

New World Journalism

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Introduction

Perhaps at no other time in human history has the power of communications been more vividly demonstrated than during this millennial transition. The virtual village our planet has already become, has been further shrunk by mobile phones carrying video and TV capacity, along with other wonders such as the palm top and blackberry – all variations of the original, voice-only cellular phone.

The media is already using these obvious and immediate advantages to sharpen the edge of its news delivery in terms of speed and accessibility and to enhance general content presentation. Most, if not all media companies in Fiji are already doing this.

The greater opportunity that this unprecedented era in technology brings is that media companies are being forced to think outside of the box of ‘traditional journalism’, by virtue of technological breakthroughs giving the ordinary citizen the opportunity to become involved in the news gathering process.

What must be made clear at this point is that of equal, if not greater importance, is the challenge to achieve this paradigm shift without compromising the news values that practitioners of traditional journalism hold dear, for it is these values which have thus far successfully underpinned the practice of ‘traditional journalism’.

Citizen Journalism

‘Citizen journalism’, the new catch phrase to describe the above phenomenon, has caught on in the Pacific, where there are examples of television stations calling on members of the public to call in and report on incidents and shoot footage of such incidents with mobile phones.

Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Ltd (FBCL) is all for the idea of the public calling our newsroom to report on things as they see them taking

place. A time is also coming when like with other more developed countries, people in Fiji will put out their own news on the web. Blogs are a step towards that direction. It is obvious that media operators are now no longer the only generators of opinion, theories and arguments in the public domain.

Public discussion has now become very public and will become more and more owned and controlled through blogs and other online avenues. The question that demands our consideration is how far public involvement should be allowed in the news gathering process.

Power vs. Responsibility

It is inevitable that the public should be allowed to participate. Anything to the contrary would be trying to stifle social development. It is not the job of journalists to manipulate development of any kind, in this case, technological, for the sake of preserving their ‘domain’. However, it is the responsibility of every journalist to ensure that what they are trained to do best does not end up getting distorted for the sake of accommodating the pressures that advancements in technology will bring.

Journalists are entrusted with a power that they would be well within their boundaries in ensuring is used for the correct purposes – to inform, educate, and generate discussion —primarily as one of the spheres of civil society that facilitate the advancement of social development and progress. How this can be balanced with the increasing role of ‘citizen journalism’ brought on by technological advancements will be the challenge for the media industry for much of this century.

It can be safely concluded then, that apart from patterns of news consumption, the very nature of what is news will soon change, if it hasn’t already, because of the inadvertent involvement of the consumers of news, in the news gathering process. In terms of how this will impact the organisational/training needs of newsrooms and the gate-keeping functions of the media, the question is, to what extent is the media willing to include the public in its role of reporting and explaining life events to the people?

No one else can answer this better than the media because any responsible industry practitioner will understand the significance of their work in the context of the larger social architecture. For the systems of law and order and justice to remain intact for the preservation of the social fabric, it is vital that the integrity of the media is preserved.

This ties in well with another question that has been posed at this forum, of whether citizen journalists should enjoy the same legal rights and

privileges as professional journalists. The answer is a straight out no. Professional journalists are trained to do their job and therefore, it can be expected of them to carry out their duties with a certain degree of responsibility because they need to adhere to professional and ethical standards.

While citizen journalists can contribute to newsgathering in a unique way through offering first hand reports and description by having been at the scene of action, it would not be safe to assume that their 'reports' are all that journalists can go by.

The issues of personal bias, emotion, political and religious affiliation, are just some of the things that will have to be factored in when considering these 'reports'.

All the more reason why, if citizen journalism is to be encouraged, professional journalists must be trained in how to use this trend as a tool for the purpose of helping understand and better convey events and information surrounding everyday incidents.

Other equally important issues that must be considered are:

- How far can citizen journalism go, in terms of who will not only take responsibility for information, but be accountable for it?
- Who will judge what is fair comment, and will there be any limits on the depth and sensitivity of information shared on the web, so that one's private/personal life does not end up being splashed world wide?
- And subsequently, what of the rules governing defamation and the impact on a person's social standing through a comment made in public verbally, electronically, or in print?

The explosion of multi-media has made the creation of citizen journalism, blogging etc, and the subsequent blurring of lines with professional journalism, inevitable. But it will be up to media organisations themselves to ensure the blurring does not lead to a complete distortion of the role of the media, and the necessary part that public comment/input and views play in helping examine and articulate current issues. Professional journalists themselves must honestly accept the practical, every-day reality that the old temptations for them as media practitioners, will remain.

The drive to want to be the first to 'break' a story will be further heightened by the 'instantaneous' nature of a more prevalent electronic media. From the days when radio was the only medium that provided an unmatched sense of urgency in news delivery through its greatest advantage of immediacy, to the present when newspapers are operating web-

sites as well, how news is covered is bound to change.

Regardless of their being of print or electronic background, every journalist is going to be eventually exposed to the 'urgency bug' inherent in an increasingly electronic-based media world. Every journalist will have to be taught how to avoid the pitfalls along this path. The responsibility will become squarely that of media proprietors to ensure that journalists are educated and trained to remain focused on their primary role of being effective messengers.

The Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Ltd Context

In the local context, FBCL operates within a world, which, in terms of news and information demands, is as complex as Fiji's demographics. A population of more than 800,000 is spread out over a little more than 300 islands, only a third of which are populated, and, which are spread over a total area of 18, 270 square kilometres.

FBCL's six different stations target as many different sections of listeners. An important point to note at this juncture would be Fiji's vibrant media industry, with its plethora of radio stations, magazines, newspapers, and now, with the issuing of more free-to-air television licenses by government, some healthy competition to Fiji Television Ltd. The first of these stations is Mai TV, started by former Fiji TV journalist and executive, Richard Broadbridge.

Part of FBCL's audience is made up of highly IT-literate consumers, whose needs are developing quickly because of their exposure to the internet, television and a multi-media environment which extends everywhere — into schools, the workplace and even the home. This segment of the local population has become so immersed in this multi-media culture that even in our homes, it has become the norm rather than the exception for families and individuals to have multiple mobile phones, Blackberries, computers, USBs, and other such devices.

This is apart from other modern-day paraphernalia such as TV sets, DVD players and recorders, digital cameras, etc. On the other end of the scale exists FBCL's duties to its rural listeners, for some of whom, the only mode of transportation, even for getting from Point A to Point B on the same island — is by boat. Even in such remote parts, though, technology is steadily making inroads through the construction of transmission towers that extend the coverage of Fiji's mobile phone network. Much of these efforts are aimed at helping tourists, and other sectors of the population that exist nearby are 'helped' by default.

Challenges

Within the overall context of these changes in local culture, the same challenges and constraints that faced journalists more than a decade ago remain, except that sadly, the pressures that these developments have created, have added to the working burden of Fiji's admirable band of reporters and their editors. There are more pressures but the same meagre resources from which to operate, by way of remuneration, facilities and equipment, all of which erode job satisfaction and therefore aggravate the sometimes-vicious job cycle of dissatisfied, under-enthusiastic and over-stressed journalists.

It is for these reasons that, as philosophical as journalists sometimes tend to become, the bottom line is that the bottom line must improve in order to improve the lot of workers across media organisations – including journalists themselves. As Fiji's oldest broadcaster, the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Ltd has gone through a reorganisation that has reduced its relationship with the State to an annual subsidy for its two public radio stations — Fiji's oldest and first radio stations — Radio Fiji One and Radio Fiji Two.

These two vernacular stations now operate in a semi-commercial mode while maintaining a public service-oriented programming format. FBCL's other four stations have moved into a completely commercial mode, with the State expecting FBCL to generate decent financial returns while operating on a level playing field with other statutory bodies.

Critical Importance

This is where having a sustainable newsroom is of critical importance to us. FBCL has always had a reputation for good broadcast journalism — something we have been working hard at restoring, in the aftermath of the news blackout FBCL suffered following Fiji's first coup of 1987. As a national broadcaster, the responsibilities on us are enormous — we are often the only medium that reaches the rural-based listening public in the outer islands and the highlands. Therefore, to highlight their plight and needs, we must ensure we do not stray from the practice of developmental journalism.

At the same time, we must meet the fast-developing information needs of the IT-sophisticate component of the populace that expects an up-to-date and vibrant web-based news service. This, needless to say, is a pulsating news sector in itself, with several independently-run news-

based websites hosted in Fiji, along with sites operated by all of the media organisations in Fiji, be they broadcast or print.

Apart from hosting a website, we also text our news headlines to mobile phone subscribers. As ambitious as all these endeavours may sound, the challenges abound in equal measure. To begin with, our commercial competitors have a 20-year head start on us, and it could be said in all fairness that unlike public broadcasters, who are a mix between commercial and public programming, the national interest is not always the priority for all-out commercial operators.

As an extension of our position as a national broadcaster, it would be natural for the listening public to expect us to be setting the standards – journalistically speaking – in the wider Fiji media. The example of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation close to home, is a good one where extreme care is given to such things as pronunciation, names, the standard of English, etc., because the public and organs of the State expect the ABC to uphold this standard.

It is, therefore, left to media organisations such as ourselves to help bring journalistic balance to a large section of Fiji's broadcast media, by virtue of our responsibilities as a public broadcaster. The market dynamics are further complicated by the more lucrative financial base of television stations, which are able to pay journalists up to three times more than what we can afford. As David Robie, former University of the South Pacific journalism program co-ordinator, puts it in his compilation, *The Pacific Journalist*: 'Starting salaries are low in many Pacific news organisations – in Fiji, for example, a journalist can be paid as low as less than half (\$F7000 a year) the starting salary for secondary school teacher.'

Those figures are from a publication of seven years ago. They remain largely the same for radio journalists in Fiji and, thus, affect the quality of reporters we are able to recruit — and, therefore, determines how far above the game we are able to lift the quality of our news service.

Concluding Remarks

A new world of communications, with its digitally converged multi-capacities for image, sound, colour and speed, has come to Fiji, as it has in other parts of the world. It can be safely said that this new world will forever change the face of journalism, creating, perhaps, 'new world journalism'. The inherent danger during this transition is that journalism as we've known could disintegrate into entertainment if consumer input is allowed into news content via imagery, sound and hard information,

without adequate and proper editorial consideration.

There has already been much debate through the greater part of the 20th Century, more so in the West, about the 'evening news' being cast with a shadow of 'entertainment' through a combination of media owners giving in to the lure, and the pressure of ratings, and the growing consumer demand for more, quicker and better. The challenges remain the same as technology asks new questions of the industry. To find the answers, we must ask ourselves how far the industry is prepared to go to ensure that the foundations of journalism are kept intact as we translate into this new world journalism.

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