

This is the author version of an book portion published as:

Duffield, Lee R. (2006) *Media and Government Relations in Papua New Guinea*, in Papoutsaki, Evangelia and Rooney, Dick, Eds. *Media, Information and Development in Papua New Guinea*, chapter 6, pages pp. 95-118. DWU Press.

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Media and Government Relations in Papua New Guinea

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INTRODUCTION

All is not well with news media in Papua New Guinea. Media and government relations are stressed, a situation adverse to the country's development. Media organisations have to deal with operational difficulties, threats against editorial freedom, and harassment or physical danger experienced by journalists. Yet there are positive factors providing hope for the future, especially that key element, freedom to publish, which goes together with a habit of openness in public life as part of the national culture.

That is the main finding of a study made during a working visit to Papua New Guinea in the latter part of 2004, assisted by the Media Council of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, Divine Word University, and officials of the PNG government. The study followed a journalistic approach. As its method, it used observation and a review of current media to check the agendas; a review of relevant books, articles and other recent documents; and extensive interviews.

BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

Media and government in Papua New Guinea are different businesses with different interests to each other which will put them at cross-purposes much of the time. That occurs in any country, though Papua New Guinea has the added factor of being a developing country enduring economic problems and widespread social distress. It is much more difficult for all parties than in the "West".

Government there looks exasperated over this, constantly engaged in crisis; in the economy, with inadequate funds; with crime in villages and urban settlements; official corruption, and irresponsible behaviour among the political leadership. There are concentrations of wealth in private hands, for instance from out-of-court settlements received by litigants against the government, often in the K100000s, (A\$ = K2 appx.), alongside poverty in the "informal sector". After the contraction of mining revenues in the 1990s, national per capita income halved between 1995 and 2000, (AusAID, 2004:13).

News media have similar difficulties covering crises and encountering high risks, including danger to personal safety of staff. High costs of transport and communications; a poor market, and weak resources in terms of support from government or commercial advertisers work against viable business operations. Others would find it at least as difficult. News organisations may hope that development will create better business conditions, but in the meantime their situation conforms to a World Bank list of impediments to doing business in developing countries:

- uncertainty over government policy;

- corruption;
- high costs associated with crime and security issues, including theft of stock, reducing sales constantly by 10%;
- infrastructure problems such as uncertain electricity supply costing another 10% of sales, (Smith, BBC, 2004).

There are positive aspects of the media-government relationship. The government has refrained from official censorship and expressly observes the rights of all citizens including their freedom of speech, under the national constitution (1975, Section 46). The news media, generally seen as seeking to be “free and fair” in approach, in the liberal tradition, also declare respect for local tradition and make a commitment to national development objectives.

The products of mass media in Papua New Guinea demonstrate a will to carry out functions of nation building, service and solidarity. Consider such functions as those identified by AusAID in its recent review of national media needs:

- supporting public information and communication;
- increasing the voice of the poor and marginalised in public policy;
- supporting civic education and respect for citizenship rights;
- supporting conflict resolution, peace-building and reconciliation;
- promoting awareness of national citizenship, identity and culture;
- delivering basic services to complement government service provision such as agricultural extension radio programs;
- improving the effectiveness of existing basic service provision such as health information broadcasts on the availability of health clinics, (Ausaid 2004,10).

Judgments need to be made as to how strong the commitment and resources might be to pursue these functions as the chief purpose of mass media. The approach set out by AusAID, focused on the needs of all citizens, is representative of “development” media models proposed for poorer countries. These assert the leading goals of mass media ought to be promotion of sustainable economic development and social solidarity. Priority would attach to news about projects for building up material resources, especially regional infrastructure and local industries, and with that, cultural enhancement through the strengthening of community relations and growth of a civil society. With the aim of nurturing local cultures, such theories value locally-based or national media, against global media systems seen as invasive. In the background to that is the long debate over a proposed New International Economic and Communications Order and globalisation of media services. For further references to “development” news please see Note 1.

Papua New Guinea is a country with pronounced development needs, and concern for development issues is reflected in the large percentage of effort and space given to development economics and infrastructure projects by the main media outlets. These are set up nevertheless on “Western” commercial lines, looking for markets for products they might come up with and anxious about their financial viability. For a mixed system of this kind, a more universalistic approach - specifically McQuail’s Five Basic Functions - is suggested as a frame for understanding what is observed of media production and media use, and relations among news media and government.

These Five Functions accommodate topical issues for Papua New Guinea by providing for mobilisation in crisis, and consensus building; also by giving a place to solidarity-making and preservation of cultures, or sub-cultures. At the same time the model takes account of the “Western” character of media services by listing as primary concerns, the quality of information and the infusing of information with entertainment values.

- Information: providing information about events and conditions in society and the world; indicating relations of power; facilitating innovation, adaptation and progress;
- Correlation: explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information; providing support for established authority and norms; socialising; co-ordinating separate activities; consensus building; setting orders of priority and signalling relative status.
- Continuity: expressing the dominant culture and recognising sub-cultures and new cultural developments; forging and maintaining commonality of values.
- Entertainment: providing amusement, diversion, the means of relaxation; reducing social tension.
- Mobilisation: campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes religion, (In Watson 1998, 93).

RESEARCH METHOD

Method

A systematic review was made of sixteen issues of the two national daily newspapers, and interviews conducted with fifteen informed observers or participants in the interchange of media and government. The media review identifies an agenda of public issues; the interviews produce a commentary on these issues and others affecting journalists’ work. Analysis of this material is supplemented by reference to documents and published works. Conclusions are drawn from this process about the state of relations.

Interviews

Interviews were recorded at Madang or Port Moresby with fourteen persons, from Government and Opposition, universities and mass media, and observers from the Australian news media and diplomatic service, during the period of the visit to PNG, 16.9.04 to 3.10.04. Sean Dorney from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was interviewed in Brisbane on 3.7.04.

News media under review

In the formal media sector, the two daily newspapers, The Post Courier (News Limited, Australia) and The National (Rimbunan Hijau, Malaysia), provide the most comprehensive record directly to hand. The weekly Wantok, owned by a churches consortium, publishes in *tok pisin*. There is the one television service, Em-TV (PBL Australia at the time of survey, now Fiji based ownership), the national broadcaster NBC, two main commercial radio services (overseas interests, Fiji and elsewhere),

and community radio services mostly church owned. The BBC and Radio Australia have their own frequencies in Port Moresby and RA programs are carried on PNG regional stations, (AusAID, 2004:16-17). There is limited use of satellite television.

The review of The Post Courier and The National, from 8 to 30.9.04 inclusive, was done to identify the news agenda and observe the intensity of treatment given to news in different categories. These categories were inferred from the coverage by the researcher, drawing on background in reporting and editing news. Most of the topic names given to clusters of reports might have been anticipated from introductory background reading on PNG current affairs, for instance development news, crime, official corruption. They were issues in the news, like official corruption, or common themes found in different stories, like sentiment towards Australia influencing the views of persons in the news. The survey of pages was comprehensive, the main editorial sections being covered, but leaving out entertainment, business, special supplements and sport sections. All stories reviewed were categorised.

The focus of the review was to find material and identify issues in debate, either contentious or helpful in relations between the news media and government. To that extent the report is selective, not purporting to be a wholly comprehensive and interpretative content analysis of PNG newspapers, as such. Reports were grouped by topic and the substantive content noted in abbreviated form. With the concentration on topics, no differentiation was made among news stories, features, letters or editorials, all being taken as indicators of the existence of a topic on the agenda. However non-news items were more likely to be placed in the “newspaper promotional campaigns and opinion” section, (see below). On the premise that a story with “legs” that stays on the agenda, with successive follow-ups, will be important; any substantial frequency of mention of a particular story was noted. In the outcome, the review provided a digest of the main content of the newspapers, presented in clusters, corresponding with topics mentioned in debate among media and government.

The arrangement of the information did not extend to a detailed record of the spatial allocations or juxtaposition of the stories. Reports were placed conventionally in these newspapers, being tabloid products constructed in sections: politics and national news first, generally leading on front pages as well; Pacific regional and world news; op-ed; features; entertainment; business; provincial news and sports.

- **News about economic management including the handling of financial and economic crisis.** This takes in news about management of the formal economy, to do with the national budget, financial management, currency rates and trade. The newspapers acted as journals of record, both covering the main stories each day, publicising what the national leadership wanted said, and also drawing on other sources, on these key issues of national policy. Very often the section contains “bad news” about failures in the implementation of economic goals. The language of such discourse includes formal terminology, e.g. references to foreign exchange reserves or budget surpluses, compared with most other writing in these newspapers. Where editors might consider “new, interesting, important and informative”, to determine what gets included in the news, the “importance” factor would be prominent in items found in this section.(44 reports).

- **Development news**, and foreign development assistance, (97).
- **News about the HIV-AIDS campaign**, treated as a development issue, (44).
- **Official corruption and misconduct**, (96).
- **Crime** and the law and order issue, (65).
- **Human interest and community activities**, (18). More such stories appear in sections not included in this monitor, e.g. entertainment, sports (see explanation of categorisation above).
- **Environmentalism**, and Rimbunan Hijau (RH). News about the controversial activities of the Malaysian timber company RH, and the timber industry generally, came in the context of stories about forest protection, (11).
- **Relations with Australia**, security and governance. Here there were linkages of ideas about Australians and their activities, and so disparate issues fell into the category with Australia as a unifying theme: some anti-Australian sentiment; Australian connections on security issues like terrorism; pressure from Australia to see good governance standards, (27).
- **Newspaper promotional campaigns and opinion**, (20). More such stories appear in sections not included in this monitor, e.g. entertainment, sports, business, special supplements (see explanation of categorisation above).

MEDIA CONTENTS

Over 422 news items or features were read and classified, with great variety in the coverage, reflecting high levels of activity and general transparency in public life. Contents and tone of the stories give the impression of essentially a free culture suffering many anxieties. With qualifications, noting the tasks involved in mounting full coverage, the study accepts observations of Rooney in a similar review made over two weeks, that much sourcing tends to be from “primary definers”, (e.g. official sources in Parliament or Courts, often enough providing strong news), (Rooney, 2003a: 124-7).

National financial standards, and crisis, (44 items).

The reportage covers the main decisions and pronouncements of government, pursuing a policy of reduced budget deficits and IMF compliance hampered by the consequences of budget shortfalls. Here most main stories of the day were duplicated in the two newspapers and editorial comment mostly supported national policy. Forty-four (44) stories were noted on these concerns about the economy, state finances and management.

Sample of contents:

The Treasurer proposed a “tough budget” of spending constraint to reverse “twenty nine years of wrong policy”, identifying increased tax receipts and foreign exchange reserves, following higher export prices. Pronouncements for Independence Day, 16.9.04, included the Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, amid well-used photo opportunities in villages, pointing out real levels of developmental progress over the decades. Much of the Independence Day rhetoric however was themed on “problems”, Somare himself lamenting the three-tier system of government had failed to help the provinces, and warning that excessive population growth would prevent future delivery of services.

In this category well over half the news reports were negative, dealing with discord over policy or something going wrong with government services. The Acting Treasury Secretary saw debt burdens continuing to “cripple” the national budget; the Internal Security Minister objected to postponement of a crucial national summit on guns; and it was admitted the Police budget would be cut by twenty percent, senior officers hoping to reduce outlays on litigation against police.

Development news, (97).

This large category answers demand for “good news” on economic advancement, especially in rural areas and small towns. Governments like it best. The items were evenly divided between the newspapers, The National 53, The Post Courier 44.

Most items were about small scale projects, in the context of broader programs, including: WHO reporting on good management of PNG health services; AusAID support for roads projects and school buildings; transport subsidies to get coffee crops to market. Stories were supported by ample picture coverage, e.g. groups in midwifery classes; turning on a new water supply; MPs or Ministers cutting the ribbon. Much of this material was carried in regional supplements published regularly by both outlets, as the main, but not only space given to outer areas. Twelve (12) of the stories could be called negative on development, for instance: structural failures of the Markham Bridge at Lae; delays with a regional water project; shortage of medicines.

The government has commenced publishing an occasional twelve-page supplement called *Gavamani Sivarai*, on development issues, through The National and the weekly *Wantok*. It is conservatively laid out carrying long media releases and featuring Ministers heavily.

HIV-AIDS campaign, (44).

With PNG the worst-affected country in the Pacific region, media reports support a sophisticated Australian-funded publicity campaign; overwhelmingly a project of The Post Courier with 35 out of 44 reports counted.

Corruption issues, misconduct, (96).

The public record revealed the seriousness of this burden, 96 stories, (The Post Courier 50, The National 46). Almost all were from open sources, in Courts or Parliament, or used statements by officials; there was little evident need for anonymously sourced or other “investigative” material given that the official record was keeping them running. The pressure on media resources is obvious, given the plethora of cases and problems with litigation, vexatious or otherwise.

Contents:

The senior public service law officer, Attorney General Francis Damem, was summonsed by the Public Service Commission on 22.9.04 to answer charges that he drew a large commission out of an out-of- court settlement of K5 million. Ten stories.

A suspended Madang MP Peter Yama pleaded guilty to seven of 34 charges in the Leadership Tribunal which included misconduct in office in relation to the use of water and drought relief funds, rural transport money and funds for law and order.

The former National Gaming Board Chairman Daniel Mapiria was found guilty of misappropriating K3.188 million but freed on an undertaking to make substantial restitution.

The proposed sale of shares in the Telekom monopoly was stopped by the government while the Ombudsman's Commission investigated the process. The Communication Minister bought full page advertisements to vouch for the investigation against Opposition demands for a formal public inquiry.

The National Court dismissed bribery charges against the Milne Bay Governor, Tim Neville, citing lack of evidence, the MP declaring he would sue in retaliation.

Eight other cases concerned MPs or senior officials misappropriating funds or investigations into the finances of government agencies. Another three reports had MPs involved in gunplay or in court over a serious domestic violence offence. There were twelve reports about illegal use of horse racing machines for gambling. The taxation authority estimated this was costing K44 million in lost state revenue. Side issues included weak port security, with machines brought in illegally, and immigration rackets, most of the accused being Asian. Several complaints about corruption appeared in letters columns referring to these cases.

Crime, law and order, (65).

Reports fell into three sections: spot news, running stories, and commentary about law and order issues; approximately the same number of stories in each category, and from each newspaper; 65 in all.

Random incidents involving individuals or group trouble among traditional clans or urban gangs: Teenage boys gaoled for a pack rape near Port Moresby; a woman shot dead by a household intruder in Lae; PNG Power employee murdered and body dumped at his Mt Hagen home; thirty-five in a fight at Daru. Ongoing incidents: Five reports on protesting landholders blocking movements at Buka airport and seaport, detaining a UN delegation en route to Bougainville; clan fighting including torching of houses, and ongoing surrender of weapons on Bougainville. Commentaries: Japanese diplomats twice publicly state security issues are impeding tourism and investment; young people campaigning against violence in their local communities; Catholic clergy write in opposition to the death penalty.

Human interest and community activities, (18).

Coverage in this category was noted in general editorial pages, leaving out the dedicated pages or supplements given to sports (at least four out of 32-36 pages), entertainment or gossip. In the supplements area, The Post Courier has increased general circulation with a women's supplement, the subject of some public debate - choosing between fashion or celebrity and more local focus.

Community level stories being labour intensive to cover, can be light-on in the general pages. Eighteen stories, mostly with pictures, were listed, again equally balanced between the two outlets, including: main coverage of the Hiri Moale festival; Aussie school volunteers leave with pleasant memories; PNG Olympians did the country proud; prisoners' art exhibition and gardening; an essay on sorcery. See Rooney's argument, that there are not that many stories about ordinary people unless in court or victims of misfortune; though media will remain important to the community through its ability to reach decision makers (Rooney APME 2003, 80, 82).

Environmentalism and Rimbunan Hijau (RH), (11).

Much environmental news, (eleven reports), is about logging. Already media reports have contributed to the initiation of the Barnett inquiry into corruption in the forestry industry (Ausaid, 2004:17); however investigations have been frustrated, not least by the burning down of the Forestry headquarters building at Hohola. In the review period one main issue was running, reaction to a Greenpeace report published earlier, positing links between RH operations and corrupt practices; covered in both papers; the company queried the report and talked about suing. Of other topics covered in the environmental category all but one are from the Post Courier.

Australia, security and governance issues, (27).

News about relations with Australia, (27 reports, equally distributed), in the areas of **national security** and **promotion of good governance**, can produce expressions of anti-Australian feeling from politicians. News organisations have only a minority of expatriate staff but many expatriates in their audiences, so tension over Australian relations will compound their difficulties.

The Enhanced Co-operation Program (ECP) despite evident public support has detractors, e.g. a suspicious letter, "why all this help from Australia?", and a report on the Supreme Court action brought by one provincial Governor, ultimately successful, challenging implementation of the ECP. An Australian contractor working on ECP staff facilities and charged with drinking offences, complained he was bashed by police. Six articles followed his case; three follow-up letters said expatriates should "abide by our laws". Two stories with pictures gave favourable treatment to Australian police arriving at Bougainville under ECP; an Australian sourced story emphasised ECP was "aid not intervention".

Un-named sources in police or security said Australian Federal Police (AFP) had put bugging devices in government offices (four reports); the Internal Security Minister expressed concern over weak port and border security, suggesting close relations with Australia exposed PNG to a bigger terrorism threat; and the acting President of the ruling National Alliance Party, speaking on terrorism, asked, "do we want to hold Australia's hand?"

Promotional campaigns and opinion, (20).

The newspapers are public spirited in their op-ed sections and on-going promotional campaigns, and prove themselves ready to criticise the government. The Post Courier adopts a promotional approach to certain issues, specifically HIV-AIDS, the need for road repairs where it organises volunteers to fill potholes, rights of women, and calls for tighter gun control. In September the newspaper received PANPA Awards, (Pacific Area Newspaper Publishers' Association), for its initiatives on gun control and women's rights. The newspaper's sales figures have fluctuated over recent years, increases often tied to these public interests campaigns, as well as to air freight delivery of papers to more provincial centres than its competitor; a substantial additional cost factor. Circulation was up by nearly 1000 to 26272 in September 2004; The National was reporting 17634, down by 5000 over nine months, management averring this was being "addressed" (Brian Gomez, interview).

Promotional features and leaders (20 noted): In The Post Courier, PANPA Awards; guns; the PC's assistance to Mt Hagen Hospital; criticism of closed-door power struggles around the office of PM; a call for more information on telephone bugging ascribed to the Australian Federal Police. In The National, a run of leading articles on the corruption theme: inappropriately lenient sentence for Mapiria; support for proposed life ban on MPs convicted of Leadership Code offences; call for stronger anti-corruption laws. Other topics: criticism of "dithering" over energy projects, specifically the gas pipeline to Australia; concern at university fee rises, yet wanting restraint in student protests; PNG "does not have a clue" about handling tourists.

Features space is available to guest writers, most often established figures, viz a former Chief Justice Sir Arnold Amet, a Minister Lady Carol Kidu, and the PNG representative of Transparency International Michael Manning. Political debate is often handled as a forum, actors speaking from both sides. Neutral criticism of government does appear, most often in letters, e.g. eight letters in The Post Courier and five in The National against lenient sentencing for defendants like Mapiria. A writer to The National on 30.9.04, as a "former lawyer with the then Justice Department", described "chains of stings" whereby kickbacks would be paid to "consultants" able to tap government or state-owned enterprises, through contracts or out-of-court settlements of claims. The Post Courier publishes a periodical "NPF Inquiry Scorecard", listing 83 people including police or MPs reported to the Commission of Inquiry into the National Provident Fund. The Inquiry, laboriously followed since November 2002, shows limited outcomes to date.

COMMENTARIES FROM THE INTERVIEWS

As might be guessed from the preceding review much of the content of news media will unsettle the government. The interviews brought out the main debates affecting media and government relations.

Moves towards media controls; incidents involving hostile politicians; scope for violence against journalists.

Relations have been punctuated by complaints made about news media by political leaders, and initial steps taken towards imposing media restrictions. There has been a parallel history of low-level incidents involving violence, harassment or intimidation. Dorney says such developments are cause for serious concern though also part of a

robust and open, ongoing exchange, compatible with the national culture. While the interviewees broadly agreed, most on the media side still insisted persons in responsible positions had to enforce the law and expressly preserve democratic conventions.

The pattern with media restrictions divides into moves to regulate mass media with the force of law, often reflecting politicians' sense of grievance, e.g. resentment of foreign ownership, and secondly, other kinds of incidents that demonstrate political hostility towards media, which are persistent, leaving journalists with the sense, in the words of Peter Aitsi from the Media Council, that "it never goes away".

Moves on regulation listed by the Media Council: Recommendations for regulatory commissions beginning with the 1978 Kalo inquiry and re-emerging in various later exercises, notably the report tabled by Communications Minister Gabriel Ramoi in the mid-1980s, (drafting of the 1989 Media Tribunal Bill); in 1994 the Martin proposals for a regulatory National Information and Communication Council, entailing elements of licensing for journalists, the formation of which would be at the discretion of a government Minister. With this last proposal, the Media Council formed ten years earlier and representing all but a few media groups, campaigned against it, promising organised self-regulation instead. The proposal reached the stage of legislative drafting without being brought forward. With these initiatives, some originating with politicians and some in the public service, according to Peter Aitsi "each successive case was opposed by media people who were very capable, and able to deflect it", (AusAID, 2004:25; Robie, VHS, 1996; Robie, 2004:56-60, 66-77).

Informal episodes involving clashes between government and media are legion, and while politicians' complaints against aspects of news media coverage are often enough well founded, the real interest here is if they are abusive or attached to ideas of institutional control.

In March 2003 Manning as co-author of a report critical of PNG's economic management was brought before the Parliamentary Privileges Committee. Part of the objection concerned coverage of his report in Australian news media, with two MPs talking about media regulations: "We need legislation to punish publications or authors ... critical of the government; we need to control media houses of publications through licensing or deterrents; to deal with the issue of not informing government on articles prior to publication" (ABC / Radio Australia news 28.3.03, 3.4.03; Aitsi, 2003:5).

Four months later the then Deputy Prime Minister Andrew Baing, at a function attended by the media community, criticised media as dictating a foreign view, its reporting an actual encouragement to crimes like murder and rape (ABC / Radio Australia news 17.11.04). He proposed compulsory local majority ownership for all outlets but later let the matter drop after representations from the Media Council.

In June 2004 the Prime Minister in Parliament compared The Post Courier to disadvantage with its rival, calling it "toilet paper"; the paper responded with a promotion delivering toilet paper to the Port Moresby and Lae general hospitals, where it is not provided to patients.

Intimidation of journalists puts the working lives of journalists into direct contact with the violence forcing its way into daily news. There is fear of intimidating behaviour committed by rogue Members of Parliament, police or other officials, or their associates. It was put to me as a visitor that where the *wontok* tradition is dysfunctional it can influence hostile responses to reports. In that connection, a story seen as critical of a relative or friend will be avenged, no particular distinction being made between a report written for media or a direct personal affront. It was further suggested some transfer would occur between more traditional clan or tribal loyalties and the loyalties of gangs, both exhibiting unquestioning support for a local “big man”, who can well be an aggrieved politician. In the interviews, this view was concurred with not disavowed, but it was also said threats of violence were much the exception not the rule. Often enough groups with a grievance would be ready to settle for getting their story told, (as related by Gomez, who had to settle an angry gathering at his editorial offices over the reporting of a communal dispute).

A past litany of violent incidents includes acts of censorship, threats against journalists, or more serious events like a 1994 police attack on student protestors and journalists, detailed by Robie, (1996). Bob Howarth at The Post Courier listed several cases of journalists receiving phone threats and serious pressure imposed on reporters in regional offices, most seriously on Bougainville Island. General violence not related to the news compounded publishing problems: “We spend more money on security than any division of News Limited ... We average still at least three armed attacks a week on staff; it’s just part of life here”.

Other editors and journalists including Aitsi report incidents of staff receiving threats, and softer but insistent pressure in the form of money envelopes. Gilinik Simbir of NBC recounted incidents from the past, including contacts from supporters of a losing political party on election night, threatening violence if on-air commentary was not stopped. Gomez however considers such pressure fairly unusual: “The police are a bit more prone to issue threats and things ... Our police reporter said one day a police officer called and said you’d better watch out I’ve got a bullet here for you, (but) it’s not common”. Ian Boden after several years in PNG journalism is rather dismissive: while telephone death threats are a reality, most are “obviously phoney and designed to stir you up”.

PM at centre of the media storm.

Journalists express concern that periodically news media will be denounced in person by Somare, given the Prime Minister’s place as the main opinion leader and effective guarantor of democratic processes. From the government perspective straight factual reportage of economic failures, violence or corruption may be seen as orchestrated harm, ignoring positive achievements of the government for development.

It fits the tone of complaints like that made by Somare in November 2003. The earlier comments by Baing had been disowned as outside of government policy, and then the Prime Minister responded in Parliament to an international survey on perceptions of corruption. It was reported by Shane McLeod for ABC: “(Somare: *They think they are damned foreigners who are living here writing about this country*). Sir Michael said he had opposed earlier proposals to control the media. (*I should have said yes, we should control the press in our country*). Sir Michael says developing countries need

to do things that Western nations may not necessarily agree with”(ABC / Radio Australia 11.11.03).

An extension is the uneasy relationship between the Head of Government and Post Courier as the country’s principal commercial media organisation. Howarth states his newspaper is denied an equal share of government advertising, important to media finances (Rooney, 2003b:81); and meetings though cordial have been difficult:

“My response to the PM when he has attacked me, at private meetings and things, has been that we do not report half of what goes on in this country, of corruption, lawlessness, crime, but that it is our duty to report what happens. It is not our job to put a gloss on anything.”

The National has a quieter relationship with government and is sometimes called a “quality” outlet because of that, but Gomez points out it has received criticism also, as when it registered opposition to a Government Bond issue: “Somare got up in Parliament and said something to the effect that all this stuff The National has reported was not worth the ink and paper it was printed on ... We get up the noses of politicians quite a bit.”

Sir Peter Barter as Minister overseeing administration through provincial governments, gives a general defence of the government’s *bona fides* in supporting free media. He sees both newspapers as supportive of the government, The Post Courier being “more independent”. He excuses some of the attacks on media as part of the rough and tumble style of politics, as with the “toilet paper” incident:

“A lot of the facts they published were incorrect ... He said your paper’s only good for toilet paper; just jovial .. He was a journalist himself and he knows the journalists’ game... Sometimes he gets a bit upset ... At one stage he hit the Editor of The National ...but they’re good friends again; just a tiff. (Question) You don’t see it as dangerous? No; anyone tries to tell you otherwise it’s bullshit ... The reality is politicians get very upset when you speak against them... I think the media are fairly responsible, though there are examples where even I get annoyed ... ”.

Radio for development.

A theme of elite media excluding the bulk of the public, and the potential for radio to fill the gap in communication needs throughout the country, is well expounded in debates on PNG media, as in Rooney, “news largely ignores the villages”(2003a, p. 127; Pamba cited in Rooney 2003b, p. 87). This is a point where mass media might be put more on a development orientated model. The Ausaid (2004, p.18) report produced survey evidence that five times as many people owned a radio as would have a television set or purchase a daily newspaper, and recommended rebuilding the run-down NBC system to serve a broader public, and there is consensus among all sources canvassed for this report in support of the Ausaid proposal. Journalists like Boden and McLeod with a radio background deplore the way that NBC services, including its training, educational functions and national transmitter coverage, have come close to collapse. Support includes the backing of the official Opposition, which has also called for a national television service, increased national ownership in media

generally, a fully-funded government information service, and better pay and conditions for journalists as an incentive to better performance, especially in areas like investigating corruption, (Franzjoseph Joku). There are some reservations among the interviewees about possible government control of a new radio system, if directed by charter to serve development needs, but the need to rebuild radio is not a bone of contention between media and government.

Criticism of reporting standards and sourcing.

Journalists in Papua New Guinea are being held to account on reporting standards, in particular over claims they do not use an adequate range of sources. They deny it and in reply point to obstruction of information.

Karen Haive, a senior government officer and spokesperson for the Community Development Minister, is a frustrated advocate for more developmental news. She believes journalists misunderstand the entire interests of the public, who want more information on economic development affecting daily life:

“People would like to see that ... When the Minister launches a project the media will come, but they do not follow through ... They prefer propaganda for politicians, Ministers or various people mostly in the upper hierarchy, who attack one another, and people don't like it...”.

Barter records complaints about some reporting, citing two key incidents. The first concerned the assassination of a senior politician on Bougainville after an erroneous press report, published and then re-circulated as photocopies, wrongly connecting the man to killings on the island. The second concerned the breaking of an embargo on a copy of a speech prepared by an assistant. The Minister had rewritten it and before the cut-off time, asked to retract the original - to no avail. It was potentially inflammatory, being an attack on criminal elements involved in disturbances in the Southern Highlands, though in the end he said it got him more public support than trouble.

Information, balance and obtaining sources.

Journalists say sources are restricted because of government ineptitude or deliberate blocking of information. It is currently one of the most bitterly argued issues between the parties. Among some of the complaints, Howarth finds an aggressive search for a comment, even in a culture that generally enjoys an argument, will be frustrated: “Our subs block up to four stories a night because we cannot get hold of the other party to get the other view, because they are simply unavailable. Most of the government don't have media reps ... Some disappear off the face of the earth for weeks ...”

Simbir adds to the case:

“They say they have a policy that only the boss can release information to the media ... so when journalists find that they cannot get in to talk with the boss, they go through the other way around, through the back door somehow. When that happens the government department or whoever will try to come down

hard on the media as a whole... From time to time our local politicians will refuse to talk to us”.

Aitsi identifies a break-down of public service structures as an avenue for corrupt practices:

“Unfortunately in the public service there’s a lack of information and a lack of record keeping ... There were certain times last year with particular inquiries getting to the point of finding information, where the files were burnt, or an office was burnt.”

He draws attention to a proposal by the Media Council to encourage better handling of media inquiries. The Council would extend its current workshops with key officials, to promote “civil society”, aimed at building up a culture of free flow of information as provided under the Constitution, Section 51 (1975). It reasons that blocking of information is often due to poor resources, a weak public service tradition and lack of expertise with political information, (Aitsi, 2003:5).

Dealing with corruption.

The present government declares for conservative fiscal management and for probity, but cannot be insulated from illegal activities within its purview. It has a quality problem in the ranks of elected politicians or officials; at times any PNG government must look for support from compromised members. It is using some institutional remedies like the hard-pressed Leadership Tribunal, and electoral reforms expected to reduce the chances of members being voted in on a very narrow segment of votes. Barter identifies some aspects of the system as encouraging malpractice, like the discretionary development funds under the control of individual MPs, now considerably reduced. He avers the government itself is honest:

“No one’s denying there’s corruption, least of all me ... It is something that I hate and detest. It makes my job extremely difficult. I get really, really angry when I have to deal with it, and I have to deal with it every day. But it is not as bad as people often make it out to be. In certain areas it is big but the bulk of the population is not involved. As far as politicians being corrupt, there have been examples but amongst my colleagues there is no-one who’s dishonest ... I cannot speak of the whole Parliament but so far as Cabinet goes ... we do everything we can to stop corruption, and I assure you it is not happening with us.”

Gomez sees government facing a tough task because of inadequate material resources:

“They’ve got First World regulatory systems and they’ve got Third World outcomes. If you look at the laws ... in any aspect it will be as good as or better than any developing countries; but when you come to implementation the resources are not there. It is swallowing up resources, millions of kina for Commissions, inquiries ... You just have to look at the Ombudsman cases to know that the system’s full of corruption.”

The Media Council is concentrating a second main initiative on a proposal, under discussion by a committee, for cross-media reporting on corrupt practices. Aitsi states: “Corruption is the biggest enemy that hampers our development as a country and under our community obligation we see that as being our number one role”. The proposal is for member organisations to provide a reporter on rotation to carry out investigative work, for a general pool. The exercise should reduce dependence on official sources, compound the impact of any strong stories produced, and reduce the vulnerability to intimidation of individual journalists.

Rimbunan Hijau and difficult relations.

The Malaysian owned company RH has been roundly accused of illegal logging operations, abuse of local landholders and company employees, and corruption of public officials including politicians to very high levels; claims detailed in an anonymous online newsletter called *Masalai i tokaut*. The English language newsletter in 2003 and 2004 listed the company’s operations in several businesses including logging, retail stores and publishing through its ownership of The National. Its suggestion of an organised network corrupting the state apparatus was taken up by Australian media outlets: The Age in June 2004, (Forbes and Fyfe, 2004), then by SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) *Dateline* in November, (2004). This issue is most difficult for PNG-based media because of the research resources required, need to protect sources, prospect of unaffordable litigation, the special case of The National with its ownership, and government sensitivity.

Barter answered criticism of loggers with a formulated defence: that the forest industry is following more sustainable practices than previously; that logging is the only resource available to people in many districts, providing their only protection against poverty and ill-health, and finally that campaigns mounted in foreign media are an affront to national sovereignty. He rejects the current claims about illegal logging and links to corruption.

“I’m in charge of providing services to people in PNG. Our government hasn’t got enough money to do it ... At some time we have to stop people dying in the bush ... improve the quality of life in rural areas ... I get upset to have international people coming in dictating to them ...”

The government statement is widely canvassed and supported. For example, Boden as a leader writer on The National keeps a distance from partisan commitments and supports conservation practices, but on forestry expressed the same position as the Minister, nearly reiterating the basic statement on sustainability, the industry’s vital economic importance, and disapproval of foreign involvements. He specifically derided The Age’s coverage as “nonsense”. Gomez from The National says it denies the tag, the “loggers’ paper”, and sometimes leads criticism of government or companies on logging issues, though it has also defended the parent company:

“I opposed a recent World Bank draft report on logging containing a cost benefit analysis by a guy who often works in conjunction with Greenpeace, saying it was unbalanced ... There have been occasions when we have reported negative statements against RH and The Post Courier have not, and when that happens of course our RH management get very upset ...”.

Journalism education.

A panel discussion with fourth-year students in the Journalism course at Divine Word University (Rooney, 2003b: 76-91; Robie, 2004:152-66) reflected on their experiences with now well-known stories in which journalists encountered trouble with the police or other government officials, or were offered bribes. They took these disturbing experiences to be indicative of journalistic life and were concerned that parties with a grievance “do not see journalists as neutral.” It was a jaded view. The students reflected on whether to work in journalism, conscious it was likely to be low paid and risky. It was not idealistic talk about being the Fourth Estate, though there was interest in ways to live with self-censorship, the hope of being able to work in “development news” without being molested - and in one case a return to the ideal of journalism as a vocation, risks kept in different perspective: “I would find it very boring sitting at a computer all day in an office. I like writing and going out and meeting people”.

CONCLUSIONS

This report pictures Papua New Guinea as a country with diverse media needs and sees the news media trying to fulfil many roles. Media outlets address the interests of elite audiences able to pay for the service, adopting production practices and news values similar to those of Australia and other Western countries. They feature development issues, mostly to do with development of material infrastructure and industry. They also seek a broad public following, using the development news, promotional campaigns, regional coverage, and emphasis on sports and entertainment. At all levels they report on aspects of ongoing crisis: economic adversity, a volatile political scene, widespread violence, corruption and other crimes.

Little is on record about traditional mass communication, as distinct from modern media systems, or how the majority use media (Rooney, 2003a:188). There is widespread scepticism about the applicability of media to most people’s daily lives, although the newspapers do say they have reports of penetration to the most remote areas (testified by Gomez, Joku); television despite its weak penetration can have strong impacts, witness the crowds for State of Origin games; radio is popular and might be successfully revived.

In the meantime, journalists must deal regularly with government as a key associate in all aspects of their calling, and must look for public support where they encounter difficulty. Without official or direct censorship, day-by-day relations with government are cordial, much in the model of mutual self-interest in an elite system, punctuated with disagreements. There are points of open discord where the two sets of interests diverge, and the chief problem areas have been examined in this report:

- Demands for information from government including effective responses to media inquiries, to permit legitimate free flow of information; these contradict politicians’ complaints that the news is unbalanced.
- Official corruption. The present government is not known to be corrupt but some of its employees and associates will be, viz certain Members of

Parliament; disputes about the amount of media exposure it gets lead to a further debate, about priority that should be attached to eradicating corruption.

- Periodic moves by members of government to bring in new media controls, generating uneasiness and suspicion in media circles.
- Verbal abuse or attempts at chastisement of journalists by high office holders. Journalists though not wanting to over-react, cannot agree to laugh this off as part of the rough and tumble. Too much of it can be seen as giving encouragement, however inadvertently, to criminals of various kinds to make war on media; to weaken it as an avenue of exposure and an aid to civil justice.
- Threats to the physical security and safety of news media organisations and their employees. Again there is a question of priority; to what extent government will go to curtail lawlessness closer to its roots, i.e. to attack social support systems available to gangsters or corrupt officials.
- The perceived power and influence of Rimbunan Hijau, the biggest company in an industry providing five percent of government revenue. The concern here is to resolve allegations that this organisation is prepared to act illegally in its logging operations, and in co-opting government agents to serve its interests. It might be resolved through transparency, whether openness with information on the part of the company itself or through the kind of public inquiry frequently sought by its critics. It is a highly sensitive issue for the reputation of the government and as the subject of intense media interest a potential field of severe conflict between government and media.

Media organisations have made a measured and concerted response to these issues through the Media Council of Papua New Guinea, standing for organised self-regulation. It has initiated a program for networking with leaders in business, government and the general community, to help with the cultivation of civil society. It is directing that activity towards getting more timely and informative responses from Ministers and government offices, in response to media inquiries. The Media Council is also proposing that member organisations dedicate staff on a shared basis, to generate a pool of stories on corruption issues.

News media anywhere despite their strengths are ultimately vulnerable to powerful forces intent on controlling them. In Papua New Guinea they are looking to government for much improved guarantees of their position in a democratic state. Journalists are proposing to work with those in government who demonstrate probity and good will. While relations will continue to be impeded by economic stress, corruption and violence, hope exists that the cultural climate of the country and shared democratic values of government and media will see these destructive factors overcome.

Interviews

Persons interviewed:

Government and Opposition

Sir Peter Barter, Minister for Inter-governmental Relations

Karen Haive, A/Assistant Director – Policy, Department of Community Development

Franzjoseph Joku, Chief of Staff, Office of the Opposition Leader

Journalists

Brian Gomez, senior editor, formerly Editor in Chief, The National

Bob Howarth, Managing Director, South Pacific Post Limited

Peter Aitsi, President, Media Council of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Gilini Simbia, Senior Programs Officer, National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Madang

Ian Boden, Lecturer Divine Word University; leader writer for The National

Journalism Students, Divine Word University

Joys Eggins

Aaron English

Joshua Kais

Christine Manlel

Australian government and media

Matt Anderson, Counsellor, Australian High Commission, Port Moresby

Sean Dorney, Pacific Correspondent, ABC

Shane McLeod, Papua New Guinea Correspondent, ABC

Note 1; development news. After foundational work by Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1971; also Galtung and Ruge, 1965), a campaign for re-orientation by international mass media services towards development goals was pursued through forums of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Concepts raised were found in later research on corporations and globalisation, e.g. in Herman and McChesney (1997), and related issues such as a debate on “Asian values”, e.g. Masterton (1996). Other references: Hameling (1994), Herbert (2001), Horton (1978), Horvat (1995), MacBride et al (1980), Smith (1980), Tunstall (1995). Citations in the bibliography.

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