

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 6

Article 1

1-1999

Editorial: In this issue

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Recommended Citation

Chanter, A., Editorial: In this issue, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 6, 1999, 3-5.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss6/1>

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Saturday evening (24 July 1999) I heard the news that there had been a plane crash in Fiji and that 17 people had been killed, amongst them five (now six) Australians. Two weeks ago I left Fiji in high spirits after attending the *Imagining Oceania* conference at the University of the South Pacific. I wondered if any of the conference delegates had tarried in Fiji for one reason or another and were on the flight. I also wondered about the fate of the Fijians I know, most of whom are academics and travel a lot.

Sunday morning I headed for the newsagent to scope the reports on the front pages of Australia's main daily newspapers. It was the same story -- five Australians dead. One of them, AusAid worker Ray Lloyd and I had spoken on the phone just under a year ago about a conference that I was convening on *Pacific Representations: Culture, Identity, Media*. I remember him saying that he was about to go on a posting in the Pacific and I remember noticing him at the conference. I tried to put possible identities to the brief descriptions of the other Australians on board and ended up figuring that I didn't know any of them.

But there was still the issue of the remaining 12 passengers about whom no information was given in the papers. I felt frustrated and angry. Didn't they matter? It is not as if the crash happened in a place in any sense remote from Australia. The historical, political and cultural relationships that bind Australia to Fiji are incredibly strong and rich. In part, these continue to be expressed in a steady flow of people, goods and ideas between the two countries. You have only to look at the people and their packages arriving on an Air Pacific flight in Sydney or Nadi airports to be reminded of this. So why wasn't this expressed in at least some reference to the other 12, even if only to say that no information was yet available?

Does this insularity suggest an unspoken contempt for the peoples of our region? How else can we explain the fact that, despite the proximity, their individual tragedies don't warrant even a mention in our "quality" press. This attitude isn't only manifest in our media. How could we forget the infamous "Cairns document" which exposed what some Australian bureaucrats (and no doubt many politicians) think of politicians and politics in the region.

The issue of the way the Pacific is represented in public discourse was central to the discussions and debates at the *Pacific Representations* conference. One of the conference aims was to break down perceptions in Australia that we are somehow removed from

the Pacific, and certainly in any way "above" the Pacific. Our links with Asia are incontrovertible, but we are also a Pacific nation. Our indigenous peoples are of the Pacific and the conflicts we face between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians are conflicts that are being dealt with a sight better in many Pacific countries than they are here. We could do much to learn from these experiences. Our media could do much to take time to consider them.

The reason why the media focused myopically on the Fiji air crash as an Australian tragedy has a lot to do with accepted notions of newsworthiness in the Australian media. I am fairly sure that these notions would be a first line of defence for editors in the face of criticism over their papers' reporting of the crash. But resort to some hallowed notion of newsworthiness is not adequate. The concept, like those of objectivity and balance, is not beyond critique. Like all media practices and principles, it is a social construct and, as such, should always be open to interrogation and contestation.

Subjecting these notions to interrogation is a key task of journalism education. As educators and practitioners, we need to explore more fully the political, cultural and, ultimately, epistemological assumptions that underpin our work. The need to rethink the way professional journalists are educated is a major theme in *Lynette Sheridan Burns's* and *Trevor Hazell's* report in this issue on a case study of a problem-based learning approach to journalism education. This rethinking is further aided by a regional perspective which, by foregrounding differences, helps to expose assumptions.

The emphasis in this issue is on Pacific media. Its commentaries, written by academics and media practitioners from Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia, attest to the different issues and concerns -- even principles -- that motivate media practice and critique within our region. The research papers critique the notion that there exist universalist criteria for media practice. *Joelle van der Mensbrugge's* paper on environmental reporting in a range of Australian and European newspapers shows how a newspaper's "culture" determines its assessment of newsworthiness. *David Nolan*, in his paper on television current affairs reporting on Pauline Hanson, takes on the idea that objective principles of journalistic practice and critique exist, arguing instead for a more contextual reading of media texts.

David Robie's paper on a dispute over work permits for journalism lecturers, in which he and a colleague at the University of the South Pacific were involved, raises issues concerning critical media practice in a volatile political context. It also points to the existence of dispute amongst Pacific media practitioners over what constitutes appropriate journalistic practice. *Frédéric Angleviel's* piece on reporting in New Caledonia on the first boat people's case shows

how very different criteria of newsworthiness are brought to bear in a context where the local media is controlled by a politico-economic elite.

Mel Togolo's commentary on what constitutes ethical media practice in Papua New Guinea similarly manifests a strong engagement with local political and cultural particularities. Kim Bullimore's comment on the representation of Aboriginal activists in the Australian "quality" press demonstrates the racist biases that underpin the assessment of newsworthiness.

A regional overview is provided by *Nina Ratulele* whose discussion of the current activities of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) illustrates a model of regional media cooperation that attempts the tricky task of working with such differences in the pursuit, nonetheless, of a consensual notion of preferred media practice.

Finally, *Christina Slade* reminds us that the Pacific stretches to the Americas and that the South American media has its own representational "take" on Oceania.

The contributions to this issue of *AsiaPacific Media Educator*, with its emphasis on the Pacific region, demonstrate the increasing elusiveness of universalist media principles and practices. Some would respond to this elusiveness by saying that a concerted effort is required to reestablish benchmarks. The trouble with this response is that these benchmarks are often very culturally specific -- mostly they derive from Western rationalist epistemology -- and, as such, are not beyond critique.

Jane Selby's argument that it is no longer acceptable for media researchers to write and judge indigenous issues without direction from and collaboration with those concerned is in line with this argument. Writing on the Palm Islands she says that "without locating the research in the needs of those researched we are in danger of duplicating some of the evils identified in critiques of the media - exploitation or the creation of moral panics".

Now is a time of ferment and opportunity for change. The opportunity will come from the work we do as media educators and practitioners in critically reflecting on our own practices and values and in encouraging our students to do the same. Our reflections must take account of the fact that we live in a culturally diverse world that will throw up culturally diverse responses. We could fruitfully begin by listening to those emerging from our region. ■