

Submission to
Pacific Plan Review
22 May 2013

by Jason Brown, editor
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This submission is dedicated to the memory of colleagues killed in West Papua.

NOTE

Key concepts:

1. Policy equity
2. Estate equality
3. Ethics capacity

Notes in CAPITALS refer to research needed to further substantiate press potentials outlined below.

Lacking time and internet resources on deadline to fully complete this submission, the author encourages policy makers to find background information via computer 'mouse', selecting key phrases and right-clicking for online search options.

Opinions are those of the author.

Introduction

Media think in hours. Days. Weeks. Months.

Governments think longer term: in years.

Many factors play into differing opinions and perceptions between governments and media over freedom and responsibility across the region, but perhaps the least examined are these widely disparate timeframes.

For the media, online updates and radio bulletins present hourly deadlines. Newspapers are frequently daily affairs, some are weekly. Magazines can be published monthly or quarterly.

Radio can be hourly, television nightly, and online services almost twenty four hours a day.

By comparison government perspectives stretch past the immediate and into the medium future - three, four or five year terms are the common electoral cycles.

Where governments and the media align is in the mutual need to please their mutual audiences.

In theory, governments rule for the national good, while media report for the public good.

In practice, governments are made up of ruling parties who must pursue policies that most increase likelihood of re-election, or suffer being consigned to the rubbish bin of history. Reality in the newsrooms sees media choose headlines that best sell papers, advertising and online subscriptions in order to turn a profit during the good years so as to be able to survive losses during bad years.

Both government and the media, therefore, frequently employ short-term survivalist tactics, rather than long-term strategies for success.

Ethical practices such as transparency and accountability frequently suffer in the process, across estates like media, judiciary, governments and parliaments, impacting wider societal progress.

Overview

This submission to the Pacific Plan review argues for the creation of policy equity for the Fourth Estate, aimed at achieving greater equality between estates, thus delivering ethics capacity.

All three elements should be regarded as introducing new models for measuring, monitoring and rebuilding news media ability to constructively participate in development efforts across Pacific Islands, as outlined in the Pacific Plan.

These new models respond to wide ranging concerns about the state, status and sustainability of news media, including a recent review that found national media associations are largely "dysfunctional".

In doing so, this submission advocates for new top-down approaches to complement decades of bottom-up attempts at developing professionalism, industry standards and news media ethics.

Myriad workshops, seminars, conferences address issues such as fairness, accuracy and balance, or "the basics" called for by both media and government management alike. These new models add value by addressing political economies that prevent these basic values from being implemented, from top to bottom.

Policy equity

News media are frequently ticked on development matrixes with terms such as being "essential", and "vital" to the proper functioning of democratic economies.

Yet beyond these assurances, little evidence exists that news media achieve more than lip service in policy debate.

Journalists and journalism, in their role as the Fourth Estate, are in fact largely ignored when it comes to formulating national development policy.

One recent example is the 2013 PACMAS funded review, *Strengthening National Media Associations*.

The review mentions capacity issues 34 times in a 20 page document, but the word "policy" appears, however accurately, only once, in a graphic.

Argued here is that capacity for a "confident, well-informed and professional" news media, as called for in the 2005 review of 14 Pacific Islands Forum countries, *Informing Citizens*, cannot be built, or more historically, rebuilt without the creation of a new sphere in public policy, for journalism as a public good.

Without more policy "equity" or space, journalism will continue to be overlooked as an effective and efficient check and balance on other estates, namely the legislature, executive and judiciary.

In policy terms, the almost complete absence of journalism can be compared to challenges facing developing countries in bridging what is referred to as a "digital divide."

Other examples of this divide can be drawn from the two leading regional organisations, SPC, the Secretariat for the Pacific Community, and PIF, the Pacific Islands Forum.

Using the term "human rights" as a comparison, for example, a search of the SPC website, www.spc.int reveals some 246,000 pages for all SPC "news" pages, 46,300 pages with mentions of "media", with some 10,000 pages mentioning "human rights"

By comparison, "journalism" occupies minimum policy space online at SPC, returning just 67 pages. Searching for the "Fourth Estate", perhaps the most policy-focused term, returns just four pages.

Interestingly, notions of "democracy" are also underserved, at 777 pages.

However the SPC site seems positively vibrant with news media discussion when compared with the Forum Secretariat.

At www.forumsec.org, there are no mentions, at all, of the Fourth Estate. There are 1,330 pages for "media" but just four pages mentioning journalism.

This submission calls for a much greater focus on policy-level recognition of news media and the Fourth Estate, to create vastly expanded ownership around recognition for the essential role played by journalism in developmental outcomes.

COMPARE ALSO ECONOMIC AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Estate equality

If anything, the disparity between first, second, third and fourth estates only becomes more apparent when examining information available on SPC and PIF sites.

SEARCH PACIFIC PLAN SITE ALSO FOR SEARCH TERMS, ADD PRIVATE SECTOR, PUBLIC SECTOR, GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, LEGISLATIVE, JUSTICE AND JUDICIARY

Regional policy development led by Australia and New Zealand over the last three decades has seen overwhelming emphasis placed on private sector-led economic growth.

However, applying free market and user-pays models to the news media have mostly ignored the public role played by journalism as the Fourth Estate, with consequent failure in public discourse, quality of governance information and sustainability of development efforts to maintain pace with efforts towards globalisation.

Current journalism debate focuses on finding new 'business models' for the news 'industry', underscoring the depth of the problems caused by corporate capture of journalism.

Indeed, corruption has flourished, with its ultimate expression seen in years of donor assistance for development of offshore financial services across Pacific Islands, exposed this year as playing a massive role in global tax avoidance.

Of the two main donor partners in the region, Australia alone has recognised the limitations of a purely *laissez faire* approach to national news media.

A 2006 joint review of aid to the Pacific by both houses of the Australian parliament saw acceptance of submissions decrying decades of news media suffering official neglect and relegation to the lowest levels of national priority.

Review findings for media particularly focused on calls for recognition of the need for effective

public broadcasters, especially radio during times of public emergency and national disaster.

Then existing short-term project-based approaches have now, as seen in the PACMAS programme, been replaced with a much more comprehensive thematic schema.

Funding of around AUD\$11 million for PACMAS over a three year period is an explicit if still inadequate admission of a previous failure to accord journalism regional priority.

Perhaps the ultimate example of how little equality journalism enjoys with other estates is in the fact revealed this year at the regional World Press Freedom Day event in the Solomon Islands, when a senior PACMAS official outlined how, out of dozens of applications from the news media itself, not one has been made under funding for journalism outputs.

Coined by one French journalist as "The Invisible Ocean", or by others as the "silent P in Asia Pacific", the region faces exponential increases in complexity of issues facing island state futures, led by enduring free trade and climate change vulnerabilities.

As a cornerstone estate, journalism can be said to be invisible to everyone, including journalists themselves.

Ethical capacity

What does ethical capacity look like?

Ethical capacity looks like ways and means of assessing, reviewing and evaluating outcomes. Rhetoric, ideology and dogma do not amount to any of these criteria.

In academic terms, theory 'and' practice amounts, in reality, mostly, to theory 'versus' practice.

Put plainly, this appraisal calls a spade, a spade. To quote a contemporary lyric, I don't care what you want, and I don't care what you say. For practical, immediate purposes, conventional wisdom is that the Pacific Plan review will amount to little more than a tick on a matrix box, as mentioned above.

Headlines must be writ. Deadlines, met.

Such as this one.

Yet such appraisals are mired in the transitional mindset of a generation locked into an age when effective discourse is limited to the length of a newspaper column, or television broadcast, much as horse-bearing messages were before them.

A bygone information age, in other words.

Today, communication costs can be met with sectoral passion that sets aside the 24/7 survival cycle and delves deeply into online permalinks to keyword discovery.

Such as 'capacity'.

Or 'ethics'.

No matter how remote the island. In this time, like no other before, the world is watching; not just now, but for foreseeable futures.

To summarise: ethical capacity looks like the slogan for the US strategic air command of the 1960s Cold War - "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

Timeframe

Reviewal of the Pacific Plan represents a rare opportunity for participation by ordinary, every day citizens to participate in policy-level discourse.

Given dysfunction of the Fourth Estate, this submission must be seen more in the context of practitioner concern; less than an institutional overview.

Timeframes, thus, are Pacific Way.

Conclusion

This submission to the Pacific Plan review was written as a very rough draft for consideration by a regional media monitoring body, aiming towards official adoption.

Thankfully, the review deadline was extended from 15 May 2013 to 22 May 2013. Otherwise, no submission.

Less thankfully, timeframes precluded official adoption by any regional, national or local agency. Lack of particulars can be attributed to factors outlined above - a systemic downgrading of news media priority.

Equally; capacity, potential.

An example from 'overseas' suffices. Where institutions like the BBC once enjoyed policy sanctuary as a normative aspiration, an onset of *laissez faire* fashion has seen emphasis shift, dramatically, from news and information.

Instead, from some three decades ago, public broadcasters such as the BBC were reviewed as having more market potential in entertainment, a quality replaced today with an additional dilution towards market quantity.

Similar processes are being followed in Oceania, with a “record funding boost” for public broadcasting in Australia not being matched anywhere else in the Pacific.

In fact, a review ordered by the John Key administration in New Zealand to cut costs at Radio New Zealand saw consulting firm, KPMG, instead found that RNZ and RNZI were already operating beyond peak efficiencies and actually recommended a funding increase.

As for New Zealand, so with the rest of the Pacific Islands.

Given the huge disparity in resources between the first three estates, and the Fourth Estate, time pressures outlined at the start of this submission can only continue to worsen.

This bodes forbiddingly for the future of democratic participation by Pacific peoples, and must be comprehensively addressed by review members if they want to achieve effective change.

Cook Islands case study

Yes, we can: an overview of the role of news media as an effective participant in political processes, for the public good

Historic evidence exists for journalism as a public good in the 1998 Political Review Commission report in the Cook Islands.

In the review, only one institution, the news media, gained a simple majority in public confidence – 56% – as an “effective control on political processes.”

This (1998) review also evidences the lack of policy recognition for news media, in that it failed to quantify this simple majority, only being picked up by the submission author after crunching survey data.

In other words, the sole institution enjoying majority public confidence in a Pacific Island sovereignty was simply ignored by the political review commission, led by USP Professor emeritus, Dr. Ron Crocombe, with former cabinet minister and then opposition party official, Laveta Short, and a USP branch director, John Herrman.

Voters surveyed by the Political Review Commission had less than majority confidence in parliament, police, state auditors, the independent Public Expenditure Review Commission, NGOs, churches, and, tellingly, voters themselves, among others.

More than two dozen recommendations for political reform were tabled in Parliament, but not one addressed the role of the news media.

A follow up review that the commission recommended for 2005 has never occurred.

In 1998, news media consisted of a public broadcaster, Cook Islands Broadcasting Corporation, run under an independent board; daily Cook Islands News, and weekly Cook Islands Press.

All were adherents to a code of ethics under the Cook Islands Journalists Association, established 1993, and, in 1997, an independent Media Council established the same year as the Cook Islands Media Association to handle complaints from the public and address media policy matters.

What did occur was that government privatised the television station, handing it to a political supporter who subsequently declared “media war” on competitors. Government also supported an application from the new broadcasting owner for full aid funding from New Zealand, assistance at the same time refused by NZAID to the author’s weekly newspaper, which subsequently failed in 1998.

The new broadcasting owner also dumped the TV news service, fired the country’s first political talkback host, and closed down radio news.

In its place, the new owner established a weekly TV review pamphlet which featured consistent, continual and defamatory personal and professional attacks on the reputations of government critics, mostly fabricated, with nuanced outright lies like this submission author being a homosexual stalker, low-grade drug dealer, a journalist with “ethics for sale” and a literal burglar of state secrets, *a la* Watergate, but of government, not the opposition.

At the same time, an application for aid funding by the author’s weekly Cook Islands Press in 1996 was delayed for two years before being denied, after being described by a New Zealand High Commission official as “politically sensitive” with a second commission official later describing a subsequent application for a news industry development project as suffering “political sensitivities.”

What was not clarified is from whence that political sensitivity stemmed, with a third NZAID official putting the problem more bluntly, in 2006, as being “... your name is mud with New Zealand.”

This followed years of the aid applicant reporting criticism of New Zealand foreign policies impacting upon the Cook Islands.

What the Cook Islands case study independently quantifies is that news media can achieve ethical success as a check and balance on the public sector, and the private interests it represents.

What this case study also proves is that, despite decades of rhetoric towards the benefits of free-market competition, New Zealand as a development partner is vulnerable to capture by

political agendas driven by strategic self-interest – a classic case of the chilling effect of aid on freedoms of speech.

Full disclosure: the aid applicant outlined above was and is author of this submission to the Pacific Plan review. Please refer to earlier submissions, attached, for historic examination of this case study, along with wider policy level discussion.

About the author

Submission writer Jason Brown is an Australian-born citizen of European heritage raised on a Pacific Island, Rarotonga, from the age of twelve.

With colleagues, he is a founding member of:

Cook Islands Journalists Association
Cook Islands Media Association
Pacific Islands Journalism Online
Pacific Freedom Forum

Brown was also a founding facilitator of the Cook Islands Media Council, and, this year, the Pacific Media Ombudsman concept.

In 2006-2007, he was acting secretary for the New Zealand based Pacific Islands Media Association, and consulted briefly on website development plans for the island-based Pasifika Media Association, established 2010.

In the same year he established JiCC, the Journalism in Crisis Coalition, set up to address the Global Journalism Crisis.

Brown took over as the coordinator for Pacific Freedom Forum, a voluntary position, in early May 2013. He was appointed sub-editor for daily Samoa Observer this same month.

As publisher of Sunday weekly Cook Islands Press, Brown is a proud co-awardee of the 1996 “Freedom of Information” award from PINA, the Pacific Islands News Association, along with, that same year, the then 126-year-old Fiji Times.

He is also especially proud of a recently discovered 19th century forbearer, Reverend George Brown, a missionary to Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and who retired to Sydney, writing 15 volumes of Pacific cultural and political history, additionally archiving some 1,100 self-produced glass plate photos, existent today.

Brown has visited but never lived in his birthland. Views expressed, therefore, are those of an outsider.

Views of the writer remain.

RESPECTS

Deep respect is expressed to colleagues, friends and frequent fellow freelancers, including; **Lisa Lahari Williams**, for her enduring regional media diplomacy, education and training; **Florence Syme Buchanan** for her role in instigating the region's first Official Information Act; TVNZ Pacific Correspondent **Barbara Dreaver** for her pioneering efforts to mainstream regional affairs in a metropolitan setting, and cartoonists **Taputu Tavioni** and **Timothy Manavaroa Buchanan**, for expanding the parameters of public discourse in the Cook Islands.

Outside of the Cook Islands, current PFF co-chairs **Titi Gabi**, of Papua New Guinea NG, and **Monica Miller**, the former, first and only female president of PINA, the Pacific Islands News Association, are warmly embraced for their personal patience with author fallibility.

Collegial inspiration comes equally over wider regional aspects from journalists such as **Maire Bopp Dupont**, **Claude Marere** and **Alex du Prel** of French Polynesia; **John Lamani** and **Dorothy Wickham** of Solomon Islands; **Ualese Petaia** and **Jean** and **Savea Sano Malifa** of Samoa; former PNG editors **Luke Sela**, and **Susuve Laumaea**. From Tonga, **Kalafi Moala**. Fiji: **Laisa Taga**, **Robert Keith-Reid**, and **Richard Broadbridge**.

From the regional media ranks of fellow *palagi*; **David Robie**, for instituting Pacific Media Watch and, through AUT, the diploma qualification for Pacific Journalism; and, Queensland university journalism lecturer, **Mark Hayes**, for utterly invaluable advice to 'take it slow' recovering from a decade or two of stress, burn-out and resultant chronic depression stemming from being a declared a public enemy during early years of a journalistic career.

Endorsement from any of the above named individuals is in *no way* implied or assumed. On the contrary, many of those named above will *no doubt* have at least a few negativities to attach to their interaction with this submission author.

Others absent from this roll-call of respect can blame the usual suspects of deadline pressure, forgetfulness and general incompetence.

Footnote: Brown is renowned among national and regional contacts for being a "know-it-all" and total "pain in the ass" when it comes to matters of media accountability, due process and journalistic ethics, among others, via Google group email list. *

* Actual quotes from PIJO/PFF online debate.

EARLIER SUBMISSIONS

2004 Pacific Media Watch update on "journalism crisis" in Cook Islands

<http://www.pmw.c2o.org/2004/cookis4339.html>

2005 Informing Citizens country chapter on Cook Islands

http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/articles/informing_citizens_report.pdf

2006 submission to aid review by Australian houses of Parliament

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=jfadt/pacificaid/subs/sub13.pdf

2007 submission to PIMA on Pasifika 2015*

2008 submission to French Polynesia, on social networking*

2010 overview of Global Journalism Crisis, European Journalism Centre

http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/2010_journalism_review_series_jason_brown_south_pacific/

2011 draft, to Australian media regulation review, not submitted

http://www.academia.edu/1027739/DRAFT_submission_Independent_Inquiry_into_Media_and_Media_Regulations_Australia

* Available on request.

TRANSPARENCY

This site by the author discusses advanced transparency techniques currently under development to address issues surrounding the lack of technical capacity to handle development funding.

www.totaltransparencytools.blogspot.com

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