

## Sites of Resistance: Fiji's Untamed Media

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### Abstract

*As one of the younger progeny of the internet, 'blogs' have shown they too have the potential to act as genuine tools of democracy and social change. As alternative media, blogs represent horizontal networks of communication, bypassing traditional media structures. They not only signal the debates going on in the public sphere, but as a new form of media, facilitate and mediate communication by providing space for dialogue, information sharing and opinions. This paper examines the phenomenon of 'blogging' in the Fijian context of blogs serving as sites of resistance and social mobilisation in the struggle for the defence of human rights and democracy, while considering the 'blogosphere' as a new, contemporary form of the democratic notion of the 'public sphere'.*

After months of threats, on 5 December 2006, the Fiji Military Forces led by Commander Frank Bainimarama overthrew Fiji's democratically-elected government. A military crackdown on dissenting opinion and the curtailing of free speech immediately following the takeover saw military 'visits' to major media outlets, journalists intimidated and pro-democracy advocates detained and allegedly interrogated and abused.

Within six months of the 2006 coup d'état, Fiji's media landscape had changed significantly. No longer was the mainstream media the sole source of information and comment for the general public. Amid claims of media intimidation and self-censorship, a new wave of anonymous, self-proclaimed 'Fiji Freedom bloggers' had emerged, expressing 'views and news, not all of them palatable or true' (*Intelligentsiya*, May 3, 2007). Documenting events and human rights abuses, questioning the regime's motives and actions, revealing claimed 'truths' about its members and leading calls for resistance and public action, these bloggers not only saw their popularity increase, but became news sources for the mainstream media, breaking stories the military-installed interim government may have sometimes preferred had remained in the private domain.

Blogs had become an alternative way for people in Fiji (as well as outside Fiji) to speak out against the interim regime. By May 2007, the Fiji Freedom Bloggers movement stood at approximately 13 anonymous anti-administration blog sites<sup>1</sup> – not all of them with noble agendas. Although the number may be miniscule in comparison to other countries, this was still a boom in blogs for Fiji, with its population of 850,000. Such 'resistance blogs' ranged from *Intelligentsiya*, which made its name exposing human rights abuses by soldiers, to the opinionated *Discom-bobulated Bubu*<sup>2</sup> and *Good men (and women) doing something*, to the controversial *Resistfrankscoup* and outright libellous *Fiji Coup Name and Shame List*.

Yet with their common denominator being their opposition to the military regime, it was not long before the bloggers themselves became the target of a military hunt to shut them down.

This paper analyses this recent phenomenon of 'blogging' in the Fijian context of web logs serving as sites of resistance and social mobilisation in the struggle for the defence of human rights and democracy. It does not aim to examine or critique the content of the blogs, nor is it a quantitative account of the use of blogs as an avenue to 'speak out', but instead the focus is on the act of blogging itself, and the 'blogosphere' as a new, contemporary form of the democratic notion of the 'public sphere'.

### The Blogosphere: The New Public Sphere?

Depending on your take, blogs are either a fantastic liberation, a self-indulgent waste of time, or a complete mystery ... If you believe the hype, blogs are as significant as the invention of the printing press for their ability to change the way the world will be seen. If on the other hand you believe the counter-hype, blogs are a self-indulgence, which pander to dull people's misguided beliefs that they have something interesting to say (Wilson, 2006).

The act of blogging is a recent phenomenon; web logs, or blogs, follow the format of interactive 'diaries', but in reverse chronological order.

<sup>1</sup> This number does not include the small number of Fiji blogs that support the military's 'clean up' campaign, some claiming to be operated by the soldiers themselves (*The Fiji Times*, May 24, 2007: 3).

<sup>2</sup> Translated as 'grandmother'.

With the majority privately operated (sometimes under ‘nom de blogs’ or ‘blognyms’), they offer commentary on a range of subjects, either personal or topical. US journalist Mallory Jensen (2003) suggests that blogs offer ‘a bit of a voyeuristic thrill’, like reading someone’s private journal: ‘They are diaries and soapboxes, where people can post everything from daily minutiae to manifestoes to sophisticated political and cultural commentary and reporting’.

Since their inception, blogs have increased dramatically in popularity and importance, and can no longer be viewed solely as avenues for gossip or self-indulgent rambles (although they can often be this too). Blogs are increasingly being seen as legitimate, credible, valid sources of news, information and opinion, particularly from the ‘frontline’, as well as offer fresh perspectives or takes in contrast to those of the mainstream media. Blogs have gained increasing attention for their role in generating news stories, even sometimes breaking stories before their mainstream counterparts (Beckerman, 2007).

Blogs are also a means of applying pressure, both in the political arena and on the media itself. BBC News journalist Giles Wilson (2006) quotes US journalist and blog advocate Jeff Jarvis as proposing that blogs offer the public true transparency, thereby pressuring the mainstream media to do the same:

The lesson we in the media have learned from the web and blogs is that the highest virtue of the media is transparency. We used to think it was objectivity, even though being objective is a really hard thing to prove because we’re all humans. But we thought in journalism that it was our job to deliver the truth, when in fact it’s our job to let the audience decide what’s true.

The line distinguishing journalists from bloggers is becoming less clear. News-based blogs – often run by self-styled amateur journalists, independent journalists or professionals simply choosing to operate through a medium unimpeded by media regulations or government restrictions – have a tendency towards public, advocacy or ‘new’ trends of journalism. In contrast, some bloggers have come out from the relatively anonymous and free world of the web to appear in other mass media, particularly radio.

The popularity of blogs has led them to become increasingly mainstream, with even politicians using them as tools for outreach and gauging public opinion. Even the traditional mainstream media (such as the UK’s *Guardian* and BBC, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*) has

been forced to keep up with the times and their readers by introducing their own blogs to encourage an online audience (Welch, 2003; Keefer, 2006).

Due to their interactive format, blogs serve as forums for open discussion on current affairs and mainstream media reports; as Wilson (2006) suggests, ‘they offer a fresh way of turning the traditional roles of writer and reader into those of people having a conversation’. As a result, blogs, and the internet on the whole, may be considered the latest manifestation of ‘the public sphere’ as defined by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Although not in itself a physical space, the web still affords the opportunity to enhance democracy through information dissemination, public debate and scrutiny.

According to Habermas (1974), the ‘public sphere’ is the space or realm in social life where public opinion, and in turn often identity, is formed through free interaction and discussion. As development specialists Susanne Schech and Jane Haggis (2000: 196) note:

Communication lies at the heart of sociality. It is the means by which symbolic knowledge is conveyed, stored and circulated. Through communication people create connections between each other and construct communities of identity and belonging.

Although traditionally argued as a physical, spatial concept (i.e. originally springing from the notion of European coffee houses as venues of art, literary, economic and political discussion), in recent times the public sphere has taken on a more global dimension through the mass media. Schech and Haggis (2000) elaborate on British sociologist Anthony Giddens’ argument that since the advent of the mass media, traditional notions of time and space have been compressed:

For most of human history, communication was possible only in face-to-face interactions, between people inhabiting the same space and time ... The coming of modernity disrupted this homology between space, place and time. It tore “space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction (Giddens 1990, cited in Schech and Haggis, 2000: 196-7).

However, although now able to transcend national boundaries, the mass media’s ability and willingness to maintain the essence of the public sphere is questionable. James Deane, a specialist in development commu-

nications, argues that the media can no longer claim its position as the autonomous 'fourth estate' charged with protecting public interest (2005: 183). He contends that while media liberalisation has resulted in the opening up new forms and spaces of public debate, it now has a tendency towards profitability, thereby treating its audience as consumers as opposed to citizens.

This is a move away from Habermas' main concern of ensuring autonomous, truthful communication, which he identifies as a critical tool for human emancipation:

A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest (1974: 49).

For instance, in writing about the growing Middle Eastern blogosphere, US journalist Gal Beckerman (2007) notes that an alternative, dynamic space has been formed that presents an opportunity to reclaim individuality, to challenge authority and expose a world of multiple perspectives often imagined by the West as having only one, conformist viewpoint. Beckerman (2007) notes that the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah not only brought attention to the many Middle Eastern blogs already in existence, but also generated thousands more, reflecting 'a new culture of openness, dialogue, and questioning'.

In the case of Fiji, blogs offer an alternative space at a time when the mainstream media is restricted in its ability to facilitate public debate. While Fiji has a relatively strong, vibrant and open media scene for a Pacific Island country<sup>3</sup> (sustained despite so many coups), it has been the target of control attempts by the military since the coup. A recent survey of six mainstream local media outlets conducted by former *The Fiji Times*

<sup>3</sup> Print and broadcast media operate in the three main languages, Fijian, English and Hindustani: as of mid 2008 there were over 5 radio stations; three English-language dailies and weekly Fijian and Hindustani newspapers; and two television stations. The majority are privately-owned. The media is self-regulated, with many mechanisms for recourse enshrined in the constitution.

deputy editor Sophie Foster found that 75 per cent of journalists, photographers and camera crew felt their freedom had been curtailed or was practicing self-censorship. There were also concerns that balance was missing because other, alternative sources had dried up for fear of military intimidation, reprisal or abuse (*The Fiji Times*, May 7, 2007: 2). As stated by Fiji Television's then news manager Netani Rika, who himself was detained and intimidated by the military:

The circumstances seen in Fiji at the moment mean that journalists live under the threat of the gun. They're always mindful of the fact that anything that they do can and may be questioned by the people in authority. When that happens, they immediately begin to practice a form of journalism which will keep them out of trouble. And when that happens, it means that the whole truth will not come out and therefore we live in dangerous times for the industry, for the media industry (Radio Australia, May 25, 2007).

### The Question of Access

Fiji's blogosphere has never been large; prior to the 2006 coup d'état it comprised mainly personal blogs or sites on tourism, culture or business. Only a couple of blogs addressed political or current affairs issues, yet with only 6-8 per cent of the 850,000 population having internet access<sup>4</sup>, this is hardly a surprise.

According to ICT expert Madanmohan Rao (2005: 272), International Telecommunication Union findings reveal that only one in every 50 people have access to the net in developing countries, therefore the internet has far to go in attaining the status of mainstream media in developing countries. Meanwhile, UNDP (2006) research reveals that while approximately 25 per cent of Pacific Islanders have regular access to ICTs, mainly through work, school and a few public centres and internet cafes, the number of actual subscribers ranges from one in five in Niue (where access is free) to one in 1000 in the Solomon Islands. In Fiji, where subscription and usage costs have until recently been exorbitant

<sup>4</sup> According to a 2004 International Telecommunications Union (ITU) study, Fiji's sole Internet Service Provider at the time, Connect, estimated that there were 50,000 users in Fiji. Connect multiplied the 8,000 subscribers, most of which were home accounts, by three and added to that estimates of users in government, the University of the South Pacific and business. (Minges and Gray, 2004: 12). As of September 2007, according to the ITU, this had increased to 80,000 users.

due to a monopoly, internet access (as well as electricity and computers) is unaffordable for a majority of people.<sup>5</sup>

Given such small numbers (in contrast to high-levels of unemployment and poverty in the country), it is likely that Fiji's anti-administration bloggers are urban, educated and economically comfortable, as suggested by the blog name *Intelligentsiya* – a local play on the word 'intelligentsia', meaning 'the intellectual élite of a society'.

Many commentators contend that behind all the hype about the digital 'revolution', gross inequalities remain (Schech and Haggis, 2000: 193). The challenge is whether it is possible to cross the digital divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', caused by this wide inaccessibility to computer technology (Rao, 2005: 272) and whether this issue of limited reach affects the potential of the blogosphere as the new public sphere.

Beckerman (2007) quotes Ammar Abdulhamid, a Syrian blogger forced into exile in 2005 for his democracy activism, as suggesting that in time this divide between the élite and the grassroots will be bridged, and the true power of the medium will be clear – a process already taking shape in the form of blog-coordinated protests and campaigns and the posting of information on human rights abuses. Abdulhamid notes:

There is nothing wrong with admitting that we represent a certain élite ... The importance of this technology at this stage is to connect the élites better, to network the élites, to make them able to share more ideas and organise.

### Cyber-Resistance in the 'Network Society'

Development specialist Hazel Johnson (1999: 164) argues there are many ways people can organise and potentially create space for influencing change. Fiji's freedom bloggers purport to be advocates of resistance and change by using the internet as their medium for the dissemination of information as a record of 'wrongs', as a forum to expose human rights abuses and injustices, and as a space to debate and vent concern and frustration. Some self-proclaimed pro-democracy bloggers have also used their sites as a forum for political action through social mobilisation, call-

<sup>5</sup> Pacific Islanders typically face connectivity charges that are among the highest in the world. Prices are on average five times higher, and range to as much as 20 times higher than in APEC developing countries. On an annual basis this amounts to one quarter to a half of the average annual per capita GDP in many countries (UNDP, 2006).

ing for peaceful public protest via a May Day no-work day. As one blogger behind the call put it:

Tomorrow is the day we are heard. Now this is something new to our nation ... the idea that we the people can peacefully, passively and yet cohesively state that we are the ones who decide what happens in our lives, our country and our future. We can decide what happens in these islands. The junta is worried. That's why they are all over the news yelling that we are dissenting, that we are a threat to national security. How can expressing ones opinion be a threat to national security? (Good men (and women) doing something, posted April 29, 2007)

Being media savvy, they also issued a press release publicising the call for passive resistance in defence of democracy (*Good men (and women) doing something*, April 24, 2007; Radio NZ International, April 26, 2007). Although a local form of resistance, the call drew attention and support beyond Fiji's borders.

The more the military attempted to muzzle the bloggers, the more publicity they attracted, the more mainstream interest they generated and the more popular they became. The local and regional press regularly carried reports from the blogs, or on the bloggers themselves, and although eluding the military, two of the *Intelligentsiya* bloggers and fellow blogger Fijian Black from *Good men (and women) doing something* were interviewed on regional radio (Radio Australia, March 23, 2007; Niu FM, May 11, 2007). In fact, any disadvantage that a lack of internet access may pose was negated by the wide media coverage the blogs generated, as well as the pervasiveness of Fiji's 'coconut wireless' – argued to be the fastest means of information dissemination (including unsubstantiated information, otherwise known as rumour) in the country.

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2004: 72-4) contends that globalisation and informationalisation are transforming the world; that computer technology is dissolving existing systems of social and political representation, thereby abstracting power from its traditional brokers. Linking globalisation and informationalisation to contemporary social movements, he analyses five distinct social movements – Mexico's *Zapatistas*, the American militia, Japanese cult *Aum Shinrikyo*, *al-Qaeda* and the 'anti-globalisation' movement – all very different in ideology and goal, but all formed in reaction to, and in opposition to, the new global order. He argues that such movements are symptomatic of the state of our societies; that they are 'defensive movements built around the trenches of resistance', 'embryos of social resistance and, in some cases, social

change’.

Castells (2004: 74) analyses the movements in line with French theorist Alain Touraine’s typology that defines a social movement according to the movement’s identity, adversary and goal or social model. While Touraine proposes that social movements stem from ideologies in an attempt to change the patterns or forces of ‘post-industrial’ society, critics propose ulterior motives may also act as mobilising forces based on ‘issues of self-interest or the calculation of material ends’; ‘that social movements are generally struggles against different forms of exclusion from society, rather than attempts to put forward a complete alternative to the status quo.’ (Johnson, 1999: 164)

For Castells (2004: 154-5), the internet has become the ‘agora’, the key networking, organising and mobilising tool of many, such as the anti-globalisation movement and the American militia, assisting in the establishment of a ‘global family’, coordination of initiatives, mobilisations and calls to arms. The internet assists isolated or dispersed movements to build networks of solidarity and support without the need for a centralised command structure, or opening themselves to threats or repression.

Although, unlike Castell’s examples, Fiji’s Freedom bloggers may not be uniting against the new global order or globalisation, they are rejecting the usurpers of power, demanding democracy in Fiji and appealing to s30 of the Constitution which guarantees ‘the right to freedom of speech and expression, including (a) freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas; and (b) freedom of the press and other media’:

Intelligentsiya was born after journalists became too intimidated because of direct or indirect threats against them or their organisations by the military ... We continue to aim to be an outlet for level-headed opinion, report events that don’t get mainstream coverage and express “intelligent resistance” to the military junta that is in power – all rights guaranteed to us in the Constitution (Intelligentsiya, posted May 3, 2007).

As Castells (2004: 154-5) notes, relatively isolated movements are able to build ‘networks of global solidarity and support’ by posting their information online in real time, therefore ensuring they are ‘less vulnerable to repression in their localities’.

### **Blogging and the Consequences of Reclaiming the Public Sphere**

Public spheres are the prerequisites for any kind of democracy, but they require physical public spaces where people actually

meet and confront each other. Information alone cannot combat fear. It is necessary to cross the invisible lines and walk out in the urban wilderness, even at the risk of “getting hurt”. There is no other way to reclaim the public sphere (Hemer, 2006).

Swedish journalist and writer Oscar Hemer (2006) argues that there are limits to mediated communication; that social change can only come about if communication mediums are open and interactive – even at the risk of personal threat or injury. Fiji’s Freedom bloggers recognise the risks they and their counterparts in the mainstream media face and live with this daily. *Intelligentsiya* (May 3, 2007), for example, called on Fiji’s journalists and bloggers to ‘remember it is a battle of the minds’ and ‘not be intimidated by the threats, direct or indirect’. Or as another bloggers explains:

In the legal sense, the army see the Freedom Blogging movement as a whole as one big “conspiracy”, and so virtually anyone connected with talking or exchanging views on the Internet could be prosecuted for participation (we are already in the words of the army “being hunted down” – warai na herd animal!<sup>6</sup> (Discombobulated Bubu, posted May 1, 2007).

There are good reasons why many bloggers choose anonymity (as tenuous as it may be); not only have blogs deemed ‘subversive’ been blocked, but bloggers worldwide – including in Asia, the Middle East and the United States – have been charged or jailed for alleged defamation, incitement and sedition, or even had their lives threatened (Beckerman, 2007). In addition to anonymity serving as a form of protection against reprisals (Johnson, 1999: 163), it provides bloggers the advantage of ‘higher ground’ in their ‘battle’ against their adversary (*Good men (and women) doing something*, posted April 26, 2007).

According to Curt Hopkins, the former director of the now-defunct Committee to Protect Bloggers that tracked the various forms of intimidation and suppression bloggers have faced, states employ three basic methods to suppress bloggers: technical filtering, the law and direct intimidation (Beckerman, 2007).

Fiji’s anonymous Freedom bloggers have faced open threats by Fiji’s military forces. Following the December 2006 coup, the military reserved the right to arbitrarily detain people it suspected of posing ‘a threat to national security’ and publicly launched intermittent hunts for the bloggers,

<sup>6</sup> Translates as: ‘comparing man to a herd of animals’.

in particular those behind *Intelligentsiya* and *Good men (and women) doing something*, on the basis that their postings had the potential to instigate conflict (*Fiji Village*, May 14, 2007). In May 2007, on separate occasions, two locals (one a prominent businessman) were detained at the Fiji military's Queen Elizabeth Barracks, accused of being Freedom bloggers (in particular blogger Fijian Black), and allegedly physically assaulted. As one blogger contended:

Fiji's media continue to report the military's efforts to shut us down citing various reasons: we are "destroying the peace", we are "racist", we are "deceitful" – the list goes on. While some other blogs (namely Resistfranksoup) could be termed "racist", *Intelligentsiya* will never condone racism or violence. We therefore despise being put under the same label as other blogs that have called for violence and made racist comments. Notwithstanding the racist and "call-to-arms" comments on other blogs, we still passionately defend our right to raise our voices. On the topic of blogs, we would invite the military to check out Loyal Fijian's blog (we suspect the army already knows about it). The last post made on April 11 (just one post in April and four in March!) threatens violence and even death to bloggers who are critical of the military junta (*Intelligentsiya*, posted May 14, 2007).

Other, less aggressive options taken have included blocking access to the blogs; the military requested FINTEL, the only international telecommunications gateway for Fiji, to shut down access to blogs that were critical of the regime. The directive proved technically impossible to carry out. All it did was prompt condemnation from watchdog Reporters Without Borders (*PACNEWS*, May 21, 2007) and give rise to conspiratorial claims by some bloggers that public servants had been banned from internet access, and that the military had posted spies in internet cafés to look for people accessing blog sites (*Discombobulated Bubu, Resistfranksoup*).

### **Blogs, Democracy and Development**

Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen (1999: 157) maintains the importance of upholding the institutions of free speech and political freedoms not only for the sake of protecting individual human rights, but also for their instrumental role in the promotion of democracy. Sen (1999: 285) supports an approach to development that focuses on improving 'our

capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value', in contrast to standard views of development that are largely concerned with gross national product, technical progress or industrialisation, 'all of which have contingent and conditional importance without being the defining characteristics of development'.

Sen (1999: 152) asserts that 'informed and unregimented formation of our values requires openness of communication and arguments', and that the existence of such public spheres are instrumental in the enhanced functioning of democracy; using the argument that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent state with a democratic government and relatively free press.

The internet (and by extension blogs) is an instrument that can transform the way societies govern and live; like the media, it can act as a genuine tool of democracy (Rao, 2005: 271). Journalist and development communication researcher Ullamaija Kivikuru argues that freedom of expression, an independent media and a 'multiplicity of mediascapes' all play a crucial role in the promotion of democracy (2005: 330). An open media, where people can safely express themselves, ensures those in power are able to adequately and appropriately meet their concerns (for example, to find solutions to prevent pending famines). The state has a vested interest in promoting and upholding freedom of expression (and hence a free and unimpeded public sphere); it needs a free and open media to assist it in building a good relationship with its constituents, as well as a good image. If legitimate, the state has nothing to fear.

Castells (2004: 343) argues that while 'media revelations, or gossip have always been a threat to the state and a defense of citizens', modern technology and media systems 'have exponentially increased the vulnerability of the state to the media, thus to business, and to society at large', the result being that 'today's state is more surveilled than surveillant'. According to Castells (2004: 344), in today's network society, the capacity for surveillance is diluted, the state monopoly on violence challenged, and the ability to repress rebellion limited:

While the nation-state still looks imposing in its shiny uniform, and people's bodies and souls are still routinely tortured around the world, information flows bypass, and sometimes overwhelm, the state; terrorist wards crisis-cross national boundaries; and communal turfs exhaust the law-and-order patrol. The state still relies on violence and surveillance, but it does not hold the monopoly on them any longer; nor can it exercise them from its national enclosure.

## Free Speech or Defamation? The Legal Ramifications of Blogging

Untamed, blogs live to a law of their own. While they aid the flow of information from the field and may offer a channel for mobilisation and social change, the legal risks and ramifications are yet to be fully explored. Issues of confidentiality, copyright and defamation abound.

A number of the Fiji anti-military, anti-interim government blogs are derisive, disparaging and defaming, using the internet as a way to disseminate rumour, misunderstanding, racism and hate. Some act as forums for attacks on specific individuals, such as the blogs *Down with dictatorship* and *the Fiji Coup Name and Shame List*, which claims to 'out and expose all those shadowy figures and all those that have benefited from the Military Coup'. Many are violating Fiji's Defamation Act as well as common law, which allows for an injured party to ask the court to instruct an Internet Service Provider to turn over records relating to a customer who has published defamatory remarks (although this may be difficult in the case of anonymous bloggers).

In addition, the Fiji Human Rights Commission has cautioned that bloggers are not necessarily protected under the freedom of expression provision of the Constitution of Fiji (*The Fiji Times*, May 19, 2007: 3); that certain rights have been limited under the interim government's *Public Emergency Regulations 2007* gazetted in the claimed interests of national security.

In contrast, bloggers claim errors or instances of misreporting are inevitable; that the truth is hard to come by when a state and public lies under military rule. Bloggers, like journalists, are not above the law, but can make mistakes because they do not have access to the truth, as illustrated by *Intelligentsiya* (posted May 3, 2007):

In all our reporting we did make about two mistakes – notably the one about a death in Vanua Levu at the hands of soldiers. A man was indeed beaten badly, a fact that the military did not expressly deny. The only denial was that the man did not die. We are not making excuses for the mistake but it does illustrate the difficulties in reporting in a country with a climate of fear – trying to obtain basic information is hard because people are afraid of the consequences of speaking out ... In the argument for a free media, the military is always suggesting that the media has been "irresponsible" at times deliberately. But on the whole, reporters face an uphill battle trying to get "official" comment from the powers that be and often have to deal with aggressive military-types while reporting.

Despite (or maybe because of) finding themselves the target of a military crackdown, Fiji's Freedom bloggers have found themselves some unexpected advocates. High chief Ro Teimumu Kepa, a known conservative ousted by the military in December, came out in support of the bloggers, arguing that blogs were an expression of freedom of speech, served as a forum that should be entertained at a time when media freedom was heavily censored and were indicative of changing development in society:

When people are prohibited from saying things and the media censors news items to the extent where there is no byline except in the sports pages, they will find other means. The coconut wireless is very healthy (The Fiji Times, May 16, 2007: 3).

But while the internet has the potential to empower citizens and communities in new ways that redefine governance, the susceptibility of bloggers to Fiji's 'coconut wireless' places this potential at risk. Like all media, bloggers tread specific ideological paths and are not necessarily straightforward propagators of the 'truth'.

## Conclusion

Freedom of expression is not absolute but depends on the context; laws and ethical norms depend on the dominant cultural and political ideologies at the time. Although Fiji has a history of cultural expression, the powers that be argue that it is limited for reasons of national security. So too, the right to freedom of expression is limited based on its harmful effect on others, and should be exercised responsibly.

To be seen as a legitimate and serious source of information and opinion, blogs, like their media counterparts, should institute a code of ethics or conduct. Clearly freedom of expression cannot be fully legislated against or controlled, but to set up a conditional framework for free expression (like the mainstream media's self-regulatory press councils serve to hold the media accountable) would lend a sense of credibility and offer recourse or an avenue of defence for those who claim to be slighted by the blogs. In turn, such regulation should respect and reflect the important role blogs can play in facilitating and mediating communication, promoting democracy or social change, and defending human rights.

Blogs not only signal or represent the debates going on in the public sphere, but, as a contemporary form of media, provide space for dialogue, information dissemination, and opinions. As an alternative media system, the internet is able to reach people through horizontal networks of communication, bypassing the control of the powers that be (Castells, 2004:

157).

Crackdowns on the media reflect fear by the authorities that the public will turn against them. Yet, as Fiji's Freedom bloggers have demonstrated, a silenced, intimidated media won't stop the communication flow. Instead, by limiting the ability of the media to operate freely and unimpeded, the administration in Fiji found it difficult to convince the local and international community that it was not authoritarian, and ran the risk of encouraging an increase in opposition. While some may question the power a small segment of the population sitting in front of 'glowing screens' in the likely comfort of their homes could have on effecting social change, 'the bloggers will say, universally, that revolutions almost always start with a tiny elite' (Beckerman, 2007).

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## Blog sites

- Discombobulated Bubu [<http://discombobulatedbubu.blogspot.com>]
- Good men (and women) doing something [<http://goodmenandwomendoingsomething.blogspot.com>]
- Intelligentsiya [<http://intelligentsiya.blogspot.com>]
- Resistfranksoup [<http://www.resistfranksoup.blogspot.com> & <http://whyfijiscrying.wordpress.com>]
- Fiji Coup Name and Shame List [<http://fijishamelist.blogspot.com>]

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