

Reproducing Disengagement: Citizens' Orientations, the News Media, and Democracy in Fiji

Erik Larson

Abstract

For news media to fulfill democratic functions, citizens must consult these media and use the information they provide. In this article, I examine how the media fit into the polity by analyzing how citizens use and understand the place of news media in Fiji. I base my analysis on data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with citizens randomly selected through multi-stage cluster sampling. I find that while citizens regularly consult news media outlets, the predominant public orientation toward news media results in most citizens experiencing news as disconnected from their daily lives. This orientation reflects and reproduces processes of news gathering simultaneously centred on the state and disconnected from citizens, reinforcing thin democratic participation in governance. This social organization of the news media within Fiji's polity hinders the prospects for fulfilling media's democratic functions.

Introduction

In early 2008, Dr James Anthony's report on the media for the Fiji Human Rights Commission became a focal point for public discussion concerning the purported strengths and shortcomings of print, broadcast, and electronic news sources (Anthony, 2008). The report—as well as the responses that it generated, which are well-documented in the report's lengthy appendices—raised (and responded to) concerns about media ownership, reporters' training and qualifications, and perceptions of bias in news coverage. An assumption that news media significantly affect public opinion and behaviour underlies many of the report's explicit and implicit criticisms of Fiji's news media, as well as similar observations by

other authors (Duncan, 2002; Field, 2007).¹

Social scientists have long investigated whether evidence warrants that underlying assumption. An initial direct effects model—in which analysts presumed that the public simply absorbed information and ideas from the media and reflected them in expressing opinions as if these messages had been injected by a hypodermic needle—gave way to a 'limited effects' understanding after preliminary research showed little difference in voting preferences between those who did and did not use news media extensively (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Muzzatti, 2007). More recent research, however, suggests a number of important, often indirect, effects, including

- (i) agenda setting – influencing the issues that the public deems important, rather than their thoughts on these issues;
- (ii) framing – highlighting particular aspects of an issue to establish what type of issue it is; and
- (iii) priming – providing criteria by which to evaluate issues, types of issues, and decisions (Graber, 1988).

For any of these effects to occur, people must use the various sources in the media and then make further use of the information and ideas from the media in social settings (Dahlgren, 2007). In other words, people use social skills when tuning into or reading news and also subsequently when drawing on media content in social action. In using media sources, people form an 'active audience,' seeking media for particular purposes and making sense of the information provided by media outlets (Gorman, 2007). Given the large quantity of information provided by the variety of media, people filter news by using interpretive schema, mental categories used to scan through and process news stories (Graber, 1988). After this initial screening, people use information from the media to form opinions as part of an interactive process of cultural interpretation by assigning meaning to this information (Neuman, 2001). This meaningful information thereby becomes a resource for people in conversation and social action in conjunction with other actors (Gamson, 1990).

The extent and intensity of media effects, therefore, depends on how a populace approaches and uses the variety of news sources. Rather than attempt to illustrate these effects by examining ways in which media and public discourse converge or differ (Gamson, 1990; Graber, 1988), I seek to understand how the news media fit as a social structure into the political life of the citizenry in relation to the state. As such, I use data from in-depth semi-structured interviews to address three inter-related questions:

¹ The Executive Summary of the Anthony Report is produced on p. 238 of this issue.

For what purposes do people use news media? How does the public expect news media to gather and provide information? How do citizens use this information from news media? This approach provides insight into the potential for media to influence democratic processes (not only voting, but also other forms of participating in governance) by highlighting how and when citizens might rely on media in their relation to the state and political leaders.

I find that while most research participants make a point of listening to, watching, or reading news on a regular basis, their practices of using news tend to position news as separate from their everyday lives. From this perspective of citizens, reporters monitor newsworthy developments—many of which relate to government action and political leaders' statements—to inform the public. Aside from a minority of professional-class citizens, most people in Fiji do not use news as the basis for social action, reproducing social structures that closely affiliate news media with a state sphere disconnected from citizens. As a consequence, Fiji's media faces structural constraints in fulfilling democratic functions.

In the balance of the paper, I first outline the functions that news media can play in promoting democracy and explain how social organization can advance or impede these functions. Next, I provide a description of the research methods of the study. I then discuss the findings of the research, organizing these findings around the three research questions, and offer some conclusions.

Democratic Governance and Social Organization of the News Media

In abstract terms, the news media contribute to democratic governance by serving both as a form of organization to enable citizen participation and as a means to extract and organize information from more complex, bureaucratic organizations associated with the state. The social organization of news media and political leadership, however, influences the actual likelihood of media serving these functions, since these forms of organization influence both reporters' access to information and how citizens use information from the media. In this section, I consider four democratic functions of the media in relation to the organization of news media and political leadership. The influence of the social organization of the media argues for the importance of assessing citizens' orientations toward and understanding of the media.

News media can serve four functions to enable democracy:

- (i) providing a forum in which citizens can encounter diverse points-of-view on various issues;

- (ii) voicing public opinion so political leaders (and other citizens) know the public will on various issues;
- (iii) surveying the political arena to provide an overview of developments, events, decisions, and conflicts to citizens who would otherwise be unaware of such happenings; and
- (iv) serving as a watchdog to ensure that government officials and political leaders act in accordance with principles of good governance (Graber, 2003). These functions differ somewhat in how they idealize the organizational characteristics of media in relation to citizens and the state. To provide a forum, news media need foremost to be neutral and open to a range of contributors, while to voice public opinion, media organizations need to collect and present information more actively when this information might not otherwise reach officials. Surveying the political world and serving as a watchdog both presume a greater professionalization of news media, since reporters and analysts are supposed to gather and present information from bureaucratic offices in a manner that may presume a degree of specialized knowledge. These professional functions differ from each other in how the media relate to officials; serving as a watchdog requires greater independence and, at times, a somewhat antagonistic relation to political leaders and government officials.

Consequently, the actual social organization of the news media in a polity shapes the prospects for the media to fulfil each of these functions. Practices of news production orient reporters toward particular sources of news. The bureaucratic organization of political offices, therefore, provides a ready-made source of events for reporters, who often focus their attention on the actions of these offices as news (Fishman, 1980). Government officials and political leaders may also reinforce these practices, since they may understand frequent media attention as a means of career advancement and, therefore, provide reporters with press releases and suggested story ideas (Schudson, 2002). Such practices provide a foundation for the media to operate in a manner oriented more toward the professional functions; however, in attempting to fulfil these functions, media organizations face power and resource limitations, since reporters frequently depend on officials' and leaders' decisions to provide information and since reporting budgets and time are limited (Graber, 2003). Finally, while competition may weaken these limitations at times, political and market pressures also constrain potential competition since the commercial value of audiences serves as a limit for pursuing costly-to-produce news stories and since democratic institutions do not always respond to

public pressures, particularly when bureaucratic news sources filter these pressures (Bennett, 2004).

In addition to the effects of the social organization of the media itself, political culture and organization shape the prospects for media's contributions to democracy. When public information about an issue is limited, political leaders or government officials have an advantage over the media and citizenry and, therefore, may appear more knowledgeable, and consequently powerful, inspiring members of the public to follow these leaders (Baum and Potter, 2008). The media may also serve as much as a means for communication among political leaders as for communication with the citizenry (Schudson, 2002), since leaders may use the media for both sharing information with other leaders and also attempting to demonstrate support or potential mobilization of support for their own positions. In this respect, beliefs about the effects of media coverage on public opinion could become a part of the repertoire of political culture even if there is scant evidence to support these beliefs (Graber, 2003). As a consequence, political leaders and political culture may influence the extent of media's contributions to democracy (Gunther and Mughan, 2000).

Citizens, therefore, may understand the news media as a part of the political structure of society. Such an understanding could influence the potential for media to serve its democratic functions, as citizens limit (or expand) their use and application of the media in political life. For instance, citizens may not actually engage news about public policy and may not participate in non-electoral deliberation about related issues, limiting the ability of media to serve the functions of voicing public opinions and providing a public forum. Similarly, different segments of the public may gather and use information from news media in distinct manners (Baum and Potter, 2008), further limiting the media's ability to serve as a forum for public opinion. Citizens' orientations toward and use of the media could also feedback into the organizational nexus between media and the polity. For instance, if many citizens believe some media sources primarily serve as a forum for communication between leaders, they may not consult these sources and, even if the sources provided information as a watchdog or a survey of the political world, this information may go without a wider effect as citizens may not consult this resource. Over time, the media business producing this information could re-allocate resources away from such reporting, reproducing the relation between media, the state, and citizens. In this respect, citizens' orientations toward and understanding of the news media both reflect and contribute to the larger political structures of society. To understand how these orientations

relate to and shape political structures in Fiji and provide insight into the media-democracy interface, I investigate how citizens see news media as a source of information.

Research Methods

Fiji presents an interesting case to examine citizens' orientations toward media and the effects of these media orientations on democracy given the country's history since independence in 1970. As a result of the multiple coups and constitutional changes since 1987, the nature of democracy and the relation between leaders and citizens have been enduring public issues in Fiji (Akram-Lodhi, 2000; Field et al., 2005; Lal, 2006; Robertson and Sutherland, 2001). Furthermore, over the post-independence period, the number of media outlets has significantly expanded, including the launch of the privately-owned Communications Fiji radio corporation to compete with the government controlled Fiji Broadcasting Limited, and the introduction of television to the country. Finally, at least on an impressionistic basis, news reporting in Fiji fits the model of a bureaucratically-oriented media, as a large proportion of news stories are based on press releases from and interviews of leaders of organizations, political parties, and government offices.²

To provide evidence to answer the research questions about how citizens understand and use news media in Fiji, I use data from in-depth semi-structured interviews that I conducted as part of a study concerning coups and reconciliation. In the schedule of interview topics, I included questions concerning how respondents get information about political events. As is standard in in-depth interviews, respondents' answers to these questions provided a foundation for a number of follow-up questions and discussions. Data from in-depth semi-structured interviews reveal meanings and orientations of respondents in ways that survey data can not. Furthermore, analysis of these meanings and orientations provides insight about social structure by highlighting respondents' participation in the patterned nature of social life (Ewick and Silbey, 1998).

I used a multi-stage cluster sampling technique to select potential respondents for this study. In the initial stages, I selected different areas in Fiji to ensure geographic and socio-demographic diversity. (That is,

² To move beyond this impressionist evidence, one would need either to undertake ethnographic research in newsrooms to see how reporters go about finding news or to engage in content-analysis based research to judge the sources of information and setting of news stories.

initial cluster selection was purposive and theoretically-guided.) In subsequent stages, I randomly selected blocks of households and randomly selected specific households to include in the sample.

I conducted interviews with the help of two research assistants (one ethnic Fijian and one Indo-Fijian). We visited each house in our sample, making multiple return visits if necessary, varying the time of day and day of the week that we made initial contact so that we could get a range of adult participation. When we contacted a member of the household, we explained the research and invited citizens' participation as respondents. We conducted sixty-six interviews out of seventy-three eligible sampled households that we were able to contact, for a participation rate of 90% of contacted eligible in-sample households. (We treated vacant households and households with no adult citizens of Fiji as ineligible.) In contrast to Anthony's (2008) study of the media which was based largely on interviews of individuals who chose to contact the researcher, we initiated contact with all respondents and we initiated contact only with respondents whose households came up in the random selection procedure.

We conducted interviews in English, Fijian, or Fiji-Hindi, depending on the preference of the respondents. (The two research assistants interpreted interviews that were conducted in the vernacular.) In some instances, multiple adults were present in the household and participated in the interview. Interviews ranged from about forty minutes to over two hours; most interviews were slightly longer than one hour. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated (if in the vernacular).

Citizens' Uses and Understandings of News Media in Fiji

In this section, I draw on data from the interviews to provide evidence about how the citizenry interfaces with the news media in Fiji. The section begins with citizens' general use of the variety of news media, highlighting how the bulk of the population is engaged with, but not engrossed by, news. This discussion of media use provides an entry into uncovering citizens' orientations toward the media, or how they expect reporters and news outlets to operate as a whole. The data suggest that most people in Fiji expect news organizations to serve to present information to them that they do not access, primarily from official sources. Finally, I consider how people use this information that they receive from the news media, finding a difference between a more-involved professional class and the rest of the population, which is more withdrawn.

Use of News Sources and the Variety of Media

While some individuals read multiple newspapers on a daily basis as well as used broadcast and internet-based news sources, most respondents reported less engagement with news sources. These individuals used news sources, but did not demonstrate the same level of commitment to seeking out a variety of sources of news. An indication of how most people used news was given by a respondent who said that he gets information about political events from a variety of sources, but singled out one source as particularly important: 'especially [the] six o'clock news [on] television.' He further explained that the early evening newscast was useful 'because [it] takes time every day, every week.' In short, watching the daily news served as a ritual for this individual (as well as many other individuals whom we interviewed, further evidenced by the fact that the television was often on to Fiji One when we arrived at houses if we were out in the early evening). As part of the individual's daily schedule, watching the news may not lead to deep engagement with the issues of the day, but provide some awareness of these issues (Graber, 1988). Furthermore, many individuals watch the news on a regular basis as a means to fulfil a sense of civic duty to maintain some level of knowledge of current events (Buckingham, 1997).

This general civic awareness of news forms part of the culture of public life, as individuals orient themselves toward news. A different respondent noted, 'If anything important is bound to happen, then we resort to listening to the radio, watching the news on TV. And mostly when it's news time, then I tune in to listen to the radio.' This individual's explanation provides a keen insight into how the general populace remains attuned to news as part of the flow of social life in two ways. First, the respondent noted that during 'news time,' she listens to the radio. As social theorists have noted, by encoding action with meaning, time serves as an important organizer of social life (Abbot, 2001; Giddens, 1984; Gregory, 1994). The separate identification of some parts of the day as 'news time' demonstrates both that awareness of attention to news is an important aspect of social life and that individuals have a temporal orientation toward news—that is, an awareness of the meaning and organization of time in relation to news as well as the practice of following this organization of time in using news. Second, the respondent noted that she is particularly attentive to news 'if anything important is bound to happen,' suggesting that there is an awareness of the type of events that will generate news as well as the need to turn to media sources for information about these events.

Most respondents reported using the television and radio as primary news sources, while a minority—those who tended to seek the greatest amount of news—reported newspapers as the most important resource. Rather than see broadcast news users as passive and newspaper users as active news seekers (Chafee and Frank, 1996), the temporal orientation toward news suggests that individuals actively seek news. Particularly for those who use radio news, the differences may also reflect ease of access and preference for Fijian- or Hindi-language news, as radio coverage reaches a larger part of the country more quickly and reliably than newspapers and televisions and since dedicated Fijian- and Hindi-language stations include news as part of their daily broadcast schedules (Geraghty, 2005). While those who mainly use television and radio may differ in the depth of engagement with current events and public policy in comparison to those who primarily rely on newspapers, individuals orienting themselves to the temporal qualities of broadcast news are not merely passively receiving news, since those who get news from radio and television stations must follow broadcast schedules. Differences in the scheduling of news between radio and television reflect differences in how people use the news, exemplified by one respondent's explanation of the differences between the media: 'The radio tends to provide information in bits having breaking news. And TV, you need to wait till six p.m.'

In addition, a number of respondents noted the effect of accompanying the news with visual images on television. For some respondents, the visual images were an important addition to seeing the truth of current events. One couple explained:

Wife: On television we can see. That everyday someone does fight, isn't it? ...

Husband (interrupting): There could be a possibility that the TV news could be correct ...

Wife (interrupting): The government tends to fight in parliament.

Husband (continuing): ... and we can see things on TV.

Wife (finishing): ... what is happening in the government.

For this couple, being able to see Ministers and Parliamentarians engaged in heated debate provided an indication that there was greater division in Parliament than similar information that they received from other sources. Visual images associated with news also held the power to heighten reactions to news, as a respondent explained in relation to finding out news about the 2000 coup and its aftermath:

Only when they watched TV, then only [we] knew what was

happening [during the 2000 coup] which generated fear amongst my family members ... Whatever was shown on the TV during the coup period, that made me even fear more.

The respondent further explained that even long after 2000, continued use of the images from the coup and looting reinforced her fear.

Citizens' Expectations of News Media

Although most citizens in Fiji have a degree of awareness of the news—tuning in to hear or see it regularly—this basic use of news media provides little information about how citizens engage news. The consequences of media use for democracy depend, in part, on what citizens expect from media (and what they do with the information that they receive from the news). In other words, the roles citizens expect the news media to place in society depend on beliefs about how the media inform the public.

For most citizens in Fiji, news reporters provide a means to access the realm of official decision-making and knowledge. One respondent reported:

Whatever we want to know, we just watch it over the news as to what is happening and what is being told to the general public and what is likely to happen in future and then its finished. And beyond that we don't try and question about the validity of the information received.

Of the three things the individual identified as getting from the media, two merit further comments. First, the individual noted that the news provides him with 'what is being told to the general public.' In this regard, the news media serve as a form for one-way communication—or, more accurately, dissemination—of information. Second, the news media provide citizens with information about 'what is likely to happen in the future,' presumably giving guidance to the public. Both types of information reflect a sense that the public gains insight from those with more knowledge, but that there is not a reciprocal transfer from the public to knowledgeable officials. From this perspective, the media's role in gathering information requires that it access official sources.

Many other citizens shared this sense that the media provides access to otherwise hidden information. Another respondent reflected a widely-held understanding of how the news media operate by expressing the perception that news reporters provide access to the truth that most citizens

can not have:

It really depends on those who are inside a scene. There's other people who really knows [sic] and see what actually happened. For those of us that hear from the news, we are just like the middleman who receives... Those other people—who really see and report—these other people really know exactly what happened in the very moment, they report.

Reporters, from this perspective, have unique first-hand knowledge, since they 'really know and see' events and, consequently, 'know exactly what happened.' By implication, in order to provide such insight, reporters must position themselves to be where the news is. Therefore, in addition to the public's temporal orientation toward news 'time,' there are also particular places in which news occurs—that is, there is a space of news that is distinct from everyday life (other than, perhaps, those instances of natural or other disasters, such as fires, in which some individuals are victims and witnesses to these events).

This reliance on news reporters to provide access to the truth underlies an acknowledged dependence on journalists' professional ethics, as exemplified by another respondent's comment: 'Those who are providing the news, they are the only ones to know as to whether the information that they provide is accurate or not.'

At first glance, it may appear that the public's dependence on news media to provide access to truthful information in an honest fashion leads to uncritical acceptance of information, such as the comment from the respondent that they do not 'question the validity' of the news. Further comments from respondents, however, suggest a degree of scepticism—as well as a few tactics based on using basic sensory perceptions to try to judge the veracity of information. Many respondents noted that they could sense that something might not be accurate with some news reports. One respondent stated:

But some of the times and many times when you hear this one reporter, they [say] something with a little bit of twist of word inside or two. Sometimes in the papers, too, there's a little bit of lying, missing from what that reporter says. And all of them, they were inside, shooting, taking records. So many times, I could say I'm a little bit confused as which one is true.

This respondent demonstrated awareness that some news items relied on the shading of the meaning of information or the omission of information. Expressions of awareness of things that are wrong or that matters

could be different provide evidence that dominant ideas do not overwhelm peoples' consciousness (Scott, 1990). At the same time, though, the respondent expressed confusion about truth.

Citizens who expressed similar doubts about knowing whether news information is truthful demonstrated that they use sights and sounds from broadcast media to get a sense of what is and is not true, much as one might use these senses in direct social interaction to judge others' true meaning and intent. One respondent noted: 'Sometimes they said that some journalist or some people, they are telling lies. So that's why we don't know what's true and what's false.' Later, in the interview, though, the respondent discussed her use of media and explained:

Sometimes in the daytime, I [switch] on the TV and when I see the TV and they're in Parliament House. Sometimes they laugh like – we just think, why are they laughing like that? If this Labour asks any questions, something – they put the question from Labour to SDL, they just sit down and laugh. The way they laugh, we just think that these people is [sic] making fun of us.

For this respondent, the direct observation of proceedings in Parliament provided a source of information that could be used to determine whether news reports about Parliamentary debates or political leaders' pronouncements were accurate. Another respondent stated:

For me, it brings me head-ache following political news. I just follow political news that I understand. I often say that intelligent people speak about politics ... Yes its true, some politicians hide things from people and they know themselves; he says something and does something else, especially us in the village ... I used to listen to the radio about political issues; by the way they talk we know their motives whether its genuine or not, [whether] he'll do what he says.

Even though this individual doesn't follow political news that closely, he used sensory skills to determine whether the political leaders were 'genuine,' and, accordingly, whether they could be believed. The general importance of this sensory monitoring for much of the populace was illustrated by a respondent who contrasted a situation in which he could not know what was true. In discussing events that happened during the 2000 coup, he noted, 'Whatever happens inside, even the camera doesn't reach there.' After being asked to clarify what the statement meant, he said, 'A school in 2000 was being occupied by the coup makers

and whatever happens, even the camera cannot reach out that far.' In this case, he could not use his own senses to determine the veracity of the information, since he had no ability to monitor the reports (by examining visual images). While the accuracy of this sensory monitoring is beyond the scope of the data in this study,³ the general finding—that people attempt to use sensory monitoring as a means to assess the truthfulness of suspect news—provides insight into how most members of the public in Fiji use news media. The sensory monitoring reflects (and reinforces) the general orientation that news reporters have unique access to the information that one could use to gauge the accuracy of statements. Reliance by members of the public on their own senses (filtered through the sights and sounds of broadcast news) locates the public's check on accuracy outside of the space in which news is produced.

Finally, some evidence suggests citizens' expectations of the news also reflect the enduring legacy of ethnic divisions in Fiji (Howard 1991; Lal, 1992; Larson and Aminzade, 2007). Some individuals noted use of the non-English-language media as particularly important, such as an individual who said, 'When we are at our home with our family, we tune into our own radio station.' Rather than identifying the language, the respondent referred to the station in much more possessive ('our own') terms.⁴ The importance of the non-English-language news during the events of 2000 was explained by a respondent:

At the workplace since our manager was there, at news time we use to tune into the Hindi station since we were scared that what if something else happened to our main leaders. We thought that if something happened we would be at work and if there would be other related problems that is [sic] bound to take place. We used to listen to the English FM station only during news time because every now and then breaking news was there.

Changing from the general practice of listening to the English news, the manager and workers listened to the Hindi news out of concern that something may happen to 'their' leaders, which may lead to further trou-

³ Social psychological evidence suggests that most people over-estimate their ability to use such sensory monitoring of others (Gilovich, 1993).

⁴ Other respondents simply may not have commented on the language, since they mainly get their news from Fijian or Hindi sources. The interview schedule did not explicitly ask about the language of news sources, so this topic only came up if the respondent mentioned it or if we had a reason to probe on the topic.

ble for Indo-Fijians. The use of this station during a time of greater crisis suggests that some segments of the population may trust Fijian- or Hindi-language news to provide news that might be of greater use or concern to them. Another respondent noted that news provided information about inequities:

We have a fair idea about what's happening, for instance, in the Education Ministry; how biased the allocation of scholarships are distributed amongst Fijians and Indo-Fijians.

The reported learning about bias suggests that news may be framing and/or priming particular issues.⁵

Citizens' expectations of the media in Fiji demonstrate that most members of the public view the media in manners similar to the professionalized model, in which reporters have unique access to information that members of the public can not access. This professional role of journalism separates news spatially from everyday life. In watching or listening to news, though, the public may bring information from the media into everyday life. In the next section, I examine what the public does with this information.

Use of News Media Information

To use information, actors must classify it, or determine what this information says about the government, economy, or society. After this initial classification, the information becomes a cultural resource, along with personal experiences and popular wisdom (Gamson, 1990). The process of classifying news information will depend on how people bring information from the news media into social life. The evidence from the interviews suggests differences based on occupational and educational status. While all individuals attempt to understand the information from the news in the context of social relations, the purpose and consequences of understanding varies. People from a more professional background focus more on explanatory, rather than descriptive, knowledge of the news (why something happened, rather than what happened) and also perceive a greater role for their involvement in the use of the information for public and national issues.

For the great proportion of respondents from the working, agricultural, and unemployed classes, news serves as a resource to help deter-

⁵ This suggestion merits further research, perhaps comparing the extent of framing and priming between English-, Fijian-, and Hindi-language media.

mine what to think. The application of the information from the news media frequently requires decisions about how to interpret the news. One respondent related:

We often talk about this during kava sessions or during community work, what we heard in the radio or watch in the TV ... It helps us a lot when we listen to the radio. Our own views as villagers, we try to connect this with what we heard in the radio. That helps in forming our opinion about political issues.

In this case, information from the news media becomes part of everyday talk among villagers. In their discussions, they 'try to connect' the news information to their 'own views.' In essence, the discussion serves as an opportunity to apply the national news to the particular village context. This discussion and application is important 'in forming [an] opinion about political issues,' demonstrating that this process leads to an outcome of deciding what to think about an issue.

These discussions sometimes rely on interpretation of leaders, individuals to whom others defer concerning how to understand news information. A respondent explained why a number of people from the community supported the 2000 coup by stating:

What we heard at that time and how some news was interpreted to us at that time about our resources—especially us in the village, we live as a ordinary Fijian people—when we heard those kind of news stories, we believed them because most of us are not well educated ... That's why we joined that opposing Fijian group against the government.

The respondent's explanation that 'some news was interpreted' demonstrates that information leaders helped to place the news into the local context in which it made sense. The 'ordinary' people believed those filtering the news because they attributed a difference in knowledge to those who interpreted the news.⁶ This interpretation provided an understanding of what was happening at the time as well as the implied response – to join 'that opposing Fijian group against the [People's Coalition] government.'

⁶ It is possible that respondents' attribution of knowledge could correspond to English-language literacy, reflecting media practices (Geraghty, 2005). If true, it is also possible that the interpretation leaders are interpreting English-language news for people who have limited comprehension of English. Unfortunately, we did not probe further in this direction in this interview, so we do not have any definitive information on this possibility.

Similar processes of filtering the news can occur in different contexts. A respondent who was a member of the military explained:

We've got one unit like – the media cell, eh – they always bring news from this part of the world, what's happening in Fiji before we know [from other sources]. They'll gather information around and then they tell us.

The military has separated the function of monitoring and selecting news into a specialized part of its bureaucracy. Indeed, many organizations have officers with similar duties, such as a public relations officer responsible both for releasing information and monitoring public information. As a regimented, total institution (Goffman, 1961), though, the military's media cell becomes a more primary point-of-contact for its soldiers (particularly those serving on missions). The media cell in many ways replicates the overall orientation toward the media characteristic of most citizens—that is, it serves as the specialist institution that monitors events for those who are unable to do so—but within the context of a particular organization.

In contrast to most respondents, some individuals—mainly those in the professional class—demonstrated a different approach to how they brought news into their social interactions, reflecting differences between social classes' use of news found in other countries (Lewis, 2006). While individuals from these backgrounds may just as likely puzzle through the meaning of news in groups, the goals (and methods) differ, as explained by a respondent:

Where I work, it's a very political sensitive area. ... There's just so much talk. Everybody has their own theory, everybody has their own remedy. Just listen, laugh ... because at work, with my friends at work, there are things happening everyday—whatever they read on the blog, wherever they get their different sources from. They just have their own and they add their bit to it. They're trying to find out why this has happened. ... [A]t home, there's hardly—I hardly talk—there's hardly anybody at home for me to converse about it at the same time.

As the respondent noted, 'everybody' is involved with 'things happening everyday.' Their goal, however, is not to figure out what has happened, but 'why this has happened.' To do so, various members of the workplace social group draw on 'their different sources,' such that the

group pieces together a variety of information.⁷ Further, each individual 'add[s] their own bit' to interpreting the news, suggesting a greater agency for each member of the group.

Active interpretation of the news represents a first step for many of these individuals, as explained by another respondent from a similar background:

I do a lot of my own thinking as well, just following things up and just putting events together with events that happened in the past, overseas and everywhere. Just putting—putting parallels in place, where I think, 'this is what happened there, so we may be going down that way.' But mostly the papers, talking to people. And I normally try to keep people on the right level, thinking, telling them 'This is what's going to happen if we do that.'

In 'putting events together,' the respondent is trying to understand how these events came about, as well as the likely effects of the events. The respondent also tries to determine 'what's going to happen' if certain actions are taken and, in doing so, advising others about the relative merits of different courses of action. This orientation differs from the respondent, cited in the last section, who watches the news to learn 'what is likely to happen in the future,' since the professional-class respondent sees the future as contingent, since events will happen only if certain actions are taken (hence, the importance of advising others). Thus, the agency extends to using the information from the news to create knowledge that can serve as the basis for mobilizing public action.

Professional-class individuals' perceived agency contrasts sharply with how most citizens consider what they should do with the information from the news. One respondent succinctly typified a standard reaction: 'With me, I just want to know what's happening, that's all. But to get involved, I don't think so.' For this respondent (as well as a large proportion of all respondents), news information can serve as a form of awareness of one's surroundings, but is not the foundation for citizen-based political action. Another respondent explained:

I only listen to the radio and I relate this to what the bible says

⁷ It is beyond the scope of my research to evaluate the quality of the variety of the sources (or validity of conclusions) that such individuals reach; however, there seems to be at least a potential in this type of a group context of people discussing the relative quality of information and interpretation and, perhaps, even seeking more direct information (such as reading original reports, rather than relying merely on a news account summary of the report).

about things that will happen in end of days. I can see that we Fijians are behind spiritually, in education. And listening to news and spreading rumours only have negative results.

For this individual, news serves as an important time to reflect on religious teachings, rather than for acting in society. This more inward-focus of the news—in which discussing events might be akin to 'spreading rumours'—does not entirely differ from those villagers who try to connect the news to their lives. In each instance, the goal is to reflect on the news in relation to salient aspects of their lives, but not necessarily to act on this reflection in the public sphere.

One reason for this limited action relates to an underlying cynicism about the political world. A professional class person stated this viewpoint succinctly:

Politics is full of lies ... Most of the time, only educated people are talking about this and the rest are left in the dark. This is a problem. The public should know the mechanism of democracy. If not, people will be ignorant of the process of democracy and this ignorance can bring fear, fear of the unknown.

This respondent's characterization of the level of understanding of most of the public does not correspond to the evidence from the interviews: the degree of scepticism about truthfulness of news as well as the understanding that one should not take political leaders' promises and comments at face value were widespread. The respondent's characterization, however, does reflect the fact that most of the public does not act on their scepticism in any visible manner (or, when they do act on the basis of information, it appears to be on the basis of misinformation, such as the villagers who supported the 2000 coup).

Notwithstanding the reluctance of many members of the public to be involved politically, some of the non-professional class research participants expressed a sense that there should be greater public involvement. Frequently, these comments happened at the end of the interviews, when I asked if the respondent had any other thoughts or comments that they wanted to share, exemplified by the following comment contrasting participating in the research interview to the news:

I really like this, you know. I really like what you guys are doing the research and all. Because every time when the news comes say bullshit and all this, our voices are not heard. It's just been heard in the family. But this is what – what you guys are doing, it's really good. ... People like us, lower income

earners and all. Our voices are heard. So maybe one day, we'll be reading and realize 'Eh, I said this.'

While the respondent has the opportunity to discuss information from the news in the family, she did not find it sufficient, as there seems to be no effective forum for voicing public opinion in an engaged manner.

This sense that public opinion has been shut out of the public sphere reflects (and is reinforced by) the patterns of orientation toward and use of the news media. The large portion of the citizenry that approaches the news media seeking its professional orientation—in which reporters survey and watch over public life—reproduces the social organization of the media and polity in which 'news' has its own space and time that are distant from everyday life. This disconnection between news and everyday life leaves members of the public at times wondering about what information in the news they can trust, but reduces their ability to assess this news to sensory monitoring. For this large part of the population, news happens and it is reported to them. They are not actively involved in the type of events that make news, reinforcing an overall level of political alienation (Lewis, 2006). In contrast, those members of the professional classes often saw as many (or more) problems with the news they received. Realizing these imperfections and the partial version of events that any single source might provide, these individuals used their interests to engage the news as part of a normal social activity to put together a more complete version of events and to lay the foundation for some degree of involvement in the polity.

Conclusions

The analysis of the interview data has highlighted how Fiji's news media exists as part of the larger political structure of the country. The position of the media in relation to citizens and the state in this structure both reflects and reinforces a narrow base of citizens' democratic participation. These structural patterns also inhibit the ability of the news media to fulfil democratic functions.

For most of the public, consulting the news media remains a valued practice in daily life. They see the media as a means to get information about events, but only a small proportion of largely professional-class citizens look to use this information for public action.⁸ As a consequence,

⁸ While one may wonder if this finding reflects the focus on the research interviews on coups and reconciliation, the interviews included substantial discussion about what

much of the public orients themselves toward the media and the state in a manner that corresponds to a model of news production centred on the state and political party bureaucracies. Rather than experience the news in terms of seeing media as dependent on flows of information and events from official sources, the public perceives media reporters as having privileged access to officials and being the source of information disseminated from these officials. This orientation leads to the spatial and temporal separation of news events from the daily social lives of much of the public.

The focus of news media on official sources results in news coverage reflecting events and people in government or other official bodies (Fishman, 1980). Combined with the orientation of a large proportion of the public toward the news as coverage of officials, issues and events in the news tend to be filtered through the lens of government action. (Hence, the common refrain, 'what is the government going to do about it?' when there is a problem of one sort or another.) This governmental-focus on issues and problems occurs even in instances when a government-based solution is not the only (or best) solution. Political leaders further reproduce this government focus by alternately taking credit for successes or placing blame on rivals for problems. These patterns reinforce thin citizen participation in governance, as the causes of the problems and their solutions are placed within the framework of government activity.

The political economy and social organization of news production that make reporters dependent on official sources inevitably results in resource constraints and trade-offs, giving officials greater control over information (Bennett, 2004; Graber, 2003). Consequently, reporters face gaps in information or conflicting accounts from different officials, leading to situations in which news accounts provide incomplete or erroneous information, a situation which a dearth of well-trained and experienced journalists exacerbates. As a consequence, the media face constraints in fulfilling the function of providing citizens of a survey of the political arena. This gap in information produces different reactions among different social classes. For the relatively smaller professional class, partial ac-

respondents thought the primary effects of the 2000 coup were. Nearly every respondent spoke—often in the greatest detail—about economic effects and a substantial proportion discussed the effects of the coup on education. These topics certainly could be associated with a greater degree of public involvement. Furthermore, the questions concerning the media typically followed more general questions about respondents' thoughts about political involvement and events. In short, it seems likely that these findings are valid, rather than artifacts of the topic of the interviews.

counts that require piecing together a variety of sources of information reflect their general practices of using news, in which a variety of sources provide a foundation to attempt to explain why events happen. For the rest of the population, though, these gaps can lead to alienation, as members of the media are supposed to be the ones who know what is happening. These conclusions suggest that rather than the extent of media use correlating with political participation (Kim and Han, 2005), the nature of media use reflects more general orientations and practices of citizenship.

The dependence of news media on information from official sources also may make reporters more reliant on research or analysis from those outside the media. As a result, news items tend to be reactive and the news media does not perform its watchdog function as effectively. When reporters do attempt to fulfil this function, the watchdog role often comes across as an attempt to impeach individual leaders or organizations, rather than conducting systematic investigations which provide citizens with information to use in participating in governance, which might provide a partial explanation of why media-government relations have been strained over the last decade, no matter who controls government (Foster, 2007; Singh, 2004).⁹

The media in Fiji also face constraints in fulfilling the remaining two democratic functions. Most clearly, members of the public sense exclusion of their voices in the media (which one would expect given the media's orientation toward the professional-role goals that focus media attention on the state). The media do not face severe structural constraints in providing a relatively open public forum—indeed, the news media's focus on political and government officials encourages reporters to seek a variety of stories and viewpoints on similar issues, as well as encourages officials with different viewpoints to contact reporters. Such a forum, however, may be less useful if competing views tend to be reported separately, as may happen when stories come more from press releases than from attempts to bring together varied perspectives. Additionally, the occasional lack of public confidence in the truth of reporting could limit the quality of a public forum, as members of the public may discount some of the viewpoints. Most fundamentally, though, the public forum has severely constrained democratic effects given the low degree of citizen participation in governance. In other words, even if the media provided an ideal public forum, without change in citizens' orientations toward use of

⁹ The strain in relations between media and government could also reflect differences between the two entities about which should be the primary source of information for the public (Hultin, 2007).

news, this public forum would do little to advance democratic governance.

This paper and the underlying research do not offer direct evidence about the ongoing debates about alleged media biases and media freedom. Deeply-engaged ethnographic research or systematic content analysis would be needed to provide the type of evidence about the processes of media news production or the patterns in media coverage, respectively, to generate insight into these issues. The research in this paper, however, has demonstrated a number of constraints that confront the media in serving democratic functions in Fiji. These shortcomings result not from particular decisions made by media organizations or government, but from the social structure in Fiji that positions the media, citizens, and the state in relation to one another. The actions of all three—political and governmental leaders' use of media, media organizations' and news reporters' focus on state activity as the hub of news, and citizens' orientations and use of the news media—reproduce this underlying social structure. These structural patterns may not prevent democratic effects from emerging from the media at opportune moments (Graber, 2003), but these moments will remain the exception without social change. While including more news stories based on the insights of people with information instead of pronouncements of officials with power might improve the likelihood of the news media providing democratically useful information (Lewis, 2006: 315), absent concomitant changes in how political leaders seek to formulate and implement public policy and in citizens' level of participation in governance, these changes by the media would likely have limited effects.

References

- Abbott, A. (2001) *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Akram-Lodhi, A.H. (ed.) (2000) *Confronting Fiji Futures*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University.
- Anthony, J. (2008) *Freedom and Independence of the Media in Fiji: A Report*. Suva: Fiji Human Rights Commission.
- Baum, M.A. and P.B.K. Potter. (2008) 'The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 39-65.
- Bennett, W.L. (2004) 'Global Media and Politics: Transnational Communications Re-

- gimes and Civic Cultures', *Annual Review of Political Science* 7: 125-48.
- Buckingham, D. (1997) 'News Media, Political Socialization, and Popular Citizenship: Towards a New Agenda', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14: 344-66.
- Chafee, S. and S. Frank (1996) 'How Americans Get Political Information: Print versus Broadcast News', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546: 48-58.
- Dahlgren, P. (2007) 'Media and the Public Sphere', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*. Blackwell Reference Online. 16 June 2008.
- Duncan, L. (2002) 'Coup Editorial Content: Analysis of the Fiji 2000 Political Crisis'. *Pacific Journalism Review* 8: 10-29.
- Ewick, P. and S. Silbey (1998) *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Field, M. (2007) 'The Media and Spectre of the 2000 Coup', in J. Frankel and S. Firth (eds), *From Election to Coup in Fiji: The 2006 Campaign and its Aftermath*. Suva / Canberra: IPS Publications, University of the South Pacific / Asia Pacific Press, The Australian National University; pp. 174-84.
- Field, M., T. Baba, and U. Nabobo-Baba. (2005) *Speight of Violence: Inside Fiji's 2000 Coup*. Auckland: Reed.
- Fishman, M. (1980) *Manufacturing the News*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Foster, S. (2007) 'Who Let the Blogs Out? Media and Free Speech in Post-Coup Fiji', *Pacific Journalism Review* 13(2): 47-60.
- Gamson, W.A. (1992) *Talking Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Geraghty, P. (2005) 'Literacy and the Media in the Fiji Islands'. *Pacific Journalism Review* 11(1): 48-57.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society: An Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilovich, T. (1993) *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Gorman, L. (2007). 'Media', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*. Blackwell Reference Online. 16 June 2008.
- Graber, D.A. (1988) *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide, second edition*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Graber, D. (2003) 'The Media and Democracy: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes', *Annual Review of Political Science* 6: 139-60.
- Gregory, D. (1994) *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Gunther, R. and A. Mughan. (2000) 'The Media in Democratic and Nondemocratic Regimes: A Multilevel Perspective', in R. Gunther and A. Mughan (eds), *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press; pp. 1-27.
- Howard, M.C. (1991) *Fiji: Race and Politics in an Island State*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Hultin, N. (2007) 'Pure Fabrication: Information Policy, Media Rights, and the Postcolonial Public'. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 30(1): 1-21.
- Kim, S. and N. Han. (2005) 'Media Use and Participatory Democracy in South Ko-

- rea', *Mass Communication and Society* 8(2): 133-53.
- Lal, B.V. (1992) *Broken Waves: A History of Fiji in the Twentieth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Lal, B.V. (2006) *Islands of Turmoil: Elections and Politics in Fiji*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University.
- Larson, E. and R. Aminzade. (2007) 'Neoliberalism and Racial Redress: Indigenization and Politics in Tanzania and Fiji', *Research in Political Sociology* 16: 121-66.
- Lazarsfeld, P., B. Berelson, and H. Gaudet. (1944) *The Peoples' Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lewis, J. (2006) 'News and the Empowerment of Citizens'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(3): 303-19.
- Muzzatti, S.L. (2007) 'Mass Media and Socialization', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*. Blackwell Reference Online. 16 June 2008.
- Neuman, W.L. (2001) 'Fear of the 'Alien Other': Cultural Anxiety and Opinions about Japan', *Sociological Inquiry* 71: 335-56.
- Robertson, R. and W. Sutherland (2001) *Government by the Gun: The Unfinished Business of Fiji's 2000 Coup*. Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press.
- Schudson, M. (2002) 'The News Media as Political Institutions'. *Annual Review of Political Science* 5: 249-69.
- Scott, J.C. (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Singh, S. (2004) 'Media Ownership in Oceania: Three Case Studies in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga - Fiji'. *Pacific Journalism Review* 10(2): 47-55.

Erik Larson (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is an assistant professor of sociology at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA. He has been a visiting academic at the University of the South Pacific four times since 2000, most recently from September 2007 until April 2008.