Editorial   A better media deal?

A
S this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* went to press, Fiji was in the throes of conducting a census. Technology is helping the process. Technology is often associated with democratising the political process, decentralising the status quo, upholding free speech, promoting direct democracy and amplifying voices that often remain silent. Regardless of the potential of technology to deliver these freedoms, the issues that existed before the advent of the internet, e.g. access to technology (affordability and availability, including the issue of electricity in developing nations), user motivation and skill in using these new gadgets still stand.

This edition, jointly produced with University of the South Pacific media staff, publishes a series of articles addressing these issues. On Media Freedom Day, 3 May 2006, the Fiji Media Council, assisted by USP's regional journalism programme, organised a panel on 'Media and alleviation of poverty'. The panel—men from the developed world who were either connected to the media industry in Fiji, or owned a great stake in it—talked about everything but the media's role in alleviating poverty. The role of technology was highlighted in the presentations, media developments were underlined and the power of media in connecting people was lauded. But it was question time before the topic of the digital divide and unequal access to media really raised its head. There was no acknowledgement of a lack of basic resources or rising poverty in the region, and no guidelines offered on how people in the Pacific might gain more media access. It was clear that even in the 21st century there is a tendency to see technology as a magical world saviour without considering a wider context of the environment it lives within.

Does the mere availability of electronic media ensure a marketplace of diverse ideas? And what about the quality of discourse such as blogging? The public's views on the relationship between blogging and the possibilities of a democratic world often range from celebration to euphoria. We could also add dismay. Presently, as the globe marks the 10th anniversary of blogs, it is estimated that are now more than 70 million bloggers, churning out some 1.5 million posts each day.

Blogs were largely an unknown phenomenon in Fiji until last December's military coup d'état. A crackdown on the media and the critics of the coup created the right environment for dissident voices to go on the internet to express their criticisms. Initially, blogs were welcomed as a way for people to have a say without fear of reprisals. It was even heralded as a new form of citizen journalism, especially because many writer bylines from the print media had already been dropped to protect their staff from military harassment. It proved more difficult for television to be as circumspect. A senior Fiji TV news editor was summoned to the Queen Elizabeth military barracks in Suva, thrust in a cell and intimidated over a period of a few hours.

In this environment of fear and silence in Fiji, blogs, providing anonymity, emerged as a healthy and a much needed outlet. But, the content of blogs has not always reliable. It ranged from adulation to outright obscenity and abuse. One weblog falsely reported that a member of the Great Council of Chiefs had died. However, a TV journalist checked this out and spoke to the 'deceased' chief. Blogs Fiji-style have not just been political opinions, they have also sometimes been combined with personal attacks, defamatory statements,

rumours, and inflammatory comments. In a racially and politically polarised society such as Fiji, the potential for harm is great.

Sophie Foster reports how bloggers started posting instructions on how to make Molotov cocktails and encouraging opponents of the coup to target tourist buses as a means of destabilising the country and challenging the military. Fiji quickly learned there is a good and a bad side to blogs and citizens would have to learn to live with both.

But as journalists look forward to the benefits that technology will surely bring to digital democracy and journalism, they need to also reflect on the approaching 'shadows'—cast by three fundamental crises that threaten the free and independent practice of journalism and the very craft of journalism itself. These intertwined crises, according to **Chris Warren**, are: a crisis of press freedom, a crisis of safety and a crisis confronting the way journalists work.

The deregulation and commercialisation of the media sector in Fiji, for example, has failed to benefit already marginalised groups. **Sharon Bhagwan Rolls** teels how it took a small NGO and an energetic group of women to develop the use of a 'suitcase radio' model to help women in small communities during the 2006 general election by giving rural women a voice they never had—a small but significant development. Finding a meaningful 'road map' back to democracy in Fiji has made at least one academic, **Rae Nicholl**, of USP argue a case for the Elections Office and political parties to expand their use of new technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones when making changes to the voting system for 2009. Fiji, one of the most developed nations in the Pacific region, already has a ready public and a market that can support voting through the use of mobile phones.

On the wider Pacific front, there is the question of the lack of political stability in some Pacific nations and whether the media has a clear and strong role to play. The Solomon Islands, Tonga, Fiji and East Timor are still recoiling from political upheavals.

In New Zealand, the media itself is in a major upheaval over staff and resource retrenchments by major news organisations that have prompted concerned journalists to respond with a national 'journalism matters' conference in the Old Parliament Buildings and the establishment of a Media Movement for Democracy **www.ourmedia.org** Meanwhile, a new survey profiling journalists, their pay and support; their politics; their cultural diversity; how well they are performing their watchdog role and their attitude towards public relations and commercial pressures is very timely.

The Pacific region is far from being isolated from the centres of global power and this issue of *PJR* examines the web of multilateral relations with a case study of the International Crisis Group non-government organisation. **Lee Duffield** looks at the record of the Crisis Group's activities in relation to East Timor, Fiji and throughout the globe generally.

This is a good point to end on, and to ask, if the Pacific media do not get a larger share of the digital divide cake, will even the 'well intentioned' media be able to shine a light on the many small Pacific countries that comprise our region?

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