



A Wake-Up Call for Pacific Journalism

Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics and Education

By David Robie 2004

Suva: USP Book Centre, The University of the South Pacific;
306 pages; paperback; US\$20. www.uspbookcentre.com

Shailendra Singh

Attacks on media freedom in some Pacific Island states by repressive governments or ultra-sensitive officials are a well-known phenomenon. The media is well accustomed to such naked and blatant forms of pressure and is quite apt at dealing with it.

Public support can be canvassed, as in the case in Fiji against government attempts to legislate the functions of the Fiji Media Council. Overseas media networks can, and have been successfully mobilised, to create a furore internationally.

However, media author, commentator and academic David Robie, raises the possibility of another form of pressure that is not so obvious, but equally insidious. In his latest publication, *Mekim News*, Robie broaches the almost taboo subject of 'envelope journalism' in the Pacific.

Envelope journalism is hardly discussed and is likely to be disdainfully dismissed if brought up. Reporters accepting bribes is seen as an Asian, not a Pacific problem. In the Pacific, the image of the media is that of the heroic reporter exposing corrupt politicians and government officials. This image is grounded in reality; Pacific island journalists have a sterling record of exposing corruption in the face of great obstacles and Robie highlights this in his book.

His concern is the lurking danger of envelope journalism. He fears it taking hold and becoming a scourge in this part of the world. In Fiji, those in media circles are aware of reporters quietly sacked, or reprimanded for

taking money or gifts. But there has been no research or investigation in this area. Robie's book alludes to this, but at the same times argues that envelope journalism, if not a current problem, could become a future one. His view is that it is not something to be dismissed out of hand or swept under the carpet.

Robie's convictions stem from surveys of reporters he conducted in both Papua New Guinea and Fiji. He found widespread dissatisfaction with pay levels in both countries, which have the most developed media industries in the region. Robie contends that this dissatisfaction makes reporters easy targets of those who may wish to bribe them. Low wages, he adds, is a serious threat to autonomy and warns that journalists could become part of the corruption problem instead of the solution.

Crusading for better salaries and more investment in training and education for journalists has earned Robie, a New Zealander, his fair share of enemies. Now an associate professor and publications coordinator at Auckland University of Technology's School of Communication Studies, Robie spent over two decades in the South Pacific – initially as a reporter covering the region and later as an educator at the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of the South Pacific for nine years.

His book is a must read for anyone wishing to understand the intricacies and challenges of practising and teaching journalism in the South Pacific. While the publication's primary focus is PNG and Fiji, where Robie spent most of his time, it also gives a broad overview of journalism in the region with a focus on the ethical, legal and other dilemmas faced by Pacific Island scribes. It touches on ownership issues, government, corporate, institutional and cultural pressures, pay and working conditions and training and development concerns as voiced by journalism practitioners, educators and students in the Pacific Islands.

The book contains research conducted by the author over several years, including data from two news industry surveys. This includes an interesting comparative analysis of the training and education levels of PNG and Fiji journalists and their perceptions and understanding of the role of the media in their societies.

The research component of the book makes it a welcome addition to the small body of academic work available on journalism in the South Pacific and as such, will have a special appeal for scholars.

Significantly, the book is the first comprehensive historical documentation of the beginnings of university journalism education in the South Pacific. It recognises and pays tribute to the sterling efforts of those who pioneered journalism education in the region, such as the now retired Murray

Masterton, the late British journalism educator Peter Henshall, New Zealand investigative journalist Ross Stevens, and journalist and historian Dr Michael King.

Henshall, King and Stevens were instrumental in starting the program at UPNG in 1975 while Dr Masterton, also a Kiwi, established the USP journalism program in 1987.

Interestingly, the journalism programs at both UPNG and USP went through the same birthing pains as journalism programs at many other universities in western countries, facing scepticism and struggling to find acceptance from both the academia and the industry.

Masterton, who is interviewed in the book, recalled that USP staff did not consider journalism a worthwhile addition to the curriculum and felt that the money could have been better spent elsewhere. He also faced a 'never-ending' computer problem. At UPNG, Stevens and his colleagues had to deal with prejudice against journalism education at the university and faced serious resource constraints. Given the prevalent attitudes at the time, it is not surprising that the journalism programs at both UPNG and USP were outside initiatives – by the New Zealand Government in UPNG's case and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation at USP. The French stepped in after the departure of the CFTC, funding a double major degree program between 1994-97, after which the USP took over.

The third university journalism-training program in the South Pacific is based at the Divine World University in PNG, founded by the Catholic Mission.

The university education versus on-job-training debate, which flares every now and then in the region, is also addressed in the book. Robie takes the question to the journalists and an overwhelming majority both in Fiji and PNG favoured some form of academic training to enable them to be better at their jobs and improve their working conditions and career prospects.

Robie's concern is the lack of support and low priority placed on journalism education in the region by not just the industry, but also academia, particularly in an era in which Pacific Island journalists are required to report on highly complex issues and need to be provided with the philosophical, socio-political and historical contextual knowledge to meet the technical skills of being effective communicators. In order to effectively carry out their watchdog and nation-building roles, Dr Robie contends that today's journalists need to be better educated to have the capacity to understand and interact with their political and social institutions in what is a rap-

idly changing, globalised world. He says:

Only a genuine understanding of what is at stake can give the journalists the will and wisdom not to bow to the considerable pressures on South Pacific media freedoms by governments, businesses, corporate power, and by non-governmental organisations (p.239).

Robie's calls for better pay and training to raise journalistic standards have been taken up by others. At the Journalism Education Association Conference in Suva in December last year, Fiji TV news director Netani Rika said that his company supported academic education for its journalists and backed calls for better pay and training. 'You pay peanuts, you get monkeys', said Rika. Last year, the pay and training issue was raised in the Fiji Parliament.

In this regard, *Mekim Nius* should heighten awareness among South Pacific journalists about not only their societal roles and responsibilities, but also their own rights and entitlements, which is something they have not been very vocal about.

This book is a wake up call to the Pacific media industry and governments over pay, working conditions and training for journalists. It is time politicians put their money where their mouth is by boosting training resources for the region's media instead of relying on outside donors.

References:

- Fiji Media Watch head calls for better pay, advocacy (2003, August 19). Wansolwara Online.
www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/wansolnews/2003/2003August/wansol1908031.html (Accessed June 18).
- Fiji journalists deserve better pay, more respect. (2003, August 2). Wansolwara.
www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/wansolnews/2002/2002August/wansol0208021.html (Accessed 11 January 2004)
- Media self-regulation under criticism (2004, May 5). Wansolwara Online.
<http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/wansolnews/2004/may/wansol0505041.html> (Accessed June 10)
- Rika, N. (2004, December) Presentation at the Journalism Education Association Conference. Suva: JJ's on the Park.

Shailendra Singh is a Lecturer in Journalism at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji.