time. However, in the wake of the lockdown, people reported that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information coming at them on social media. It may well be that people found it easier to accept what Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and health spokesman Ashley Bloomfield said. One respondent noted that Bloomfield had ‘integrity’ and added: ‘If he says that we need to trust the science then I would believe him.’ (Kantar Public, 2021)

The report went on to say that demographic issues were at play, with older people more likely to be confused by incorrect information than other groups. Curiously, younger people—who were praised by the Ministry for Pacific Peoples report for providing technical support during the lockdown so people could establish their digital communities, reported that they did not recall seeing a lot of information about vaccination online. The report concluded:

It is important to note that few people seemed to believe in any of the specific conspiracy theories in circulation. It is rather the sheer volume of them, particularly in the absence of other credible sources of information, that seems to be creating a climate of uncertainty.

In May 2021, more than 100 Pacific church ministers, their families and congregation members received their COVID-19 vaccinations in Ōtara. Reverend Dr Featunai Liuaana said it was important that church leaders showed their communities that the vaccination was safe to help alleviate any fears. ‘People are hearing so much information about the vaccination, much of which is not

true.’ he said. ‘As church leaders we need to walk the talk and show them it’s safe and easy to do’ (Te Whatu Ora/Health New Zealand, 2021).

At the Sāmoan Methodist Māngere Central church all 120 members of the congregation were vaccinated by the end of 2021. Reverend Suiva’aia Te’o said she talked to her congregation about why they should be vaccinated and left it to them. She said she had no time for Christian leaders calling the COVID-19 vaccine the mark of the Beast. ‘I don’t agree. I think it’s just an excuse and they need to get vaccinated,’ she told Radio New Zealand. ‘I’m convinced [the vaccine] has been developed with God-given wisdom and knowledge by professionals so we can be safe’ (Latif, 2021).

### Conclusion

This article opens up several avenues for further exploration. It would be extremely useful to look at what is being said online in all the Pacific languages and see whether there is any difference in what is being said in diasporic sources and home Island sources. This would allow for a much broader examination of sources other than those in English. It would also recognise the multilingual environment in which New Zealand’s Ministry of Health has had to operate, with information and advice being available online for Pacific communities from the Ministry of Pacific Peoples (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, n.d.) and the government’s Unite Against COVID-19 campaign (COVID, n.d).

While the WHO has declared the COVID-19 emergency over, it has not gone away and people continue to contract the disease and die from it. When the WHO’s Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared the emergency over in May 2023, the cumulative cases worldwide stood at 765,222,932, with 6,921,614 deaths (WHO, 2023). It would therefore also be useful to conduct a longitudinal study examining whether anti-vaccination and conspiracy theory messages have changed and in what way since 2020.

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# Benefits of the project model capstone

## Key experience themes for journalism students

**Abstract:** Capstone units are culminating experiences typically offered in the final semester of a tertiary degree. Capstones are common across higher education and are increasingly being offered in university journalism programmes. However, there is no consensus about the most effective capstone for journalism. At least three models have been identified: the project, the newsroom simulation and the internship. While traditionally popular, the newsroom simulation and internship models have certain limitations. Some of these have become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalism educators see merit in the project model, but it is not widely used. To date, there has been a lack of research about how journalism students respond to the various capstone options. The study presented here makes a contribution to this field by describing graduating students' feedback about a new project model capstone unit offered through an Australian journalism undergraduate programme. It describes some of the key themes to emerge from survey responses gathered over three years. The project experience was found to enhance both tradecraft and transferable life skills and helped many students feel more prepared to enter the workforce. The project shows significant promise as a valid alternative capstone experience for journalism students.

**Keywords:** Australia, capstone unit, COVID-19, employability, employment, internships, journalism education, life skills, project journalism, soft skills

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### Introduction

**C**APSTONES are substantial learning experiences that take place in the final stage of an educational course. Also known as senior seminars, they are common across undergraduate and graduate courses, with 70-80 per cent of higher education institutions in the US offering them (Apgar, 2019). Capstones are culminating experiences that give students the context in which to integrate and apply prior learning. They provide depth and complexity,



engender independence and confidence and orient and assist in transition to life after graduation. They are special, significant and challenging. Capstones have been identified as high impact educational experiences for college students (Kuh, 2008). Increasingly, they are also conceptualised as the key location for identifying whether students can demonstrate the achievement of many, if not all, degree programme learning outcomes (Lee & Loton, 2015).

Capstones are generally adapted to meet the specific needs of graduating students and can vary significantly across disciplines. Researchers have noted a lack of uniformity in quality and design (Apgar, 2019; Lee & Loton, 2019). However, some universal purposes have been proposed. These include integration and synthesis of knowledge and skills acquired to date, including giving students the opportunity to apply their skills through authentic work experience; facilitation of transition from university to professional working life; reflection on what has been learned including identifying personal strengths; and providing closure through a culminating experience that recognises accomplishments and draws together various aspects of learning (Thomas, Wong & Li, 2014).

While there is a strong focus on enhancing employability, capstone experiences should not be confined to developing discipline-specific skills. Various researchers (Bennett, 2019; Cullen, 2017; Ivison, 2015; Succi & Canovi, 2020) have argued that more generic, transferable life skills or soft skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, capacity for lifelong learning, creativity, adaptability, resilience and confidence are just as crucial for graduates entering an increasingly complex and dynamic workplace. If we are to educate for employability (growing abilities) rather than employment (securing a job), then the concern for educators is to move beyond graduate employment to focus on the development of graduates who are prepared to meet the demands of life and work well beyond their discipline (Shine & Cullen, 2019).

In Australia, three capstone models have been identified among undergraduate journalism programmes: professional placement (usually known as an internship), newsroom simulations and projects. The internship is the most common. While most educators see merit in the project model, it is not widely used (Cullen, 2017).

To date, there has been a lack of research about how journalism students respond to the various capstone options. The study presented here contributes to the literature by describing graduating students' feedback about a new project model capstone unit introduced into the undergraduate journalism programme at Curtin University in Western Australia. It describes some of the key themes to emerge from survey responses from three cohorts of graduating students. It also outlines students' responses to other journalism capstone experiences.

## Literature review

Six common capstone models have been identified across disciplines: externally oriented projects; academic inquiry projects; practice-oriented simulations; practice-based consultancies; task-oriented simulation and professional placement (Lee, 2015). Reviews of the capstone literature have found that the two project models are dominant (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015) and are said to comprise up to 85 percent of all capstones (Lee & Loton, 2015). Externally oriented projects, also known as problem-based projects, typically give students the opportunity to engage in a professional project whereby they develop a solution for an external client, who may be real or imaginary. Assessments usually take the form of presentations and reports which may be delivered to the client. Academic inquiry projects may take the form of a major creative or professional project or a substantial research dissertation (Lee, 2015).

In Australia, capstone units are regularly used to transition graduating students from university to professional life with appropriate knowledge and skills (Cullen, 2017). About two thirds of the 30 universities in Australia that teach journalism use at least one journalism capstone unit in their undergraduate programmes. These facts emerged from the findings of an 18-month study that reviewed undergraduate capstone units embedded in journalism degrees and majors in Australian universities (Cullen, 2016). The research involved face-to-face interviews with 30 journalism academics at 18 universities in five states, to discover what types of capstone units they used, the principles they employed, and the skills students needed to be able to demonstrate and apply. Most journalism educators in the study reported the use of one and often two (and sometimes three) types of capstone unit. The internship was the most popular, followed by newsroom simulation and then a project (Cullen, 2016). A more recent review of the units offered at Australian undergraduate tertiary journalism courses conducted by the author in 2023 confirmed that the internship remains the most popular capstone option. However, it appears that the project model is increasingly being adopted. Of the 25 Australian journalism courses identified, 10 offered a project capstone. The project unit was often offered in conjunction with either a placement or newsroom simulation unit.

According to the journalism educators interviewed for the Cullen (2016) study, the internship unit usually consisted of a placement at a media outlet. This involved consultation with the journalism coordinator about the suitability of the placement. One of the limitations of this model was that less competent students often struggled to cope with the demands of industry newsrooms (Cullen, 2016). High-performing students were often selected for these internships, but they were not always available to average or under-performing students. Several educators argued against using an internship as the only capstone unit as adequate supervision and mentoring were not always provided in the news-

room. Frequent discussions with students before, during and after the internship usually provided the most productive outcomes and experience (Cullen, 2016). Journalism educators have reported that internships were problematic for testing graduate capabilities as they were decreasing in number. Participating students did not necessarily have the required skills and regularly reported that they were restricted to performing menial tasks in the newsroom (Tanner, Green, Cullen & O'Donnell, 2013; Zheng & Bluestein, 2021). More recent research has also pointed to various limitations of the internship model including equity, quality and access issues (Hora, Chen, Parrott & Her, 2020; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). Furthermore, access to internships has become even more restricted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gill, 2020) which has seen a significant increase in people working from home, including those in news media. This, coupled with a reluctance to put staff or visiting students at risk of contracting COVID, has made securing internships across a range of industries more difficult.

The newsroom simulation capstone was popular with educators in the Cullen (2016) study as it allowed students to demonstrate what they had learned during their undergraduate course. In this capstone, students assumed different editorial and reporting roles and created a portfolio of published work. According to educators, the newsroom simulation capstone encouraged students to think and act like journalists and helped them to develop a more confident and professional approach to their work. This model also allowed educators to identify gaps in their learning. However, newsroom simulation units can be difficult to implement within the parameters of conventional tertiary learning activities. The Cullen (2016) study reported that only one of the Australian journalism programmes was able to offer its newsroom simulation unit as a whole day class, once a week. The newsroom model also tended to require intensive, hands-on supervision and ongoing interactions between staff and students throughout the class. Unlike more traditional tutorial-based learning, it is not well-suited to online delivery, a disadvantage that become increasingly problematic during the pandemic as many tertiary programs had to shift to fully online teaching.

The third type of journalism capstone unit involved a project, in which students covered an event or a local social or political issue to produce a substantial piece of journalism (Cullen, 2016). Generally, this involved students practising a wide range of journalistic skills including interviewing, research, writing, editing and meeting production deadlines. One advantage of the project over other capstone models is its versatility, which makes it particularly well-suited for journalism education. This was noted by Glitsos (2021) who proposed that the project model could be modified to provide an international focus to encourage journalism students to foster connections with media professionals and organisations beyond Australia.

Reflective practice is considered a key part of the project capstone model as

it is through reflection that students become more aware of and intentional about their own professional identities. Furthermore, reflective practice enables both personal and professional development by encouraging individuals to consider contexts, themselves and their roles (Cullen, 2016). It contributes to the acquisition and development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking (Hovorka, 2009). Although the project was not widely used, educators in the Cullen (2016) study saw potential in the model, particularly in the opportunity it provided for extended research and analysis.

### **The unit**

This section describes the introduction of a capstone project unit at Curtin University in Western Australia. The Journalism Major Project is the culmination of the three-year journalism undergraduate degree, in which students apply the skills and knowledge learned over the course of their studies to produce a substantial long form journalism project or body of work. The unit was designed to allow students to use and enhance their journalism disciplinary skills, but it also aims to develop lifelong, transferable learning abilities and traits. The section below provides more information about the unit, followed by key findings from a survey, conducted over three years consecutive years (2018-2020), that asked students about their experiences of the project capstone.

Unit development was guided by the capstone principles articulated by Lee & Loton (2015, p. v) as part of a report on capstone curriculum across disciplines prepared for the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching:

1. Integration and extension of prior learning.
2. Authentic and contextualised experiences.
3. Challenging and complex scenarios.
4. Student independence and agency.
5. A concern with critical inquiry and creativity.
6. Active dissemination and celebration.

Unit design was influenced by research (Funston & Lee, 2014; Schwering, 2015) that has pointed to the advantages of the project model capstone. A critical element of the project model is the concept of ownership. Students should feel that the project is entirely theirs—from conception to submission. Implicit in this approach is a focus on autonomy and independence. For this reason, a decision was made to allow flexibility around what a project might entail. The students were told that their project must be multimedia and should include input from a minimum of four sources. It was up to them to choose a topic and decide how to report on and present the story.

It was important that the assessment weighting reflected the expected workload associated with the project, so this was set at 60 percent, and the project was due for submission at the end of the penultimate week of semester. However, there

was also a need to ensure that students had a clear idea of what they planned to do for their project within a few weeks of the start of semester. Hence, a presentation assessment worth 20 percent was included. For this assessment, students presented to peers and their tutor a detailed proposal for their project around four-six weeks into semester. As reflective practice is another important element of the capstone approach, a reflective essay, also worth 20 percent, comprised the final piece of assessment. The unit learning outcomes below outline what students are expected to do to successfully complete the unit:

1. Evaluate a variety of sources in order to identify and explore a focus for the project.
2. Gauge potential of the project, in terms of its feasibility and originality, and subsequently advocate its worth to audiences and publishers.
3. Produce a substantial piece of journalism that complies with legal, ethical and professional standards, and synthesises complex ideas and information.
4. Critically explain and justify approach to production process, reflecting upon challenges and opportunities presented.

The unit comprises a three-hour weekly seminar/workshop. To date, the unit has been taught in-person, although it does have the potential to be delivered online as will be discussed in more detail later. At the start of the semester, the students enrolled in the project unit are introduced to the idea of a major project and are shown multiple examples of projects within journalism. These range from prize-winning multimedia international stories to projects produced by other students, as well as examples of prize-winning work from the Ossie (Australian Student Journalism) Awards. To give students more guidance around the process of producing a major piece of journalism, local journalists join a few classes each year to share their experiences and advice. These sessions focus on producing long form multimedia journalism.

In week one, students are formed into small groups of four to five people to work together throughout the semester to discuss their ideas and deal with issues that may arise. These groups play a particularly important function during weeks two to four as students identify a topic for their project. Topic ideas are confirmed after consultation with teaching staff. Students present their project proposals to staff and their peers in weeks four to six. During the remainder of the semester, the unit includes some structured teaching each week on topics such as writing, producing infographics, editing, design and layout. Students are expected to draw on the skills and knowledge acquired over the course of their journalism degree. Students are also given time to work on their projects in class and seek feedback from staff and other students. The intention is to create a newsroom style and a collaborative environment in which the teaching staff provide guidance, but let the students take ownership of, and responsibility for,

their projects. The projects are submitted in the penultimate week of the semester so that the final class can include a review of the semester and a showcase of some of the best projects. All the projects are considered for publication on the programme's news website and the best of the work is displayed as part of an annual networking event with industry representatives. These elements align with the capstone principle of active dissemination and celebration.

## Results

Week	Content and activities	Assessment
1	Introduction to project-style reporting including professional and student examples. Form student 'support' groups	
2	Workshop from industry guest/ guests with long-form reporting expertise. Research potential ideas.	
3	Advanced research and interviewing skills workshop. Students finalise project ideas and seek tutor approval to proceed.	
4-6	Students present project proposals and receive feedback from staff and peers.	Presentations due
7	Producing longform video and audio workshop	
8	Data journalism and infographics workshop.	
9	Longform writing workshop.	
9	Editing, layout and design.	
10	Drafts due for staff and peer feedback.	
11	Final review of stories including all multimedia aspects.	Projects due end of week
12	Class review of finished projects. The best projects are displayed at an Industry Showcase event a few weeks later.	Reflection due

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire via a Survey Monkey link at the start of the semester and again in the last week of semester, after the projects had been submitted. Each survey comprised 10 questions. To encourage candid responses, the student responses were anonymous. The answers elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. The project was approved by the university's Human

Research Ethics Committee. All participants received an information sheet, and signed a consent form, before completing the survey. Of the 35 students enrolled in the first year of the project unit, 26 completed the first survey and 16 completed the second survey. In the second year, 31 of 44 students completed the first survey and 18 the second. In 2020, 25 of 33 completed the first survey and 12 the second. In total, 112 students enrolled in the unit over the course of three years. Of those, 81 (72 percent) completed the first survey and 46 (41 percent) completed the second survey. It was unfortunate, but not unexpected, that the number of participants was not as high for the second survey. As most educators know, it can be difficult to get students to provide formal feedback, particularly at the end of semester when they often have a high assessment workload.

For the first survey, the students were asked about their expectations of the unit, what specific journalism skills they wanted to improve through completing a major project, their experience of previous journalism units and their sense of preparedness to enter the workforce. For the later survey, the students were asked about their experience of producing the major project and again about their preparedness to start their careers. They were asked about the skills they had developed throughout the process of producing their project and what they considered to be the best aspect/s of the unit overall. They were also asked to compare the project unit to other final-year units within the journalism major, including an internship unit and a newsroom simulation unit.

When asked to nominate their preferred capstone unit, the project unit was the most popular choice (37 percent), followed by the internship unit (33 percent) and newsroom simulation (30 percent). Although the project unit was well-received, many students mentioned the value of these other journalism capstone models. A high number of students said the three units offered distinct, discrete benefits for student learning and that they complemented each other. The project unit proved popular with students from the outset and support for the unit grew. When asked whether they thought the unit should be a compulsory unit within the journalism major, 90 percent of the first group of students said 'yes'. By the third year, that percentage increased to 100 percent. Overall, the students' responses pointed to the value of the project capstone in enhancing both tradecraft and transferable life skills. An analysis of the qualitative responses identified certain dominant themes regarding skills and abilities acquired. These are outlined below, with supporting qualitative comments from students.

### **Independence**

Over the three years, students' responses consistently demonstrated their appreciation of the project capstone's focus on ownership and the independence it fostered. To have control over the project from conception to completion was motivating for many:

Being given the opportunity to choose my own topic was an integral part of the project for me. I was genuinely interested in what I was researching, which ultimately resulted in working to the highest standard possible.

Numerous students reported they had to be disciplined and organised to work to a long deadline, without the same level of staff input they had experienced in previous units:

The independence and freedom in this unit was a great opportunity in many respects including developing ideas, gathering research and working through our individual processes of creating the project. Working independently compelled us to be responsible for our work and organisation as well as allowing us to develop our planning and time management skills.

Some of the students were initially apprehensive about their ability to produce a major project. The ownership that motivated most of the students had the opposite effect on others. Some reported feeling overwhelmed by having to make all the decisions and the responsibility that came with taking the lead. However, most said they felt ready to tackle a substantial topic of their own choosing after working on relatively short news stories, with a high degree of staff supervision, for most of their degrees. Taking ownership of a project signaled a significant step forward and fact that most students were willing to do so suggests this was an appropriate method of transition.

### **Interviewing**

Each year, a high proportion of students surveyed (more than 80 percent) nominated interviewing as the main journalism tradecraft skill they had developed or improved while completing the project unit. Many said this was due to having more time to find sources and to prepare for and conduct interviews:

I was able to conduct far longer and more in-depth interviews than I had previously, and through each of them I was able to put into practice skills I hadn't yet mastered in my degree. The first of those was learning to listen. This was really the first time that I actually thought I needed to stop being so formal with my questioning and sit and listen to what they were saying.

More than half of the students surveyed nominated long form writing as a skill they had developed through completing the project unit. Many of those said this was due to acquiring a better understanding of how to structure stories including what to include and what to omit. Other tradecraft skills developed included advanced researching, video and photo editing, creating graphics, audio production, sub editing and design and layout.



### **Persistence**

Some of the skills/traits most frequently nominated by students were life skills and journalism skills. For example, a high proportion of students said they had learned to be more persistent, a trait that is highly valued in reporters. They regularly described having to make repeat approaches to potential sources for interviews and having to re-adjust when interviews and other arrangements did not go to plan:

It's really about persistence and being adaptable at all times. Sometimes your story will start in one place and then evolve as contacts arise or don't arise. It's your job to find a new angle and connect it to your original goal.

Because they had so much more time to work on the project than they would on a standard news story, they realised they had to keep identifying possible sources and contacting people. They could not use the excuse that they had run out of time. Most of them discovered that there was usually a feasible solution to almost any hurdle encountered.

### **Collegiality**

Although all the students were working on individual projects, a significant proportion of the survey responses mentioned the high degree of collegiality and camaraderie they experienced with their peers. The intention to provide a newsroom-style environment in which students were encouraged to share their ideas and discuss their work with their peers was shown to have clear benefits:

Communicating with classmates became a huge part of the unit. I feel like I went to classmates more than tutors for guidance as we were all going through the same things and were able to help each other out. I think putting it on us to work through things by ourselves was a hugely beneficial part of the unit.

This collegiality was particularly evident in the final cohort of students who set up a messaging group that included every student in the unit. This was done without any direction from staff, but proved so valuable that it is now recommended every year. The students messaged each other through the semester, working through ideas for stories, sources and support, making them less reliant on staff input. This outcome reinforced the value of the project experience in terms of providing an effective transition from university to the newsroom, where collegiality is a critical element of journalism practice.

### **Preparedness**

The students were asked in each survey about their preparedness to enter the

workforce. Every year there was a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt prepared to start their careers from when they started to after they had completed the unit. In the first cohort of students, the number of students who felt prepared jumped from 27 percent at the start of the semester to 50 percent by the end. In year two, the percentage increased from 45 percent to 67 percent and in year three the percentage went from 37 percent to 83 percent. Qualitative responses suggest this shift in attitude could be attributed to students' perceiving the process of producing a major journalism project as an authentic workplace experience:

I really had what I would define as a career-starting experience, working out the process of being a journalist and calling on every skill I've learned at university to get me over the line.

It felt like the closest experience to actually being in the industry and allowed us to tackle obstacles independently.

Having the opportunity to drive a challenging, substantial project and work like a professional journalist gave many students a confidence boost that made them feel more ready to start their careers.

I was able to improve my long form writing, my interviewing skills, researching capabilities, photography and video creation. Most importantly, though, I am now confident that I can be a proficient journalist, thanks to this unit.

### **Confidence**

As previously mentioned, a high proportion of students appreciated the opportunity to take ownership of their project from the idea through to completion and that this experience gave them confidence in their abilities. Across the survey responses, confidence was one of the most prevalent skill/traits identified. The process of initiating, overseeing and producing a major piece of journalism and overcoming the ensuing obstacles and challenges instilled in many of the students a sense that they could graduate from university and succeed as a professional journalist:

This unit has also taught me to have more faith in my own abilities; something I have always struggled with.

Journalism Major Project has made me feel more confident and prepared for life after graduation than any other unit in my entire degree. Looking ahead to life after graduation, I am filled with both excitement and caution. But now, mostly due to this unit, I am now filled with a sense of pride and confidence that I too can go forth and change the world—one story at a time.

## Conclusion

The findings from this three-year survey suggest the project model capstone can achieve the dual aims of enhancing tradecraft skills and developing broader transferable abilities in graduating journalism students. Through the process of producing a major journalism project many students honed disciplinary skills such as interviewing and writing as well as developing sought-after life traits, including persistence, confidence, adaptability and effective time-management. The experience of completing the unit made the students more employable through the application and extension of journalism skills, while also enhancing employability through the development of life skills and abilities. Student responses suggest the unit fulfils the aims of a successful capstone as outlined by Thomas, Wong and Li (2014) in that it allows for the integration and synthesis of knowledge and skills, offers an authentic work experience and provides a sense of closure and accomplishment. Significant increases in the sense of preparedness to start their career reported by the participating students confirm the unit offers an effective transition from university to professional life.

Journalism Major Project has been extremely well-received by students as evidenced by the fact that 90-100 percent of those surveyed agreed it should be a compulsory third year unit. Nevertheless, the unit does have certain limitations. Unlike an internship or a newsroom simulation unit, the project capstone does not prepare students to produce news stories to tight daily deadlines, as most journalists in entry-level jobs are expected to do. This was noted by several students surveyed, some of whom said that being given so much time to work on a piece of journalism felt like a luxury that would not be replicated in the workplace. While that may be true, there is still considerable benefit in producing journalism of this nature. It may be the only chance aspiring journalists get to concentrate their efforts on high quality, long form journalism for some time. A project is also a valuable addition to a portfolio which is likely to be dominated by news stories. Several students noted in their survey responses that working to a long deadline required a different level of discipline and motivation.

Despite the popularity of the project unit, a significant number of students surveyed considered either the newsroom simulation or the internship unit to be the most appropriate culminating unit for a journalism major. These units were more aligned with their perceptions of entry-level journalism. This paper does not dispute the value of these more traditional capstone experiences. Ideally, a journalism course would have the resources and capacity to offer all three. However, that is not always be possible. Furthermore, the internship and newsroom simulation models have certain limitations (Hora et al, 2020; Shine & Cullen, 2019; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). As some of these have become more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes sense to consider other capstone alternatives for journalism.

Unlike the internship unit, the project capstone is not dependent on external media outlets offering student placements. The project unit is suitable for students of all abilities and all students have access to the same supervision and mentoring from teaching staff. It offers more flexibility in terms of teaching delivery than the newsroom simulation model and is less time and resource intensive. It has the potential to be delivered online as it adheres to a conventional tutorial format and encourages students to work independently. Collegiality among students could still be encouraged via the use of messaging apps and breakout groups in online classes.

This research involved a relatively small group of students from one university. Nevertheless, the rare, detailed student feedback provides a valuable contribution to the tertiary capstone literature and to the emerging body of research about capstone units in journalism education. This study highlights the benefits of the project model for graduating journalism students and argues that the project is an appropriate capstone option for our discipline. If journalism programmes are not able to offer internships or newsroom simulations, the project model is a promising alternative that can achieve the key objectives of a successful university capstone experience.

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## SPECIAL REPORT

# The world according to China

## Capturing and analysing the global media influence strategies of a superpower

**Abstract:** This project captured and analysed Chinese strategies seeking to influence global media in its coverage of China. While there is ample literature defining some of these strategies, there is a lack of empirical data tracking the strategies in practice. The project addressed this by surveying officials from journalism unions in 87 countries on their perceptions of Chinese influence on the media in their country. The surveys were complemented by focus groups with senior journalists and editors in six countries. The findings illustrated how China's global media outreach policies have grown increasingly sophisticated and how the country utilises a multi-pronged approach to influence global media.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, case study, China, global media, influence, journalism, Pacific, public sphere

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### Introduction

**M**ONTHS before Xi Jinping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a communique, referred to as Document Number 9, was circulated by the CCP General Office (ChinaFile, 2013). The document outlined a harsher political, free speech and media environment President Xi intended for China. It advised party leaders and officials to be on guard against several political 'perils': constitutionalism, civil society, historical mistakes by the Communist party, universal values—understood here to be those

enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—and, most importantly for this research article, Western-style press freedom (Ranade, 2013; Ho, 2015, ChinaFile, 2013). The document signalled a significantly harsher climate for freedom of expression as well as the imminent demise of watchdog journalism, to strengthen the Marxist function of journalism as a tool to guide and channel the masses (Bandurski, 2018).

We need to strengthen education on the Marxist perspective of media to ensure that the media leadership is always firmly controlled by someone who maintains an identical ideology with the Party's Central Committee, under General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership. (ChinaFile, 2013, p. 8)

Chinese officials never denied the authenticity of Document Number 9, and a court later sentenced veteran journalist Gao Yu to seven years in jail for her role in allegedly leaking the document (Ho, 2015; Veg, 2015).

Since coming to power, President Xi has changed the constitution to make way for an unprecedented third term as party leader (Phillips, 2018) and cracked down on online and offline political dissent (ChinaFile, 2013). He has also instituted a system of political indoctrination camps to re-educate as many as one million of China's mainly Muslim minority in the far northwestern region of Xinjiang (Sudworth, 2019). Furthermore, the Xi government has effectively ended the One Country Two Systems status of Hong Kong by imposing draconian National Security Legislation on the territory, and globally spruiked its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Bradsher, 2020). His propaganda mission, as well as tightening control over the media (ChinaFile, 2013), has been to 'tell a good China story' or 'tell China's story well' (Huang, 2019; Jacob, 2020).

It should be acknowledged *all* countries want their story told well, and China is neither the first, nor the last powerhouse trying to influence how the rest of the world perceives them. The US has projected its power around the globe since the end of World War II via media outlets such as the Voice of America. Russia set up international news channel Russia Today to tell its story well globally. Several countries have media with global reaches, such as BBC's World Service or the French news channel France24, though they operate under different funding models and editorial oversight to Russia Today. However, China's efforts are exemplified by their scale, coherence and resources invested, as well as their truly global ambition.

Unlike the (ideal) role of journalism in liberal democratic countries, the media in China is not independent but controlled by the CCP, and its most important role is to serve as the CCP's information disseminator to maintain stability and social coherence in the country. All other possible roles for Chinese media are secondary (Dukalskis, 2017). As Lim and Bergin state: 'For China, the media has become both the battlefield on which this "global information war" is being



waged, and the weapon of attack' (2018).

It is inaccurate to assume authoritarian regimes do not need to legitimise their existence. Using Dukalskis' authoritarian public sphere (APS) framework (2017), we argue China's global media outreach strategy can be understood as an intervention into the global public sphere, attempting to influence and control global public discourse on what China stands for, the legitimacy of its policies and regime, and its future global role. Dukalskis describes APS as antithetical to the traditional Habermasian (1989) liberal democratic public sphere. A system dominated by an APS lacks free speech, freedom of assembly, and free flow of information, properties crucial for a traditional public sphere. Instead, an APS is populated with what Dukalskis terms 'legitimising messages'. In China, these are created and published by the CCP to justify the party's existence, rule, and effectiveness. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a timely reminder of the importance of such messages justifying the Chinese government's refusal to explicitly condemn the Russian invasion and join international sanctions against Russia (Kirby, 2022).

The principal research question for this project was: What are the strategies used by China to influence foreign media's reporting of China in the countries of study? To address the question, this article analysed two global surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020/2021 of journalism unions affiliated with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Union officials in 58 countries were surveyed in 2019, with 30 senior journalists and editors from three countries participating in follow-up focus group interviews. A second round of 50 union officials from 50 countries were surveyed at the end of 2020 and another group of 30 senior journalists and editors from three other countries participated in focus groups in early 2021. In total, participants from 87 different countries took part in the two studies. It should be noted the data collected in the surveys are the observations of union officials and cannot be representative of all journalists. However, as they are union officials and thus engaged with media policy issues, it is likely they possess a sound level of knowledge regarding the issue of Chinese media influence.

The 2019 study found China uses several tools to influence international media. The most influential were funding trips for foreign journalists to visit China; providing Chinese-produced media content for free; buying shares in foreign media companies; expanding China's state-run media presence overseas; and negotiating and signing memoranda of understanding (MOU) with foreign media companies and government agencies. The 2020/2021 study found China's decade-long effort to lay its global media groundwork shifted into overdrive trying to influence waves of media coverage generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts appeared to be somewhat successful. Many of the participating countries reported China was perceived more positively at the end of 2020 than before the pandemic.

The article is organised as follows: a background and literature review section will be followed by the methodology, a findings section and finally the discussion and conclusion sections.

### **Background and literature review**

For more than a decade, there has been significant scholarship regarding China's efforts to influence international media and public discourse regarding the perception of China (Jacob, 2020; Thussu, 2017; Wasserman, 2013; Xin, 2009). Given the post-pandemic global environment and China's ongoing efforts to influence the discourse on its role in the world, this topic deserves ongoing attention. Literature spanning from 2008 to the present has traced China's growing reach and utilisation of specific strategies to influence international media. However, the literature still requires a global and up-to-date empirical dataset identifying the strategies in practice and assessing the impact of these strategies. The studies described in this article aimed to contribute to such a global dataset. This section will provide both a general overview and highlight seminal scholarship.

### **'Going out' strategy**

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a watershed moment for China's global outreach strategy. CCP leadership expressed frustration with the critical coverage of Chinese human rights issues and regarding the situation in Tibet (Lim & Bergin 2018). In a 2008 speech, then President Hu Jintao noted international opinion on China had continued to maintain a 'West is strong, we are weak' pattern, calling on its journalists to be vigilant in meeting this 'challenge' (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2008).

In 2009, Hu Jintao committed US\$9.3 billion on a global media expansion project (Mantesso, 2019) to grow the overseas presence of the state-run media outlets CCTV (renamed CGTN in 2016, then merging with Radio International and China National Radio to become Voice of China in 2018), Xinhua news agency and the *People's Daily* newspaper. This served as the media prong of China's 'going out' strategy, with the aim of promoting China's views and vision to the wider world and rebuffing negative portrayals (Thussu 2017, p. 2).

Previous scholarship on Chinese state-sponsored media organisations examined narrative patterns (Zhou & Wu, 2017), analysed localised bureaus and their messaging and discourse (Marsh, 2016; Marsh, 2017; Xiang, 2020; Xin, 2009), provided possible models for their international expansion (Mi, 2017), their use in public diplomacy (Hartig, 2017), and their history in lockstep with state strategies of 'going out' (Huang, 2017).

### **China in the Global South**

Much has been written about China in the global south, including relations with

Africa (Finlay, 2013; Madrid-Morales, 2018; Wasserman, 2013; Xiang, 2020), Latin America (Morales, 2018; 2021, Ospina Estupinan 2017, Ye and Alborno 2018), relations across Southeast Asia where China first tested its ‘soft power’ strategy (Kurlantzick 2007)—and the Pacific Islands (Zhang 2021; Zhang & Watson 2020).

From 2000-2015, trade between Africa and China increased from \$10 billion to \$280 billion (Thussu, 2017). Under President Hu Jintao, China’s media also sought a foothold in Africa, with CCTV launching African headquarters in Kenya in 2012. China’s pursuits in Africa have been the subject of several studies describing the strategies used (Finlay, 2013; Madrid-Morales, 2018; Wasserman, 2013; Xiang, 2020; Xin, 2009) and analysis into how specific audiences interpret these strategies (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018; Xiang 2018). China’s interest in African countries can be perceived as a long-term strategy, making African countries more economically dependent on China and as an extension loyal to the Chinese worldview (Madrid-Morales, 2018). This is a notion borne out by the findings in this study, as we demonstrate below.

Like Africa, China’s trade and media relations with Latin America expanded in the previous decade, peaking in 2013 at \$278 billion in bilateral trade (Ye and Alborno 2018). Again, in similar fashion, China has a media presence in Latin America via CCTV/CGTN-Español. Ye (2017) identified stories relating to China accounted for over 50 percent of airtime, and grounded international stories from a Chinese perspective using Chinese experts and officials. Moreover, non-news programmes such as documentaries were still grounded in the Chinese perspective, such as history, tourism destinations and food (ibid).

Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu have access to English language CCTV/CGTV and China maintains ground stations in these countries (Crocombe, 2010). In 2010, Xinhua established a branch in Fiji’s capital Suva, the first in the Pacific. China has repeatedly arranged trips to the mainland for Pacific journalists (Zhang, 2021), and funded construction of media facilities (Zhang & Watson 2020), while on occasions barring local journalists from questioning visiting Chinese dignitaries (Zhang, 2021; Lyons, 2022; Ahearn, 2022). Media organisations in the Pacific are seen as ‘vulnerable’ to offers of financial assistance by China (Ahearn, 2022a, 2022b). Chinese foreign aid to the Pacific has been previously discussed (Crocombe, 2010), including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Zhang, 2021). The use of international trips, financial aid, and other media investment can be seen as a recurring technique used to influence media coverage and public perception of China, as demonstrated in our results below.

### **China in the Global North**

China’s global media efforts are not isolated to the Global South but found also in the Global North. As many as 30 foreign newspapers, including *The New*

*York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, were paid to carry supplements called ‘China Watch’ in their pages (Lim & Bergin, 2018). In 2016, Fairfax Australia (now known as Nine Newspapers) began publishing pull-out propaganda supplements titled ‘*China Daily*’ (Mediawatch, 2016), like those carried by *The Washington Post*. *The Daily Mail Australia* also had a partnership with the *People’s Daily* of China which provided content which could be ‘swapped’ (Greenslade, 2016). While content was often saccharine or non-political, these partnerships served to provide legitimacy to the propaganda wing of the CCP.

Scholarship on China’s behaviour in the wake of COVID-19 identified a further refinement of global media influence strategies, building on the ones identified above. Jacob documented how China promotes its contributions to the COVID-19 effort, deflects the blame for the outbreak and draws attention to other countries’ struggles with their outbreaks as evidence of struggling political systems (2020).

### **The authoritarian public sphere**

It has been argued that historically, during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, civil societies resembling Habermasian public spheres did develop in China (Rankin, 1993). Scholarly discourse on the development of a modern Chinese public sphere emerged in force after the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989. Gu’s (1993) useful overview concluded there was close to unanimous agreement in the early 1990s that civil society, and to a certain extent a Chinese version of the public sphere, was (re)emerging after a long period of being mostly dormant. However, he concluded the public sphere conceptual framework was of limited use in analysing the relationship between Chinese citizens and the state.

It seems that by proceeding in this way, we indeed run the risk of getting involved in an ideological or teleological exercise in which the Western model of development is merely projected onto China, without increasing our understanding of the real dynamics of change in Chinese society past and present. (p. 52)

Another important moment in the research and discourse on China and the public sphere was with the quick growth of the internet during the first decade of this century. Here Svensson’s work on the role of investigative journalism and its connection to the internet and to the civil society/public sphere is important (2012). After initial positive signs of Web 2.0 strengthening civil society in China, the CCP successfully turned the Chinese internet into a tool to control its citizens and to tame some entrepreneurs that became too independent as Svensson shows in one of her latest studies (2021). She also concluded during Xi’s time as President, the public sphere, in the Western meaning, has withered in China.

This is why Dukalskis' work on the authoritarian public sphere provides a highly useful framework for the conceptualisation of this study (2017) and analysis of the findings. Dukalskis argues authoritarian regimes use the media and its role in the APS to keep citizens out of politics as politically neutral and passive actors so the ruling elite can stay in power. Dukalskis has created a taxonomy of the techniques used by autocracies to populate and dominate the APS. He has labelled 'the six elements of legitimising messages' (2017, pp. 55-56). Concealment elements aim to suppress and, when possible, erase, events and facts undermining the legitimacy of the regime. Framing elements focus on stories that are positive for and confirm the state. Inevitability elements portray the regime as unified and strong and prepared to rule in perpetuity. Blaming elements push responsibility away from the regime, blaming failures on other actors and stakeholders. Mythologised origin elements seek to connect the ruling regime with historical events and figures to justify its existence based on history. Finally, promised land elements are forward-looking and describe a better and brighter future if the current leaders are allowed to rule in perpetuity. Our study found the Chinese global media outreach strategy uses all but one of these messaging elements to influence the perception of China in the global public sphere.

Some work has been done on capturing the nature and effects of the APS inside authoritarian countries (Dukalskis, 2017), but largely missing so far is the capture and assessment of the impact when a superpower like China attempts to expand its APS outside its borders. This study contributes to new knowledge to this part of the APS framework.

## **Methodology**

The project's research questions were:

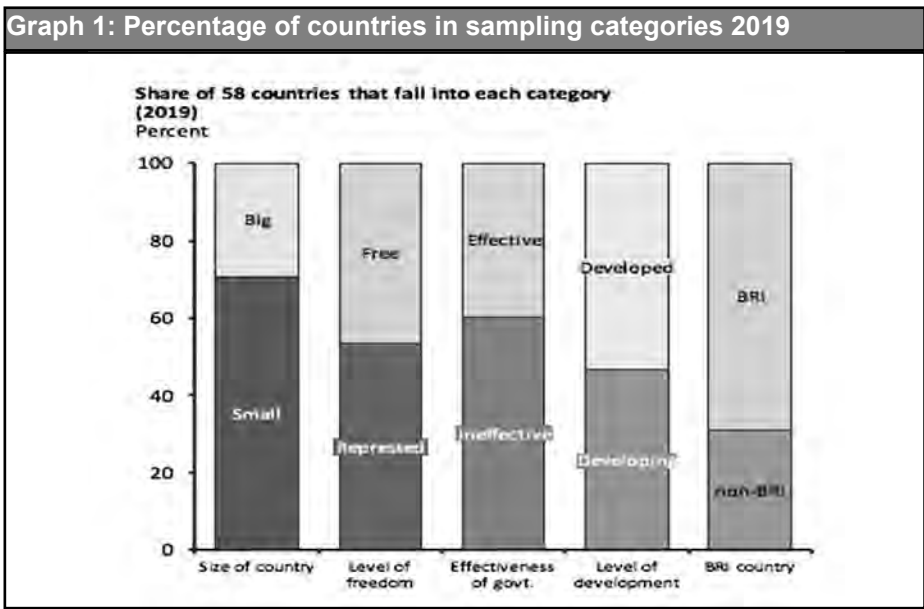
- What are the strategies used by China to influence foreign media's reporting of China in the countries of study?
- What is the impact of China's global media outreach policy in the countries of study?
- How has COVID-19 influenced the coverage of China in the countries of study?

To access and engage with a large number of people in the journalism industry, the research team collaborated with the IFJ. This turned out to be crucial for the research design as IFJ's distribution of the online surveys and facilitation of the focus groups led to high survey response rates and high-quality focus group. The translation of the online surveys into four languages was, most likely, helpful in generating the high participation rate. The core of the research design was a mixed methods approach combining the quantitative data generated by the surveys and the qualitative findings captured in the focus groups. According to Neuman, a mixed methods approach is particularly useful as the research questions

are addressed by two different data sets and these sets can be used to verify each other (2013).

The sampling method was to send invitations to IFJ journalism union affiliates in the 146 countries that are members of the IFJ. In the first 2019 study 58 journalism union officials in 58 countries affiliated with the IFJ participated in the survey using the Qualtrics online survey tool. The unions were based in six regions: Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America and the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa). Of the participating countries 31 were in the Global North, 27 were in the Global South. A full list of participating countries is available in Appendix 1. The participating countries were divided into the following categories to ensure a valid socio-economic spread in the sample: country size, level of freedom, effectiveness of government, global north/south and signatory of BRI.

The survey study was followed up with focus groups with 30 senior journalists and editors in Kenya, Philippines and Myanmar, ten in each country. The sampling method for the focus group was purposive sampling (Neuman, 2013) based on IFJ led workshops regarding China’s media influence in the three countries. The World Bank’s Government Effectiveness Index and Voice and Accountability Index were used to measure the participating countries’ governance performance and level of freedoms. The UN Human Development Index was used to place a country in the global north or the global south. Country size was based on World Bank data and a large country was defined as having a population of more than 40 million people (Worldbank, 2020b; Worldbank, 2020c; Worldbank, 2020a; United Nations, 2020)



Graph 1 provides an overview of the sample categories and the proportion of the participating countries in each category.

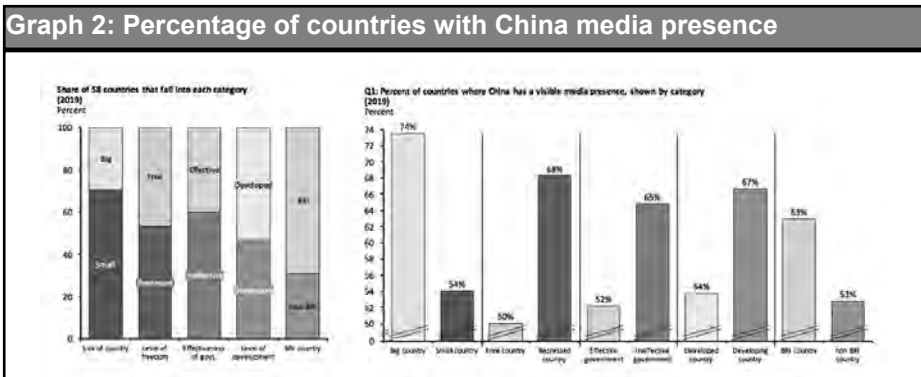
The second study, conducted December 2020 to January 2021, addressed the same research questions as above with the addition of a number of survey and focus group questions surrounding COVID-19 and its influence on China coverage in the countries of study.

In the second survey, 54 national journalism unions from 50 countries participated. The participating countries in both studies are listed in Appendix 1. They came from the same regions as in the first study, but the number of participating countries in the MENA region was increased to firm up the generalisability of the findings. The focus groups in this study were conducted with 30 senior journalists and editors in Serbia, Italy and Tunisia.

In total 87 national journalism unions were surveyed, and 60 senior journalists and editors participated in the focus groups in the two studies. Given the extensive reach of the surveys complemented by the focus group data and the geographical and socioeconomic mix in the sample, there can be a reasonable level of confidence in the global generalisability of the findings (Neuman, 2013). The amount and high quality of the data captured in the project empirically tracking and visualising the impact of the Chinese global media strategy is the study’s main contribution to the field of journalism studies. This is the first study surveying such a geographically diverse population of journalism union officials about Chinese media influence.

## Findings 2019 and 2020/2021

The detailed findings have been published in two reports produced for the IFJ (Lim & Bergin 2020; Lim, Bergin & Lidberg 2021). Below is a summary of the principal findings based on these reports. Where not attributed to the reports, the data is published for the first time in this article. What was not included in the IFJ reports were the APS framework and the discussion and analysis based on



Source: Lim & Bergin (2020).

the APS. The total sample population for the two surveys was the 146-member countries in the IFJ who all were invited to participate in the survey. After the two surveys IFJ affiliate journalism unions in 87 countries had replied to the surveys giving a 60 percent response rate. This is a healthy participation rate, meaning the data reliability is high and the margin of error small (Neuman, 2013).

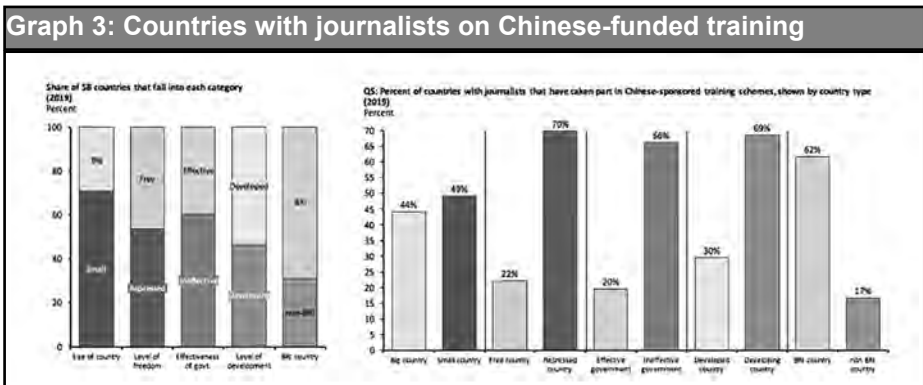
The baseline finding in the 2019 study is illustrated in Graph 2. What stands out in Graph 2 is China is most active in countries with developing economic and political systems, countries that have signed up to the BRI, and in large countries. The survey responses also indicated China’s media outreach policy is sophisticatedly tailored to individual countries. An example of this is the African country Guinea-Bissau, population 1.8 million, received significant amounts of media production equipment from China via the national journalism union. China also funds large parts of the media in the country and pays for the education of journalists in Guinea-Bissau.

The survey found three principal strategies used by China to influence foreign media on their own turf: Chinese funded journalistic exchanges and reportage trips to China; journalism union cooperation and content sharing agreements.

### Journalistic exchanges

Overall, half the survey respondents indicated they had been on reporting trips, exchanges, and training funded by the Chinese government. Trips varied in length from a few weeks to up to ten months. Majority of the respondents (75 percent) said union members found the trips very useful from a reporting perspective.

Excursions were often connected to a theme such as technological advances, the strong Chinese economy, and the building of modernised cities. These initiatives were not only targeted at the global south, but also the global north, such as Australia. One example was a collaboration between the University of Technology Sydney and the All China Journalist Association that between 2016-2019 organised China reporting trips for 28 senior Australian journalists and editors (Lim & Bergin, 2020).





## **Union corporation**

Signing memorandums of understanding (MOU) is an influence tool frequently used by the Chinese government via the state controlled All China Journalists Association (ACJA) (Svensson, 2012). Survey data showed 36 percent of the respondents had been offered to sign a MOU, with 14 percent signing. It is clear China's global media outreach policy has a strong focus on the Global South. However, the countries that entered MOUs were geographically and economically more diverse than expected. Two were in the Asia-Pacific, three in Africa and three in Europe (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

The United Front is China's most important tool for advancing China's interests and image domestically and abroad. Firmly controlled by the party, it coordinates many other agencies and party run organisations. Using MOUs is classic United Front strategy—if you cannot outmanoeuvre or neutralise a non-friendly entity, then co-opt them (Suzuki, 2019).

Unfortunately, most MOUs include a non-disclosure clause, so we have very limited knowledge of precise content. Some information regarding the MOUs has been shared with the IFJ, indicating most appear to centre on journalistic exchanges, financed reporting trips, training programs and cooperation between journalism schools. In some cases, the signatories agree to take part in seminars about the BRI (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

## **Chinese content abroad**

Of the respondents 34 percent said their country had content sharing agreements with Chinese media. The most far-reaching example was provided by the Afghani union where Xinhua News Agency had signed content sharing agreements with between 25 and 30 media outlets including Afghanistan TV, *Kabul Times*, Rasad News Agency, Saba TV and Aftab TV. The respondents pointed out most of the Chinese media content provided a positive picture of China as culturally diverse, technologically advanced, and economically successful. (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

## **Positive framing of BRI**

The Belt and Road Initiative, connecting east with west (China, Europe and Africa) partly along the old silk trading routes, building roads, harbours, and train lines, is the CCP's and Xi Jinping's principal vehicle to restore China to its former position as the global dominant trading and economic power. BRI is one of the major reasons for the global media strategy that is, in part, aimed at preparing opinion for this undertaking. China has been very successful in signing BRI MOUs with countries, illustrated by the fact that nearly 70 percent of the study's respondents came from signatory countries. There are perks to being a signatory. Journalists from these countries can apply for a ten-month training programme

at elite Chinese institutions. This is of course an opportunity to present the BRI in a positive light to foreign journalists (ibid).

### **Media ownership and presence**

Buying foreign media companies outright or in-part is a United Front strategy known as ‘borrowing a boat to reach the ocean’ (Lim, 2019). The survey showed this is a rapidly expanding strategy. Nearly two thirds of the responses said there was a ‘visible’ media presence by China in their countries. Part of this presence is through media ownership. The responses also reported this presence varied from country to country, indicating a sophisticated tailoring per country. Like the union cooperation described above, there was great geographic spread as to where respondents reported Chinese entities had either bought whole media companies or set up joint media company ventures: four countries in Europe, two in the Asia-Pacific, two in Africa and one in the MENA region.

### **The focus groups**

Focus groups with senior journalists and editors were conducted in Myanmar, the Philippines and Kenya. The groups were designed to capture qualitative data to complement and enhance the survey findings.

A common theme occurring in all focus groups was the prevalence of Chinese funded journalistic exchanges, training, and travel to China. Almost all participants in the Myanmar group had been on such trips, with one visiting nine times. A Filipino journalist [informant 20] described the tours as just the start of engagement with local reporters, ‘The Chinese embassy here organised several media tours: in several batches, to many cities and provinces in China. And since then, I’ve never stopped receiving press releases and invitations to events from the Chinese embassy.’ The informant described China’s engagement as the most intense and consistent of all embassies.

A Kenyan participant [informant 7], who had been on one of these trips, said, ‘The main focus is usually to try to make Kenyan journalists . . . get to see the other side of China because the Chinese during these trips usually insist that the Western media give the wrong impression about China.’ But the journalists criticised the strict controls on their movements while in China.

On the efficacy of such trips, one Kenyan journalist [informant 2] commented:

Their strategy is two-pronged. They target journalists who cover news, so that they would want to brainwash you to think the way they think. It may not have worked to a greater impact, but it was a work in progress. On another front, some of those who benefit from these trips are key actors in the newsroom, especially at the editorial level. In that way, you can say they are trying to embed themselves in the newsrooms.

Content sharing and media company ownership were also common themes, with some of participants labelling the Chinese content published in their country as propaganda aimed at glorifying Chinese policies, local investments, and infrastructure projects funded by Chinese companies. One Kenyan [Kenyan informant 1] said, ‘The presence of the Chinese media in Africa is basically to propagate Chinese policy with regard to Africa.’

Journalists from the Philippines focus group described how some of the reporting trips to China targeted Muslim journalists. These trips went to the Xinjiang autonomous region, aiming to counter reports about Beijing’s political indoctrination camps, imprisoning as many as one million members of the Muslim Uyghur minority according to a United Nations committee (Levy, 2018). One focus group participant [informant 24] said they personally knew of three journalists who had been to Xinjiang on Chinese tours, then written positive stories about it: ‘They all wrote about how beautiful [it is], also some stories praising China for cracking down on terrorists.’

Some Kenyan journalists thought the Chinese focus on inspiring and positive news about Kenya and other African countries was refreshing, but expressed concern about the Chinese influence on the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting, via its ownership of the Kenyan-based StarTimes Pay TV network. The network has 25 million subscribers in 30 African countries, giving it major reach into both metropolitan and rural areas, and offering a way to broadcast Chinese media content ‘that tells China’s story well’ (Lim & Bergin, 2018). In both the Philippines and Kenya, participants were suspicious about the long-term goals of the Chinese presence in their country, with some expressing concerns their own government would adopt a CCP-style media policy clamping down on watchdog journalism. One Kenyan journalist [informant 1] said,

The danger here is that these Kenyan party leaders may adopt the position taken by the Communist party of China to clamp down on journalists who do not dance to the tune of the government that is in power. We see that as a potential challenge.

These fears were echoed by a Filipino journalist [informant 28], who expressed worry about the impact of Chinese influence on young journalists and officials, ‘I’m afraid that they are learning the wrong way. Instead of getting insights on journalism from free countries like the US, UK, Western Europe and even Japan, they are learning state-control.’

### **Findings 2020-2021 study**

The aims of the second study remained the same as in the 2019 data collection with the addition of what impact, if any, COVID-19 had had on China’s media presence and strategies in the countries of study. The principal takeaways from

the 2020 study were: COVID increased China’s media presence abroad, COVID diplomacy, China’s strengthened standing in the global south and the use of mis- and disinformation (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

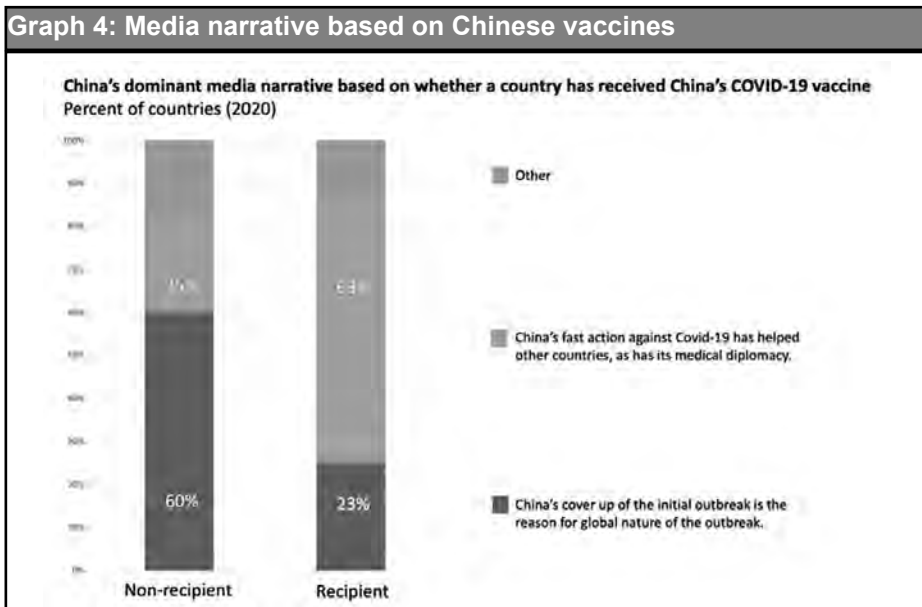
### China’s increased media presence

When the pandemic hit in 2020, China’s global media influence infrastructure went into overdrive. The survey showed 56 percent of the participants said their perception was China’s image in their country had become more positive since the start of the pandemic. Twenty percent said the image of China was unchanged and 24 percent had the belief China’s image had become more negative since the start of 2020 (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021). Another key finding from the survey was 76 percent of the respondents reported a visible Chinese presence in their country’s media system, be it coverage, content sharing, MOUs or media company ownership. This was up from 64 percent in the 2019 survey (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

### COVID diplomacy

China donated medical aid to 47 of the 50 countries that undertook this survey. The aid came in various forms, from personal protection equipment to Chinese made COVID vaccines, and in Tunisia, the construction of a hospital. Of the countries of study, 42 percent received Chinese vaccines. This had a profound impact on how China was perceived in the different countries, as illustrated by Graph 4.

Furthermore, the survey data showed 57 percent of respondents from vaccine recipient countries had observed efforts by Chinese actors to shape and influence





**Figure 1: ‘Thank you, Brother Xi’.**

media coverage. This compares to 34 percent in the non-vaccine recipient countries (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

### **The focus groups**

Serbia was a major recipient of Chinese COVID aid during 2020. In the centre of Belgrade, the effects were plain to see. The large billboard depicted in Figure 1 carries text beside an image of Xi Jinping: ‘Thank you, Brother Xi.’ This is a clear illustration of the visibility and impact of China’s COVID diplomacy and messaging.

A theme in the Serbian focus group was how close the Serbian government had grown to China during the pandemic. Much of China’s strategy is seen to be self-serving, as described by Serbian informant 2, ‘When it comes to media strategy by China, it primarily relates to inter-governmental relations. Reporting by Serbian media on China primarily focused on wealth development and thriving international relations between Serbia and China’.

One journalist working in a mainstream paper [Serbian informant 8] described the relation between the two countries’ leaders as taking centre stage in coverage. ‘This is how media are reporting in Serbian cooperation between Serbia and China. Everything is based on the presidents, the friendship between our two presidents, which is a bit laughable.’ During 2020 China invested heavily in Serbian data centres, smart surveillance and the cooperation with the Chinese telco giant Huawei deepened (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021). One journalist [Serbian informant 4] described his fears that Serbia would be a ‘testing ground’ for China.

We are aware that China has ambitions regarding technological standards and that there are plans until 2035, 2040 to flood the European market

with certain technological standards. I guess it's Serbia that may serve as a testing ground for a number of those digital standards in the exchange of goods and services which then can be rolled out Europe-wide.

The Italian focus group centred on how China vigorously courted Italian authorities after the country was hit by the first COVID wave. One example was Chinese media outlets offered content for free, translated into Italian, illustrating the increased country tailoring of Chinese media content. One journalist [Italian informant 6] described another example:

They asked us to give more space to the New Year speech of President Xi Jinping. They gave it to us for free directly translated into Italian and we broadcast it, in of course not the best times, but still, these were the first steps.

A second example discussed in the focus group was the content deal between the Italian state-run news agency ANSA and Xinhua. This led to the launch of the Xinhua Italian service. A consequence of the deal was ANSA ran, on average, about 50 Xinhua produced stories per day. According to one participant, the arrangement had been non-controversial so far.

In sum, the Italian focus group participants recognised China was trying to influence Italian media content with particular focus on how China was covered. But the consensus was Italy, as a democratic country, had enough 'antibodies' to resist mis- and disinformation. The ANSA-Xinhua content deal was subsequently cancelled in 2022 (Harth 2022), only for a more minor outlet, The Nova Agency, to helm the deal.

## **Discussion**

The findings make it clear China's global media presence has grown significantly since the 'going out' policy was instigated in 2009. Our studies have shown this in both quantitative and qualitative terms. From the focus group data, we can conclude that the participating countries situated in the global south, and particularly those which host Chinese investment and infrastructure projects, appear to have been more heavily impacted by China's media strategy. The global north countries displayed more scepticism toward China's influence campaign, but during the 2020 year of COVID, China's influence in countries like Italy and Serbia appear significant. How significant needs to be further investigated.

Our findings correlate with most of the principal findings in a Freedom House Report (Cook et al, 2022). The study covered 30 countries from all global regions. It found China has significantly expanded its global media footprint between 2019-2021. The CCP and its proxies have become increasingly sophisticated in shaping the global Chinese media narrative and suppressing critical reporting.

Disturbingly, the study pointed to an alarming unevenness in how democratic countries withstand and counter Chinese media influence (ibid).

Though initially perceived as crude propaganda techniques, China's strategies to influence foreign media reporting have grown more sophisticated since 2009. This is illustrated by the country-specific tailoring of strategies, such as offering Chinese-produced media content for free, already translated into target languages. Such influence campaigns are coupled with COVID diplomacy, with donations of vaccines, protective equipment, and the financing and construction of medical facilities.

The billboards in Belgrade displaying 'Thank you, Brother Xi' are a prominent example of direct impact of China's COVID diplomacy. Such findings clearly show how China used COVID to further its global media presence and influence. China has patiently and purposefully built its global media influence infrastructure since 2009, so when COVID struck, this infrastructure could be deployed with great precision. The pandemic saw increased global Chinese media influence and a more positive perception of China in some parts of the world. However, this does not necessarily map onto an increased usage of news content provided by the Chinese media. One example of this is Madrid-Morales' study analysing a corpus of 500,000 news stories in 30 African countries (2021). The principal finding was African publishers were far less likely to use content provided by Chinese media on COVID-19 compared to content from non-Chinese sources.

### **Legitimacy messaging and the spread of the Chinese authoritarian public sphere**

The strategies used by China to increase its global media presence and influence can be viewed through the lens of the APS and Dukalskis' legitimising message taxonomy. The Chinese funded exchanges and reporting trips are examples of concealment elements. This is particularly true regarding reporting trips that took journalists from Muslim countries to the Xinjiang autonomous region. The aim of these trips was to conceal the true nature of the political indoctrination camps where members of the Muslim Uyghur minority are detained, showcasing them instead as vocational education centres.

Fully funded reporting trips targeting senior journalists in various countries to frame the Belt and Road Initiative in a positive light could be seen as framing elements as exemplified by the positive stories journalists filed after such trips, as shown by the Philippine example in the findings section.

The production of stories showing China's economic success and unique creation of state capitalism fits into the inevitability elements category, sending the message China will inevitably become the dominant global power. The overall framing paints it as a state that is strong, unified, and prepared to rule in perpetuity.

The 2020 study found clear evidence of the use of disinformation attempting to

shift the blame for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic onto US soldiers visiting the city of Wuhan. Such stories epitomise blaming elements which aim to shift blame away from China and onto other actors.

The final category identified was *promised* land elements. Most Chinese produced media content about the BRI falls into this group, as do Chinese-led seminars on the origin and the future of BRI. The message here is the future is bright for all countries who sign up to the BRI.

The only legitimising message element that was not clearly identified in the findings in this project was mythologised origin elements. A possible explanation for this is this element is primarily used domestically.

Taken together, the above analysis points to a well-planned and consistently executed global strategy to influence the image of China abroad. What marks China out from similar global media influence efforts is the centralised coordination and the global ambition of its strategy, which targets countries with a range of political systems and economic structures. Another important difference with liberal democratic countries lies in China's authoritarian political system and its party-led judicial system, which lacks domestic checks and balances. In liberal democratic countries, based on the separation of power doctrine, independent courts test new laws and policies against the constitution, but this mechanism does not exist in China, given the CCP's tight rein.

The insertion of China's APS was most evident in the African countries that participated in the studies. China's message here, based on the findings, appears to preference its state-led capitalism over liberal democratic alternatives. That message was strengthened by China's COVID diplomacy, as confirmed by the African surveys and focus group.

## **Conclusion**

This article has empirically captured the strategies used by China to increase its global media presence on a large scale. Given the number of countries that participated in the survey study (87), the findings are globally generalisable. It should, however, be noted the number of focus groups, conducted in six countries, are too low for generalisability. The focus groups should be seen instead as a qualitative complement to the survey data.

Principal findings show China's long-term commitment to its strategy of disseminating messages into the global public sphere that legitimise CCP rule, as well as outlining the type of tools used to achieve that goal. These include fully funded journalistic exchanges and reporting trips, MOUs with both media unions and media companies regarding content sharing and free, translated Chinese produced media content, buying shares in foreign media companies, offering media infrastructure support, pushing the BRI, and engaging in COVID pandemic diplomacy.



This article has argued that, taken together, the above strategies can be seen as an effort to offer an alternative to the traditional public sphere—the authoritarian public sphere, where the void created by the lack of free expression, free assembly and free flow of information is filled by messages legitimising the rule of the Chinese Communist Party in perpetuity.

As China's rise continues, it is crucial empirical study of its media influence strategies continues. This should not be done with the sole aim of providing counterbalance to propaganda, but to also further understand the mechanisms and strategies used to drive its global rise. In the age when mis- and disinformation spreads at warp speed, the thoughtful and long-term capture of data can serve to counter such information and the threat it poses to liberal democratic systems by undermining the confidence in its institutions.

The principal question raised by this project is the extent to which Chinese strategies have succeeded in individual countries. The notion raised by journalists and editors in the Italian focus group, that the Italian media and political systems have enough 'antibodies' to withstand the Chinese media influence deserves further attention. Future studies could focus on journalistic publication practices and media content in countries where China's media influence has been particularly active to determine the success of such strategies.

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**Appendix 1: Countries involved in the two IFJ global surveys**

2019	2020/21
Afghanistan, Australia, Brasil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroun, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Cyprus, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, France, Gambia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Macedonia, Malaysia, Mali, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palestine, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Russia, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, United States of America, Uruguay.	Afghanistan, Australia, <b>Belarus, Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina</b> , Brasil, Cambodia, Cameroun, Canada, <b>Colombia</b> , Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, <b>Cyprus, France, Italy, Jordan, Korea (Republic of), Macau SAR China</b> , Malaysia, Mali, <b>México, Mongolia</b> , Myanmar, <b>Namibia</b> , Nepal, <b>New Zealand</b> , Pakistan, Palestine, Panamá, Peru, Philippines, <b>Serbia, South Sudan</b> , Sri Lanka, <b>Sudan, Syria, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tunisia</b> , Uganda, <b>Vanuatu</b> , Uruguay, United states of America, <b>Yemen</b> .

Note: Countries listed in bold were not surveyed in 2019.

# 'Voice of the voiceless'

## The Pacific Media Centre as a case study of academic and research advocacy and activism

**Abstract:** For more than a decade, the pioneering Pacific Media Centre at Aotearoa's Auckland University of Technology led the way in journalism research and publication, publishing the globally ranked peer-reviewed journal *Pacific Journalism Review*, monographs, and a series of media and social justice books and documentaries. Perhaps even more important was the centre's role in nurturing young and challenging Asia-Pacific student journalists and communicators seeking social change and providing them with the opportunity, support, and encouragement to enable them to become confident changemakers and community advocates. This article is a case study of a style of academic advocacy and activism that was characterised by its own multiethnic stakeholders' advisory board as 'the voice of the voiceless'. A feature was the 'talanoa journalism' model (Robie, 2014), focused more on grassroots people and community resilience, especially faced with the global COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis. The inspired initiative ended with a change of management to a more neoliberal approach to education at the university with scant appreciation for the vision.

**Keywords:** case studies, climate activism, communication, decolonisation, environmental journalism, human rights, New Zealand, Pacific Media Centre, talanoa journalism

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### Introduction

THE Pacific Islands have long been a refuge,' wrote celebrated Vanuatu-based investigative photojournalist Ben Bohane in the introduction to his extraordinary 2013 image collection *The Black Islands*, 'for eccentric foreigners and castaways too, who often fell into one (or several) of these categories: mercenary, missionary, or misfit.' Adding to his message of how the region was a magnet for mystics and mayhem, he wrote:



**Figure 1: Several of the cross-cultural teams involved in one of the Pacific Media Centre's core publications, the *Pacific Journalism Review*, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. The cartoonist Malcolm Evans (riding a dolphin) has portrayed the crew on board a traditional double-hulled Polynesian environmental waka (canoe). Vanuatu photographer Ben Bohane sports sunglasses and an inevitable camera. The bearded author and founding editor, David Robie, is at the tiller. Current editor Philip Cass wears a hat and is carrying binoculars.**

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through these shimmering islands, perhaps I am a crude mix of all of the above. I was drawn to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of its conflicts were largely unreported. There were family connections too.

So beginning in 1994, I ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomon and coups in Fiji. (Bohane, 2013, p. 13)

Bohane (see Figure 1) began his long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal (and thus the Pacific Media Centre) with an illustrated investigative article in 2001 about the complex, divided loyalties within the Fiji military following the George Speight attempted coup debacle in May 2000. He characterised the crux of the divide to be between the 'professional' soldiers, typified by then Commander Voreqe Bainimarama (later coup leader and ultimately elected prime minister until he was defeated at the polls in December 2022), who believed the military should stay out of politics, and the 'political' military, who sought to ensure the supremacy of Indigenous (iTaukei) Fijian rights (Bohane, 2001). He followed this with two powerfully evocative portfolios of photographs published in the journal (Bohane & Dean, 2006) and (Bohane, 2014). In the former, Bohane featured some of his photos from the

Bougainville war, which started in 1989 in response to an environmental crisis over the massive Panguna copper mine; a deployment of Australian troops (and other Pacific forces, including from Fiji and New Zealand); the controversial arrival of 43 West Papuan refugees in 2006, and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the Solomon Islands the same year.

Bec Dean, curator of Bohane’s original Black Islands exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, noted that the photographer’s long-standing journalistic focus in the region had been to explore the connections between *kastom* and resistance movements. As she described it, *kastom* is a broad term ‘derived from the Tok Pisin (Melanesian pidgin) for “custom”, used to describe dynamic new religious movements with a traditional and spiritual base.’ As Bohane himself explained:

As an Australian, resident in Vanuatu, I see myself as a Pacific Islander and reject the grandiose claims of Australia being a ‘continent’. I believe that this notion has blinded Australians to the reality that we remain forever linked to other Pacific islands through the blood and songlines of our Indigenous people and our historical and military legacy in the region. (Bohane & Dean, 2006, p. 158)

Another influential Indigenous activist photographer, this time in Aotearoa New Zealand, also had a long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* and the Pacific Media Centre, with his trajectory of civil rights, anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear, social justice, political transformation and struggle. John Miller (Ngāpuhi) received New Zealand’s Media Peace Prize Lifetime Award in 2003 for his contribution to the struggle for peace as a ‘sympathetic observer’. His enormous archive—and he has a prodigious memory—on events such as the Springbok tour of 1981, the *hikoi* (Māori Land March), Waitangi protests, and the 2006 *tangi* of the Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Ataiangikaahu, has been developed into an iconic collection. He was a frequent guest lecturer for the Pacific Media Centre and was one of the recipients of the first centre research grants in 2007, which led to publication of the photo essay ‘Seeing the wood for the trees—Ngatihine’ (Miller, 2011).

The first Nga Tamatoa protest at Waitangi in 1971 launched a new era of assertiveness in the struggle for Māori Treaty, land, and cultural rights. Such events as the Māori Land March (1975) and the Indigenous occupations at Bastion Point and Raglan (1978) received prominent treatment in mainstream media of the day, noted *Pacific Journalism Review*. However, how well equipped were the then predominantly monocultural news organisations in understanding underlying issues behind such protests? Miller sought some answers:



My own interest in issues of media coverage comes from an involvement in a complex legal dispute over a Māori-owned land block 35 years ago, during which I had much contact with journalists of the day, at a time when the media landscape was much less ethnically diverse. Of the 41 or so ‘mainstream’ journalists I had varying contact with over a 24-month period from 1976 to 1978, 36 were Pākehā, three were Māori (one of these a trainee), and two were Samoan. I was effectively presenting a minority culture issue to media workers overwhelmingly of the majority culture. I discovered that the subject was virtually unknown territory to these journalists. This was certainly a ‘blind spot’ issue. (Miller 2011, 177)

Social psychologist Emily Pronin first coined the term in research relating to the bias blind spot in 2001. While the research was primarily about the bias of the average person (eighty-five percent of a sample of six hundred people considered that they were less biased than the average American), it has a particular applicability to news media too (Pronin et.al., 2001). Situations abound where editors and news directors fail to provide coverage or analysis of issues and thus create blind spots for their audience. Marginalisation by mainstream news media in New Zealand of the West Papua human rights crisis is an obvious example of this (Robie, 2017) (Figure 2).

In the past 13 years, the Pacific Media Centre-Te Amokura, especially through its publications, *Pacific Journalism Review*, *Pacific Journalism Monographs*, books, documentaries, and news websites, sought to challenge ‘blind spots’ in Oceania.<sup>1</sup> It sought to offer a ‘voice for the voiceless’ (as its own multiethnic stakeholders’ advisory board has described its desired objective). In its final annual report, the PMC advisory board chair, Professor Camille Nakhid, argued: ‘The advocacy and activism, struggle and resilience to continually bring current, relevant, and soul-awakening news to the public are embedded in the mission of the centre’ (Nakhid 2020, p. 6). The ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusive’ journalism coverage and methodologies in the Asia Pacific region were a key rationale for the establishment and evolution of the Pacific Media Centre during its existence. It has been unique among Australia’s twenty-two and New Zealand’s three university-based journalism schools. It set a high benchmark for both Asia Pacific collaborative media research and innovative journalism, featuring several publications and a weekly radio programme, *Southern Cross*, broadcast on the neighbouring Auckland University’s campus radio station 95bFM.<sup>2</sup> As an article in *Independent Australia* argued,

[PMC] was popular with Pasifika students, especially post-grads who would go on [Pacific Island] reporting ventures for practice-led research; it was a base for online news, for example prolific outlets including a regular Pacific Media Watch; it had international standing primarily through the well-rated, SCOPUS-listed, academic journal the *Pacific Journalism Review*; and it was



**Figure 2: Multiethnic members of the Pacific Media Centre collective defiantly raise the West Papuan Morning Star flag, banned by Indonesian authorities, at a public seminar at Auckland University of Technology on 1 December 2020.**

a cultural hub, where guests might receive a sung greeting from the staff, Pacific-style, or see fascinating artworks and craft.

Its uptake across the ‘Blue Continent’ showed up gaps in mainstream media services and in Australia’s case famously the backlog in promoting economic and cultural ties. (Duffield, 2022)

This article outlines and examines how the centre enabled and theorised the students’ activism through their journalism and bore witness to struggles in the region. The PMC ensured that students engaged with often forgotten and ignored histories of activism for civil, social, cultural, and environmental rights, such as the Bougainville conflict, Kanak independence, and the West Papuan peoples’ struggle for self-determination. In recent years, responding to how Pacific Islanders have adapted their lives in complex and nuanced ways to cope with the climate crisis and the COVID health pandemic became a critical part of the centre’s work (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020). The article addresses the multiplatform methods the students adopted for their assignments, ‘real time’ newsgathering, current affairs and documentary projects, and media advocacy. The first section provides background to the establishment of the centre; the second section discusses the talanoa model and strategic activist approach to

journalism followed by a discussion of seven components of the centre's programme and finally a conclusion.

My own advocacy and research-work background in developing countries and a decade living in Fiji and Papua New Guinea have certainly assisted my focus on media blind spots and human rights as founding director of the centre, which led to photographic exhibitions in Kenya (a social justice portrayal of Madagascar); Auckland ('Faces of Africa' and 'Nuclear Exodus: The Rongelap Evacuation', with the latter being turned into a video broadcast on *Tagata Pasifika*); and Wellington; and books including *Eyes of Fire: The Last Voyage of the Rainbow Warrior* (Robie 1986), *Blood on Their Banner* (1989), *Mekim Nius* (2004) and *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (2014).

Western journalism schools prioritise journalists as detached observers, keeping their distance, and they frequently underperform over cultural diversity. However, we need to examine our media role more closely and more critically. Does our journalism perpetuate human rights violations or conflict, or does it contribute to restoring peace and justice? *Nepali Times* publisher Kunda Dixit is the author of the journalism text *Dateline Earth*, a critique of Western mainstream media and the control of news by multinational corporations reflecting the interests and preoccupations of industrialised countries. The original edition of his book (in 1997) was essentially before the rise of the internet and social media networking, but the lessons remain similar today: 'News was whatever happened in the US, Western Europe, Australia, and the periphery wasn't deemed to be important.' As Dixit warned: 'This is not just the "end of history", it is the end of geography. No place is too near or too far; a Uighur yurt could as well be in your backyard' (Dixit, 1997, p. 6). When his revised edition emerged (Dixit, 2010), he argued that the mediascape was not any better; corporate media control still persisted in the internet age, although by then it was also struggling to maintain a successful business model.

However, with the cybernet revolution, believes Dixit, photojournalism, especially with an investigative edge, is enjoying a resurgence. Dixit was keynote speaker at the Pacific Media Centre's 'Investigative Journalism and Technology' conference at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), which later provided an incentive for the founding of New Zealand's Centre for Investigative Journalism. His inspirational exhibition of 'peace photographs' by a range of photojournalists featuring the ten-year Maoist civil war in his country created interest. Some of the images, including the cover, were featured in the collection *Conflict, Custom & Conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017* (Marbrook et al., 2017), published to mark the tenth anniversary of the centre. They were drawn from his trilogy *The People War* (Dixit, 2007). I wrote in a review analysing the influence of his works:

Dixit's prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste, and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a [norm]. Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. (Robie, 2009, p. 230)

Postgraduate students, mostly female, ranging from their early twenties to forties, from Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and West Papua was involved in the centre including one from Myanmar. Research associates and lecturers were from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Singapore. Many staff, students, and volunteers affiliated with the Pacific Media Centre achieved outstanding results in investigative photojournalism and documentary work, including Karen Abplanalp (2012), whose investigative feature 'Blood Money' in *Metro* magazine, forced the NZ Superannuation Fund (NZSF), which has an ethical investment policy, to withdraw from the then American and Indonesian-owned Freeport copper and gold mine at Grasberg in West Papua. This feature won several investigative journalism awards. Del Abcede has organised public seminars and chronicled visually the personalities, cultural diversity, and initiatives of the centre for the past decade with empathy, depth, and passion. Filmmaker Jim Marbrook's feature length documentary *Cap Bocage* on a New Caledonian environmental saga began its genesis with a small—and inaugural—seed grant of \$10,000 from the PMC in 2007 to create a pilot programme (Marbrook, 2015). His initiative created the impetus for the *Conflict, Custom & Conscience* book (Marbrook et al., 2017), and he inspired a documentary dimension to the Pacific Media Centre's work through Te Ara Motuhenga.

### **Talanoa and strategic activist journalism education**

For thirteen years, the Pacific Media Centre research and publication unit published journalism with an 'activist' edge to its eclectic style of reportage, raising issues of social justice and climate justice in New Zealand's regional backyard (Figure 3). It achieved this through partnerships with progressive sections of news media and a non-profit model of critical and challenging assignments for postgraduate students in the context of coups, civil war, climate change, human rights, sustainable development, and neo-colonialism (Robie, 2018a; Pacific Media Centre, 2020). One of the models characteristic of PMC media initiatives had evolved from the 'existentialist journalism' philosophy articulated by the late American professor emeritus John C. Merrill, a pioneer in international journalism education. He argued that in contrast to the usual 'objectivity' stressed at journalism schools, journalists should 'not shun the subjective' or be afraid of 'rocking the corporate boat' (Merrill 1977, p. 7). He encouraged

them to ‘feel and act as well as think and act’. Lauding the ‘lonely rebel with a conscience’ approach, Merrill explained:

The existential journalist . . . has an attitude of commitment, of rebellion, of individuality, of creativity, and of freedom. The existential journalist is committed to personal standards, not to the often asinine rules and practices of the organisation. . . . This journalist revels in the ethical code that is personally internalised, not in the framed corporate code hanging on the wall. The existentialist stands, chooses, acts, and is willing to take the consequences of these choices and actions. This is often painful. (Merrill, 1977, p. 8)

In January 2016, an earlier *Pacific Scoop* venture (2009-2015) that was initiated by the PMC in partnership with the New Zealand digital innovator Scoop Media (<https://pacific.scoop.co.nz/>) which was premised on these existential values, morphed into a pioneering journalism school venture for the digital era, *Asia Pacific Report* (APR) (<http://asiapacificreport.nz/>). Amid the contemporary global climate of controversy over ‘fake news’ and a ‘war on truth’ and declining credibility among some mainstream media, the APR project demonstrated on many occasions the value of independent niche media based at a university, questioning and challenging Establishment and corporate agendas. In the next section of this article, a series of brief case studies examines how the collective experience of citizen journalism, digital engagement, and an innovative public empowerment journalism course can develop unique student-based online publications. The examples traverse some of the region’s thorny political and social issues—including the controversial police shootings of students in Papua New Guinea in June 2016 and the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-22.

Underpinning the methodology have been the twin pillars of critical development journalism—a blend of empowerment, existential, watchdog, and transparency strategies—and ‘Talanoa journalism’ (Robie, 2014, 2019; Singh, 2020), a ‘Pacific Way’ approach to reportage that is more suited to Island cultures. The concept of talanoa, or frank face-to-face discussion with no hidden agenda, became popularised in the contemporary Pacific through the initiatives of East-West Centre academic Dr Sitiveni Halapua (2013; Robie, 2019, p. 11). For the Pacific Media Centre’s Talanoa journalism approach in the Asia-Pacific region, the model contrasts with normative, or orthodox, ‘Western’ journalism in that it has a greater focus on grassroots sources and less attachment to elite and Establishment sources (Robie, 2019, p. 12; Fairbairn-Dunlop & Coxon 2014). Singh (2020, p. 472) argues that Talanoa is a time-honoured Pacific storytelling practice based on communal values such as open dialogue, discussion, consensus, and conflict avoidance in decision making. The following matrix (Table 1) outlines some of the key differences between Talanoa and normative journalism.

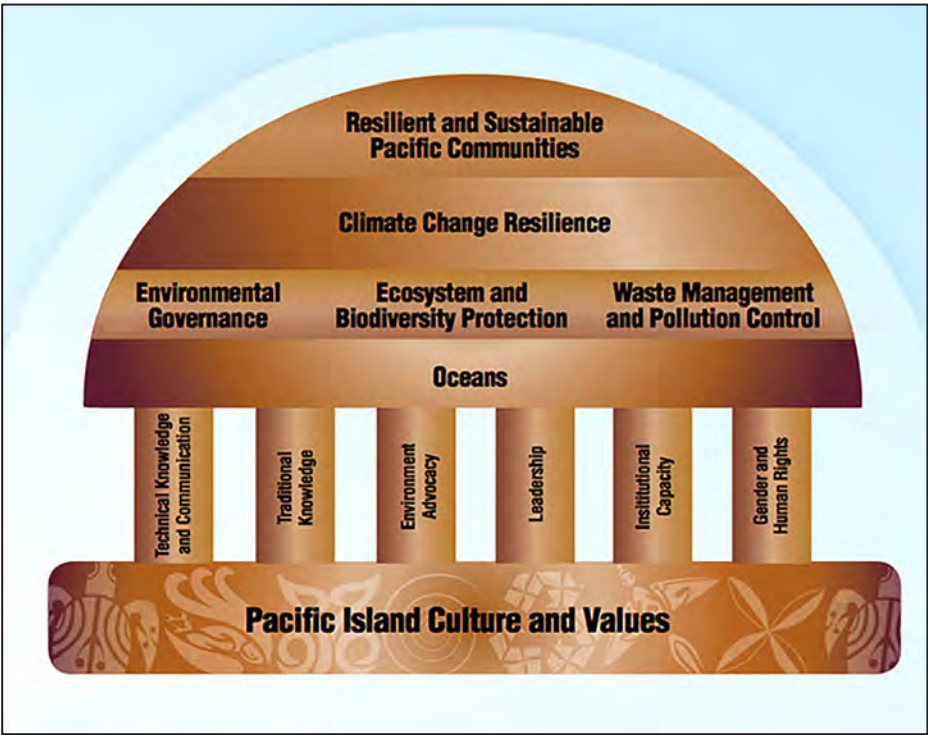


Figure 3. Pacific Island culture and values: Traditional knowledge and resilience reflected in ‘Talanoa journalism’.

### Strategic directions deployed in various Pacific Media Centre project case studies

#### *Asia Pacific Internships*

*China Daily, Cook Islands News, Philippine Star, Jakarta Daily Post, Wansolwara, and others*

For thirteen years, the Pacific Media Centre organised, funded, and supervised international Asia-Pacific internships, either with news media in the region or on standalone projects, mostly in partnership with the University of the



Figure 4: The PMC logo.

South Pacific Regional Journalism Programme but also with the Asia New Zealand Foundation and AUT’s International Office. This was a unique programme at New Zealand journalism schools (Figure 4). It began with an internship at the English-language *China Daily* in Beijing in 2007, pioneered by postgraduate student Felicity Brown, who later became a diplomat and is currently New Zealand’s consul in Nouméa, Kanaky New Caledonia. More than 30 internships were coordinated with students going as far afield as the *Cook*

**Table 1: Talanoa and 'normative' journalism matrix**

Mainstream Journalism Western	Talanoa Journalism Pacific
Elite course oriented	Grassroots source oriented
Hard news description	Hard news with context, cultural interpretations
Objective, detached, uninvolved stance	Reflexive stance
Solutions not an issue	Possible solutions for identified problems
Top-down mainstream vertical public opinion	Grassroots, citizen public opinion, horizontal views
Emphasises individualist achievement	Emphasises community achievement
Unfettered free media focused on conflict	Free media, but balanced with social responsibility
Consumer, business orientation	Public interest, civil society, community empowerment focus
Entertainment on sensational angles	Focus on positive outcomes for wider community
Focus on crime, disaster and deviant behaviour	Focus on socio-economic development, community needs, well-being and progress
Normative mainstream ethical codes	Community ethics with recognition of indigenous, diversity, cultural values

Source: 'Karoronga, Kele'a, Talanoa, Tapoetethakot, and Va: Expanding Millennial Notions of a "Pacific Way" Journalism Education and Media Research Culture', in *Media Asia* (Robie, 2019, p. 11).

*Islands News* in Rarotonga, *Jakarta Post* in Jakarta, *Philippine Star* in Manila, and the *Vanuatu Daily Post* in Port Vila.

The internships were underpinned by two postgraduate papers—one for Asia-Pacific Journalism Studies, JOUR801, an introduction to the region's cultures and languages; political and social systems; the legal systems as they related to journalism; and critical media studies in the various countries, and the other for International Journalism Project, JOUR810, offering an advanced postgraduate assignment or media exposure.

According to the JOUR801 course description prescriptor section, the course:

Introduces advanced studies in comparative journalism and media globalisation with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The political economy of the media in selected regional countries is examined. As well as the contextual media environment, this paper offers opportunities for in-depth

regional reportage on cultural, climate change, environmental, political, governance, national development, social, media freedom, and legal issues. (JOUR801, 2020)

The companion paper for JOUR810, requiring a special application after successfully completing the introductory Asia Pacific Journalism paper: ‘Enables an advanced international journalism assignment or project, usually in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper would usually be a two-week fulltime block assignment or internship in the mid-semester break or linked to a Summer School programme, or equivalent.’ Learning outcomes included: ‘1. Plan and execute an international journalism assignment/[project]; 2. Critically engage with an important International event or process; 3. Demonstrate quality reportage in a culturally and/or challenging environment; 4. Demonstrate critical engagement with international issues; and 5. Analyse and reflect on a topical cross-cultural assignment’ (JOUR810, 2020).

Arguably, one of the most successful internship projects was the recruitment of a cohort of thirteen students from the JOUR801 course who teamed up under the leadership of Alex Perrottet to cover the 2011 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ conference in Auckland on the eve of the World Rugby Cup. The reportage was robust, nuanced, and in-depth, especially compared with the mainstream media at the time. A student scoop was recorded about West Papua by asking a pointed ‘decolonisation’ question of then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and Papua New Guinean student Henry Yamo’s story reverberated around the world (Robie, 2013, p. 155). This prompted then Green MP Catherine Delahunty to declare in a letter to AUT: ‘The coverage produced by [the students’] efforts was world class and their participation in press events was outstanding . . . New Zealand media was shallow and lacked the robust approach led by the students from the Pacific Media Centre. . . . The PMC website became the “go to” place for the real stories of the Forum’ (Delahunty, 2011). *Project Link:* Asia-Pacific journalism internships:<https://pmc.aut.ac.nz/index.php/projects/asia-pacific-journalism-projects-and-internships-2019-4588>

### ***Bearing Witness***

*David Robie and Jim Marbrook*

A three-year Pacific climate research storytelling documentary and journalism project contributed to a disruption and renewal theme in Pacific Islands countries’ development. The project was an offshoot of the Asia Pacific Internships but had a course structure and credits towards postgraduate degrees at AUT. It adopted the name ‘Bearing Witness’, drawing on the Quaker tradition of taking action over ‘truth’, based on conscience and being present



**Figure 5: Daku Village**



at the sites of injustice (<https://pmc.aut.ac.nz/categories/bearing-witness>). This seemed highly appropriate given that the field trips sought to provide an alternative framing of climate change journalism in terms of resilience and human rights. An inspiring example of this ‘bearing witness’ frame for climate change media action was the Collectif Argos (2010) photojournalism portfolio on climate refugees; many of the images were portrayed in their book with the same title. The bearing witness theme was also explored in the Pacific Media Centre’s photojournalism collection, *Conflict, Custom and Conscience*, published to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Centre (Marbrook et al., 2017).

Focused initially on Fiji, the project involved three pairs of postgraduate students engaging with climate change challenges. Responding originally to the devastation and tragedy wrought in Fiji by Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016, the Pacific Media Centre embarked on the Bearing Witness journalism project by sending two postgraduate students to Viti Levu, Fiji, to document and report on the impact of climate change in rural communities (Robie & Chand, 2017). Their main component was a multimedia report on Daku Village in the Rewa River delta area (Figure 5). This was followed in 2017 by a series of reports leading to a multimedia package on the relocation of the remote inland village of Tukuraki (Robie 2018b). The third episode focused far more strongly on documentation, with reports on waka navigation and climate change, the ‘ghost village’ of Vunidogoloa, and a ‘homecoming’ short feature about the Banaban people of Rabi and the impact on them caused by climate change. The project explored Paulo Friere’s notions of ‘critical consciousness’ as they might relate to teaching documentary-making and also drew on the concept of Talanoa journalism.

Our experience with the Bearing Witness project has demonstrated that the process of independent learning while engaged in praxis (making the work) is the key step up in the learning process. While the newsroom or web platform remained a key structure in the dissemination of student work, the challenges had ‘more to do with students’ abilities to improvise and to use tacit knowledge to negotiate their way through stories. (Robie & Marbrook 2020, p. 85)

The notion of ‘bearing witness’ was at the core of this project. Climate justice expresses the notion of the ‘moral and/or ethical consideration of addressing climate change’ (Harris, 2019, 101), and bearing witness provides the opportunity for reporters or filmmakers to experience the injustice and share this with a wider audience (Robie & Chand, 2017, p. 192). The experience can be both strengthening for the community sharing their story and transformative for the students. Towards the end of the Banaban film *Banabans of Rabi: A Story of Survival* (Ikimotu & Tom, 2019), there is a moment during an interview with

elder Tom Corrie when he clearly addresses the filmmakers (and, by extension, the audience) (Robie & Marbrook 2020, p. 10): ‘People [on remote Pacific Islands such as Rabi] still do not know. They are not aware of the facts of climate change. It is only when you [the filmmakers/journalists] come in and tell us and report what we go through that they know the effects of climate change’ (Ikimotu & Tom, 2019).

Papers published about the first two years of the Bearing Witness project highlighted some of the challenges and triumphs the students faced as they reported on issues in Fiji (Robie & Chand, 2017; Robie, 2018b). The students described the rich and challenging environment of reporting in Fiji; they described technical challenges and on the demands of working stories as they happen. Both sets of students described being ‘considerably enriched’ by the process and also described how they saw the challenge of this project as a sound preparation for future employment. In the case of the first pair, Taylor Jo Aumua, herself of Pacific heritage, reflected on the enriching experience of being immersed in ‘intertwining cultures and religions’ and how that had helped prepare her for her future Pacific media career (she became a reporter with the Sunpix television programme *Tagata Pasifika* and then a photographer for the Nuku project, celebrating the creativity and courage of Indigenous women). She and her assignment partner, Ami Dhabuwala, added their impressions about their experiential visit to the Rewa River floodwaters-impacted village Daku and came face to face with how villagers lived daily with the realities of climate change:

Arriving [there, we] bore witness to flood waters lapping on the doorsteps of village homes. Remnants of Super Tropical Cyclone Winston [in 2016] that savaged Fiji two months [earlier], and other tropical depressions which have left parts of the nation drenched in heavy rainfall, have left their mark. Waterlogged land leaves the village vulnerable to water-borne infections like dengue, filariasis, and diarrhoea, and in the worse-case scenario, cholera, and typhoid. (Dhabuwala & Aumua, 2016).

Digital media ‘encourages intergenerational knowledge exchange between young people and elders of a community,’ argues researcher and former journalist Usha Harris, who featured the work of the Pacific Media Centre as a case study in her 2019 book *Participatory Media in Environmental Communication*. ‘Many young people are leaving traditional ways of life to live and work in urban areas and losing interest in old ways’ (p. 169).

This has been a feature experienced by the students on all three incarnations of the Bearing Witness project so far—the exchanges with elders in Rewa Village of Daku, the harrowing tale of survival through the mudslide and cyclones of Tukuraki Village near Ba, and finally, even more so with filmmakers Hele Ikimotu and Blessen Tom’s engagement with the villagers of Rabi. The

presence of Ikimotu’s mother, Janet, on a ‘personal journey of rediscovery and the shock of the environmental degradation in the intervening years adds a certain poignancy’ (Robie & Marbrook 12). The two-way exchange of inter-generational knowledge and skills gives a balanced share in the storytelling. *Project Link*: Pacific Climate Bearing Witness 2017: ‘We’re running out of time’. <https://pmc.aut.ac.nz/categories/bearing-witnes>

### **Climate and COVID-19: The Pacific project**

David Robie and Sri Krishnamuthi

While many of the international plaudits were enthusiastic and generous about then Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s handling of the COVID crisis—ranging from ‘master class’ (*The New York Times*) to ‘squashing the curve’ and a decisive ‘voice of reason’ (TV presenter Whoopi Goldberg)—several analysts and commentators have been less kind about New Zealand’s news media, one describing their ‘machinations’ as ‘leav[ing] much to be desired’ (Forrester 2020). According to Al Jazeera English contributor Glen Johnson:



**Figure 6: The climate project**

Taken over time, New Zealand’s reporters have appeared focused on managing perceptions, berating and cajoling a fearful public on numerous fronts. In doing so, and from the earliest stages of a four-level alert system, public health concerns have been eclipsed by a clamouring commentariat, all seeking to score political points and undermine the government’s health-first priorities.

A case can be made that the nation’s media, laundering many of the opposition’s attack lines and big business talking points, have repeatedly endangered public health. (Johnson 2020)

The Pacific Media Centre (PMC) adapted early in its response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic (fig. 6). Recognising the rapidly expanding global nature of the crisis, the centre laid the groundwork and prepared to embark on its Coronavirus Plus Project in early March 2020, more than two weeks before New Zealand went into its first national lockdown on March 25, including the closure of university campuses. The PMC deployed its Pacific Media Watch Coronavirus Plus project with its small team working from home and using various sharing software programmes to communicate and to continue publishing on the centre’s websites *Asia Pacific Report* and *PMC Online* (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020, p. 193). It was critically important to provide basic information on how to survive and persevere during this pandemic and to counter the ‘disinfodemic’. Using a long-established network of media partnerships and collaborations along with contributing student journalists from Aotearoa New

Zealand, Fiji and the Philippines, the project was able to establish a credible and innovative news coverage.

While the Pacific Media Centre did not embark on a project with the Internews' Asia-Pacific affiliate Earth Journalism Network until June 2020, the Internews guidelines had already been adopted for an earlier ten-week project under the PMC's Pacific Media Watch umbrella (Robie & Krishnamurthi, 2020) between March 19 and May 31. The strategic guidelines included a five-point plan: 1. Good, accurate, evidence-based information; 2. That everyone can access safely; 3. That consumers know how to critically access; 4. That is valued by communities and sustained by business models that work; and 5. Where governments and businesses are accountable for keeping it that way. During the earlier period, the project published 268 articles (65 in March, 120 in April and 80 in May) about the coronavirus involving analysis, news, health, science, media, political, and social issues on *Asia Pacific Report* and on the centre's own weekly *Southern Cross* radio programme broadcast in partnership with Radio 95bFM at the neighbouring University of Auckland. *Project Link: Southern Cross* <https://95bfm.com/bcasts/the-southern-cross/1393>

### ***Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koakoa and the PJ Monographs***

*David Robie, Philip Cass, Khairiah Rahman, Del Abcede, Chris Nash, Wendy Bacon, and Nicole Gooch*

One of the core projects at the Pacific Media Centre was the *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal, founded in 1994 at the University of Papua New Guinea. It was published for four years at UPNG and then relocated to the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, where it remained for a further four years before being published until 2020 by the PMC. It has now been adopted by a new incorporated non-profit, Asia Pacific Media Network (<https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/>). Traditional with a moderately radical edge, the journal has maintained a strong reflexive journalism stance as a research publication. According to its website's declared ethos,



**Figure 7: *Pacific Monographs***

While one objective of *Pacific Journalism Review* is research into Pacific journalism theory and practice, the journal has also expanded its interest into new areas of research and inquiry that reflect the broader impact of contemporary media practice and education. A particular focus is on the cultural politics of the media, including the following issues: new media and social movements, indigenous cultures in the age of globalisation, the politics of tourism and development, the role of the media and the formation of national identity, and the cultural influence of New Zealand as a branch of the global economy within the Pacific region. It also has a

special interest in climate change, environmental and development studies in the media, and communication and vernacular media in the region. (*Pacific Journalism Review*, n.d.)

In a research commentary published after the celebration of the journal's twentieth anniversary at AUT in 2014 marking 'twenty years on the frontline of regional identity and freedom,' Lee Duffield (2015, p. 18) noted: 'Eclectic, not partisan, it has nevertheless been vigilant over rights, such as monitoring the Fiji coups d'état. Watching through a media lens, it follows a "Pacific way," handling hard information through understanding and consensus.'

Striking sections of the journal include impressive photojournalism essays/galleries featuring leading 'activist' photographers in the region, such as Vanuatu-based Ben Bohane, Ngāpuhi resistance icon John Miller, and Todd Henry, whose latest portfolio featured 'kava culture' in Aotearoa New Zealand. Sydney academic and investigative journalist Wendy Bacon pioneered a regular section called 'Frontline,' which has focused on reflexive journalism and journalism-as-research (Bacon, 2012; Robie, 2015). Chris Nash, author of *What is Journalism? The Art and Politics of a Rupture* (2016)—which argues that journalism should treat itself as an academic discipline on a par with history, geography, and sociology—has been another pioneering figure and adviser of Frontline. Taking the helm of *PJR* as editor in 2021, Philip Cass declared in his opening editorial: 'We have established a strong presence in the academic marketplace, scoring extremely well across a range of academic publication indicators and providing space for voices from Asia, Australia and the Pacific as well as Aotearoa New Zealand.' (Cass & Robie, 2020, p. 10)

A companion research series, the *Pacific Journalism Monographs*, was launched in 2012 (<https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-monographs/>), offering journalists, journalism academics, and researchers an outlet for quality research and analysis with long-form articles of up to 15,000 words (Figure 7). So far, the series has produced seven editions, with topics covering a diverse range of journalism research from media freedom and human rights in the Asia-Pacific to Asia-Pacific research methodologies, climate change, vernacular Pasifika media research in New Zealand, and post-coup self-censorship in Fiji. Titles include *Pacific Media Freedom 2011: A Status Report* (Perrottet and Robie 2011), *Coups, Conflicts and Human Rights: Pacific Media Challenges in the Digital Age* (Robie 2012), *Pacific Way: Auckland's Pasifika Community Diaspora Media* (Neilson 2016), *Watching Our Words: Perceptions of Self-Censorship and Media Freedom in Fiji* (Morris 2017), and *Science Writing and Climate Change* (Maslog, Robie, & Adriano, 2019). *Project Link*: Tuwhera expands the *PJR* 'critical inquiry' archive <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/announcement/view/24>

## **Pacific Media Watch**

*David Robie, Alex Perrottet, Daniel Drageset, Alistar Kata, Sri Krishnamurthi, and others*

Pacific Media Watch (PMW) was founded originally as an independent, non-profit, and non-government network by two journalism academics (Peter Cronau and David Robie) based at the University of Technology Sydney (Figure 8). In 1996, the kingdom of Tonga jailed two journalists and a pro-democracy parliamentarian in an event that



**Figure 8: The PMW logo.**

shattered any illusions about press freedom and democracy in the South Pacific. The two *Taimi 'o Tonga* editors, 'Ekalafi Moala and Filokalafi 'Akau'ola, had been accused of contempt. The late 'Akilisi Pohiva (at the time Member of Parliament and who eventually became prime minister) was the best-known whistleblower in the region at the time, having waged a decade-long campaign for open government and democracy (Robie, 2016a, p. 220).

Many media commentators saw the jailings in Tonga as the most serious threat to media freedom in the South Pacific since the Fiji coups in 1987 (Moala, 2010). Then a fledgling media freedom monitoring group, Pacific Media Watch launched a campaign in support of the so-called 'Tongan three', eventually helping secure their release from jail. PMW later became a regional, independent Pacific media freedom monitor based at the University of Papua New Guinea (1996–1998), University of the South Pacific (1998–2002), AUT University (2002–2007), and was finally adopted as the Pacific Media Watch Freedom Project at AUT's new Pacific Media Centre (PMC) (2007 onwards). It received its first development grant in 2007 when it was adopted by the PMC, hiring postgraduate student interns. It was subsequently awarded a grant by the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2009 (Robie, 2016a, p. 221).

Pacific Media Watch coverage has featured a blend of social media and citizen journalism 'breaks', such as Japan's Tōhoku tsunami in 2011 and its impact on the Pacific Island microstates; coup renegade Colonel Ratu Tevita Mara's 'escape' from Fiji to Tonga (also in 2011); and the brutal torture of recaptured prisoners by Fiji security forces in 2013, and dedicated inquiries and investigations by postgraduate student journalists and analysis by media commentators. Standout PMW postgraduate student editors have included Alex Perrottet, who moved on to a stellar career at Radio New Zealand Pacific; Daniel Drageset, a Norwegian public broadcast journalist who won the Dart Asia Pacific Journalism and Trauma Centre's award for PMW in 2013 for his media investigation into Fiji torture (Pacific Media Watch, 2013); and Alistar Kata, who covered the Fiji

back-to-democracy election in 2014 and made a series of powerful activist mini-documentaries on the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific Movement (NFIP) (Kata, 2016). She is now a consumer investigative reporter with TVNZ's *Fair Go* programme. Sri Krishnamurthi followed on PMW, covering the 2018 Fiji general election and reporting on the global climate crisis and COVID-19 project. Pacific Media Watch has gained a reputation of taking on 'underdog' cases over media freedom, especially those involving Indigenous and cultural rights.

*Project Link: Pacific Media Watch Project – The Genesis.* [Video, 2019] <https://youtu.be/xvd-iwd7LZA>

## Publishing

*David Robie, Del Abcede, Camille Nakhid, Philip Cass, Allison Oosterman, and Khairiah A. Rahman*

Apart from the research journals, the Pacific Media Centre has published a remarkably diverse range of more than ten Pacific cultural, media, and sociopolitical books, including *Being the First: Storis Blong Oloketa Mere Lo Solomon Aelen; Disasters, Cyclones and Communication; Dreadlocks; Journalism Education in the Pacific; Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics and Education;* and *Tonga: In Search of the Friendly Islands*. Del Abcede, an AUT design graduate, played a key role in the production of these books, including designing *Pacific Journalism Review* with a distinctive format, and she also edited the quarterly newsletter *Toktok*.

*Project Link: Pacific Media Centre Books, 2020.* <https://www.autshop.ac.nz/pacific-media-centre/>



**Figure 9: 10 books published**

*Journalism Education in the Pacific; Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics and Education;* and *Tonga: In Search of the Friendly Islands*. Del Abcede, an AUT design graduate, played a key role in the production of these books, including designing *Pacific Journalism Review* with a distinctive format, and she also edited the quarterly newsletter *Toktok*.

## Rainbow Warrior and Nuclear-Free Activism

*David Robie, Alistar Kata and Little Island Press*

Marking the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing of the Greenpeace environmental flagship *Rainbow Warrior* on 10 July 1985, I teamed up with Pacific Media Watch editor Alistar Kata, more than forty journalism and television students from AUT, and Little Island Press publisher Tony Murr



**Fig 10: Eyes of Fire microsite**

ow to produce a remarkable microsite, *Eyes Of Fire: 30 Years On* (Figure 10) (<https://eyes-of-fire.littleisland.co.nz/>) As I was on board the bombed ship and wrote the book *Eyes of Fire* about the last voyage, it was logical for me to be a resource person and a link to the many living history stories compiled by the students on video. Telling the stories of many of the nuclear-free activists and crew members involved in the *Rainbow Warrior* saga and a new generation of climate crisis campaigners was the ambitious goal in this unprecedented me-

dia school collaboration coordinated by the Pacific Media Centre in mid-2015 (Robie, 2016b).

In an interview with student Hayley Becht as part of this project, I reflected:

[As] a nation, this was a coming of age for us. I think we lost our innocence then. The idea that a friendly nation could commit an act of state terrorism against us, a small nation in the Southern Hemisphere and against a peaceful ship and against people who were trying to make a better world and trying to make a better environment—that shock was shared by everybody in the country for a long time. And there was a lot of hostility towards France. (Robie, 2016b, p. 210)

Although that hostility eased, especially after the halt to nuclear testing in 1996, there is still ongoing environmental fallout from both nuclear testing and climate change that makes it imperative that this sort of deeper journalism practice and protest continues (Robie, 2014).

*Project Link: Eyes of Fire: Thirty Years On.* [Microsite, 2015]. <https://eyes-of-fire.littleisland.co.nz/>

## **Conclusion**

News media ought to be vigilant in countering elected despots who use their mandate to destroy the very institutions that allowed them to be voted into power in the first place, argues Kunda Dixit. The Pacific has its fair share. When Dixit spoke in Auckland at the Pacific Media Centre's conference in 2011, he issued a challenge that is just as valid today: 'Let's work on a paradigm shift in the way we in the media approach stories. We should strive to cover deprivation and the causes of social injustice, not just its effect. It means each of us having a conscience and using it—by striving to be fair in an unfair world' (Dixit, 2011, p. 19).

His challenge underpins the very foundations that carried the Pacific Media Centre for thirteen years, foundations were reflected in the centre's educational and student-driven independent approach to Asia-Pacific existential journalism, empowerment, and talanoa journalism with strong social media tools (Figure 11). The centre was also an example of what can be achieved in spite of limited resources and declining institutional support. It was a 'creative nest', nurturing both students and staff. Perhaps the centre's most important role was unleashing the potential of young and challenging Asia-Pacific student journalists and communicators seeking social change and providing them with the opportunity, support, and encouragement to enable them to become confident changemakers and community advocates. Staff were supported by providing seed grants and enabling resources for independent journalism and documentary making. At the core of their outputs was a commitment to marginalised and under-represented community groups in the Asia Pacific region and telling 'hidden stories' or



forgotten histories of activism for civil, social, cultural, and environmental rights.

However, at the beginning of 2021, the university effectively abandoned the centre weeks after the director had retired in spite of the talented PMC team's enthusiastic desire to carry on and to realise the plans for future development (Duffield, 2022; Fuatai, 2021; Robie, 2022). Neoliberal changes to the university management and restructuring had a devastating impact on the institution, culminating in the planned retrenchment in 2022 of 170 academic staff after AUT had made a NZ\$12 million surplus in 2020 and 2021. The plan was described as 'flawed' and 'outrageous' by critics, and the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) ordered the university to scrap the redundancies (*New Zealand Herald* 2023; Ruru, 2023). Tertiary educational unions and Indigenous Māori and Pacific academics also criticised the cuts, likening the campus to a 'morgue' (Tovao, 2022).

None of the original management team involved in establishing the centre in 2007 remained at the institution in 2020, and their neoliberal successors did not share the original vision. Writing in the *Independent Australia* about the demise of the PMC in the face of neoliberal changes, Lee Duffield noted that the PMC had been placed in the journalism academic discipline, a 'professional' and 'teaching' discipline that traditionally drew high-achieving students interested in its practice-led approach. He argued that there was little support from line academics in disciplines that lacked professional linkages but that were offered because of professional interests in the hierarchical arrangements and power relations within the confined space of their universities: 'The Pacific Media Centre frequently challenged



**Figure 11: End of an era. The Pacific Media Centre made strong use of social media and this was its final tweet on 16 December 2020.**

“ethnocentric journalistic practice” and placed Māori, Pacific, and indigenous and cultural diversity at the heart of the centre’s experiential knowledge and critical-thinking news narratives’ (Duffield, 2022; Robie, 2021).

However, the initiatives and progress made by the centre are not entirely lost. The good news is that a non-profit NGO, the Asia Pacific Media Network/ Te Koakoia Inc., <https://www.facebook.com/PacificJournalismReview>, comprising many of the former team, both staff academics and student volunteers, has been established to carry on the *mahi* (work) with at least two of the publications, *Pacific Journalism Review* and *Asia Pacific Report*, continuing. They are keeping alive the ‘voice of the voiceless’ vision.

## Notes

1. Oceania studies, or Pacific studies in the context of this essay and the Pacific Media Centre, largely refers to the broad region from a journalism perspective. As a geographical area, it includes Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, and the centre. It also includes in its ‘Asia Pacific’ project zone five Asian countries in particular, where policies, economic, or geopolitical interests intersect with Pacific states, i.e., China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Taiwan. Excluding the five Asian countries, Oceania is estimated to have a land mass of almost nine million sq km and a population of just under 45 million.

2. The student short-documentary, *Pacific Media Centre 10 Years On—Journalism Under Duress*, by Sasya Wreksono: <https://youtu.be/UWwWEDYyTKM>.

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## PHOTOESSAY

# Refugee migration

## Turning the lens on middle Australia

**Abstract:** This non-traditional research paper explores the role of photojournalism and documentary photography in shifting the power dynamic inherent in photographing refugee migrants in Australia—the refugee as an object of photographic scrutiny. It draws on visual politics literature which argues refugees have been subjected to a particular ‘gaze’, where their migration narratives are mediated, mediatised, dissected and weaponised against them in the name of journalistic public accountability in and for the Global North. This photo-documentary praxis project subverts this ‘gaze’ of the Global North and decolonises the power dynamics of the visual politics of refugee migration, by turning the lens on middle Australia. Instead of questioning refugees, this project asks what is our moral responsibility to support them? These images are drawn from three years of photographically documenting the Meanjin (Brisbane) community that rallied around and eventually triggered the release of about 120 medevaced refugee men locked up in an urban motel in Brisbane for more than a year in 2020-21. In these images taken outside the detention centre, community members go ‘on the record’ to articulate their motivations for taking a stand—an enduring Fourth Estate record of their social and political stance as active participants within the mediated democratic process of holding power accountable in the refugee migration space. The refugees central to this project have now been released into the community but as they continue to languish in an immigration purgatory, the project is ongoing and continues to manifest through an activist journalism framework, drawing on human rights-based photojournalism practice.

**Keywords:** Australia, human rights journalism, photojournalism, photoessay, refugees, refugee migration, visual politics

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### Introduction

**F**OR MORE than two decades successive Australian governments have re-defined, unpicked, and frayed global protocols and conventions on human rights-based refugee migration—the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. In doing so, Australia has replaced these human rights-based refugee

migration processes with mandatory detention and an offshore processing-based regime that has come to be known internationally as the ‘Australian solution’—a global ‘worst practice’ model shaping refugee processing strategies in much of the global North. Indefinite mandatory detention, ‘pioneered’ through offshore processing on Manus Island and Nauru, are shaping controversial British and Danish refugee processing strategies that propose to send people seeking asylum to Rwanda, while the EU refugee deterrence strategy is increasingly relying on offshoring refugee processing in Asian, African, and Balkan countries which have less stringent human rights monitoring mechanisms. Such outsourcing not only shifts the responsibility of processing refugees away from the democracies of the Global North, but it also shifts the scrutiny of their treatment, review of their claims, and more importantly the fallout of inhumane treatment away from the mechanisms of democratic accountability.

The strategy is simple. It relies on subjecting refugees to invisible, slow violence as a deterrence to refugees in distant geographies, while preventing highly visual refugee migration events unfolding within the Global North’s line of vision. Spurious it may be, but the ultimate narrative is that the government is doing this fulfil its primary obligation of keeping its citizens safe in a highly securitised post-September 11 world where threats to national security are presumed to be imminent and omnipresent. The subtext is ‘this is being done to keep the population safe by keeping our borders secure’. However, this supposed national interest appears to be misaligned with public sentiment. A 2022 attitudes survey carried out by IPSOS in 28 countries showed 83 percent of Australians agree people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including Australia (IPSOS, 2022).

However, public sentiment abstracted to statistics provides little or no voice to the individual perspectives and motivations needed to animate discourses in the democratic space. The individuals making up those statistical surveys themselves are invisible in the mediated narratives of the Australian refugee debate, like the refugees they support. Turning the focus on the supporter cohort humanises them, makes them visible and visibilises the sentiments, interrogates their motivations and offers a record beyond numerical data.

### **‘The Australian solution’ and its global legacy**

In April 2022, the British Home Office announced a new ‘Migration and Economic Development Partnership’ with Rwanda to relocate people seeking asylum in the UK through irregular migration routes, to Rwanda to have their asylum claim processed and decided. The Home Office boldly claimed their ‘innovative, ambitious, and long-term agreement sets a new international standard...’ (Home Office News Team, 2022). On 29 June 2023, the Court of Appeal ruled that the plan was unlawful, reversing a previous High Court decision on



19 December 2022 that ruled it was lawful (British Red Cross, 2023).

In Denmark, the Danish version of the multi-regional, European, English language digital news platform, *The Local*, reported that ‘2020 saw a total of 1,547 asylum seekers registered in Denmark, the lowest number since records began in their current form in 1998’ (*The Local*, 2021). The article reported Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen telling the country’s Parliament ‘she wanted to reduce asylum applications in Denmark to zero’ (*The Local*, 2021). A 2021 Border Wars Briefing report alleges the European Union has adopted the ‘Australian Model’ which relies on more than 22 countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Balkans and West Asia as quasi border outposts keeping refugees from reaching the EU borders (Akkerman, 2021). The report notes the Europeans rely on ‘outsourcing oppression’ and gross human rights violations against these refugee migrants on to the transit countries, shielded from public and news media scrutiny.

The British, Danish and the EU refugee migration policies, build on Australia’s draconian refugee processing system, sometimes openly referred to as the ‘Australian solution’ that relies on mandatory detention, offshore processing, a ‘tighter borders’ rhetoric and oppressive deterrence policies. Since 1992, Australia has employed a policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat, under the *Migration Act 1958*. Under this policy, individuals who arrive without valid visas are detained in immigration detention centres while their claims for protection are processed.

Until 1992, detention of unauthorised arrivals was a discretionary power. But in May 1992, when Keating was prime minister and Gerry Hand his immigration minister, Hand gave the Second Reading Speech of the *Migration Amendment Bill 1992*, which made the practice of detention mandatory. Mr Hand said this, about what was then termed ‘migration custody’.... But back in May 1992, ‘migration custody’ was limited within the same Bill to 273 days... (O’Brien, 2011)

Despite their initial assurances, the Keating government removed the time restriction from section 54ZD of the *Migration Act*, which came into force in 1994, paving the way for Howard to famously claim on 28 October 2001 when he told the Liberal Party’s official election campaign launch in Sydney: ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ (Howard, 2001). Prime Minister Rudd would further strengthen the indefinite nature of detention when he decreed on July 19, 2013 ‘...asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia’, effectively condemning a large number of refugees to an immigration purgatory that has lasted a decade, with no real hope of ending (Hall & Swan, 2013).

Successive governments since Howard have also legislatively pushed and

manipulated the definition and physicality of the Australian border making it legislatively impossible for refugees to reach the Australian border. The Howard government's *Migration Amendment (Excision from the Migration Zone) Bill 2001* introduced in September 2001 excised Christmas, Ashmore, Cartier and Cocos (Keeling) islands from the migration zone for asylum seekers arriving by boat. The Gillard government extended the excision policy to include the mainland through the *Migration Amendment (Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals and Other Measures) Bill 2012*. In addition to removing the border from the refugee's reach, Australian governments also have a history of turning to Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbours to outsource refugee processing. Along with boat turn backs, Howard initially introduced the option of third country processing which led to indefinite detention on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Gillard explored third country options with Timor-Leste, PNG and Malaysia, eventually signing memoranda of understanding with Malaysia in July 2011 and PNG in August 2011. When the High Court ruled against the 'Malaysian solution' because Malaysia was not a party to the 1951 Refugees Convention, Gillard, like Howard, turned once more to Nauru and Manus Island. The Gillard government signed MoUs with the Government of Nauru on 29 August 2012, and the PNG government on 8 September 2012. 'The first transfer to Nauru was on 14 September 2012 and the first transfer to PNG was on 21 November 2012' (Phillips, 2014).

### **Militarisation of a humane response**

The mandatory offshore detention and exclusion of Australia from the Migration Zone for asylum seekers removed both refugees, and the systematic slow violence they were subjected to, from beyond the Australian public's line of vision, enabling the government to curate a particular type of gaze that presented refugees within a government narrative of securitisation and pseudo-compassion—i.e., the need for stronger borders in a post September 11 security environment and the pseudo-compassion of replacing highly visible drowning in our waters with a less visible slow death hidden away elsewhere. Howard's October 2001 election speech is arguably the playbook for this hegemonic narrative that has been repeated by successive governments and, all too often, by the popular media. Howard told the audience:

National security is . . . about a proper response to terrorism. It's also about having a far sighted, strong, well thought out defence policy. It is also about having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders . . . we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.

I want to place on record my gratitude . . . to the men and women of the Royal Australian Navy who have not only been protecting our

borders but saving lives in the process of doing it. Now that's the face of Australia to the world. We will be compassionate, we will save lives, we will care for people, but we will decide and nobody else who comes to this country. (Howard, 2001)

Rudd would echo Howard when he said in July 2013 '... our responsibility as a government is to ensure that we have a robust system of border security and orderly migration, on the one hand, as well as fulfilling our legal and compassionate obligations under the refugee convention on the other', (Hall & Swan, 2013) while condemning refugees to an indefinite detention purgatory that has lasted more than a decade. Such political rhetoric has not only intrinsically linked securitisation of the border with a purported humane response but has made even that spuriously humane response subservient to 'national interest' manifesting through securitisation and militarisation of migration.

University of Sydney researcher Andonea Dickson (2015) argues 'Australia's border enforcement strategies and immigration control policies operate in distant geographies, concealed from human rights groups, media and the public' (p. 437). In her exploration of the militarisation of asylum seeker news on television, Stewart (2016) argues 'As policies regarding the treatment and processing of people seeking asylum in Australia have become increasingly punitive across successive governments, similarly the visual presence of military artefacts and personnel at the borderline, and linguistic uses of militarist language in media reports of people seeking asylum have increased' (p. 1). Such observations align with the name change and rebranding of Australia's border control authorities—Customs or Customs Service (1991-2009), the inclusion of Border Protection Command into Customs in 2005, the rebranding of Customs as the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (2009-14) and eventually Border Force in 2014.

This militarisation of the border has shifted the Fourth Estate scrutiny of border regimes from a democratic accountability space to a national security space, where the mediated narrative itself plays out, with some notable exceptions, within this predetermined narrative framework between securitisation and a pseudo-compassionate humane response uber-concerned with drownings and little else.

### **Dehumanisation and the slow violence of invisibility**

In her seminal text *On Photography*, Sontag (1977) explores how the act of photographing involves a particular kind of seeing, a particular gaze. She argues that the act of looking through the camera lens and capturing an image involves a power dynamic between the photographer and the subject being photographed. This concept of a 'photographic gaze' explores the representation and portrayal of refugees in photography, particularly in relation to power dynamics, empathy, and ethical considerations.

Wilmott (2017) argues ‘news images of refugees have become increasingly negative, often portraying them as either innocent victims, who lack political agency, or as security threats, with the potential to threaten the host country’s national security and identity’ (p. 67), a perspective supported by a large volume of literature suggesting such portrayals fall within that established hegemonic narrative of refugees (Berry et al., 2015; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2016; Wilmott, 2017). Rettberg and Gajjala (2016) note this socially mediated representation is even more insidious for particular groups of refugees, particularly men. Based on their analysis of images and words associated with the Twitter hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome in the aftermath of the 2015 Syrian refugee migration to Europe they note refugee men are often vilified and cast as either terrorist and rapists, or as cowards (pp. 178-181). Bleiker et al. argue the Australian press mediatisation of refugees has primarily represented asylum seekers as ‘medium or large groups and through a focus on boats . . . this visual framing, and in particular the relative absence of images that depict individual asylum seekers with recognisable facial features, associates refugees not with a humanitarian challenge, but with threats to sovereignty and security’ (2013, p. 398). Lydon notes that ‘Visual strategies that define and contest the place of . . . refugees seeking to come to Australia have been criticised for depicting their subjects as abject victims who lack agency or history, or simply rendering them invisible. Some have been critical of the visual discourse of spectacular violence that has been created and promoted by the Australian government in its pursuit of policies of “deterrence”,’ (Lydon, 2022, p. 100). Bleiker et. al. further note ‘These dehumanising visual patterns reinforce a politics of fear that explains why refugees are publicly framed as people whose plight, dire as it is, nevertheless does not generate a compassionate political response’ (2013, p. 398).

### **Subverting the gaze**

There is a long and rich history of visually documenting refugee migration—from Robert Capa’s coverage of Republican refugees fleeing Franco’s army (1939) and Jewish refugees arriving in Israel (1948-50), and Henri Cartier-Bresson’s coverage of refugee migration following the partition of India (1947) to Paolo Pellegrin’s ‘Desperate Crossings’ series and Jérôme Sessini’s studies of the Calais Jungle. Magnum’s Mark Power, who photographed the Azraq and Zaatari refugee camps in Jordan in 2015, says ‘I believe strongly in photography as a mark of history to carry forward to future generations to learn from’ (Magnum Photos, 2016). These narratives, while seminal in their own right, tend to belie more subterranean structures that facilitate the slow violence they highlight within these refugee migration scapes—such as that of militarisation and securitisation within national security paradigm.

But there has been attempts to break away from this traditional photo-

journalistic framing of refugee migration. Richard Mosse's *Heat Maps* series uses military thermal radiation cameras to create detailed panoramas of refugee camps, and he also used Kodak Aerochrome, a Cold War-era infrared satellite film, to document the war in Congo (Locke, 2017)—using techniques and material that deliberately draws attention to militarised, surveillance to which the refugees are subjected to. Bouchra Khalili's video work 'The Mapping Journey Project' (Kennedy, 2016) explores refugee migration as a journey with multiple push and pull factors as opposed to an end-country 'problem'.

But all this work still focuses on the refugees themselves, and not on the citizens of the Global North that wield the ultimate power of electing political leaders and supporting rights based legislative reforms that can usher in more humane refugee processing regimes. Zaborowski and Georgiou's analysis of the visual mediation of citizen/noncitizen encounters in Europe's 2015 'refugee crisis' note that 'On the one hand, many news media simulated zombies' threatening strangeness in images of refugee massification; on the other, many news media images reaffirmed the decisive power of the national subject over refugees' fate,' (2019, p. 92)—suggesting a power dynamic between citizens and noncitizen refugees that tilts in favour of the former.

Considering the refugees have been subjected to a particular mediated gaze designed to 'explain' and scrutinise refugee migration for media consuming citizens in the global North, this photo-documentary project posits that this gaze can be subverted by turning the mediated scrutiny of the camera lens on the 'citizens' and on their perceived moral responsibility in engaging with the refugee 'crisis'. It is this 'moral responsibility' that prompted Meanjin (Brisbane) community members to rally around and eventually trigger the release of a group of medevaced refugee men who were locked up in an urban motel on Brisbane's Main Street at Kangaroo Point for more than a year in 2020-21—their latest confinement location in more than eight years of continuous mandatory detention.

While hundreds of people joined the solidarity protests outside the perimeter wall of the Kangaroo Point Alternative Place of Detention (APoD), there is little public record of their motivations for joining the protest, with the exception of a few 'event organisers'. As such, this non-traditional visual project argues it is not only the refugees who have been silenced and invisibilised in state sponsored refugee rhetoric and indeed mediated discourse, but also those who challenge the political narrative. In these images taken of community members outside the KPAPoD, community members go 'on the record' to articulate their motivations for taking a stand—an enduring Fourth Estate record of their social and political stance as active participants within the mediated democratic process of holding power accountable in Australia's heavily politicised refugee migration debate.

The refugees they stood in solidarity with have since been released into the wider Brisbane community, however they remain unsettled and unanchored,

living precariously in yet another version of an all too familiar immigration limbo. The unresolved nature of their residency and the continued solidarity of the public means this photojournalistic project is ongoing, as it continues to document and visualise the complex motivations and interactions of individuals within this space. In subverting the gaze, and by turning the lens on the Meanjin (Brisbane) community, this work enters this public sphere discourse challenging the hegemonic visualisation of refugee migration that dominates mediated discourse. In doing so, it is undeniable that it manifests through an activist journalism framework (Russell, 2017; Ward, 2019), drawing on human rights-based journalism (Shaw 2012) and investigative photojournalism practice (Dean, 2006; Bohane, 2007; Bohane, 2014; and Robie, 2017)—the activism being practised here then, is a community’s right to be heard within an open and transparent mediated space.

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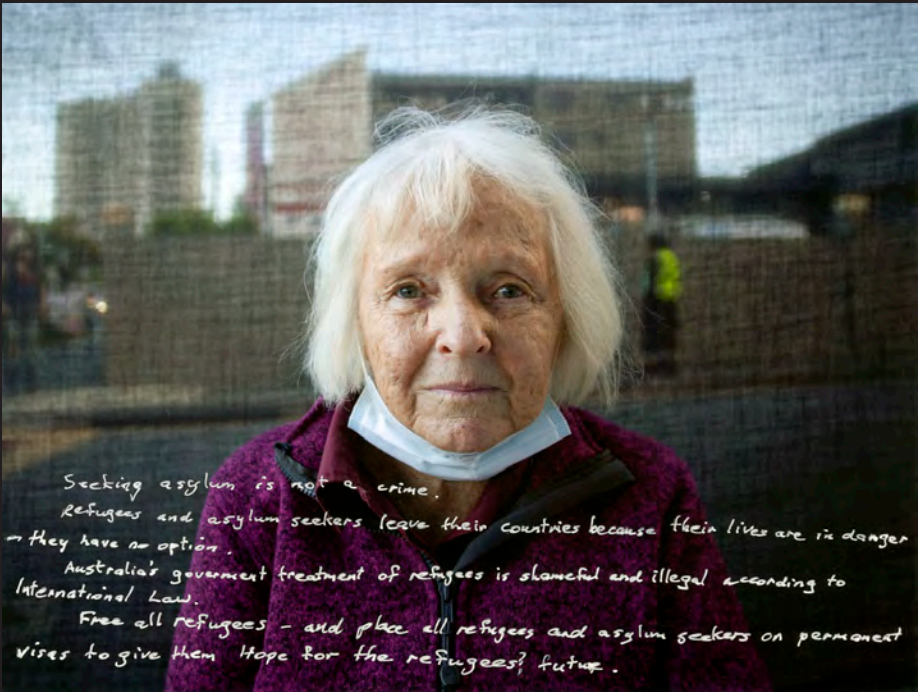


Image 1: Barb Nielsen: 'Seeking asylum is not a crime'



Image 2: Jarrah Kershaw: 'Standing in solidarity with guys in Kangaroo Point . '



Image 3: Jack Shaw: 'Open when someone in danger knocks.'



Image 4: Marisol: "I have a refugee background."

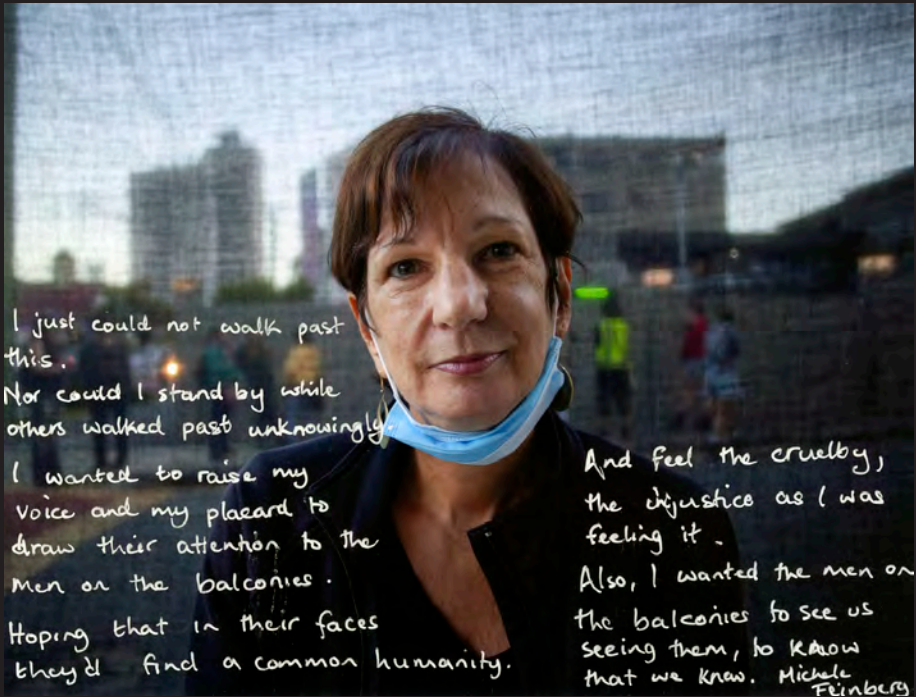


Image 5: Michele Feinberg: 'I just could not walk past this.'

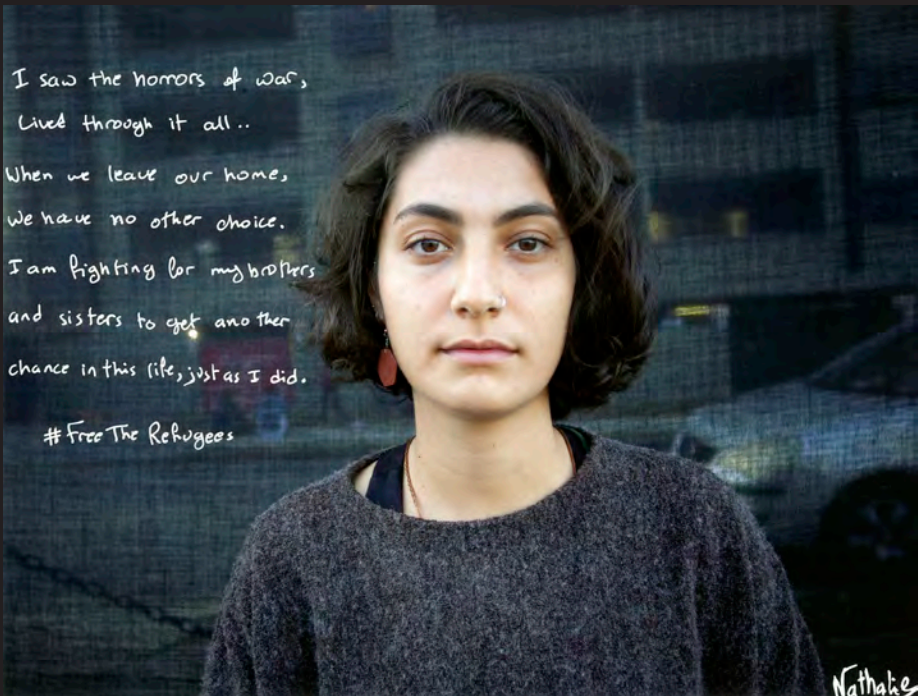


Image 6: Nathalie: 'I am fighting for my brothers and sisters.'



Image 7: Sam Woripa Watson: 'An injustice to one is an injustice to all.'

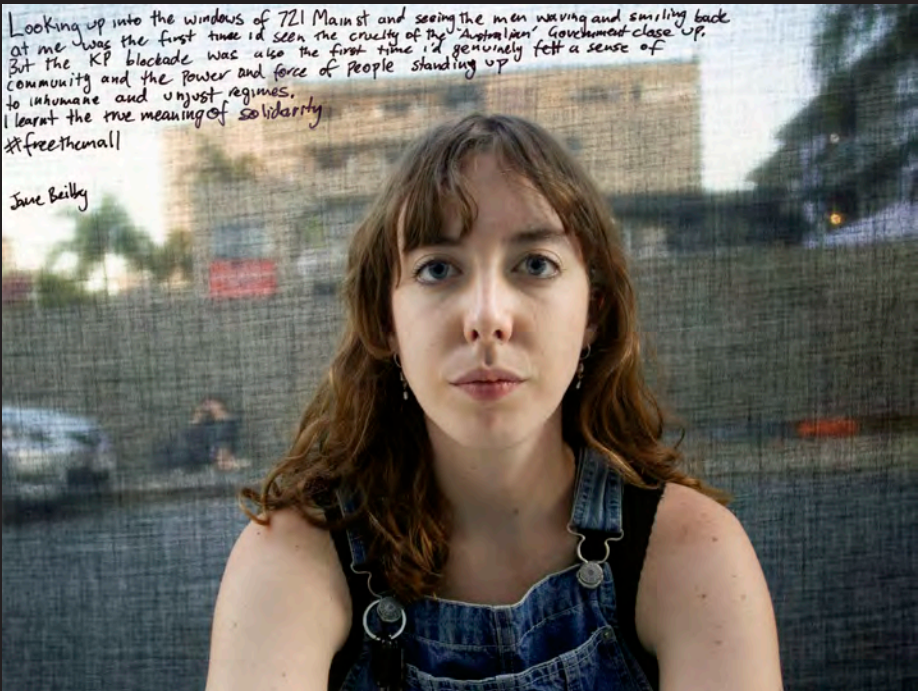


Image 8: Jane Beilby: 'I've seen the cruelty of the "Australian" government closeup.'

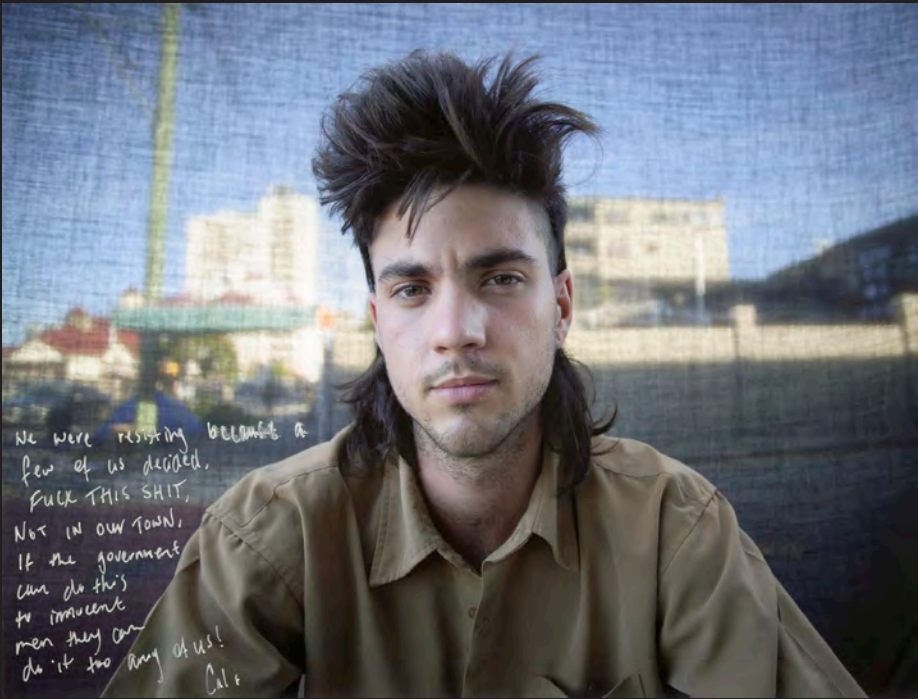


Image 9: Cal: 'If the government can do this, they can do it to any of us.'

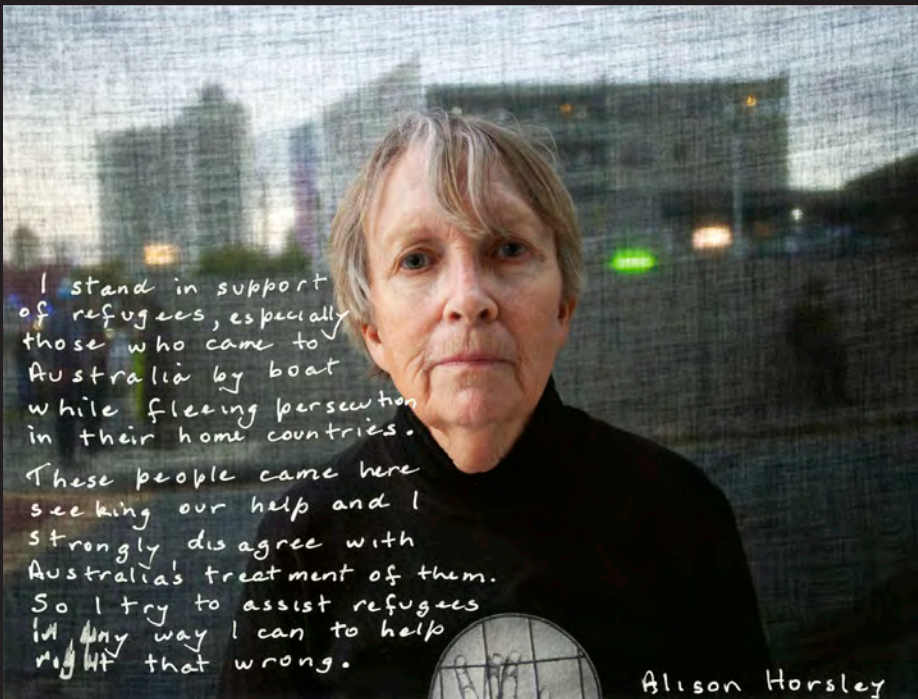


Image 10: Alison Horsley: 'I stand in support of refugees.'

No one deserves the treatment that you have experienced at the hands of so called "Australia". I stand in strength and solidarity with you now and in the future. All my love, Jacqui.



Image 11: Jacqui: 'No one deserves the treatment that you have experienced. . .'

Indefinitely detaining people is a shameful blight on my hometown Brisbane.  
Cameron Gaffney



Image 12: Cameron Gaffney: 'Indefinitely detaining people is a shame.'



Image 13: Lux Adams: 'How can someone not feel compelled to protest?'



Image 14: Clancy Smith: 'Australia [has never] treated refugees with dignity.'



Image 15: Cassidy Chapman: 'Strong communities can win out over oppression.'



Image 16: Beatrice: 'It is my duty to my ancestors to be here.'



The standard you walk past is the standard you accept. And I don't accept this. It is the state sanctioned torture of human beings. This is just wrong. Fiona Carlin



Image 17: Fiona Carlin: 'I don't accept this.'

"da liberta non è un regalo ma una conquista."  
I Refuse to see innocent people imprisoned and tortured. This immense pain, cruelty, fear and hate cannot be normalised. They are humans, just like us. If you were them you would want someone fighting for your freedom. Their dreams cannot breathe, Their heart cannot heal, Free them!  
Martha Barbocini



Image 18: Martha: 'I refuse to see innocent men in prison and tortured.'

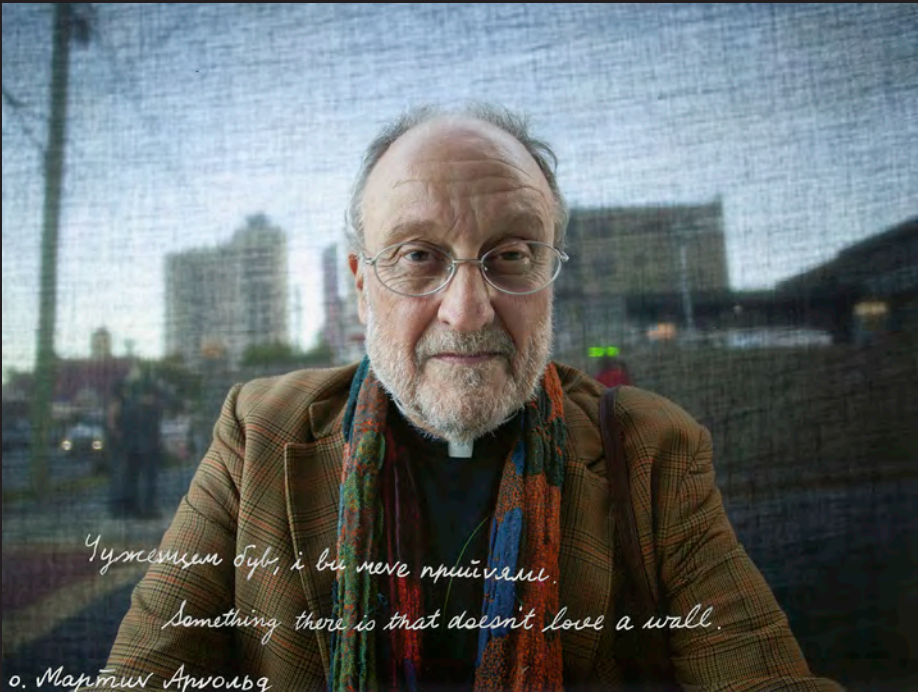


Image 19: Father Martin Arnold: 'Something there that doesn't love a wall.'



Image 20: Frederika Steen: 'For God's sake! Australians are better than this . . .'

## *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies*

Research Institute For Islands and Sustainability  
University of the Ryukyus



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*Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* is a peer reviewed journal published by the Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability (RIIS) at the University of the Ryukyus. We seek papers written in English on issues and topics related to islands and islandness. The journal welcomes papers, forum essays, interviews, and book reviews with topics that deal with interests or issues that are parallel to those faced in Okinawa with an interdisciplinary and/or comparative lens. The journal accepts submission at any time of the year, but by convention we generally consider papers that have been submitted by June 30th (Japan Standard Time) for publication for the issue of that academic year in Japan (April-March). The issue is scheduled to be published both open access annually in March.

We also welcome proposals for special issues throughout the year on topics related to islands, islandness, and archipelago. In the past, we have successfully collaborated with the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI) on *Island Cultures and Heritage: Open and Continuous Reflections* (Volume 3, 2022), *Resilience and Vitality* (Volume 3.2, 2022), and on *Island Activisms* (Volume 4, 2023) with Evangelia Papoutsaki, Tiara R. Na'puti, and Marina Karides.

For the most updated submission guidelines, please visit our website at <http://riis.skr.u-ryukyu.ac.jp/publications/periodical-publications/ijos/>. If you have any questions regarding submission details and manuscript style, please contact the *OJIS* office at [riis@riis.skr.u-ryukyu.ac.jp](mailto:riis@riis.skr.u-ryukyu.ac.jp). We look forward to receiving papers, creative pieces, and book reviews.

## OBITUARIES

# Shirley Shackleton

## A Timor-Leste hero's quest for truth

26 December 1931 – 15 January 2023

**Abstract:** Shirley Shackleton said that after her husband Greg was killed in Timor-Leste in October 1975, for seven weeks she became a campaigner for justice for the journalists murdered in Balibo, then after Indonesia invaded in December 1975 she became a campaigner for justice for all the East Timorese too. Shackleton saw the Australian government treatment of the killings as a litmus test of Australian East Timor policy. She continued to pressure the government for a Federal Police investigation of those responsible for the deaths, culminating with Australian politicians and diplomats being put in the dock and scrutinised under oath in a Coronial Inquiry in 2007.

**Keywords:** Australia, Balibó Five, East Timor, Indonesia, journalist killings, journalist safety, media freedom, obituaries, Timor-Leste

PETER CRONAU

*Investigative Journalist, Sydney*

**I**T WAS in the darkest days of the East Timor freedom struggle. Before the world again remembered East Timor. Before the Santa Cruz massacre in Dili was filmed by Max Stahl and broadcast to the world. Before John Pilger's Timor film *Death of a Nation* (1994) was shown on commercial television. Before East Timor re-entered the public consciousness in the 1990s. Long before, but not so long ago.

Shirley Shackleton said that after her husband Greg was killed in October 1975, for seven weeks she became a campaigner for justice for the journalists murdered in Balibó, then after Indonesia invaded in December 1975 she became a campaigner for justice for all the East Timorese too.

'One could hardly put the killings of five white men ahead of an entire nation,' she said (Shackleton, n.d.).

Shirley was one of the people who never gave up in the struggle for East Timor. When many forgot about East Timor as the years passed after the invasion, Shirley was a go-to person for journalists like me, needing a quote to make a short story on Timor come alive to be accepted by the editor.

Always available to journalists, she studied events in Timor, talked to every-



**Figure 1: Shirley Shackleton, an extraordinary campaigner for justice for the Balibo Five journalists murdered by Indonesian soldiers in 1975 and the East Timorese people: Her quest for the truth lives on.**

one with some knowledge of what was happening inside, and urged leaders and the public to not forget. One of an infinitely small group of external activists, aid workers, religious figures, and others, at that time, Shirley was perhaps the bravest.

By 1989, Indonesia thought they had the Timorese resistance defeated. The resistance leader Nicolau Lobato had been captured and shot dead, the capture led by the putative 2024 Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto. Successive Australian governments had officially recognised the Indonesian annexation. The brutal war and the forced famine of 1978-1980 had killed more than 180,000 people out of the 600,000 population. It was a policy of ‘pacification’, approaching genocide.

So confident in having won, the Indonesian government decided to open the territory to allow visitors in for the first time since the invasion. They had such high confidence in the Timorese staying silently cowed, they even invited Pope John Paul II to visit the largely Catholic nation in October 1989.

Shirley Shackleton decided to also visit East Timor, using the Pope’s visit as an opportunity to enter the country where her journalist husband Greg Shackleton had died in 1975. She said she wanted to see for herself the real condition of the Timorese, to see whether their lives were improving as Indonesia’s mouthpieces in the Western media made out.

In the capital Dili, she stayed at the Turismo Hotel from where Greg and

his four colleagues had left to report on the Indonesian build-up on the border at Balibó. By chance, also staying at the hotel for the Pope's visit at the same time as Shirley, was the architect of the Indonesian invasion and planner of the Balibó attack, Indonesian General Benni Murdani.

The night before the Papal Mass in Dili, Murdani walked into the Turismo courtyard puffing a huge cigar followed by deferential aides. Shirley couldn't stomach it and she stood and walked out into the night air. By the beach across the road, as Shirley describes in her brilliant 2010 book, *Circle of Silence*, she imagined the shells on the sand were pleading eyes, and the gusts of fireflies in the air, the souls of dead Timorese. She mustered her courage.

That night, secretly, dozens of young Timorese were organising banners and planning for a protest against the Indonesians in front of the world's media at the Papal Mass the next day.

In the morning, with her legs shaking, she walked to the table where the muscular much-feared general was having breakfast, and sat down. She says she resisted slapping his face, and instead after introducing herself, asked him, 'Tell me what happened at Balibó'.

The brave general—who had a fearsome reputation, who had once commanded the army parachute assault in the invasion of West Papua, who had planned the invasion of East Timor, who had dined with and seduced the Australian ambassador in Jakarta, who had condemned the five journalists in Balibó to army commanders on the ground, who had toured Dili on the morning Australian journalist Roger East was captured and murdered by his soldiers, who had also ordered the shooting of hundreds of anti-government demonstrators in Jakarta—was gutless in the face of a little 58-year-old widow.

'He denied any knowledge of the fate of the Balibó Five or Roger East,' Shirley wrote.

Later that day the young Timorese protesters carried out their plan and suffered beatings, arrests and more, at the hands of the embarrassed Indonesian authorities.

Shirley on that journey did, however, discover some of the truth of what had happened to Greg and his four colleagues in the mountain town of Balibó on 15 October 1975. An Indonesian military officer she met in a park in Dili wanted to speak. He hesitantly told her how they were shot, stabbed and mutilated, some having their genitals cut off and stuffed in their mouths, an Indonesian Kopassus special forces 'trade mark'. This image would live on in Shirley forever.

In November 1991, a huge rally of mainly young students in Dili gathered at the Santa Cruz cemetery for the funeral of a student stabbed to death by Indonesia's thugs. The cemetery was to become the death site of 271 of the young people who were shot and bludgeoned to death by Indonesian soldiers. Massacres such as this had been done many times before in Timor, but this time was different.

It was filmed by journalist Max Stahl, whose smuggled tapes put Indonesia's crimes on television across the globe (Stahl & Gordon, 1992).

Following the massacre and excuses from Western politicians and diplomats, Shirley immediately found another opportunity to confront the Indonesian authorities. She was inspired to join a small Portuguese passenger ship, *Lusitania Expresso*, trying to take aid to the Timorese people. In March 1992, after threats from the Indonesian Navy, the voyage of the ship was halted off the coast of Timor as three Indonesian warships blocked the ship's path.

Three years later on 16 October 1995, on the 20th anniversary of the Balibó murders, Shirley spoke at a seminar held by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at the University of Technology Sydney, while I was the centre director. Late that night after the event, Shirley took action to formally confront the Australian government by writing a demand to the Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. It called for the government to once and finally hold a formal official government investigation into the deaths.

The ensuing Sherman Inquiry reported in 1996, but it was a sham. It had been apparently infiltrated by a suspicious witness unfortunately furnished to the inquiry by journalist Jill Jolliffe in Lisbon. The witness provided fake details not supported by dozens of other witnesses. To the delight of both the Australian and Indonesian governments, the Sherman report could then claim the deaths had been accidental and that the journalists were 'caught in the crossfire'.

This contradicted everything Shirley, and others, had previously learned of the killings, and she called out the scam. She was joined by others to pressure for a recall of the Inquiry. After new witnesses appeared on ABC TV, in 1997 the Second Sherman Inquiry was called and stated finally that it appeared the journalists were intentionally killed.

Global events were to overtake the glacial approach of the governments to the independence calls of the East Timorese. Shirley's ultimate victory over the murderous generals, the lying diplomats, the cowering politicians, came when in 1999 the East Timorese voted in a UN-supervised plebiscite to be free.

Campaigning and pressure from the supporters of East Timor, of which Shirley was a leading member, had finally found fertile ground the year before. With the fall of the Indonesian president General Suharto during the Asian financial crisis, the then-Labor foreign affairs shadow minister, Laurie Brereton, decided the party's policy on East Timor was untenable—he moved the party to adopt a policy supporting independence in Timor.

The Liberal government, facing the looming 1998 election, had to counter this popular policy. PM Howard tried to have Indonesia take the heat out of the issue by announcing a referendum to be held in 10 to 20 years' time. This cynical policy of accommodating genocide backfired on Howard, and Indonesia called for an almost immediate referendum.

At that point, thousands of Australians and others around the world, came out to demonstrate support for the Timorese, and to pressure the Australian government to lead the INTERFET peacekeeping mission. History shows when the referendum was held in September 1999, the Timorese voted to be free. Indonesia though wrought a terrible retribution on their former colony, destroying the majority of buildings and killing around 2000 more Timorese, before leaving.

The world celebrated with the Timorese the formal independence ceremonies in the capital Dili on 25 May 2002. At that moment a new phase of rebuilding became East Timor's priority. Shirley too threw herself into these efforts. For Shirley the campaign for the Timorese did not stop with their liberation.

Shirley participated in dozens of documentaries and thousands of news stories on East Timor for the world's media. Her trip back to Timor with SBS journalist Mark Davis in 2000 to document the invasion and the journalists' killing, is one of the most memorable (Davis, 2000).

At times, Shirley could be abrasive and off-putting to some around her, but her voice was able to cut through when others often did not. Described as 'a true giant of democracy', her devotion to the cause had a huge personal cost.

Shirley became integral to the formation of the Friendship Groups programme to link Australian communities with communities in East Timor. Dozens of similar friendship projects have since flourished around the country.

Shirley worked to set up the Balibó House Trust with other Balibó journalists' family members and supporters, to raise funds. In October 2003 the Balibó House, where her husband Greg and his colleagues had sheltered before their murders, was opened and handed to the Balibó community as a community learning centre.

The Trust has gone on to construct and support other community facilities, including a kindergarten, several schools, and a dental clinic. They also supported renovations to the old Portuguese Balibó fort, and in 2015 the Balibó Fort Hotel was opened. It provides a beautiful holiday location, as well as a point for historical learning.

Shirley saw the Australian government treatment of the killings as a litmus test of Australian East Timor policy. She continued to pressure the government for a Federal Police investigation of those responsible for the deaths. In 2007 with this and great pressure from other family members, a Coronial Inquiry into the Balibó death of Channel Nine cameraman, Brian Peters, was opened in Sydney (Balibo five deliberately killed, 2007).

For the first time, Australian politicians and diplomats were to be put in the dock and scrutinised under oath. Then-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was questioned for three hours. He gave evidence that he didn't know about the impending attack on Balibó, although other evidence showed intelligence reports had been sent to Canberra giving advance notice.



Then-government ministers and officials testified they had no knowledge the journalists had travelled to Balibó, despite many in Timor at the time knowing of their plans. No warning of the invasion and impending attack on Balibó was ever passed to the journalists. Their fate had been sealed.

‘Dead men can’t tell stories, so it’s left to their poor old wives to do it for them,’ Shirley told reporters outside the hearing.

The NSW Coroner ruled that the Balibó Five had been deliberately stabbed and shot while surrendering by Indonesian special forces, led by Captain Yunus Yosfiah, who had later, in an act showing Indonesia’s lack of remorse, become Indonesia’s Minister for Communications (NSW Bar Association, 2007).

For seven years, a Federal Police investigation that sprang from the Coronial Inquiry, limped on. Despite Shirley’s ongoing pushing and prodding, she smelled a rat. After several years without ever interviewing any of the accused Indonesian killers, the AFP investigation was closed in 2014 due to ‘insufficient evidence’ (Davidson, 2014).

In 2009, Shirley visited the Indonesian capital Jakarta, where her husband’s and colleagues’ remains have lain interned since 1975. Sitting on the grave, Shirley declared to gathered cameras that Greg’s ‘grave is a crime scene’. She called on the Indonesian and Australian governments to cooperate to have her husband’s remains returned to Australia for burial. The burnt bone fragments, believed to be of four of the murdered men, remain buried in a cemetery plot in Jakarta.

An Australian-made feature film *Balibó* was released in 2009, presenting a largely historical account of the killing of the five journalists at Balibó and that of journalist Roger East in Dili (Connolly, 2009). In Indonesia, the film was banned. Shirley confronted Indonesian authorities again by travelling to Indonesia to give evidence in a Jakarta court to try to overturn the ban on the film. Although the film remained banned, blackmarket copies of the DVD became a best seller on the streets of Jakarta.

Meanwhile Shirley was working on her autobiographical account of her life and struggle. But it is so much more, being a cold case investigation and an expose of political crimes and deceit. Her book *The Circle of Silence* was released by small publisher Murdoch Books. And it certainly deserves now to be republished by a larger publishing house.

The book won the 2010 Walkley Award for best book. At the gala televised event in front of hundreds of gathered journalists she said, ‘We need to have some justice paid because our Australian journalists in the field are going to go on being targeted, because governments have colluded to cover up for the murderers.’

Conscious of the wider struggle by the media for truth-telling, she also declared, ‘Our democracy is under threat again because of the [crackdown on] WikiLeaks.’

The Timor-Leste government in 2013 recognised Shirley for her efforts over 40 years. In a ceremony in the capital Dili, she was awarded the Order of Timor-Leste medal in recognition of her life's work to support the independence and the future success of the Timorese people. And in Australia in 2015 she finally saw the unveiling of a War Correspondents' Memorial at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—the memory of the journalists would live forever.

And Shirley was far from done yet.

In 2019, at the age of 87, she travelled again to Dili to deliver a petition of 4000 Timorese signatures to the visiting Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The petition demanded the dropping of charges against lawyer Bernard Collaery and Australian spy 'Witness K', who were then facing charges over revelations of the 2004 bugging by Australia of Timor-Leste's cabinet's discussion on oil and gas.

At the Palacio do Governo in Dili, she entered the official welcoming ceremony and sought to present the petition. Blocked and harassed by officials, she said, 'Don't bully me. I'm here to see the prime minister.' She later delivered the petition to the Foreign Minister, but not before getting the lion's share of attention by the assembled media to gain coverage of the spy trials underway in Australia.

In the next years, Shirley again travelled to Timor, assisting and helping write a film being made by two filmmakers, Luigi Acquisto and Lurdes Pires. The film takes a fresh look at the Timorese struggle for independence, through the eyes of Shirley's search for the truth over the journalists' murders. Shirley was able to see the completed film in late 2022. The film, *Circle of Silence* was released in early 2023 (Acquisto & Pereira, 2023).

After the trips Shirley continued with her writing and campaign work, but time, and a life in the struggle, were beginning to tell. In Melbourne after a lingering illness, Shirley finally slipped away on 15 January 2023, at the fine age of 91, in the presence of her son Evan and close friends.

Following Shirley's death, the accolades were many from activists and leaders alike. Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos-Horta thanked her in a statement and said that now her 'soul rests with us in Mt Ramelau', the highest mountain in the country where the Timorese believe the spirits of their deceased reside.

In a move that would have pleased Shirley no end, Ramos-Horta also used his statement about her death to call on the Australian government to immediately, and finally, release all the remaining secret government documents relating to the Indonesian invasion.

Shirley's quest for the truth lives on.

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*Peter Cronau is an Australian journalist who has reported on East Timor since the 1980s in numerous newspapers, radio, and in the 2000s for Australian ABC TV. In 2007 he and his team was awarded the Gold Walkley Award for journalism for a report on an outbreak of political violence in East Timor. He has since produced reports on the Timor Sea gas and oil dealings, and the Australian bugging operation in Timor and its aftermath. In 2000 he helped establish the Friends of Maliana-Leichhardt friendship group and helped his sons raise funds for Timorese communities at their local school.*

@PeterCronau

# Jill Jolliffe

## Running for her life

7 February 1945 – 2 December 2022

**Abstract:** Journalist and author Jill Jolliffe’s work took her around the world, including 16 years in Portugal, reporting on corruption and injustices, including the killing of five Australian, British and New Zealand journalists at Balibo on the eve of the Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste in 1975. Her commitment to East Timorese independence endured over decades. Paying tribute, Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão, said: ‘Jill was an activist, a rebel and a fighter . . . She is one of us.’

**Keywords:** Australia, Balibo Five, foreign correspondents, Indonesia, journalist killings, journalist safety, media freedom, obituaries, Portugal, Timor-Leste

FIONA GRUBER

*Journalist and radio producer*

Journalists often lead peripatetic lives, but few have travelled more than Australian foreign correspondent Jill Jolliffe, whose career included covering war in Angola, investigating secret Nazi gold in Portugal and documenting the sex-slave trade in Europe. She wrote for newspapers and news agencies across the world on a wide variety of subjects, but will always be associated most strongly with Timor-Leste and its struggle for independence from Indonesia.

Jolliffe witnessed Indonesia’s military incursions first-hand when she was part of a student delegation visiting the new nation in 1975 to celebrate its release from Portuguese colonial rule. A group of journalists covering the invasion for the Seven and Nine networks asked her about conditions at Balibo, a town on the border with Indonesian West Timor that she had just visited.

It was a bush warfare situation out there, she told them, but if they kept their heads down they should be okay. Regardless of their precautions, though, all five journalists in the group were murdered by members of the Indonesian military and became known as the Balibo Five. Journalist Roger East, who was sent to investigate their deaths, was also executed.

Jill Jolliffe—who died in Melbourne on 2 December 2022 aged 77—began doggedly and dangerously seeking the truth about the murders and reporting on conditions more broadly in Timor-Leste. She spent 20 years in Portugal working with the Timorese resistance-in-exile and making secret visits to the island



**Figure 1: Foreign correspondent Jill Jolliffe who covered Timor-Leste at the time of the Indonesian invasion: She set up the Living Memory Project for recording the testimonies of former political prisoners and victims of torture and her reporting played a crucial part at the 2007 NSW Coronial Inquiry into one of the murders of the Balibo Five.**

(from which she was banned by the Indonesian government). On one occasion she was captured and briefly imprisoned. Her determination to keep the story alive often met with media indifference and Australian government attempts to play down a complex geopolitical situation.

Her first book, *East Timor: Nationalism and Colonialism*, was published in 1978, three years after Indonesia's invasion, and her 2001 study, *Cover-Up*, became the basis of the highly regarded feature film *Balibo* in 2009.

Timor-Leste regained its independence after much bloodshed in 2002. By then, Jolliffe had set up the Living Memory Project, which recorded the testimonies

of former political prisoners and victims of torture. Her reporting also played a crucial part at the 2007 NSW coroner's enquiry into one of the murders, which finally established the role of the Indonesian military in all the journalists' deaths.

'I was told recently that my coverage of the Balibo story was what really alerted people to the East Timor issue and that began it all,' Jolliffe said in a documentary we made together for ABC Radio National in 2017. 'I felt proud of that... An injustice is an injustice and it doesn't change with time and people need to be brought to account.'

After moving back to Australia in 1999, Jolliffe lived in Darwin and then Melbourne, where she wrote *Finding Santana* (2010) about her secret return to Timor-Leste for a rendezvous with guerrilla leader Nino Konis Santana. But her last book, published in 2014, was quite different.

*Run for Your Life* covered her unhappy childhood with outwardly respectable but violent adoptive parents in the Victorian seaside town of Barwon Heads, and her political awakening at Monash University. Her well-honed sense of rebellion made her a natural for membership of the radical Monash University Labor Club, and her achievements included disrupting a Billy Graham evangelical gathering and being one of the only female speakers at Melbourne's 1970 anti-Vietnam war march. She also ran a feminist bookshop—Alice's Restaurant—in Greville Street, Prahran, and helped found an early feminist magazine, *Vashti's Voice*.

Jolliffe found out later that her adoptive mother had doxed her in to ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) for subversive activities. When she gained access to her file she was amazed and amused by its size.

It was only when she reached her sixties that Jolliffe decided to risk finding out about her birth parents, and that story too is covered in *Run for Your Life*. To her relief (and with a great degree of trepidation) she discovered that her mother was still alive and willing to meet. 'I've thought about you every day' were the first words she said to Jolliffe when they spoke by phone.

Having known Jolliffe since her return from Portugal I was honoured to be asked to drive her to the rendezvous with her mother at an anonymous bus stop in a northern suburb in 2013. The woman we saw walking briskly towards us was remarkably like Jill, with her short crop and outfit of baggy trousers, loose shirt and small beaded necklace. Given the age gap was only 15 years, she could have been Jill's older sister.

The hug they shared was their first bodily contact in 68 years. They quickly established how much they had in common: both were atheists, passionate about history and politics, and fiercely independent. As Jill said at the time, 'I think we shared more than a few genes.'

Although her mother died two years later, the reunion was profoundly healing for both of them.

Jill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at the end of 2016. It was a particularly

cruel diagnosis for a woman whose life had been spent travelling and uncovering truths in very dark corners of the world, and she took it badly.

In the radio documentary about her life, we covered her medical diagnosis and its ramifications, which included severely curtailed freedoms.

As she commented rather bitterly, ‘People say that my capacity to cope with [dementia] is very limited but I don’t see it that way, because I have spent most of my life as a foreign correspondent and I’ve been under fire from the Indonesian army and from the American air force and I’ve come up against quite hair-raising situations; I’ve survived all of these, some people might say through my rat cunning.’

Jolliffe was nuggetty, cynical, sometimes ornery but also generous, witty and fiercely principled. She was also a very fine journalist and, for the people of Timor-Leste, a hero.

One of many fine tributes to her came from Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão: ‘Jill was an activist, a rebel and a fighter. At great cost to herself, she persistently exposed the reality of the Indonesian military occupation of Timor-Leste and supported the struggle of our people. She is one of us.’

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*Fiona Gruber is a journalist and radio producer. With her husband Mark Williams and friend, Ann Brady, she became Jill Jolliffe’s legal guardian in 2016. This obituary was originally published in Inside Story on 16 December 2022.*

# Tui Rererangi Walsh O'Sullivan

The 'flying bird in the sky'

4 July 1940 – 20 May 2023

**Abstract:** In 1977, Tui O'Sullivan, Te Rarawa became the first woman and the first Māori appointed to a permanent position at what was then the Auckland Technical Institute (it became Auckland University of Technology in 2000). At AUT, she developed the first Women on Campus group. She helped establish the newspaper *Password*, a publication introducing new English speakers to New Zealand society and culture. She taught courses on the Treaty of Waitangi when the treaty was a subversive idea. She contributed to the change in social and political thought that has brought the treaty—that her tupuna signed—to greater public influence. The justice it promises was a major theme in Tui's working life. She was also a founding member of the Pacific Media Centre advisory board and advocate for *Pacific Journalism Review* from 2007 until she retired in 2018.

**Keywords:** culture, diversity, history, inclusiveness, Māori educators, obituary, social justice, society, Treaty of Waitangi

DOMINIC O'SULLIVAN

Charles Sturt University, Canberra

**K**ia ora koutau katoa. Kia ora mo o koutou haerenga i te ahiahi nei. Kia ora mo o koutou aroha, o koutou karakia mo Tui i te wa o tona harenga ki te rangi.

I whanau mai a Tui, kei Kaitaia, hei uri o Te Rarawa, i te tau kotahi mano, iwa rau, wha tekau.

Tui was born in Kaitaia in 1940—exactly 100 years after her great-great grandfather, Te Riipi, signed the Treaty of Waitangi. She was descended, too, from a Scotsman, John Borrowdale who named his boat *Half Caste*—after his children. Such was the mystery of race, life and family in 19th century Northland.

Tui was the last born child of Jack and Maata Walsh, and sister of John, Pat, Rose and Michael. Maata was Te Rarawa, from Pukepoto. Tui lies alongside her at Rangihoukaha Urupa in Pukepoto. She was named Tui Rererangi, the flying bird in the sky, in honour of her uncle Billy Busby—a World War II fighter pilot.





**Figure 1: Tui Rererangi Walsh O'Sullivan: 'She taught courses on the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi when the treaty was a subversive idea. She contributed to the change in social and political thought that has brought the treaty—that her tupuna signed—to greater public influence. The justice it promises was a major theme in Tui's working life.'**

Maata died when Tui was two years old. She and Rose and their brothers were raised by their father, Jack Walsh, his mother Maud and his sister Lil. Maud was born in Townsville. Her father was a lacemaker from Nottingham who emigrated, with his wife, firstly to Australia and then to the far North of New Zealand.

Jack was born in Houhora and died when Tui was 23. Jack's father emigrated from Limerick.

Early in the next century, the writer Frank McCourt described Limerick, just as it had been in Timothy Walsh's time, 'It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.'

It was a better world these people sought, in and with, Te Rarawa.

Tui's story—almost 83 years—spans a time of rapid social, political and technological development in New Zealand and the world. Her contribution was transformative for the many, many, people she encountered in her professional, social and family lives.



**Figure 2: Tui O'Sullivan beside the University of the South Pacific's Dr Shailendra Singh (right), then Auckland University of Technology vice-chancellor Derek McCormack (centre) and with members of the *Pacific Journalism Review* editorial board and supporters on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the research journal.**

Tui's schooling began at Ahipara Native School. Transcending the government's official purpose of the Native School, of 'lead[ing] the lad to be a good farmer and the girl to be a good farmer's wife'—Tui left primary school with a Ngarimu VC and 28th Maori Battalion Scholarship to St Mary's College in Ponsonby. Some of her friends from St Mary's were present for the memorial mass, and her granddaughter, named in her honour, started at the school in 2023.

Disrupting social orthodoxy was Tui's life. On leaving school, she enrolled at the University of Auckland, completing a degree in English and anthropology part-time over the next 20 years. During these years she trained as a primary school teacher, working in Auckland, Wellington, Cambridge, Athens and London.

In the past week, we took a phone call from somebody Tui had taught at Kelburn Normal School in the 1960s. Such was Tui's impact.

I was born in Hamilton in 1970. Deirdre in Cambridge in 1973. We moved to Northcote Point in 1975 and, in 1977, Tui became the first woman and the first Māori appointed to a permanent position at what was then the Auckland Technical Institute (it became Auckland University of Technology, or AUT, in 2000). I remember her telling me she was going for a job interview and coming into this Church to pray that she would be successful. Deirdre and I did our primary schooling at St Mary's.

Being a working single parent in the 1970s and 80s was hard work. It did not reflect social norms, but the Auckland University of Technology, as it's become, provided Tui, Deirdre and me with security and a home—a home that has been Tui's since 1978.

At AUT, she developed the first Women on Campus group. She helped establish the newspaper *Password*, a publication introducing new English speakers to New Zealand society and culture. She taught courses on the Treaty of Waitangi when the treaty was a subversive idea. She contributed to the change in social and political thought that has brought the treaty—that her tupuna signed—to greater public influence. The justice it promises was a major theme in Tui's working life.

Tui was interested in justice more broadly, inspired by her Catholic faith, love of people and profound compassion. These values stood out in the memories of Tui that people shared during her tangihanga at Te Uri o Hina Marae.

On Twitter, like them all, a social media that Tui never mastered, a former student, some 40 years later, recalled 'the sage advice' given to a 'young fella from Kawerau'. As Tui remembered, for a Māori kid from the country, moving to town can be moving to a different world. In a media interview on her retirement, she said: 'Coming from a town where you didn't know names, but everyone was Aunty or Uncle, Auckland was by far a change of scenery'.

In Auckland, Tui knew everybody. Always the last to leave a social function, and always the first to help people in need.

Tui helped establish the university's marae in 1997. She would delight in sharing the marae with students and colleagues. Just as she delighted in her family—especially her grandchildren, Lucy, Xavier, Joey, Tui and Delphi.

She remembered Sarah Therese. Her grandchildren tell of their special times with her, and her deep interest in their lives. Last year, Deirdre and Malcolm and their children moved from Wellington to be close by. Joey and I came from Canberra for the year.

We talked and helped as we could. My job was to buy the smokes. I remember saying one day, 'I'm going to the supermarket, what would you like for dinner'—'a packet of cigarettes and a bottle of wine'. That was Tui's diet and she loved it. And it was only in the last few months that she stopped going out.

At the wake for her brother John's wife, Maka, in November, she was still going at three in the morning. I worried that three bottles of wine might not have been the best idea at that stage in life, but she was well enough to do it, and loved the company of her family as we loved being with her.

In December 2022, she took Joey and Tui to mark their birthdays at the revolving restaurant at Auckland's Sky Tower, where she also joined in the celebration of Lucy's 18th birthday a couple of months earlier. Delphi liked to take her out for a pancake. She loved Xavier's fishing and rugby stories.

Over the last year, she was not well enough to watch her grandchildren's

sport as she would have liked, take them to the beach as she used to love, or attend important events in our lives. But she did what she could right until the end.

My last conversation with her, the day before she died, was slow and tired but cogent and interesting. We discussed the politics of the day, as we often did. She asked after Joey and Lucy, and after Cara—always concerned that they were doing well. She didn't speak for long, which was out of character, but gave no reason to think that this would be the last time we spoke.

Her copy of my book, *Indigeneity, Culture and the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, published in April 2023, is still in the post. She did not know that it was dedicated to her and that I had explained, in the acknowledgements, that the reasons needed more words than the book itself.

That was supposed to have been for her to read, and for her to learn, that the dedication was also from her grandchildren. She was the immediate and unanimous choice when I asked them, 'to whom should I dedicate this book'.

No reira, ka nui te mihi ki tena ki tena o koutou. Kia ora mo o koutou ma-naaki me te aroha.

Kia ora huihui tatau katoa!

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*Dr Dominic O'Sullivan, Tui's son and professor of political science at Charles Sturt University, delivered this eulogy at her memorial mass at St Mary's Catholic Church, Northcote, on 27 May 2023. It is republished by Pacific Journalism Review with the whānau's permission. Tui O'Sullivan was also a foundation advisory board member of the Pacific Media Centre in 2007 and was a feisty advocate for the centre and its research publication, PJR, until she retired in 2018.*

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## REVIEWS

*DR JOHAN LIDBERG is head of journalism at Monash University. He has a special forces background and has twice served with the UN Peacekeeping Forces in Cyprus and Lebanon.*

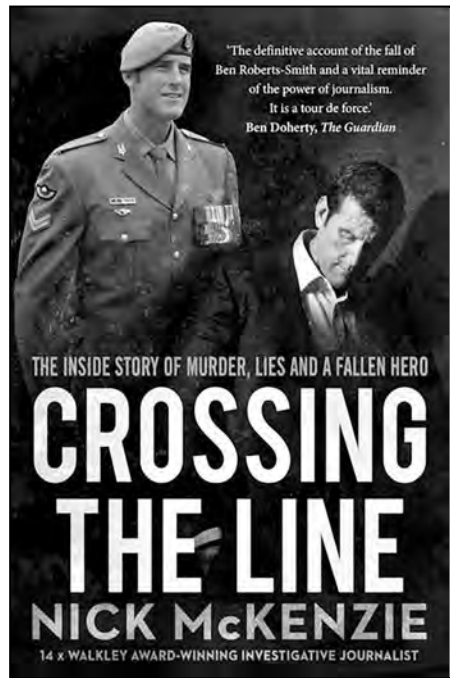
# SAS exposé a masterclass in investigative journalism

***Crossing The Line: The inside story of murder, lies and a fallen hero***, by Nick McKenzie. Sydney: Hachette Australia. 2023. 454 pages. ISBN 9780733650437

**I** WILL forever remember choking on my morning coffee when I read *The Age* on 8 June 2018. Nick McKenzie and Chris Master's article detailing the alleged war crimes in Afghanistan of a highly decorated Australian war hero was confronting, to say the least. 'This is crazy brave,' I remember thinking. 'I really hope they've done their homework.'

Not surprisingly, they had. I say not surprisingly given that Masters comes out from the golden age of Australian investigative journalism in the 1980s; his reporting—along with that of the *Courier-Mail*'s Phil Dichie—helped expose in the Joh Bielke-Petersen government and bring it down.

The opening of McKenzie's book,



*Crossing The Line: The inside story of murder, lies and a fallen hero*, makes one reflect on how Australian investigative journalism still manages to thrive, making crucial contributions to our liberal democracy and holding power to account.

To list a few of the past decade: McKenzie and team reporting on Melbourne's Crown Casino; ABC *Four Corners* and Louise Milligan, reporting on child abuse in the Catholic Church leading to the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse; *Crikey*'s Amber Schultz reporting on the abuse of state guardianship; Nine's Adele Ferguson exposing malpractice in the banking and financial sector regarding financial advisory services.

These examples are even more impressive given the severe restrictions

on public interest and investigative journalism in Australia, where power elites employ ‘lawfare’ to smother public interest journalism.

However, McKenzie’s and Masters’ reporting efforts on Ben Roberts-Smith goes beyond any previous investigative journalism undertaking in Australia. McKenzie’s book, in forensic detail, tells the inside story of the Roberts Smith reporting project, reflecting the courage required to shed light on the nation-forming myth of the ANZAC legend and Australia’s infatuation with war heroes.

To dare to challenge the reputation of a living war hero is one of the greatest challenges in public interest journalism in Australia. We should all be deeply grateful to McKenzie and Masters for igniting a much-needed, respectful national discourse on our relationship with the ANZAC legend. This relationship is far from healthy as McKenzie’s book so clearly and eloquently illustrates.

*Crossing The Line* resonates strongly with me. I have deployed twice with UN peace-keeping forces in Cyprus and Lebanon, and although I’ve never witnessed the alleged savagery of Ben Roberts-Smith and some of his colleagues, I have seen his archetypes—the bullying, the lack of empathy, the harm caused to those deployed too many times into theatres of war.

The book outlines in detail how sections of the Australian power elite tried to stop the truth from being reported, including Brendon Nelson, the former defence minister and former

director of the Australian War Memorial; Kerry Stokes, the Seven West Media billionaire who bankrolled Roberts-Smith’s defamation case to the tune of tens of millions of dollars and, disappointingly, decorated investigative journalist Ross Coulthart, who was allegedly hired as a PR consultant to pressure *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* to not run the stories.

Roberts-Smith’s defenders corralled around him, knowing the Australian Defence Force—instigated Brereton inquiry into alleged war crimes in Afghanistan was ongoing. Surely this should have sparked some doubt in their support for the disgraced war hero, especially given the number of current and former SAS soldiers—in luding former SAS captain and current Liberal member in the House of Representative, Andrew Hastie—who spoke up about the problematic culture in the SAS.

I know from personal experience how incredibly strong the code of silence is within special forces units. The fact that McKenzie and Masters, from the first article, had numerous SAS sources indicated they were reporting the truth and had done due diligence in ensuring they could back these deeply serious claims.

Whatever happens next to Roberts-Smith (and this case still has a long way to run), the power elite that backed him and tried to stifle the truth should be held to account. Perhaps this will happen with each indictment we are bound to get from the Office of the Special Investigator acting on the Brereton report, which found there was credible evidence of 25 Australian

soldiers being involved in 39 murders of Afghans during their deployments to Afghanistan.


The current chair of the Australian War Memorial, Kim Beazley, has a major challenge in how the memorial deals with our, allegedly, disgraced war heroes, starting with the life-sized Ben Roberts-Smith portrait and exhibition.

The book is a complete page-turner and a master class in investigative journalism. Tracking down the name of the victim who was kicked off a cliff and then shot in the Darwan incident is crucial in humanising a killed Afghani civilian. His name was Ali Jan. The section where McKenzie describes his trip to Afghanistan to talk to Jan's wife, Bibi, is deeply moving.

Echoing McKenzie's words, we owe an immense debt of gratitude to the SAS soldiers past and present who stood up and told the truth. They are the real heroes. As Andrew Hastie pointed out, they may have saved the SAS.

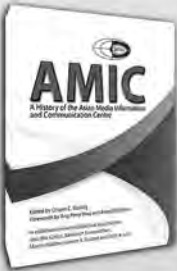
With McKenzie and Masters (and credit to both Fairfax Ltd and Nine Entertainment for backing the publications), they managed what no other liberal democracy has done to this extent so far—exposing the dirty and disgusting underbelly of war, which morally corrupts some of the people we deploy to fight in our name.

Nick McKenzie's book should be read by every Australian citizen. It will certainly be a set reading in the journalism courses I teach.




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DR HEATHER DEVERE is a peace and conflict resolution studies researcher.

## Learning from Oceania peace activists

***Peace Action: Struggles for a decolonised and demilitarised Oceania and East Asia***, edited by Valerie Morse.

Te Whanganui-A-Tara (Wellington): Left of the Equator Press. 2022. 178 pages. ISBN 9780473634452.

THE AIMS of *Peace Action* as stated by the editor, Valerie Morse, are ‘to make visible interconnections between social struggles separated by the vast expanse of Te Moana Nui-A-Kiwi [the Pacific Ocean] ... to inspire, to enrage and to educate, but most of all, to motivate people to action’ (p. 11). It is an opportunity to learn from the activists involved in these struggles.

Published by the Left of the Equator Press, there are plenty of clues to the radical ideas presented. The frontispiece points out that the publisher is anti-copyright, and the book is ‘not able to be reproduced for the purpose of profit’, is printed on 100 percent ‘post-consumer recycled paper’, and ‘bound with a hatred for the State and Capital infused in every page’.

By their nature, activists take action and *do* things rather than just speak or write about things, as is the academic tradition, so this is an important, unique and rare opportunity to learn from their



insights, knowledge, and experience.

A total of 23 contributors representing some of the diverse peoples of Aotearoa, Australia, China, Hawai’i, Japan, New Caledonia, Samoa, Tahiti, Tokelau, Tonga, and West Papua offer 13 written chapters, plus poetry, artworks, and a photo essay. The range of topics is extensive too, including the history of the Crusades and the Doctrine of Discovery, anti-militarist and anti-imperialist movements, land reclamation movements, nuclear resistance and anti-racist movements, solidarity and allyship.

Both passion and ethics are evident in the stories about involvement in decolonised movements that are ‘situated in their relevant Indigenous practice’ and anti-militarist movements that ‘actively practice peace making’ (p. 11).

While their activism is unques-

tioned, the contributors come with other impressive credentials. Not only do they actively put into practice their strong values, but many are also researchers and scholars.

Dr Pounamu Jade Aikman (Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura, Ngāti Wairere, Tainui, Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Te Rangi, Te Arawa and Ngāti Tarāwhai) holds a Fulbright Scholarship from Harvard University; Mengzhu Fu (a 1.5 generation Tauīwi Chinese member of Asians Supporting Tino Rangatira-tanga) is doing their PhD research on Indigenous struggles in Aotearoa and the Canadian-occupied Turtle Islands; Kyle Kajihiro lectures at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and is a board member of Hawai'i Peace and Justice; Yamin Kogoya is a West Papuan academic from the Yikwa-Kogoya clan of the Lani tribe in the Papuan Highlands; Ena Manuireva is an academic and writer who represents the Mā'ohi Nui people of Tahiti; Dr Jae-Eun Noh and Dr Joon-Shik Shin are Korean researchers in Australian universities; and Dr Rebekah Jaung, a health researcher, is involved in Korean New Zealanders for a Better Future.

Several of the authors are working as investigators on a project supported by the Royal Society's Marsden Fund entitled 'Matiki Mai Te Hiaroa: #ProtectIhumātao' a recent successful campaign to reclaim Māori land. These include Professor Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan (Waikato, Ngāti Mahuta and Te Ahiwaru), Frances Hancock (Irish Pākehā), Carwyn Jones (Ngāti Kahungunu), Qiane Matata-Sipu (Te Waiohua

ki te Ahiwaru me te Ākitai, Waikato Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Pīkiao), and Pania Newton (Ngāpuhi, Waikato, Ngāti Mahuta and Ngāti Maniapoto), who is co-founder and spokesperson for the SOUL/#ProtectIhumātao campaign.

Others work for climate justice, peace, Indigenous, social justice organisations, and community groups. Jungmin Choi coordinates nonviolence training at World Without War, a South Korean anti-militarist organisation based in Seoul; Mizuki Nakamura, a member of One Love Takae coordinates alternative peace tours in Japan; Tuhi-Ao Bailey (Ngāti Mutunga, Te Ātiawa and Taranaki) is chair of the Parihaka Papakāinga Trust and co-founder of Climate Justice Taranaki; Zelda Grimshaw, an artist and activist, helped coordinate the Disrupt Land Forces campaign at a major arts fair in Brisbane; and Arama Rata (Ngāruhine, Taranaki and Ngāti Maniapoto) is a researcher for WERO (Working to End Racial Oppression) and Te Kaunoti Hikahika.

Some are independent writers and artists. Emalani Case is a writer, teacher and aloha 'āina from Waimea Hawai'i; Tony Fala (who has Tokelauan, Palagi, Samoan, and Tongan ancestry) engages with urban Pacific communities in Tāmaki Makaurau; Marylou Mahe is a decolonial feminist artist from Haouaïlou in the Kanak country of Ajë-Arhö; Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou) is a researcher, author and an advocate for environmental Indigenous and human rights; and Jos Wheeler is a director of photography for film and television in Aotearoa.

Background analysis for this focus on Te Moana Nui A Kiwi provides information about the concepts of imperial masculinity, infection ideas from European maritime law *Mare Liberum*, that saw the sea as belonging to everyone. These ideas steered colonisation and placed shackles, both figuratively and physically, on Indigenous Peoples around the world.

In the 17th century, Japan occupied the country of Okinawa, now also used as a training base by the US military. European ‘explorers’ had been given ‘missions’ in the 18th century that included converting the people to Christianity and locating useful and profitable resources in far-flung countries such as Aotearoa, Australia, New Caledonia and Tahiti.

In the 19th century, Hawai’i was subject to US imperialism and militarisation. In the 20th century, Western countries were ‘liberating other nations’ and dividing them up between them, such as the US ‘liberation’ of South Korea from Japanese colonial rule. The Dutch prepared West Papua for independence in the 1960s after colonisation, but a subsequent Indonesian military invasion left the country in a worse predicament.

However, the resistance from the Indigenous Peoples has been evident from the beginnings of imperialist invasions and militarisation of the Pacific, despite the arbitrary violence that accompanied these. Resistance continues, as the contributors to *Peace Action* demonstrate, and the contributions reveal the very many faces and facets

of non-violent resistance that works towards an eventual peace with justice.

Resistance has included education, support to help self-sufficiency, medical and legal support, conscientious objection, human rights advocacy, occupation of land, coordinating media coverage, visiting sites of significance, being the voice of the movement, petitions, research, writing, organizing and joining peaceful marches, coordinating solidarity groups, making submissions, producing newsletter and community newspapers, relating stories, art exhibitions and installations, visiting churches, schools, universities, conferences, engaging with politicians, exploiting and creating digital platforms, fundraising, putting out calls for donations and hospitality, selling T-shirts and tote bags, awareness-raising events, hosting visitors, making and serving food, bearing witness, musical performances, photographic exhibitions, film screenings, and songs on CDs.

In order to mobilise people, activists have been involved in political engagement, public education, multi-media engagement, legal action, protests, rallies, marches, land and military site occupations, disruption of events, producing food from the land, negotiating treaties and settlements, cultural revitalisation, community networking and voluntary work, local and international solidarity, *talanoa*, open discussions, radical history teaching, printmaking workshops, vigils, dance parties, mobile kitchens, parades, first aid, building governance capacity, sharing histories, and increasing medical knowledge.

Activists have been prompted to act because of anger, disgust and fear. The oppressors are likened to big waves, to large octopuses (interestingly also used in racist cartoons to depict Chinese immigrants to Aotearoa), to giants, to a virus, slavers, polluters, destroyers, exploiters, thieves, rapists, mass murderers, war criminals, war profiteers, white supremacists, racists, brutal genocide, ruthless killers, subjugators, fearmongers, demonisers, narcissistic sociopaths, and torturers.

The resisters often try to 'find beauty in the struggle' (p. 70), using imagery of flowers and trees, love, dancing, song, braiding fibers or leis, dolphins, shark deities, flourishing food baskets, fertile gardens, pristine forests, sacred valleys, mother earth, seashells, candlelight, rainbows, rays of the rising sun, friendship, alliance, partners, majestic lowland forests, ploughs, watering seeds, and harvesting crops.

Collaboration in resistance requires dignity, respect, integrity, providing safe spaces, honesty, openness, hard work without complaint, learning, cultural and spiritual awareness. The

importance of coordination, cooperation and commitment are emphasised. Readers are made aware of the sustained energy that is needed to follow through on actions.

The aim of *Peace Action: Struggles for a decolonised and demilitarised Oceania and East Asia* was to inspire, enrage, educate and motivate. These chapters will appeal mostly to those already convinced, and this is deliberately so. In these narratives, images we have guidance as to what is needed to be an activist.

We admire the courage and bravery, we are educated about the multitude of activities that can be undertaken, and the immense amount of work in planning and sustaining action. This can serve as a handbook, providing plans of action to follow. Richness and creativity are provided in the fascinating and informative narratives, storytelling, and illustrations.

I find it difficult to criticise because its goal is clear, there is no pretence that it is something else, and it achieves what it sets out to do. It remains to be seen whether peace action will follow. But that will be up to the readers.

ROWAN CALLICK is an author, journalist and researcher and a former editor-in-chief of the Times of Papua New Guinea.

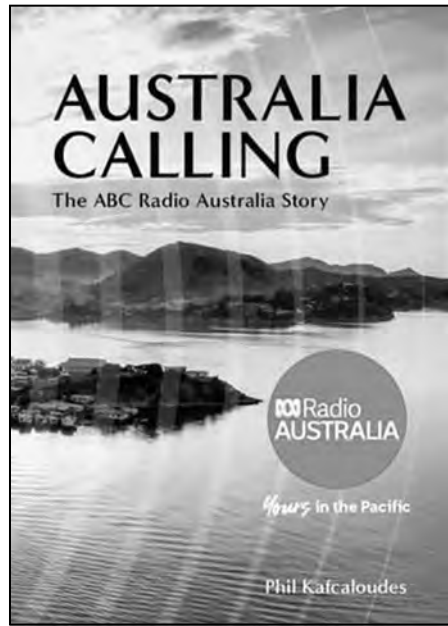
## Radio Australia speaking to the world

***Australia Calling: The ABC Radio Australia Story***, By Phil Kafcaloudes, ABC Books, 2022. 224 pages. ISBN: 9780646852430.

RADIO AUSTRALIA was conceived at the beginning of the Second World War out of Canberra's desire to counter Japanese propaganda in the Pacific. More than 70 years later its rebirth is being driven by a similarly urgent need to counter propaganda, this time from China.

Set up within the towering framework of the ABC, Radio Australia was, and remains, an institution with a lively multilingual culture of its own. Sometimes it has thrived and sometimes, especially in recent decades, it has struggled as political priorities and media fashions waxed and waned within the ABC and the wider world.

Phil Kafcaloudes, an accomplished journalist, author and media educator who hosted Radio Australia's popular breakfast show for nine years, was commissioned by the ABC to write the service's story for the corporation's 90th anniversary celebrations. The result is a nicely illustrated and compre-



hensively footnoted new book, *Australia Calling: The ABC Radio Australia Story*, which uses the original name of the service for its title. (With appropriate good manners, Kafcaloudes acknowledges previous accounts of the Radio Australia story, by Peter Lucas (1964) and Errol Hodge (1995).)

The overseas service's nadir came in 2014 after the election of the Abbott government. At the time, *Inside Story's* Pacific correspondent Nic Maclellan described in devastating detail the impact in the region of the 80 redundancies brought on by the government's decision to remove the Australia Network, a kind of TV counterpart to Radio Australia, from the ABC. The network had controversially been merged with key elements of Radio Australia to create ABC International.

Among the casualties was the legendary ABC broadcaster Sean Dorney,



**Figure 1: Author Phil Kafcaloudes (centre) with *Australia Calling* editor Kellie Mayo (from left), ABC Radio Australia's Hilda Wayne, journalist Caroline Tiriman, and producer Vaimo'oi'a Ripley at the launch of *Australia Calling*.**

known and loved throughout the Pacific. Programmes for Asia were axed, as was much specialist Pacific reporting, with English-language coverage to be sourced from the ABC's general news department.

The ABC's full-time team in the Pacific was reduced to a journalist in Port Moresby and another (if it counts) in New Zealand. Australia's newspapers had already withdrawn their correspondents from the region, and online-only media had not filled the gap. Where once, in 1948, Radio Australia had helped beam a signal to the moon, the countries of our own region now seemed even more remote.

Despite the steady erosion of the service over decades, though, Kafcaloudes's book has a happy ending of sorts. Its final chapter, titled 'Rebirth: Pivoting to

the Pacific', tells how Radio Australia benefited from the Morrison government's 'Pacific Step-Up', launched in response to China's campaign to build regional connections. Steps to rebuild Radio Australia's capacities have since been enhanced by substantial new funding from the Albanese government.

When current affairs radio is at its most effective, it places listeners at the scene. Kafcaloudes tells of being on air when a listener in Timor-Leste called to tell of an assassination attempt on José Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmão.

'Radio Australia instantly changed its scheduling to broadcast live for three hours so locals would know whether their leaders were still alive.'

But, as Kafcaloudes explains, 'for all the good work, global connections and breaking news stories, the truth is,

for many Australian politicians there was little electoral capacity in a service that a domestic audience did not hear'. Thus the abrupt funding reverses and the constant tinkering.

Former ABC journalist and manager Geoff Heriot describes how, during a challenging phase for the ABC about 25 years ago, managing director Brian Johns' desire to defend the ABC meant that, 'if necessary, you could cut off limbs'. And Radio Australia was the limb that often seemed most remote from the core.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, Kafcaloudes says, the service 'was often at or near the top of the polls as the world's best'. Many listeners, especially in China and elsewhere in East Asia, testified to having learned English from listening to Radio Australia.

Its popularity in Asia and the Pacific was boosted by the fact that it broadcast from a similar time zone, which meant its morning shows, for instance, were heard during listeners' mornings. In 1968 alone, the station received 250,000 letters from people tuning in around the region.

For decades, broadcasts were via shortwave, the only way of covering vast distances at the time. But the ABC turned off that medium for good in 2017, so Radio Australia now communicates via 24-hour FM stations across the Pacific and via satellite, livestream, on-demand audio, podcasts, the ABC Listen app, and Facebook and Twitter.

With new audiences emerging in different places, the geography of Radio Australia's languages have changed

too. As the use of French in the former colonies in Indochina declined, for instance, new French-speaking audiences developed in the Pacific colonies of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

One of the continuities of Radio Australia is the quality and connectedness of its broadcasters. Most of them come from the countries to which they broadcast, and together they have evolved into a remarkable cadre who could and should be invited by policymakers and diplomats to help Australia steer and deepen its relations with our neighbours.

Kafcaloudes rightly stresses the importance of that first prewar step, when Robert Menzies, 'a man who believed he was British to the bootstraps, despite being born and bred in country Victoria', decided 'Australians needed to speak to the world with their own voice'.

How best to do this has frequently been disputed. In a 1962 ministerial briefing, the Department of External Affairs argued that Radio Australia's broadcasts 'should not be noticeably at variance with the broad objectives of Australian foreign policy'—an instruction that John Gorton, the relevant minister, declined to issue publicly.

Tensions have inevitably resulted from the desire of the service's funder, the federal government, to see its own policies and perceptions prioritised. Resisting such pressure has required greater stamina and skill at Radio Australia than at the ABC's domestic services, which can count more readily on influential defenders.

Kafcaloudes says it was Mark Scott, who headed the ABC a dozen years ago, who linked Radio Australia with American academic/diplomat Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power'. Then and now, this was a seductive phrase for politicians. It also became a familiar part of the case for restoring, consolidating or increasing funding, while underlining the familiar, nagging challenge for the station's 'content providers' of choosing between projecting that kind of power on Canberra's behalf and dealing with stories that might well be perceived as 'negative' for the Australian government.

Of course, the conventional public-interest answer to that dilemma is that fearless journalism is itself the ultimate expression of soft power by an open, democratic polity. But not everyone sees it that way.

The public broadcasting ethos of the station's internationally sourced staff has meanwhile stayed impressively intact. Kafcaloudes introduces one of them at the end of each chapter, letting them speak directly of how they came to arrive at Radio Australia and their experiences working there.

Running Radio Australia has been complicated for decades by its being bundled, unbundled and bundled again with television services that have sometimes been run by the ABC and

sometimes by commercial stations. Technologies have of course become fluid in recent years, freeing content from former constraints. So too has the badging—the service is now 'ABC Radio Australia', which morphs online into 'ABC Pacific'.

Radio Australia continues to broadcast in Mandarin, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Khmer, French, Burmese and Tok Pisin (the Melanesian pidgin language spoken widely in PNG and readily understood in Vanuatu and, slightly less so, in Solomon Islands), as well as in English.

Dedicated, high-quality journalism remains the core constant of an institution whose story, chronicled so well by Kafcaloudes, parallels in many ways Australia's on-again, off-again, on-again engagement with our region.—*This review was first published by Inside Story.*

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JEREMY REES is an executive editor at New Zealand's public broadcaster, Radio New Zealand

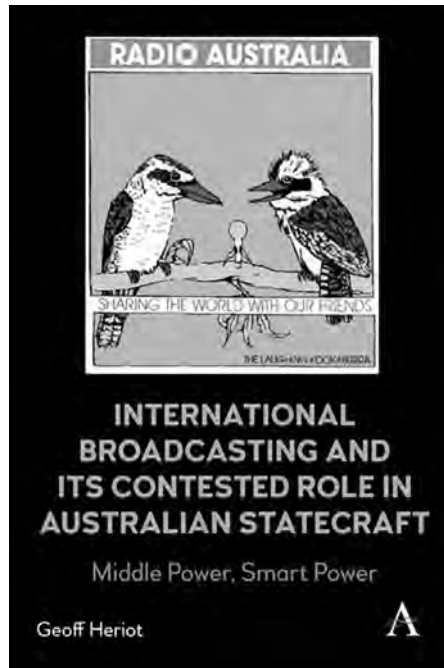
# A fascinating, timely account of ABC 'soft power'

***International Broadcasting and Its Contested Role in Australian Statecraft; Middle Power, Smart Power***, by Geoff Heriot. Melbourne, VIC: Anthem Press. 2023. 292 pages. ISBN 9781839985058.

IN MAY 2023, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong announced what she called a 'transformational package of support' for the Pacific, including money for infrastructure, security and criminal justice. It came amid growing competition with China in the Pacific.

Included in the package was a promise to 'leverage' Australia's strengths, including broadcasting (and sports links), as part of an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy, enabling more Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) members to access Australian content. Australian external broadcasting was firmly back in the spotlight.

A new book, *International Broadcasting and Its Contested Role in Australian Statecraft; Middle Power, Smart Power*, by Geoff Heriot, arrives with perfect timing. It is a fascinating, timely and challenging account of



Australia's attempts to project itself through broadcasting, largely on the ABC international feed to countries in the region.

After World War Two, the ABC's Radio Australia held a place just below the behemoths of international broadcasting, like the BBC (Britain) and Voice of America (USA), aiming firstly at countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, says Heriot. But the years after the Cold War when history was meant to have ended, with the US the sole hegemon, and in the age of CNN providing a global reach, the importance of the ABC's international work became less certain.

Funding rose and fell. Now the question of providing content feeds, whether by broadcasting or digital means, is exercising governments,

including Australia and neighbouring New Zealand.

If anyone is well placed to examine the role of the ABC it is Geoff Heriot. A former ABC correspondent (1974-1977), he was head of news and current affairs for Radio Australia, then held two key executive roles, manager of ABC corporate strategy (1996-1998) and chief of corporate planning and governance (2000-2008).

He is a consultant in media and governance and completed a PhD at the University of Tasmania. His book is based on the research, but is hugely informed by his understanding of both the ABC and its role, and the expectations of successive Australian governments.

Heriot creates a substantial framework by which to analyse transnational broadcasting.

He argues the purpose of international broadcasting is to provide a space in which power relations can be contested through a marketplace of ideas. In other words, the broadcaster engages audiences with content which infuses discussion with a credible Australian narrative.

Heriot applies three success factors for the performance of a broadcaster. First is the way it represents the values and interests of the country. Just as importantly is his second point that it has to reach across different cultures and nations to engage people successfully. And lastly, is the way all its practices, arrangements and policies help it to achieve that—or not.

These are then applied to six

functions which could be expected of a broadcaster, like the ABC. They include engaging foreign audiences (even during periods of tension), challenging any ‘cartels’ of information so an Australian narrative reaches an audience, countering disinformation, contributing to peaceful region building, helping develop regional media architecture, and responding quickly to crises within the area.

Heriot is especially good in moving along the entire length of an international broadcaster’s purpose and work, from the expectations of government, and the laws and policies by which the broadcaster must operate, through the internal arrangements and discussions of what to do, through the way the content is received or understood in the country receiving it. He has clearly experienced and studied every link in the chain.

He is especially strong in discussing how the messages produced in one cultural setting will be perceived once transmitted to another. In the case of the ABC, how a flow of news meant to demonstrate Australia’s commitment to the rule of law, for example, will be understood by listeners in another cultural context.

The second half of *International Broadcasting* shifts gears to applying the frameworks to the history of the ABC, mostly during the Cold War but also during the Gulf War 1990 when Australians were taken hostage in Kuwait. Heriot is particularly strong in looking at the ABC’s role in broadcasting to Indonesia, ‘the crucible’ as he

calls it, including at times of tension.

He has an insider's knowledge, backed by extensive research into primary sources, of the tensions between governments and the ABC, and within the organisation itself. The cast of characters is recognisable today. There are government ministers, trying to uphold free speech and the independence of the ABC, while irritated at its reporting. Or ambassadors complaining the broadcaster's stories are making their job more difficult. These are also journalists and leaders struggling to adapt as the world changes.

Now, in a contested Pacific, the place of the ABC is under the spotlight again. Geoff Heriot's work is timely and illuminating of the issues facing the country and its public broadcaster. His framework is closely argued; his historical chapters insightful and entertaining.

Heriot's framework and case studies are useful in themselves, but doubly important now that the issue of Australian soft power to counter China in Asia and the Pacific is back strongly on the political agenda.

## ***A tribute to OWEN WILKES***

### AN OUTSTANDING NZ PEACE ACTIVIST

#### CONTRIBUTORS

Ingvar Botnen, Nils Petter Gleditsch,  
Nicky Hager, Di Hooper,  
Murray Horton, Maire Leadbeater,  
Robert Mann, Neville Ritchie,  
David Robie, Ken Ross, Peter Wills

EDITORS **May Bass & Mark Derby**

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DR ADAM BROWN is an Auckland academic, author and the editor of a New Zealand Muslim publication.

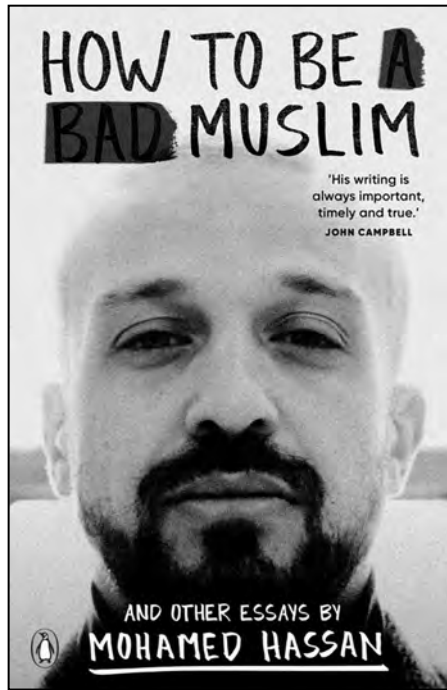
## Exposing problems Muslim immigrants face in NZ

***How To Be (a Bad) Muslim and Other Essays***, by Mohamed Hassan. Auckland: Penguin/Random House, 2022. 208 pages. ISBN 9780143776215.

**H**OW TO Be A Bad Muslim is a collection of 19 short essays by Mohamed Hasan, an award-winning poet and international journalist. He was born in Cairo, but moved to Auckland at the age of eight.

This personal history underlies much of his writing: his fond memories of Egypt and its collectivist society and extended families, versus his adolescence as a migrant with a clearly identifiable Muslim name in individualist New Zealand. After 9/11, suspicions deepened and Muslims were subject to collective guilt and racial profiling, despite that fact that Muslims around the world condemned the attacks.

‘To be granted citizenry and promised equality but to always be held at arm’s length. To be accused of plotting disharmony when all we have ever fought for was integration, acceptance, peace.’ In other words, to be ‘welcome, but not welcome’. This is



all documented in chapter 11, ‘How to be a bad Muslim’.

Memories from his youth include spooky childhood memories from Cairo (chapter 2, ‘The witch of El Agouza’), followed by real-life memories and standing up to being bullied in school in New Zealand by someone who later became an All Black (chapter 3, ‘Showdown in the Kowhai Room’). As a Muslim, the author’s refusal to enter the binge drinking culture of New Zealand, while entering the local poetry scene, shows that it is possible to enjoy oneself without alcohol (chapter 4, ‘The last sober driver’).

The author is well acquainted with IT, the internet, YouTube, social media, etc. An important chapter is the first, entitled ‘Subscribe to PewDiePie’, being the last words of the Christchurch shooter

before entering Al-Noor Mosque. The chapter documents the seemingly innocent growth of YouTube and social media over a decade, all leading ultimately to the Christchurch massacre.

Many passages in the chapters touch on the misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam, as the author reports from first-hand experience. He was bullied at school, given the cold shoulder at work, passed over for promotion, regularly subjected to ‘random’ searches at airports, etc. His brother no longer goes with his two young sons to Friday prayers in Manukau, because he does not feel they are safe.

‘The growing mistrust was fuelled by grotesque and irresponsible media narratives that portrayed Muslim immigrants as an existential threat, and the public believed it’ despite the fact that the public knew little about Islam and Muslims, and failed to find out about it. ‘A Sikh man studying at a café outside his medical school had police called to interrogate him after a woman spotted wires hanging out of his bag. They were headphone cables.’

In chapter 10, ‘Ode to Elliott Alderson’, he catalogues the misrepresentation of Muslims in film, involving famous actors such as Rami Malek, Omid Djalili, Hank Azaria, Sacha Baron Cohen, Christian Bale, and Sigourney Weaver.

Throughout the chapters, the author reports his memories and experiences, but often with a sense of humour, and with a poet’s turn of phrase. He describes his baby sister sleeping ‘as only an infant can, her fingers curled into themselves and her breath like a moth dancing around a faint sun’.

As an Egyptian Muslim growing up in New Zealand, he was ‘a kid who wore the question of belonging like an ankle monitor everywhere I went’. As a keen observer of the effect of IT, the internet and social media, he wonders, ‘Will our greatest of grandchildren unearth our metadata and try and decipher what our selfies said about our civilisation?’

This is an important book for anyone wanting to understand the problems immigrants—especially Muslims—face in New Zealand.

*DR CHRIS WILSON is programme director, Master of Conflict and Terrorism Studies, University of Auckland.*

## Fear and loathing in New Zealand

***Fear: New Zealand's hostile underworld of extremists***, by Byron C Clark.  
Auckland: HarperCollins, 2023. 328 pages.  
ISBN 9781775542308.

SINCE the horrific attacks in Christchurch in 2019 there has been substantial and growing attention paid to the extreme right in New Zealand. The pandemic—and the conspiracy theories and anti-government sentiment that developed in response—increased that scrutiny, and the sense of unease or alarm many felt about it.

Yet until now we have relied on just a handful of academic articles and media reports to gauge the extent and nature of the contemporary far right in New Zealand. Byron Clark's new work is the first book to provide an overview of the multitude of groups and individuals loosely categorised as 'alt-right'.

Clark is an independent researcher who has done invaluable work in exposing the ideologies, behaviour and online and offline presence of a range of fringe political groups and individuals. He has an unparalleled knowledge of



this network, their YouTube and Telegram channels, and the connections between them.

The book (like Clark's Twitter account) is a crucial starting point for anyone seeking to understand the alt-right in New Zealand. It is beautifully written and contains excellent insights that can inform the study of contemporary extremism.

As one example, he discusses how, as the traditional markers of adulthood like home ownership and a stable career became increasingly unattainable, many young men found sanctuary in gaming and other online pursuits. For some, feminism came to be seen as threatening even that refuge.

In short, this is an excellent and useful book. For those of us who research (and teach about) extremism,

it will serve as an important reference point. Nor is it confined to New Zealand; it serves as a study of how quite disparate, even opposed, groups can begin to orbit one another during a time of crisis.

Some aspects of the book might have been stronger, however. In particular, there was a need for clearer definitions of key terms, and much more evidence needed for many of its claims.

The author uses three important terms—alt-right, far right and extremism—in the title and throughout the book. The various groups, ideologies and individuals discussed—including Action Zealanda, Voices for Freedom, Counter-spin, QAnon, Groundswell and Hindutva—are presented as manifestations of these phenomena in New Zealand.

But the author never defines these terms, and uses them interchangeably. Given the contention of the book that these groups should be understood as ‘far right’, it was crucial the author explain why this is the case.

When used by the leading scholars in the field, the term ‘far right’ is normally reserved for highly nationalistic and racist movements. These seek a strong, even authoritarian, leader and government, a punitive focus on law and order, the punishment of social deviancy, and are ‘nativist’ (anti-immigration). These goals may not come at the expense of democracy but always come at the cost of *liberal* democracy.

The alt-right refers to a more contemporary iteration of this white nationalism, characterised by intensive use of social media. ADL (formerly the

Anti-Defamation League) defines the movement as ‘a repackaging of white supremacy by extremists seeking to mainstream their ideology’.

The category spans an eclectic network of misogynists, white supremacists, neo-Nazis and fascists, all united in their focus on white identity and seeking to provide an alternative (hence the label) to the mainstream conservative right.

The author also provides no definition of ‘extremism’, a word used both in the book and its promotion. Government definitions refer to extremist movements as those seen as ‘objectionable’, ‘holding views outside the mainstream’ or “seeking radical changes to society”.

But liberal democracy is predicated on the tolerance of views outside the mainstream and so such broad definitions are unhelpful, even damaging. The key feature of extremism, then, is the use or legitimisation of violence in pursuit of the movement’s ideology or goals.

If definitions had been provided, it might have stimulated a more nuanced consideration of the motley network of groups and movements that emerged in New Zealand during the pandemic.

Some groups covered in the book—Action Zealanda and Counter-spin, for example—clearly fall within the normal definitions of these terms. But for others, their inclusion is puzzling and unconvincing. Many do not seek a society based on law and order and centralised authoritarian leadership, oppose immigration or seek to protect the ‘white race’.

And most have not legitimated violence. Opposing vaccinations or spreading disinformation does not qualify a group as far right—many on the left and in between also do that.

The book discusses groups as diverse as Action Zealanda and Groundswell, and individuals such as neo-Nazi Philip Arps and former knitting club member and Voices for Freedom founder Alia Bland, as if they are manifestations of the same movement. At one point, the Wellington anti-mandate protests are explained together with the Christchurch terrorist attack as being due to ‘people no longer knowing what to believe anymore’.

This lack of definition and conflation of different groups, ideologies and goals is connected to my second concern: a lack of evidence.

Many chapters focus on particular movements, parties or forms of ‘extremism’ identified by the author as present or important in New Zealand. Unfortunately, the book fails either to show the movement is present in New Zealand or to provide a compelling case that it is far right, alt-right or extremist.

In part, this is because much of the discussion relies on the claims and reports of New Zealand-based commentators that are themselves not based on evidence.

The chapter on Voices for Freedom starts by stating ‘no comprehensive study of New Zealand’s far right can ignore them’. But clearly that depends on how we define the far right: as far as I am aware, the group has expressed none of the views listed at the start of

this review (and none are provided in the chapter).

Whatever we think of the group’s opposition to vaccination, lockdowns and other measures to control the spread of COVID-19, this does not make it far right. And as much as we might find the group’s views reprehensible and damaging, it does not seek violence.

There is even less evidence provided in the following chapters on the anti-mandate Outdoors Party, the farmers movement Groundswell, and the apparent presence in New Zealand of a racist Rhodesian pride movement. Even the chapter on disinformation provides no data or evidence to support the claims made.

There is a tendency to focus on fragmented evidence of a New Zealand-based individual or group, and buffer a lack of activity or presence in this country with discussion of an affiliate group from the past or from overseas.

For example, Hindutva is presented as present and threatening in New Zealand, but with little to no evidence. Because of a lack of demonstrable activity or presence here, the author uses the fact that the New Zealand Hindu Council is affiliated to the India-based nationalist organisation VHP, to discuss in much greater length the VHP’s extremist activity in India, even including a discussion of the riots in Gujarat in 2002.

This history of violence and extremism in India will give many readers the impression that something similar



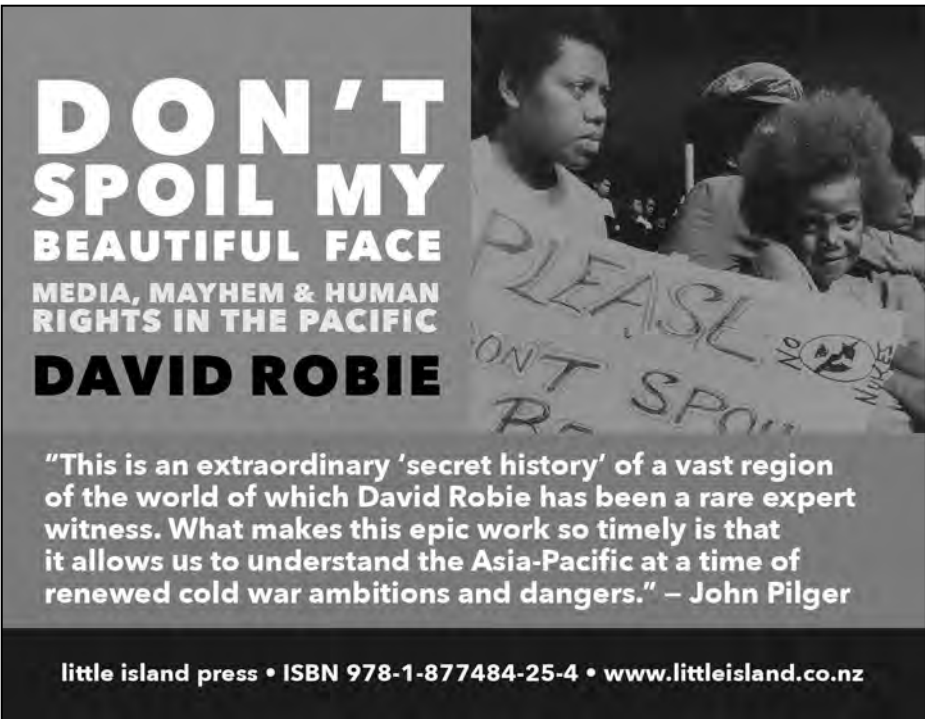
is present in New Zealand, when no evidence has been provided for this inference.

Other important statements also required supporting evidence. The back cover states: 'New Zealand has one of the highest concentrations of alt-right groups compared with other nations.' As a marketing tool this is understandable: it will shock browsers in bookstores and be repeated as fact at parties around the country. But no evidence is provided for the claim.

For all that, Byron Clark's work provides an exceptional service to researchers and all those who want to understand the often bizarre and counter-

intuitive features of the far right, conspiracy theory and anti-government movements in contemporary New Zealand.

But when we write about these groups we need to take care how we describe them, and not to exaggerate their size, intentions and organisational links. Otherwise, we risk adding to their appeal among the disaffected, pushing together otherwise antithetical groups, generating misplaced fear and contributing to rising polarisation. The topic is too important not to warrant very careful coverage.—*Republished under Creative Commons from The Conversation.*



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DR PHILIP CASS is editor of Pacific Journalism Review.

# Peace researcher who was a global trailblazer

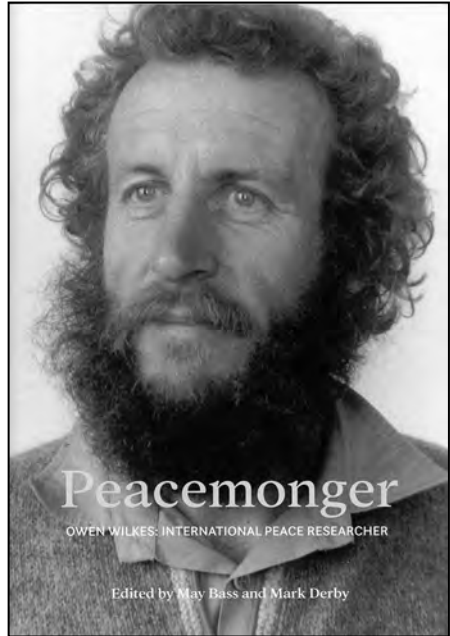
***Peacemonger: Owen Wilkes: International Peace Researcher***, edited by May Bass and Mark Derby. Wellington: Raekaihau Press, 2022. 196 pages. ISBN 978191153869196.

THIS volume of essays provides a committed overview of the life of the extraordinary Aotearoa New Zealand peace campaigner and co-founder of the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA), Owen Wilkes.

Drawing on contributions by those who knew him and co-edited by his long-time partner, May Bass, who was for many years editor of *Peacelink*, it tells the somewhat complicated—and ultimately tragic—story of his life.

CAFCA organiser Murray Horton, who has contributed a chapter to this book, once said of him: ‘He looked like an Old Testament prophet. And his words had the same sort of impact’ (Horton, 2005).

This deep respect for Wilkes is evident in this book, which includes essays by some big names in New Zealand activism such as Maire Leadbeater, Murray Horton, David Robie, Nicky Hager and Peter Wills, and others in Scandinavia. This examination of his enormous contribution to the Peace



Movement and Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement research is a fitting tribute to his life and work.

Born in Christchurch in 1940, he worked in the Antarctic, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Hawai'i and in Norway and Sweden. He astonished his Scandinavian hosts by skiing in shorts (he is also said to have waded across an icy river in shorts in order to get near the Russian border) and was arrested by police for taking photographs. Wilkes was also a subsistence farmer and a beekeeper who built what must have been one of New Zealand's first eco-homes near Punakaiki, West Coast (it was demolished by the local council because he built it without permission.)

Editor Mark Derby said he had never met anybody who made less distinction between their work and leisure.

Owen could take a holiday on a remote west coast beach and discover a covert government communications facility. Or face espionage charges from the Swedish government after taking photographs from the roadside during a cycling tour. The entire world kept revealing itself to him in ways both marvellous and enraging. (p. 15)

One of Wilkes' major achievements was to unearth so much material about the activities of United States agencies in the region. He was able to do this working largely with publicly available documents, being able to glean information and figures that were hiding in plain view. Scientist Peter Wills praised his 'brilliance in digging out every last iota of information and assembling it . . . to reach and prove conclusions that would not otherwise have been suspected' (p. 129).

It was this ability that contributed to him being invited to work with the International Peace Research Institute (IPR) in Oslo and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) where he pieced together state secrets by patiently combing through publicly available material and knowing when to photograph something unusual. This ability led him into serious trouble with the Norwegian and Swedish authorities.

At one stage he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Canterbury University sociology professor W. E. Wilmott in recognition of his many years of 'selfless research on issues related to peace and war' (p. 7).

Wilkes was famous for his inves-

tigations into the presence of the US military in New Zealand, uncovering bases and setting out to prove that these islands were part of a secret US plan to establish a navigation system that would be used by its nuclear-armed submarines. This involved investigating the proposed Omega transmitter station in the South Island, which he believed would make New Zealand a target in a nuclear war (Falconer, 2005).

Wilkes withdrew from the Peace Movement in the late 1990s. Described by those who knew him as independent and uncompromising, he was not afraid to criticise those around him. He caused some consternation when he eventually criticised the Peace Movement and challenged those who favoured the ban on nuclear-powered US Navy ships from New Zealand harbours (p. 129).

Horton noted in an online article that in 1993 Wilkes had declared that some of Greenpeace's campaigns were 'just great, but some of them are pretty bloody stupid, I reckon. And it is only recently that they've started going screwy' (Horton, 2021).

His life ended tragically in 2005 when he committed suicide at 65, 15 years after the death of his only child, Koa, who had also taken her own life.

### **Activism in Australia**

Wilkes was also active across the ditch, although his name was not well known outside peace and activist circles. According to Mansell (2023), from whose obituary this section is drawn,

he made an enormous contribution to the anti-nuclear and peace movements in Australia from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

His exposure of the planned Omega station in New Zealand prompted the United States to move the project to Australia, and in the early 1970s he travelled to Melbourne where helped produce a detailed submission about Omega's role as a navigation aid for Polaris submarines to hearings of the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

In 1974 he took part in the so-called 'Long March' (in reality a three week bus trip) to the US Navy's nuclear submarine communication base at North West Cape in Western Australia. This effort was reflected in New Zealand the following year with a 'Resistance Ride' in the South Island.

It was in Melbourne in 1982 that Wilkes made his announcement that he no longer believed that Omega would play a role in submarine navigation, having been superseded by the Loran-C VLF system. Despite the shock his change of mind caused, he kept in touch with the Australian nuclear disarmament movement and was welcomed as an expert guest speaker at public meetings and on the radio.

In March 1986, Owen appeared as an expert witness for the Christian activists on trial in the Melbourne Magistrates Court for splashing blood on the Watsonia dish at Easter 1985. He returned to North West Cape in June 1988 and followed this with a month-long speaking tour focusing on the destabilisation of the Pacific.

In early 1990, Owen lived in Melbourne for several weeks, helping research the history of US ballistic missile testing in the Pacific.

*Peacemonger* has excellent end-notes, with sources and additional details. This will be extremely useful for journalists and readers of New Zealand history, society or politics. A full bibliography of Wilkes' publications is also included, which demonstrates the breadth of his interests as a peace campaigner and archeologist.

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DR DAVID ROBIE is founding editor of *Pacific Journalism Review*.

# Disinformation and the end of democracy?

***How to Stand up to a Dictator: The Fight for our Future***, By Maria Ressa. London: Penguin Random House, 2022. 301 pages. ISBN 978073559208.

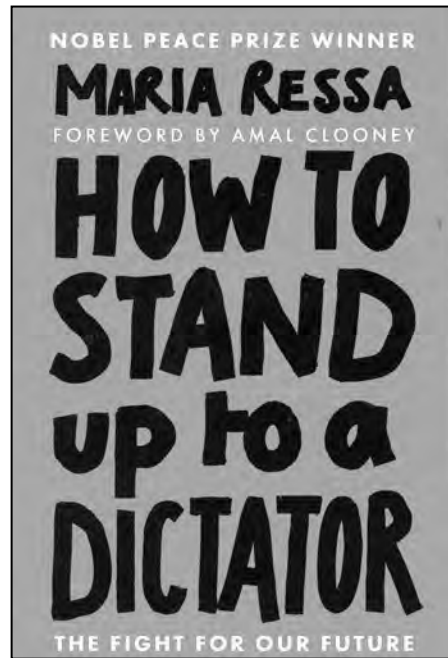
AS WE marched in our pink t-shirts in solidarity with the diaspora supporting outgoing Vice-President and opposition leader Leni Robredo in Auckland's Centennial Park in the lead up to the Philippine presidential election in May 2022, the thought weighed heavily on our minds: 'Surely, Filipinos wouldn't elect the son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos just 38 years after his corrupt father had been ousted by People Power?'

Pink for the defence of democracy.

Our hopes were strong. People Power had been the global inspiration of a generation.

The peaceful revolution had ousted a dictator who had been in power for almost 21 years. Pro-democracy uprisings followed in quick succession elsewhere in the world—in South Korea in 1987, Myanmar in 1988 and China and Eastern Europe in 1989.

It even inspired me into joining the 1988 International Peace Brigade and writing a series of investigative articles about New Zealand's controversial



Bukidnon forestry project in the southern island of Mindanao and Philippine human rights violations (Robie, 2014).

Sadly, the hopes for the survival of genuine Philippine democracy were crushed at the polls with the dictator's tainted son triumphant, swept to power by an avalanche of disinformation and a rampant army of social media trolls.

Truth to power? No, the powerful elite cynically removed truth in a salutary warning to the world (Trump's playbook too). Leni Robredo had been the victim of a massive 'red-tagging' campaign (Bolledo, 2022).

In a damning indictment of the Duterte and Marcos Jr administrations and the rise of the disinformation era globally, investigative journalist and Nobel peace prize laureate Maria Ressa warns in *How to Stand up to a Dictator* how democracy everywhere is under threat

from the authoritarians and the power of the technology corporations—the new media gatekeepers—enabling a torrent of hate and lies to dominate.

She herself is still in danger of going to prison in her fight for the truth after years of harassment, threats and lawsuits. Her predictions about President Ferdinand Bongbong Marcos Jr have been borne out with the International Press Institute becoming the latest media watchdog to give thumbs down to the dictator’s son.

‘One year since Ferdinand Marcos Jr took office as president, little progress has been made in improving press freedom in the Philippines,’ an IPI correspondent reported, calling the Marcos electoral pledge to ‘better protect the press’ (Dailey, 2023).

The Duterte government frequently targeted and attacked journalists and critics whom he accused of being ‘corrupt’ and ‘not exempted from assassination’. During his eight-year term of office until 2022 and his notorious ‘war on drugs’ (Sepe Jr, 2018), 20 journalists were killed—all with complete impunity. This was a higher death toll for scribes even than during the Marcos dictatorship.

After growing up and being educated in the US, Ressa returned to the Philippines in 2004 on a Fulbright scholarship for political theatre studies, but she preferred ‘real-life theatre’—she chose journalism, initially with the post-Marcos People’s TV. She set up and headed CNN’s Jakarta regional bureau for five years, gaining a reputation for tenacious investigative reporting. She recalls:

Marcos and Suharto left behind similar problems that lay just beneath the surface. In the Philippines, it was cronyism and patronage politics. In Indonesia, it was called KKN (pronounced ‘ka-ka-en’): corruption, collusion and nepotism. That top-down, oppressive, controlling political system took its toll on the people. Their leaders’ biggest sin was that they failed to educate their people. (p. 64)

Ressa then teamed up with three other dedicated and courageous women journalists to establish *Rappler* as a pioneering digital-only news website in the Philippines. One of her colleagues, Glenda Gloria, was a keynote speaker at an Auckland University of Technology conference in November 2021 (Gloria, 2022).

Using Facebook and other social media platforms, *Rappler* sought to ‘create a new standard of investigative journalism’ and ‘build communities of action for better governance and stronger democracies’. With crowd-sourced breaking news, the website also targeted action for climate change.

At *Rappler*, we exposed corruption and manipulation not only in government but increasingly in the technology companies that were already dominating our lives. Starting in 2016, we began highlighting impunity on two fronts: President Rodrigo Duterte’s drug war and Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook. (p. 3)

The book is divided into three parts following a prologue provocatively titled ‘the invisible time bomb’ about the destructive side of social media. ‘Part 1:

Homecoming: Power, the Press, and the Philippines, 1963-2004' deals with Ressa's split lives and families and her 'kidnapping' to the US at the age of 10 and then her return to her homeland.

'Part 2: The Rise of Facebook, *Rappler*, and the Internet's Black Hole, 2005-2017' articulates the transformation of the 'CNN effect' with global satellite news gathering into cellphone reporting and her experience in rebuilding ABS-CBN into a trusted television news service, until it was destroyed by the Duterte administration.

Of particular interest to me in this section was when ABS-CBN anchor and friend Ces Drillon and her two cameramen were seized in 2008 as hostages for ransom in Mindanao by Abu Sayyaf, 'a homegrown terror group linked to Al-Qaeda' (p. 89). This incident triggered 10 days of negotiations with the gunmen by Ressa and her colleagues (who later formed the *Rappler* core group).

Had the negotiations failed it could have been a tragedy. Just a month earlier a group of labourer hostages had been beheaded and their heads delivered to the company that refused to negotiate (p. 90). For several years I used this crisis as a course case study on the dilemmas of journalist safety for my postgraduate Asia Pacific student journalists.

Another shocking incident among many was the Maguindanao massacre on 23 November 2009, when 58 people, including 32 journalists, were murdered in broad daylight. The Committee to Protect Journalists described

it as 'the deadliest single attack on journalists anywhere in the world' (p. 93).

The book's final—and most disturbing—section is 'Part 3: Crack-down, Arrests, Elections, and the Fight for our Future, 2018-present'. The chapter titles give a hint to the grim narrative and analysis— 'Surviving a thousand cuts' (Chapter 9), 'Don't become a monster to fight a monster' (10), 'Hold the line' (11) and 'Why fascism is winning' (12).

Inspirational as she is, Maria Ressa admits that there are times when she struggles:

Because I refuse to stop doing my job, I've lost my freedom to travel. I can't plan my life because I still have seven criminal cases that could send me to jail for the rest of my life. But I refuse to live in a world like this. I demand better. We deserve better. (p. 262)

In her 2021 Nobel peace lecture, Ressa appealed for a 'people-to-people defence of our democracies—of our freedom, of equality. I've tried to flesh that out in this book.' And she has certainly succeeded.

*How to Stand up to a Dictator* should be required reading for any young journalist, not least because of its refreshing non-Western perspectives, an antidote for the smug complacency of liberal democracy media.

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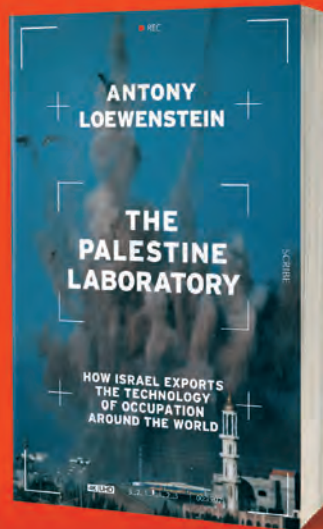
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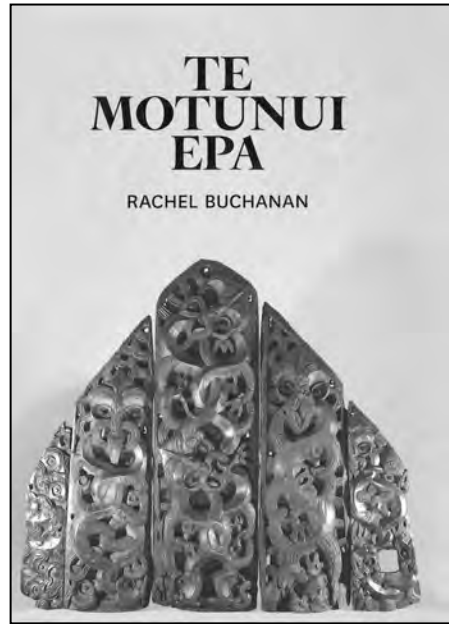
# Award-winning account of a Taranaki taonga's long journey home

*Te Motonui Epa*, by Rachel Buchanan. Wellington: Bridget William Books, 2022. 251 pages. ISBN: 9781990046582.

**T**HE *MOTONUI EPA* is a brilliant account of how five carved panels that were smuggled out of New Zealand were recovered after a long struggle and prompted major reassessments in official attitudes towards preserving Indigenous artefacts.

The story begins during the Musket Wars when Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Whātua rivalry led to clashes in which warriors armed with European weapons fought for dominance in the North Island. As war spread to the Taranaki, Te Ātiawa hapū dismantled their most important public buildings and hid significant pieces in the Peropero swamps.

Among the taonga that were buried were the epa, serpentine figures carved in five tōtara panels, which are at the centre of this story (Figure 1). In Dr Buchanan's telling of this remarkable and complicated story, the epa come alive, watching and waiting as they are whisked around the world by the



people who took them and the auction houses that try to sell them.

It is a testament to the author's writing skills that this conceit works, making the taonga living things and far more than just artefacts. (Indeed there is room here for a consideration of how taonga now fare in museums in New Zealand where their custodians increasingly accord Māori treasures the status of objects imbued with mana and the life they carry on behalf of their iwi. The story of how museums have learned to treat taonga in line with Māori values—and the effect Māori curators have had on museum practice—parallels the long struggle to bring the Taranaki carvings home.) By according the Taranaki carvings the status of witnesses, Buchanan also gives them agency.

In brief, after 150 years in the swamp, the five boards, which once



**Figure 1: The Taranaki epa, serpentine figures carved in five tōtara panels.**

formed part of a storehouse, were re-discovered by accident. A local Māori, Melville Manukonga, took possession of them and after a while sold them to people from overseas who managed to take them out of the country, perhaps hidden in a wardrobe,

Once outside Aotearoa New Zealand they became the object of collectors and were subject to the attentions of auction houses. They eventually passed into the hands of George Ortiz, scion of a wealthy Bolivian family now living in Switzerland. He had amassed a huge collection of objects. All sorts of ludicrous stories were put up to explain the provenance of the objects and justify his possession.

Sharing the centre of the story with the taonga is the New Zealand government and Dr Buchanan's skills as a researcher come to the fore as she traces the story of the government's long fight to recover the Taranaki

material through a trail of documents and papers.

The story is long and complicated, but she manages to present clearly the many legal twists and turns as the government fought its way through the English courts, ultimately going all the way to the House of Lords before failing. Further legal action was planned, but something else occurred: all the publicity meant that when Ortiz tried to sell the Taranaki treasures, nobody would buy. They were locked away in the Geneva Freeport, a notorious and highly protected storage shed for the very wealthy, who use it to hide their Picassos from the tax man (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

The government's initial failure was not for want of trying, but the law at this stage was inadequate and, as the pursuit of the taonga continued, New Zealand found itself at the forefront of the drive to develop legislation that

would protect culturally sensitive material and provide frameworks in which countries might hope to have material returned to them. New Zealand's then Attorney-General, Jim McLay, told a meeting of the Commonwealth Law Ministers in Colombo that effective legal machinery and international co-operation were the only ways to protect cultural property.

The UK opposed such legislation, perhaps mindful of what might happen if they introduced laws that might allow the Greeks to have their day in court in their even longer fight to claim back the Elgin Marbles.

It must be noted that in recent years the British have been willing to hand back other significant treasures, such as the Benin bronzes, which were taken during the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin (now in Nigeria) in 1897 (Sherwood, 2020).

To find out how the remarkable detective story of the Taranaki epa ends, you will have to read the book.

*Te Motunui Epa* was the joint winner of this year's Ernest Scott Prize.

The prize is awarded annually to the most distinguished written contribution to the history of Australia or New Zealand, or to the history of colonisation.

Dr Buchanan (Taranaki, Te Atiawa) shared the A\$13,000 prize with Australian historian Alan Atkinson, author of *Elizabeth and John: The Macarthurs of Elizabeth Farm*. The judges said Buchanan's book was grounded in Te Ao Māori and a fine example of modern New Zealand writing.

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Call for articles and commentaries

## PJR: 30 years on— Will journalism survive?

**This special issue of *Pacific Journalism Review* is themed to mark the 30th anniversary of the publication, which was launched at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1994 and was also hosted at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, for five years at the turn of the millennium.**

Check our website for more details on the above *PJR* edition theme and an expanded call for papers, including the climate crisis, and about exciting plans for our anniversary: [www.pjrview.info](http://www.pjrview.info)

The journal especially seeks papers about innovative journalism education and training publications and programmes, or research articles addressing media, communication and climate change or environment related themes.

The deadline for submissions is 20 January 2024.

The double blind peer-reviewed journal has five main sections:

- *Research articles* (6000 words);
- *Commentaries* (industry insights, developments and practice – 1500-3000 words,
- *Frontline* (investigative journalism and reflective journalism-as-research – 6000-7000 words);
- *Forum* (up to 800 words); and
- *Reviews* (books, documentaries and online developments – 800-1500 words, commissioned by the editors).

The APA-based style guide is at: <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/style-guide>

Submissions must be uploaded to the OJS open access website for *Pacific Journalism Review* on the **Tuwhera** indigenous research portal:  
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## Notes for contributors

***Te Koakoā; Pacific Journalism Review***, founded at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1994, is a peer-reviewed journal covering media issues and communication in the South Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. It is now published by Asia Pacific Network and has links with the University of the South Pacific. While one objective is research into Pacific journalism theory and practice, the journal is also expanding its interest into new areas of research and inquiry that reflect the broader impact of contemporary media practice and education.

A particular focus will be on the cultural politics of the media, including the following issues—new media and social movements, indigenous cultures in the age of globalisation, the politics of tourism and development, the role of the media and the formation of national identity and the cultural influence of New Zealand as a branch of the global economy within the Pacific region. It also has a special interest in environmental and development studies in the media and communication—and vernacular media in the region.

### **Main sections:**

- *Research*: Academic research and analysis papers (up to 6000 words)
- *Commentary*: Industry insights,

developments and practice (1500-3000 words)

- *Frontline*: Reflective journalism research (up to 6000 words)
- *Reviews*: Books, films, online developments, multimedia (800-1500 words).
- *Noted & Books*: 300-350 words.
- *Forum*: Letters, brief commentaries (up to 800 words)

### **Submission of papers:**

Within the editorial scope of the journal, we invite the submission of original papers, commentaries and reviews. Submissions are reviewed by the editor, or editorial committee. Submissions are double blind peer refereed.

### **Editorial deadline for next issue:**

20 January 2024. Submissions should be filed through the new submissions website on Tuwhera: [ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/](https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/) Correspondence should be emailed to the editor,

**Dr Philip Cass:**

[PJReview@aut.ac.nz](mailto:PJReview@aut.ac.nz)

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**Cover: Pacific women show off the colours of the *Morning Star* flag of West Papuan 'independence' at MACFEST2023 in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in July 2023.**

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