

# 14. Forgetting PNG?

## Australian media coverage of Papua New Guinea

**Abstract:** Coverage of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in Australian media has been a source of resentment and dissatisfaction among academic writers and journalists within PNG and in Australia, and PNG activists and political leaders since the former Territory's independence in 1975. A survey of Australian media coverage during 2007-11 found there was a low volume of coverage and much of the content was negative. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) provided an exception by maintaining a Port Moresby correspondent. The present study finds the volume of coverage has increased slightly with indications of more positive approaches in reporting on the country. It contrasts disinterest in PNG among established Australian press and commercial television, with the ongoing contribution of ABC, and the 'new media' *Guardian Australia* making a targeted and well-serviced entry into the field.

**Keywords:** Australian Broadcasting Corporation, coverage, foreign correspondence, Papua New Guinea, political journalism, Radio Australia, *The Guardian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

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### Introduction

WAS Papua New Guinea (PNG) forgotten by Australia after independence in 1975? That is a conclusion which could be drawn from the very limited coverage of the former Territory which occurred in Australian mass media. It was an omission marked by some exasperation, resentment and dissatisfaction among academics, journalists and political leaders within PNG, noted by non-PNG observers such as those cited here. Thirty years post-independence, the question was addressed in a research collaboration based on monitoring and assessment of actual levels of coverage. Ginau and Papoutsaki (2007) found 40 articles about PNG subjects in six Australian newspapers chosen for analysis; Duffield et al (2008) analysed broadcast media content; and the studies were brought together by Ginau et al., in Papoutsaki et al. (2011), to settle on conclusions that media treatment of PNG in Australia was not only sparse in volume, but where it occurred, it tended to be 'negative'.

It was found that coverage by the ABC and its international service, Radio Australia, provided some relief from this, with a consistent flow of reportage containing usually more ‘positive’ treatments.

The debate over what was taking place embraced a range of arguments that became prevalent from the early 1970s, for example taking up Galtung’s (1965) formulation of the ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ in the media world: That the commercial imperatives of Western news media permitted near-exclusively the extraction of ‘bad news’ stories which could arrest the attention of home audiences, usually on violent conflict and disasters; like street crime in Port Moresby, expulsion of the ‘Sandline’ mercenaries, or the Aitape tsunami. Overseas journalists deploying liberal, or commercial ‘news values’, such as the privileging of conflict in the news, were seen as uninformed and culturally insensitive, distorting the reality of life in post-colonial settings (Ginau & Papoutsaki, 2007:127-28).

A plea would be made for more exposure of local people, and not just elite figures, as sources for the news; more news about their needs and way of life, and ‘development news’ about achievement. In response, as local editors and journalists would affirm, news operations were seen as restricted by difficulties with high costs and poor infrastructure (Duffield, 2004), and at times officialdom withholding information or visas (Dorney, 1998). These interactions and discussions reflected widespread concern that PNG society was not being faithfully or adequately reported to itself or the world at large. News media to a significant extent were supporting the characterisation of PNG as principally a site for the limited or ‘negative’ agenda: tribal war and urban violence, Australians suffering injury and misadventure, commemorative visits to the Kokoda Trail battlefields, relief work during natural disasters, some sports especially popularity in PNG of Australia’s State of Origin football, and sometimes a *sing-sing*, ‘cultural’ performance for documentary-style treatment. Several other matters would come up occasionally and in isolation—cases of official corruption, logging and the environment, business and finance reports about the resources industry, or news from parliament—without achieving routinised treatment for updates, connectivity or continuity.

The present study, after a further 10 years, was carried out to ascertain whether at all the unsatisfactory situation had improved, specifically with a possible increase in volume of coverage. It might obtain information on whether events in the news, and developments in media had made PNG a less marginal, and in cases a better understood field for media interest.

It was concluded that coverage of PNG has an acknowledged, if limited, place in Australia’s general news agendas, where for example it might be expected that a major political story will be aired, but with overall a modest tally of individual PNG items in the count-up of reports published in Australia. The reviewing exercise has shown more clearly the divergence among Australian media, with the

News Corp press and commercial television showing little interest while ‘quality’ orientated media, such as the ABC and *Sydney Morning Herald*, if not providing heavy coverage, at least showed consistent attention.

The review did not find a pronounced weighting overall towards ‘negative’ treatment of news, that would be pejorative, or confined to a ‘mantra’ of violence and disaster. Certainly large problem issues for the country existed and demanded coverage, such as corruption charges against the recently-removed Prime Minister, but the tendency was towards more detached reporting on a problem solving process, not exploitative treatment with potential to in some way aggravate the situation. Similarly, while the sourcing of reports continued to include mostly ‘outside’ voices or elite figures in PNG society, social responsibility would be observed on the part of the news media, where the civil society, *viz* sports officials, health workers or the views of private citizens also would be represented. One major change was the advent of *The Guardian*, Australian edition, as a new participant, with a well-serviced plan for expanding and changing the character of reporting from PNG.

### **Method and approach**

The task was to obtain a record of reporting on PNG from a survey of content of Australian mass media. The research problem was to assess the extent and quality of Australian media coverage of PNG, in the light of critical findings obtained previously. The questions included: What volume of coverage is provided by a selection of main media outlets? What will be the content of this coverage, as a set of news topics, and its characteristics in terms of a faithful reflection of events? What inferences might be drawn on the authenticity of the coverage and its value to users in understanding the ‘life’ of PNG?

The undertaking dealt predominantly with news pages and news bulletins, but included information on other relevant content. Only events with a reference to PNG were considered except that some issues to do with the close neighbour Papua, in Indonesia, were accepted. Given the scope of this project, with one researcher, the approach taken was to define a period which was extended enough, that it might be seen to contain the news cycle on some main issues; and then to work through a wide enough selection of exemplars to be able to identify agendas, trends, similarities and differences in the coverage. It provided a sampling of the offerings of a representative set of media outlets, for limited periods within the prescribed time frame. Planning was informed by the volume of material encountered in the research done during 2007-11. The content monitoring was carried out from 1 October 2019 through to 14 January 2020.

The exercise reviewed essentially the same media outlets as in the earlier research: three newspapers, two commercial free-to-air television stations and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the ABC and Radio Australia, and the

addition of *The Guardian* (listed under News Media). As all of these outlets have their content posted directly online or in versions formatted for online and mobile users, there was far greater accessibility than nine years earlier. The exercise could not replicate the research conducted in 2007-11, as a group project carried out over a longer period, which happened prior to certain key changes, especially the founding of *The Guardian* in Australia, and technological changes giving good access to content, but not through the same process of checking—for example much quicker access to archived ‘stories’ and ‘clips’ as well as episode run-downs displayed by the commercial television networks. Only three print newspapers were reviewed against six previously, while *The Guardian* was added. In 2019-20, opening pages and noting, then compiling the topics for the reports as they were found, was a sequential effort over the prescribed interval of time. The news outlets studied had much the same, historical events and processes to work with as each other, during this restricted, six-weeks period.

Within its limits, the rationale was that answers to the researcher’s questions would emerge as the data was obtained and organised in a sequence. The experience of reading this, as the proceedings and results were documented for the respective media outlets, one-by-one, might be seen as an unfolding of the history and substance of all of their coverage being brought together.

## **Monitoring of media content**

### ***Commercial free to air television and SBS***

Commercial free to air television remains heavily watched with content firmly fixed on immediate and close-to-home interests of the maximum available reach and number of Australian viewers. These are scarcely in the ‘market’ for material that might be available from relatively ‘remote’ PNG, whatever possibilities can be imagined, for example: cultural material, travel, wildlife, investment, or political developments like the fall of a government, independence for Bougainville or penetration of Chinese interests. International content generally in commercial news and current affairs is mostly limited to main headline events especially where those involve highly recognisable figures, *vis* Donald Trump or Meghan Markle. Otherwise, from overseas, there is competition from amusing or dramatic back-of-the-bulletin colour stories. In the scan of content made for this study one report related to PNG was found on each of the two networks.

**Channel Seven News** has a selection of main stories on its Home page in a dedicated ‘Asia Pacific’ category, with 46 displayed during the calendar months of October and November 2019—one relating to PNG. They included main headline reports, for example six on the Hong Kong rioting. Others were, the arrests in Vietnam over the asylum seekers truck deaths in the United King-

dom, and winding-up of an Australia-China agreement on human rights. Stories about Australians abroad included the ‘Sydney grandmother’ drug mule cleared in Malaysia, and a Youfoodz founder apologising for allegedly anti-Asian remarks made in Singapore. There were several in the ‘human interest’, oddity or ‘click-bait’ category, all with images or video, taking in a baby born with two heads in India and a woman in Thailand murdered by her son—body parts kept in the freezer. Not in PNG, but neighbouring Papua, the network had funded a trip accompanying a young man back to his ‘cannibal village’. This followed up a venture 14 years previously when a crew had gone there to help the boy as an infant accused of witchcraft ‘escape’ to foster care in Sumatra (Seven News, 2020). The incident is a reminder of the capacity of major media organisations to put resources into coverage in difficult areas if moved to do it.

**Channel Nine** on the Home page posts a large selection of free views including news bulletins from the preceding week and clips, mostly 4-5 minutes, from the current affairs shows *Sixty Minutes* (190 items scanned from 2019) and *A Current Affair* (580 items). A replay of the six available news bulletins, from Brisbane, at the start of January (6 to 12 January 2020) demonstrated a standard line-up for the commercial sector, of heavy concentration on a major story from anywhere (the bushfires, the flare-up over Iran including destruction of the airliner, ‘defection’ of the Sussex Royal couple); celebrity stories, health reports, finance and family budgets; then local accidents and crime, and community events, as Elvis impersonators, or opening of a new park. Finally there is comprehensive treatment of elite sport being played in Australia. One story related to PNG was found, a *Sixty Minutes* interview with a Bougainville politician on Chinese influence after prospective independence (9NOW, 2019).

**The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)** produces a nightly one-hour news bulletin with emphasis on international coverage, in line with its mission, ‘to provide multilingual and multicultural radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians, and, in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society’ (SBS Act) . It runs advertisements but functions as an independent, government-sponsored entity. The bulletin like those on commercial television is structured around extended coverage of a few main stories, though the one-hour duration permits more stories to be included within that format. The SBS World News will at times cover Pacific events, as in the 2008 study (Duffield et al, 2008, pp. 11-12). However, the service’s interests are global and geo-political, ranging beyond Australia and the Pacific. Playing through one week of bulletins this time (9-14 January 2020) provided analytical features on the situation in Libya, Northern Ireland or Poland—but nothing on Pacific affairs. The current affairs programme *Dateline* had 28 editions archived from 2019, showing the same pattern, conversation-making topics from many countries, not the Pacific, except for the Christchurch Mosque massacre.

### **Newspapers—The Courier Mail and The Australian**

A detailed reading was made of print copies of two News Corp newspapers, *The Australian* and the Brisbane *Courier Mail* over one week, 4-10 November 2019, noting any mentions of PNG, with very sparse results. It included the *Weekend Australian* on 9-10 November 2019 and the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* on 10 November 2019. Hard copies were used as the online records are less accessible behind paywalls. Three mentions of PNG were found: A forthcoming game between the national Rugby League side and Fiji was noted in a table of weekend sports events (*Weekend Australian*, 9-10/11/19). In a feature about Australian coast watchers during World War II, PNG was included as one country where they operated (*SM*, 10/11/19). An article in the *Sunday Mail* travel section called ‘How can I see the true PNG’ promoted cruise ship holidays, quoting a travel agent: ‘The cruise lines have secured safe locations for their guests to experience and are trustworthy.’ It said the ‘locals put on displays and festivals to meet the ships’ (*SM*, 10/11/19: Escape 52).

Two stories might be classed as indirect mentions, with the name of the country not included. The Pacific Islands Forum, of which PNG is a member, criticised America’s withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement (*CM*, 7/11/19). The PNG Rugby League player James Segeyaro contested charges he had deliberately ingested Ligandrol. This was run by both dailies, with a front-page picture in the *Courier Mail* (*Australian*, 8/11/19; *CM*, 8/11/19). He was criticised the next day by a sports columnist for requesting a court timeline (*Weekend Australian*, 9-10/11/19). Segeyaro was identified as a member of the Brisbane Broncos team (‘fallen Bronco’) without reference to his PNG origins.

### **Newspapers—The Sydney Morning Herald**

*The Sydney Morning Herald* has a public archive of stories in segments which include an ‘Oceania’ page, extending back two months. For the present study it was searched for the three-weeks period (18 November 2019 to 12 January 2020). The articles tend to be in clusters forming coverage of a breaking story, and in the period under review this was heavily skewed by concentration on the White Island eruption in New Zealand—61 of the 99 items found. PNG was mentioned in nine articles, of which seven were about the independence referendum on Bougainville; the others were reports on gun running in the PNG Highlands, and on Behrouz Boochani, the Manus detainee visiting New Zealand for a literary festival. The veteran Pacific Region journalist and photographer, Ben Bohane, contributed five of the Bougainville articles, forming part of a portfolio of his reportage and analysis of the event published by the Lowy Institute and other outlets. Bohane was awarded the inaugural Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism, made by the Walkley Foundation, and used the prize to fund his reporting trip. This is noted as it represents one means by

which coverage of events in the Pacific region can be supported and injected into many outlets including ‘mainstream’ publications like the *SMH* (Bohane, 2019).

***Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)***

The ABC has for some decades provided an oasis in what might otherwise have been a media desert in terms of coverage of PNG in Australia. The research preceding this study determined that a report would be published by the ABC on PNG, in one format or another, each two days (Ginau et al, 2011, p. 70). This was the largest media contribution towards awareness of the former Australian Territory and new information about it. A key factor has been maintaining a resident overseas correspondent in Port Moresby, with some local support staff—for several years now the only full-time representative from an Australian media organisation. The present incumbent, Natalie Whiting (Natalie Whiting, 2020), posts online recent reports across a broad range, from political controversies, to news stories with an Australian link, to more general interest pieces. Five items listed there in October 2019 were: ‘Suspicion of birth control drives men to cut implants out of their wives’ arms’; the former PM’s interim court order to prevent arrest (two reports); over \$1million missing after purchase of 40 Maseratis for the 2018 APEC conference; concerns being expressed about Bougainville independence and a possible ‘crisis’ in the Pacific. The reports appear in diverse programs on television, online, in radio news and current affairs, and on Radio Australia. This process represents ‘value for money’ without overuse, providing a ‘backbone’ of PNG reportage together with material from several other sources also.

ABC news stories compiled and posted online, in an ‘Asia Pacific’ category, where some 150 reports will be posted in a month, were checked for the calendar month of October 2019. Eight PNG reports were recorded on several topics: Bougainville referendum; Australia easing kava import rules; former PM Peter O’Neill on corruption charges (two reports); money missing from sale of VIP Maseratis; RAAF fetching performers for the Military Tattoo in Melbourne; Chinese-owned Ramu nickel plant shut down over toxic spill; men opposing birth control for women. Separately, the running list of candidate stories for publication presented online as ‘Just In’ was monitored again, as it had been used in the previous research (finding 15 ‘PNG’ stories out of 2597) (Ginau et al., in Papoutsaki et al., 2011, p. 66). For one week commencing 21 November 2019, 700 reports were noted, of which four referred to PNG: Australian financial aid sought by PNG; a loan of A\$400-million to PNG, expected to replace an anticipated loan from China; Bougainville referendum (two reports).

The three radio current affairs programs, *AM*, *The World Today (TWT)* and *PM* use limited PNG material, most from the resident ABC Correspondent. The

programs were monitored for the month of October 2019. *AM* broadcast 237 reports of which five were on PNG issues, such as Australian economic aid boosted, corruption charges against O'Neill, toxic spill from the Madang province nickel mine. *TWT* which does not broadcast on weekends had 141 reports, none noted on PNG. The published archive had 23 days available for *PM* which broadcast 148 reports in that period, three relevant for PNG, including the O'Neill arrest warrants and trouble along the border with Papua.

A few offerings were found during October 2019 in lists published for specialist ABC programmes. In television, none of 83 reports on 7:30 were about PNG matters, nor any of 24 *Foreign Correspondent* episodes publicly archived, and the religion and ethics program *Compass* had none that month, though the record included a feature in July on a group of Polish missionaries. In radio, *Correspondents' Report* listed two dispatches, one on Papua, one on street art in Port Moresby. Radio National Breakfast had a report on the O'Neill arrest and a lawyer speaking on human rights in Papua. ABC Sport posts news highlights online, with sections for individual sports. Review of the Rugby League category (28 postings) and Cricket (34) produced two PNG mentions: the suspension of the Broncos player and PNG national James Segeyaro; and a visit by the Australian Prime Minister to a training camp in Fiji, to be used by police and military teams from across the Pacific.

### **ABC Radio Australia**

The ABC's international service, Radio Australia, provides extensive coverage of Pacific affairs via 13 local FM radio stations (five in PNG) and relay stations, Internet streaming, on-demand audio, podcast downloads or live satellite (ABC RA frequencies). It controversially dropped its traditional shortwave services in 2017 in recognition of new alternatives and as a cost-saving measure. News and current affairs in English are carried in the two flagship programmes, *Pacific Beat* and *Pacific Review*. As programmes for overseas listening they have no broadcast outlet within Australia. The diversity and high volume of material is an indicator of the potential of PNG as a field of interest for Australian media.

The daily *Pacific Beat* necessarily provides an Australian perspective, though eclectic in its sourcing, describing itself as delivering 'interviews with leaders, newsmakers, and people who make the Pacific beat ... to keep (listeners) up-to-date on the happenings in the Pacific' (ABC RA *Pacific Beat*, 2020). It provides reports of about four minutes, in 25-minute segments twice in the morning then in the late afternoon. *Pacific Beat* remains easily available online as a strong resource for the representation and understanding of regional affairs, though its absence from domestic radio is a 'missed chance' for the Pacific Region to be stronger in national agendas. That might also match the declared aspiration of the Australian government to cultivate Pacific linkages (DFAT, 2020).



The present review charts *Pacific Beat* content for calendar October 2019, with 85 items broadcast, 23 related to PNG. Seven of the 23 items are indirectly linked to PNG being on relevant Pacific-wide themes. These included initiatives by non-government organisations (NGOs) towards increasing female representation in the region's parliaments, or to clean up plastic waste in the ocean; the United States 'Pacific Pledge' raising the possibility of increased investment spending; moves by an industry body in Australia to promote the fashion trade in the region; Australia's relaxation of import restrictions on kava, and a Lowy Institute report discounting charges against China of conducting 'debt trap diplomacy'.

In news instigated 'from outside' directly related to PNG, there are reports on a project of American universities to preserve early recordings by anthropologists, and the contentious deportation of a part-Aboriginal man, of PNG background, from jail in Australia. The 'strictly PNG' material, originating there, included: the cricket team, the Barramundis, entering the T-20 World Cup; proposed legal action against Ramu Nickel over pollution near Madang; the former Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, evading arrest on corruption charges; the Treasurer anxious about a 'very deep hole' in the national budget; claims of law and order problems being linked to squatters' 'settlements'; complaints by people along the Indonesian border about shooting incidents and the presence of Papuan separatists. A check on sourcing showed that 11 of these 23 reports were initiated by PNG citizens, five were from Australia, two from the United States, another five from other 'outside' sources. PNG citizens would be involved in follow-ups on the latter reports.

The second current affairs offering on Radio Australia, the weekly *Pacific Review* also follows a practical and open brief, as 'a roundup of major stories from across the region and the people involved and affected by them' (ABC RA *Pacific Review*, 2020). The programme is slower paced permitting some analysis, produced each Saturday, running 30-minutes, with three stories in each edition. Three of the 12 'major stories' posted for October 2019 directly concerned PNG: preparing for the aftermath of the Bougainville referendum; former Prime Minister O'Neill facing arrest, and Australia's new import rules on kava. *Pacific Review* had also recently reported on increased American and Indian interest in the Pacific Region, and the US 'Pacific Pledge'.

### ***The Guardian Australia***

An initiative by *The Guardian*, the Australian online edition, offers to materially change the overall story of PNG coverage. The earlier research referred to (Ginau et al, in Papoutsaki et al, 2011) took place three years before *Guardian Australia* was founded. In 2019, it obtained a major grant from the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas (JNI, 2019) to support a 'Pacific Project' whereby it will expand the volume, range and quality of coverage available in

Australia. PNG has a separate page (*The Guardian*, 2020), and coverage there during the calendar month November 2019 demonstrates the editors' intentions.

As well as dedicated 'Project' items, the publication continued also with 'regular' coverage, where during November it had four articles about Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish detainee and writer travelling from PNG to New Zealand. Under the 'Pacific Project', there are six postings from Bougainville, badged with the sponsor organisation's logo: three feature-length reports by PNG journalist Leanne Jorari, a guest article by Bertie Ahern, Chairman of the Referendum Commission, an historical gallery of pictures, and a substantial article, 1700 words, 'Bougainville's independence referendum explained' by Kate Lyons, the Pacific editor appointed in October to lead the project (*Guardian Australia* press office, 2019a). Also in the Pacific Project coverage of the month, journalist Jo Chandler filed from Port Moresby, a report on the 'Maserati scandal' over the government's luxury cars, and an extended interview with the beleaguered former Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill.

In October 2019, 'pre-Project', *The Guardian* had featured a 22-minute documentary on contraband firearms in tribal fighting in Enga Province, jointly made with Screen Australia. The film records the efforts of a local 'peace-maker' to dissuade two belligerent groups from mutual killings and major destruction of property.

### **Commentary on *The Guardian* case**

*The Guardian Australia* initiative raises issues about the kind of coverage likely to occur, and more generally the rationale for reporting the news. The first of the issues concerns motivation of the sponsor organisation, which, as with most coverage monitored for this study, is pragmatic and focused on demonstrable social, cultural, environmental and also economic bases for news coverage. Mark Ryan, director of the Judith Neilson Institute, said at the Pacific Project launch in July: 'The Pacific is increasingly a focus of global attention as larger geopolitical forces play out and it's on the frontline of climate change and other major environmental impacts. It's an obvious area of need and JNI is keen to support efforts to boost reporting of these issues and bring them to the attention of Australian readers and policymakers.' Lenore Taylor, the *Guardian Australia* editor, said: 'The region receives relatively little sustained reporting even though there are globally significant security, environmental and social stories to be told. We know these topics are of strong interest to our readers in Australia and around the world' (*Guardian Australia* press office, 2020b).

Going further, Ryan stressed JNI's championing of 'quality journalism and storytelling', stating that with 'news media everywhere facing unprecedented challenges ...', 'the need for accurate, evidence-based journalism is stronger than ever.' Taylor added: 'We're excited to work with local journalists and we have

plans to collaborate with SBS on some bigger investigations.’ The points made contain an appeal to traditional liberal journalistic values, as to ‘evidence-based’, establishing facts, while the reference to ‘quality journalism and storytelling’ may take in the ambition to deploy advanced production values and a variety of forms, especially with options created by advanced ICT—hence *The Guardian*’s juxtaposition of galleys of text, video, picture galleries. Taylor’s contribution signalled a pre-emptive response to past criticisms of media coverage, that it excluded local voices, and with the reference to SBS, pointed up the growing phenomenon of cooperative ventures in news reporting—a break with commercial models focused on building audiences for advertisers in a competitive scramble.

Where the motivations and goals addressed in this case put social and cultural objectives first, commerce second, they are concerned with ideology, being an ideology about mass media and its uses in society. It would plainly assume that humans value having validated information and knowledge for its own sake, and that facilitating this is a social good: news as bonding material of the culture not as a commodity. It is not so much a generalised, political ideology, of left versus right, ‘haves’ versus ‘have-nots’ and the like. That is, except for a forceful protectiveness towards human rights, widely shared across the media community worldwide, and following the signature liberal stance of *The Guardian*’s parent newspaper in England. Indicative of that concern, *The Guardian* gives a significant proportion of coverage to the condition of ‘Australian’ asylum seekers held in PNG.

Discussion of media work in PNG has always had to take account of the high cost of operations and low returns, in terms of the weak local consumer economy and sluggish interest levels in Australia. *The Guardian* model in this instance accepts the cost challenge through use of foundation support, at base the Scott Trust’s funding of its parent organisation (Scott Trust, 2020), other grants, advertising, collaborations (as with JN1, SBS and Screen Australia), and such other means as crowd-funding and subscriptions—evading the tight squeeze imposed by finding profit for shareholders.

As a ‘mainstream’ player it has been developing audiences, bringing in substantial numbers with a measurable interest in variety and facts; without pressure of servicing a ‘lowest common denominator’ to maximise the numbers. The Australian site has turned a small profit since 2018, when audience growth reached 2.8-million unique visits per month (*Guardian Australia*, 2018), (Samios, 2018). Current company postings give larger user numbers and some pertinent audience profiles (*The Guardian Advertising*).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Altogether 86 items were assessed here of which 26 from ABC, 23 from Radio Australia and 17 in *The Guardian* and the *SMH* almost attaining double-figure

with nine. There was some doubling-up of stories in different outlets. These were mostly reports on ABC from the full-time correspondent—similar to the situation in 2011 (Ginaud et al, in Papoutsaki et al, 2011:66). This repetition is estimated at less than 20 percent of the total for all outlets, and ‘repeat’ versions are included here due to stories being repackaged and repurposed, for different audiences in diverse programs. The ABC output again led. Whereas in 2011 it was estimated one ABC report appeared each two days, in 2019 it was *pro rata* 1.3 reports each two days, excluding the large input from Radio Australia. Otherwise the volume of coverage was not demonstrably greater than 10 years ago, except for the reinforcing factor of *The Guardian* coming in—a substantial change.

To address the issue raised in the Introduction of representation of Papua New Guineans in media reports, and ‘negativity’ in reporting about PNG: A standard was applied as to whether the principal voice or presence in a report was a PNG national. In the case of an Australian interviewing a PNG politician, the latter was the main actor. Where Australian journalists wrote about the PNG NRL player James Segeyaro, in balance the PNG participant should still lead. Mostly the choice is more obvious. One standard applied is, who has provided the main information? For example, where the Australian government provides information about its air force flying PNG dancers to Melbourne, and the dancers are pictured in the story, on this criterion the lead presence would still be Australian. An aspect of the long-held concerns about representation of PNG people in news, is the use of ‘elite’ speakers as against others. Within the bounds of this study, it is observed that in 2020 more people speak, for example the ‘peace-maker’ in *The Guardian* documentary, or in situations like the heavy coverage of the Bougainville referendum, where there is strong community engagement and so more voices, especially educated young people talking as private citizens. Certainly, the spread of mobile telephones (Watson, 2011) has made a breakthrough in communication and access for more people, with expected increases in ‘media competencies’. In this qualified assessment Papua New Guineans were the principal voices in 50 of the 86 items.

Determining a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ cast in media reports is far less reliable and useful because of the complexity of values involved. Reports about tribal warfare or street violence are doubly negative, as they involve harm to persons, and put the country in a bad light, for example discouraging tourists. The consensus, colour and festivity surrounding the Bougainville decision, despite the uncertainty about what will follow, was doubly positive: a decision made firmly and peacefully, enabling dignified representation of it in the coverage. Reporting of corruption charges against the former Prime Minister, Peter O’Neill, was negative as a reminder of widespread corruption in PNG, again affecting the country’s reputation, but could be considered positive reportage in showing that, however difficult, much was being done about it under the legal

system—a good reflection on the country. The O’Neill stories were classed as ‘neutral’ in their moral impact. Signalling the ambiguity in such choices is the *SMH* headline, denoting a grim situation and positive response to it: ‘Papua New Guinea is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a woman. But enlisting men and businesses to fight family violence has raised hopes of progress’ (Topsfield, 2019). The monitoring exercise has noted evidence of in places, expanding coverage with more involvement of Papua New Guineans and more ‘positive’ treatment of subjects.

This survey shows once again there are many difficult issues for the country to deal with, though in the media reporting crime and calamity appear descendent not the mainstay of coverage. Most of the coverage is describable as reasoned with no preponderance of obstructive or gratuitously critical treatments. The monitor of stories separates the News Corp publications and commercial television from the rest. The former are the more commercially orientated outlets focused on maximising Australian audiences, the least committed to providing news from PNG, and if they do, the most likely to highlight irruptions of violence. To be disingenuous, such events may have lost some of their novelty and ‘shock’ value over the years, hence interest value as news for those outlets. Coverage of bad events does continue to be done as a professional duty by the more sympathetic media, including an interest in reporting campaigns to try and resolve social problems. In the analysis of 86 articles, 42 were classed positive, 28 negative, 16 neutral.

The review of media output showed a familiar pattern in the making of news agendas, where one or a few strong running stories obtain most of the attention, over a period of weeks. From October 2019 into early January 2020, the Australian agenda was dominated by the bushfires, with the supplementary issue of the Prime Minister’s holiday in Hawaii; tragedy of the White Island volcano; the tension between America and Iran, and destruction of the Ukrainian airliner; President Donald Trump’s impeachment process, and later the Duke and Duchess of Sussex stepping down from the Royal ‘life’. Where certain news takes precedence through sheer volume of attention over an extended time, PNG, at home, also has such an agenda; for the period under review led by the O’Neill case and the Bougainville referendum. These stories did have significant play also in Australian news media, if not in the zone of the first-line, high-volume topics. If the news is considered a process where stories qualify for status through being of universal strong interest and in some ways considered important, PNG is not closed out or peripheral.

This review shows how there is interest in developing media coverage of PNG towards more extensive and resourceful treatments, away from superficial and exploitative models that have attracted criticism in the past. The publicly-funded ABC has carried a large burden in PNG but with its many tasks and tightened

budgets has not radically extended that contribution. Suggestions were made in 2011, to provide Radio Australia current affairs on domestic radio in Australia, or to create a national news service, to make PNG news more easily accessible (Ginau et al, in Papoutsaki et al, 2011, p. 71). With the hindsight of a decade those seem unlikely. In 2020 however strong possibilities exist for growth of the coverage and expansion of its horizons, through opportunities being created in the field of digitised ‘new media’. These begin with an aspiration for change, as articulated by the JNI foundation backing *The Guardian*, above, and are carried out by enterprising media outlets, such as *The Guardian* with its diversified funding, or the freelance grant recipient Ben Bohane publishing through major outlets like the *SMH*. Possibilities are in play which can enable deep change.

### News media

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