Large ocean media: Reporting security in an age of new Pacific diplomacy

Steve Sharp, TME Media and Education Services

Introduction[1]

There is an increasingly urgent need in the Pacific for recognisable, independent and credible media discourses on national security that are disaggregated from the noise of self-appointed influencers on social media. National media institutions must bear this mantle because they are best placed to do so, for three reasons:

1. Security literacy: Journalists bound by professional codes of ethics are best placed to drive 'security literacy' from a low base. From global 'human security' agendas down to grassroots conceptions of material survival, reporters are required to make sense of the nuances and explain why they matter. Journalists are infinitely better placed than the shadowy voices that emerge from, and slide back into, the digital social media cracks, who are not accountable.

2. The media as early warners: The Pacific diplomatic playground is re-organising itself in ways that make us more connected, but in unpredictable ways. A professional class of journalists who are 'security literate' will be well placed to tell the story of regional integration in ways that protect the region against the disintegrative forces during this and any major period of geo-political upheaval.

3. Transborder collaborations: The task of tracking and keeping pace with regional developments and translating the detail into relevant national news is becoming increasingly complex, but no less urgent. The transborder nature of business and politics is ripe for cross-border collaborations between national media to explain the business–politics nexus to national and regional audiences.

This conception of rising intellectual demands on our professional reporters is problematic not least because it is riven by an ideological divide about the media's true and proper place in national development. On the one side, there are those who believe media should partner government in promoting agreed national goals (developmentalist thinking); on the other side, there is the view that national progress emerges from institutional competition where media record events but in doing so, also scrutinise power (watchdog role).

As Sheila Coronel notes (2010:111): 'The press as watchdogs of power is embedded in the self-definition of journalists and in varying degrees, also in public expectations of the media'.

Since the 1990s, the international donor community has also accepted that 'corrupt and inept governments were a major impediment to development efforts' (Coronel 2010:112). But governments have resisted media scrutiny, often in ways that degrade media institutions and threaten the physical safety of journalists. Expect the trend towards online harassment of reporters under political direction to continue (IFJ-SEAJU 2018).

The Pacific's shifting and competing security narratives are complicated. And this is where the Pacific media as regional storytellers are more challenged. What to make of all the speeches, communiques and bickering around the Pacific family dinner table? To simply report the words of leaders is insufficient. Journalists need to not only report the significant but to explain why it is significant. This means connecting the polished words of official declarations with the daily struggles of town and village – the folks in whose name security narratives are being spun. It also means pointing out the disconnections. Because therein lies the story.

Undermining media scrutiny: A regional issue

Officials and leaders from across the region work within accountability structures and make political calculations about the risks of non-disclosure or 'no comment'. They must consider the chance of hidden information becoming public knowledge at some point and their capacity to hose it down.

The energy, persistence and skills required to pursue these kinds of stories should not be underestimated in any jurisdiction. They are especially exacting within the institutional structures of media-government relations in PNG and the wider Pacific. The youthfulness, inexperience and lack of confidence of the Pacific journalistic corps are well known. Add to that the regular hostility of leaders. The Fiji Prime Minister in the *Fiji Times* newspaper stated:

> the *Fiji Times* is controlled by a cabal that manipulates the news agenda and uses inflammatory language to create disunity, division and instability and to advance its own political interests (Radio New Zealand 2015 in Singh 2017:4).

Or in September 2020, the Samoa Prime Minister referred to the leading daily *Samoa Observer* as 'the Opposition' and of trying to topple the government. The newspaper had earlier complained of being denied 'the right to ask questions of the Prime Minister at weekly press conferences and even copies of bills before Parliament' (*Samoa Observer* 2020).

What is the media's role?

There is also the tangible question as to whether audiences perceive the media's role as one of scrutinising power? How do Samoan or PNG reporters flag issues of national interest to their audiences and relate them to metropolitan corruption? Perhaps developmentalist thinking is easier to absorb and the 'watchdog' metaphor less congruous.

A watchdog media is meaningless unless audiences come along for the ride. Reaching audiences in a deeper sense is about meeting information needs and nurturing conversations within 'language communities' where participants are both informed and feel they belong.

Within this model, knowledge of say, 'national security' is not centralised within government agencies and drip fed to select media (divide-and-rule) but distributed, where media expertise enables channels for informed interactions. As these channels multiply and gain community traction over time, intangible networks of trust solidify within them. At this point, the media can offer a check and balance on executive power (deliberative democracy). In this scenario, 'security literacy' for all participants rises on the same tide.

Professional news reporting has the potential to be a 'journal of record' for readerships. Rather than being purely episodic and attention-grabbing, news reporting can over time become the 'first draft of history' – not just recording history but preserving an historical memory that can mobilise communities of interest that impact politics, including at election time.

The efficiencies of access to digitised content are driving changes to media business models. Well-managed and creative use, re-use and re-purposing of digital content is what gives media businesses their competitive edge. But journalists are only one group of players. The global tech platforms are way ahead in terms of data capture and its creative re-use. Their model is to capture and monetise user data, not preserve historical memory.

In PNG, the most important media organisation is the National Broadcasting Corporation, with its radio channels extending into all villages. And yet, after years of media aid and 'capacity building' NBC has no website and therefore, no means of capturing the rich storytelling of its citizens over time and making 'the national story' accessible online to new audiences, researchers, journalists and students.

Other forms of storytelling

Institutional media does not have a monopoly on storytelling. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the development space where NGOs have embraced 'digital storytelling'. Communication for Development (C4D) is now an academic field as well as a development practice. Media skills are harnessed not in the traditional journalistic mode of factual reporting but as explicit tools for educational advancement and empowerment. Creative production is based on participatory methods with a strong emphasis on visual storytelling. Behaviour change campaigns are both an information source for, and a content competitor with, mainstream news media.

Every development organisation beyond a certain size employs media staff and contracts communication consultants for specific projects. Their media products serve as public relations competing for eyeballs and funds. They can also become influential content in their own right beyond their stakeholder base. C4D initiatives coincide with and are driven by the democratisation of media; they contribute to the expansion of network technology through apps and are drivers of social change.

Examples from PNG in recent years are *Yumi Sanap Strong* www.yumisanapstrong.org and *Yumi Kirapim Senis* (Thomas et al. 2018). Their rich visual storytelling has led conversations around gender-based violence and community security with accessible content that can be re-purposed in various advocacy and educational contexts.

C4D products impact news media in the Pacific and elsewhere in three ways:

- the market for creative content, especially visual content, is exploding as it is for the skills required to create it;
- creative media opportunities (jobs) have expanded just as traditional media business models are collapsing under pressure of re-invention; and
- this pressure encourages innovation in media operations but Pacific newsrooms cannot invest to transform their systems like the *New York Times* can. Donor funds have rushed in to fill the gaps, sometimes successfully, but institutional decay haunts large nation-wide enterprises, old and new.

Media and security

Expanded notions of security are driven by island members pushing back against disempowering characterisations such as small, fragile and conflict-prone and promoting 'large ocean states' with stewardship over 'the Blue Pacific' (Tarte 2020:10).

ANU scholar Katerina Teaiwa goes further and identifies those responsible:

The Australian media, and certain activists, scholars, policymakers and leaders, often present Pacific nations as corrupt or conflict-prone 'failed states' whose instability is viewed in simplistic and often racialized terms … Knowledge of the region's historical and cultural contexts remains shallow (Teaiwa 2019:58).

But what about the Pacific media's ability and willingness to track these shifting contexts and educate audiences region-wide about 'the expanded concept of security' and the common threats expressed in the Boe Declaration? On climate change, the region's media has been successful in driving climate literacy and inter-island awareness around themes of 'existential threat' and 'climate emergency'.

Through powerful (mainly visual) storytelling, the Pacific media ecosystem, which includes its science communicators, has created social media friendly discourses that connect with like-minded youth networks in Australia and New Zealand. As Teaiwa puts it: '"vulnerable" does not mean "incapable"' (ibid:67). Or as the former president of Kiribati urges:

we have no choice but to engage even more aggressively internationally, because the key to our survival will depend on whether international action is taken on climate change or not (Tong 2015:24).

It is a well-nourished field from which Pacific politicians can credibly speak with moral authority about collective responsibility and in the same breath, criticise Australian domestic policies.

Case studies of reporting Pacific security

On 21 September 2017, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama addressed the UN General Assembly as the president of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP23). He had come a long way from running a military-led dictatorship for eight years and an elected government for three. 'It is clear that global warming changes our very understanding of what our national interests are', he told the assembly as the first ever Pacific island COP president. Referring to Fiji's long history of UN peacekeeping he added: 'For 40 years, we have helped to make the world more secure – and now we are determined to make a successful contribution to the wider security of the planet through our leadership of COP23' (Bainimarama 2017).

It was a media masterstroke: the leader of a small Pacific nation encapsulating the hard and soft edges of security into its narrative of global environmental stewardship.

Expelled from the peak regional body the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2009 (for not holding elections after its 2006 coup), Fiji established a rival body in 2013 – the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) – with funding which included that from the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). Fiji's leader launched Fiji's climate diplomacy through a vehicle that unlike the PIF, did not include Australia and New Zealand as members. The PIDF served Fiji's post-coup foreign policy interests but never won over PNG or Samoa. While it held no annual meetings in 2017 and 2018, the PIDF remained the primary medium for regional organisations to convey security perspectives.

Having won elections in 2014 and 2018, Bainimarama returned to the PIF meeting in September 2019 with enhanced standing and found a platform from which to pressure industrial nations in general, and Australia in particular. At last year's PIF gathering in Funafuti, Tuvalu, Fiji's rehabilitation was complete and its leader continued his regional activism making speeches that captured the media's attention. Addressing the Forum from which his nation had been evicted 10 years earlier, Bainimarama forged a pan-Pacific 'coalition of the vulnerable' against industrial nations (Bainimarama 2019).

Standing shoulder to shoulder, Fiji, Tuvalu and our Pacific Island neighbours intend to do everything humanly possible to get the world to take the decisive action needed to save low-lying atolls like Tuvalu from the rising sea levels and extreme weather events associated with climate change. … But if…that effort fails because the industrial nations continue to selfishly put their own interests above our own, Fiji will offer a home to you – the people of Tuvalu. We have made the same offer to your neighbours in Kiribati (ibid).

Such rhetoric spoke to small island grievances and fears and it niggled its 'big brother' member of the Pacific family at a time of intensifying geo-political competition – with the PRC in the main frame – it also made great media fodder. One scholar calls this a 'more assertive, independent and innovative diplomacy by Pacific island states' producing a 'different regional security narrative focused on climate change' (Tarte 2020:3).

Such were the mercurial workings of Pacific climate politics and its capture of public attention, frequently through media coverage over the last decade, that this shift in the story was formalised by PIF member states in 2018 in the Boe Declaration, which refers to 'an expanded concept of security' covering human security (aid, rights, health and prosperity), environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cybersecurity (PIF 2018).

Environmental reporting: Fiji

Seven months before Bainimarama's magnanimous Tuvalu statement on environmental refugees, a story broke on an online news site based in New Zealand. A hotel casino development in Fiji – the largest in the country – was accused of damaging the foreshore (fishing grounds) on Malolo Island in breach of numerous environmental laws. The Chinese developer is accused of donating to the government and receiving special treatment in return.

An environment lawyer accuses the company of breaching its own lease and damaging land and reef over which it has no development approval. He is also quoted saying that government agencies were informed the previous year and supplied with drone photography but took no action.

The developer, the story reports, ignored several stop-work notices, including from the High Court. The lawyer used media to push for accountability:

The Chinese development has not stopped. Nor has it been made to stop, which has raised serious questions about the Fijian government's effectiveness or enthusiasm to administer its own environmental laws (Reid 2019a).

In a follow-up report a day later, landowners are calling for the eviction of the Chinese and local workforce. The report's lead announces that the Office of Public Prosecutions would prosecute the developer. The environment minister revealed he referred the alleged damage to prosecutors several months earlier. An opposition parliamentarian states:

> Enforcement is weak and the villages suffer…All arms of government have been negligent here by not following through on enforcement. They should cancel the lease and get the company to rectify and pay damages (ibid).

By April, the same New Zealand reporting team were in Fiji investigating the same story but this time with a camera crew. The three-person crew were arrested. After being held overnight, the Fiji Government released them and went into damage control. 'Rogue officers', it said, were responsible for the arrests, following their release. As details filtered out about Fiji's bureaucratic inaction in the face of the Chinese company's impunity, the *Fiji Sun* ran a company press release under its own masthead defending the company and claiming it was investing in Fiji at the request of the Fiji Prime Minister (Maraia 2019).

By late February, not long after the story broke, the Prime Minister was telling tourism operators that investors damaging Fiji's environment would be banned. By April, the Malolo Island development approvals had been cancelled. The wheels of enforcement only started to turn after there had been widespread regional exposure.

Restrictions on Fijian media

Critically, it was a foreign news site that raised the alarm, not the local press. When we move from Pacific summitry to the grassroots, maybe large ocean states *are* vulnerable – including their media.

Fiji's media operate under the shadow of the Media Industry Development Decree and its implementing agency the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA).

> [T]hat media legislation is more restrictive than anything we've had in previous history. Prior to the 2006 coup, media freedom in Fiji was seen to be almost on par with countries like Australia and New Zealand. But the 2010 Media Decree changed all that … The main problem with the decree is the fines and jail terms stipulated for publishers and editors. The fines up to FJ$100,000 [A$66,000], I believe, and jail terms of up to two years and five years if you fall foul of the decree (Singh 2018).

Fiji's editors and reporters live in fear of the Media Industry Development Decree 2010 that had its origins in the suspension of constitutional government, public emergency regulations, and rule by military decree. Up until 2015, in addition to editors and publishers, the decree provided heavy fines and jail terms for individual reporters, an imposition removed following victory at the 2014 general elections.

Singh believes that various internal problems afflicting Melanesian media more generally magnify the impact of external government restrictions. Poor reporting and errors when they do occur are evidence of 'lack of capacity' but also a weak institutional position manifest in low status, low pay and high staff turnover. He says:

> downplaying the internal threats is counterproductive since they are a serious impediment to media freedom and media development in their own ways (Singh 2020:49).

When government attacks are launched or restrictive laws enacted, the media's position is further weakened, making it less likely to win audience support against these depredations. Most Fiji scholars and practitioners agree that punitive media laws including heavy fines and jail terms for editors and publishers are a recipe for a 'captured media' and self-censorship, not media industry development (Morris 2017:29).

Environmental reporting: Papua New Guinea

On 25 August 2020, PNG's *Post-Courier* published an editorial on a recent taskforce investigation into logging operations in Northern Province, asserting that 'companies who have no respect for the law of PNG and habitually breach them must be banned from operating in PNG' (*Post-Courier* 2020). It was referring to, among other things, the escape by aircraft of 16 foreign workers before the taskforce arrived at their camp. This must be, the newspaper guessed, 'the tip of the iceberg'.

'We must change the image of PNG as an easily penetrable nation that can be used, abused and exploited by greedy corporate entities' (ibid.). Strong words from PNG's leading daily. The violations sounded like a textbook case of non-traditional security threats: foreign workers illegally breaching PNG's border, unregistered vehicles found at the logging site, police hired by loggers to secure their sites, bribes and gifts given to metropolitan officials, habitual lawbreakers left untouched, resource security imperilled and so on.

But ironically, the substance of the editorial accusation could have been credibly made at any time during PNG's decades-long history of timber piracy. And as is so often the case in stories of Pacific resource plunder, none of these entities is named!

Similarly, Lasslett laments the lack of investigative weight carried by mainstream PNG news outlets to the point where he concludes in the case of yet another land grab:

> foreign citizens are better informed by their mainstream media about investigative research into improper or illegal commercial transactions in Papua New Guinea, than Papua New Guinea citizens (Lasslett 2015).

National court judgements, commission of inquiries, public accounts committee reports, auditor general reports, and published research is literally teeming with information on corruption, illegal resource theft, police misconduct and human rights abuses. And names are named! Senior politicians, civil servants, business leaders and major corporate brands are all explicitly cited (op.cit.).

It's one thing to access official documents but another to hold officials to account for them. Lasslett (ibid)

acknowledges this when he concludes: 'the institutional structures are simply not in place to support professionals who want to engage in investigate reporting that scrutinise the dealings of the powerful'.

The origins of impunity are not in the formal structures but in the actual interactions between elected officials, the bureaucracy and journalists. Long-time former ABC correspondent in PNG, Sean Dorney provides a telling example. He recounts efforts by a news reporter from the state broadcaster NBC to discover how a Chinese consortium acquired a site in Port Moresby from PNG Telecom for their $414m Chinatown project.

The reporter was passed from the Lands Minister to the foreign investor to the governor and on to the state vendor. And so it went on. How much did the consortium pay? No answers there (Dorney 2019:79–80). This form of stonewalling of journalists is routine across the Pacific. It occurs elsewhere too but the editorial effort to get to the bottom of it is premised on the journalist's persistent belief in the underlying news value of the story. But this belief is insufficient. They must be backed by their editors. Such efforts outside the Pacific islands are commonly better resourced and promoted and therefore, have more impact.

Moving towards a new media paradigm

Pacific journalists are as capable as any of producing impactful reporting on Pacific security.

But reporting the region's crowded and complicated security landscape does not occur in an institutional vacuum. National security reporters must track their countries' engagements on the regional and global stage so that their citizen audiences can make an informed judgment on how well their leaders are safeguarding the national interest. They must interpret their region with sufficient insight to tell credible stories of their nation's unique place in it.

Regional literacy

The Pacific project at the Guardian Australia is funded by the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas (https://jninstitute.org/project/pacific-editor/). Judging by the quality of the published articles, it appears to be a genuine and practical effort to address regional illiteracy among reporters and audiences alike. The collaborative model of funding Pacific reporters on the ground to write long-form journalism for a different readership is admirable – if it can be sustained and extended. There are numerous shining examples of creative long-form journalism that are transnational, of which The Panama Papers is only the best known.

They expose and name international actors and networks that undermine national sovereignty, retard genuine development, steal national wealth and create victims. Such journalistic push back has been a reaction to national repression against independent media (Benequista 2019). It also makes sense that media professionals collaborate across borders when trade, finance, capital, labour and crime are all transnational.

Regulating social media

Professionalism alone will not protect journalists and their risk-averse business managers from targeted attacks and online influencers and their shadowy proxies. Considerable resources are arrayed against independent media whose core business is to focus audience attention on factual verification while telling a story.

These were spelt out last year at a Melanesia Media Freedom Forum (MMFF) in Brisbane where delegates expressed concern at the increasing range of threats aimed at journalists. These threats, they declared in their final statement, were undermining the accountability role played by journalists in Melanesian democracies (MMFF 2019)

Conventional journalistic methods can be overwhelmed by the emotional bluster of the social media pile-on. So often promoted as free speech, these viral moments produce the opposite – what I called 'crowd-sourced censorship'.

Worldwide governments seek to rein in social media often to clamp down on harmful abuses and sometimes to sandbag against unrestrained criticism. The social media ecology has become more complicated since mainstream platforms have been implicated in fake news, data theft and influence operations against democratic states.

The Pacific has its own ecology with governments routinely threatening legislative measures, which just as regularly, are countered with libertarian objections. MMFF has led the objections. But significantly, last year's forum declaration on social media was about literacy:

> The media is ready to work with all parties that want to improve the social media landscape: There is an urgent need for the media to assert its role as a source of accurate and impartial information and to play a role in building social media literacy and public understanding of how to identify credible sources of information.

The statement sounds like a plea by media houses to its audiences to confront the social media scourge together. Rising media literacy will, the Forum hopes, make media consumers more discerning and more wary of the dangers of online content that manipulates, inflames and hijacks legitimate news narratives in ways that ultimately limit the online dialogue around issues that matter.

On the other hand, Vanuatu's *Yumi Toktok Stret* Facebook group has been successful at driving conversations that hold leaders to account at election time. While not immune from criticism, it has avoided the polarisation and pile-ons that afflict so much online discourse. This has been possible because key officials have embraced the medium and invited democratic scrutiny.

Elsewhere, in Fiji, institutional media have co-existed with the often anonymous postings and leaks on social media. According to Singh, social media has become a source and cover for media outlets to publish claims that are already circulating in social media channels.

Governments have responded with social media regulation such as in Fiji, where the Online Safety Act 2018 targets dangerous online behaviour. Singh acknowledges a degree of public support for the legislation but fears

such laws can also ensnare reporters to the point where 'government is now killing two birds with one stone' (Singh 2018; Tarai 2019).

On another level, social media bloggers who follow no other ethical code than their own compete with the more deliberative journalism of the major mastheads. This can lead journalists down a slippery slope as they try to keep up with what the public are fixated on at any given moment. Along with the pressure to feed the 24-hour news cycle, social media can have the effect of degrading professional ethical standards (Tarai and Drugunalevu 2018:5).

Social media regulation is a global fact of life and will become more so. Increasingly, national security legislation encompasses cyberspace and the information warfare waged within it. National security threats are being viewed through the prism of cybersecurity. This has placed greater demands on journalists to probe what is by its nature hidden, hostile and hyper-partisan. For the profession, journalists require new precautionary skills to protect themselves and their sources (Benton 2019).

The price of media freedom

The Boe Declaration on Regional Security is a recognition of shared security threats and by implication, the need for coordinated strategies to meet them. To extend this logic further:

> countering these security threats expressed in non-traditional terms rely on informed and vigilant publics. The national media sectors with their networks down to almost every town and village are well suited to surveilling the security landscape and warning of impending threats to life, livelihood and living conditions.

So critical to the quality and timing of information is a culture of information sharing between journalists and government officials. But it appears that the spirit and purpose of Boe does not translate well to the bureaucratic cultures of individual member states. The stonewalling and hostility by Pacific government officials referred to above is a symptom of the dysfunction between two different professional cultures. Last November, the Melanesia Media Freedom Forum complained:

> The unwillingness of politicians and officials to engage in dialogue is undermining the media's accountability role: public figures are becoming more resistant to responding to direct questions from media, choosing instead to issue media releases, or statements on social media or to preferred media outlets (MMFF 2019).

Hard conversations need to be had about the need for both sides to understand and respect each others' role. More functional interactions will lead to unblocking information flow in ways that serve the broader national interest. According to Ben Bohane, Communications Director at the ANU's Australia Pacific Security College:

> The only way to do it is to have government and media at the table working out the rules of the game to avoid this us-and-them mentality. We need to also remind government officials that the freedoms that are enshrined in their constitutions transcend individual leaders.

Security and geography

In the north Pacific, the critical flow of information between reporters and officials appears to be no more functional. Last August, Palauans were kept in the dark about the timing of a visit by US Defence Secretary Mark Esper (Kesolei 2020). The Republic of Palau, which has a compact agreement with the United States, is currently reviewing the agreement with its long-time underwriter, as are its Micronesian neighbours Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Current compact funding arrangements will end for RMI and FSM in 2023 and for Palau in 2024 (Firth 2010).

The importance of these negotiations to the security of Micronesian peoples well into the future is obvious but the mere presence of such a high-level political actor in their region will always test the analytical skills of local reporters. Their written accounts are disadvantaged as long as they are unable to frame their own news agendas. Like an episode of Survivor, the location is a mere backdrop to a scripted message delivered to the world with the locals out of frame.

Three hours after touchdown, the Defence Secretary was gone again with a minimalist 143-word Department of Defence statement released in his wake. No wonder the dominant story that spread globally was the letter to Esper from the Palauan president urging the US to set up military facilities on the islands (Carreon and Doherty 2020).

The release of the letter played cleverly to different audiences and showed a Pacific statesman well versed in the 'new Pacific diplomacy', combining traditional defence and non-traditional economic security agendas to amplify Palau's strategic value as a large ocean state not to be ignored by great-power competitors in the north Pacific.

Equally adept has been the joint call by the leaders of Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, RMI and FSM to threaten withdrawal from the PIF if their Micronesian nominee for the next Secretary-General is not installed, according to an arrangement to rotate the position between the three PIF sub-regions (Carreon 2020).

Over in Guam, Mar-Vic Cagurangan publishes *Pacific Island Times,* an online magazine that covers Guam, the Northern Marianas and Palau. She manages a team of about 12 freelance writers who have access to local officials. However, even though Guam is a trust territory of the US, they cannot approach official sources based on the US mainland:

> The Joint Region Marianas is our direct contact to the military. We can ask them questions. If we get a response, we're going to get a one-line or two-line response. But otherwise, it's not as accessible as we hope them to be. The inaccessible sources [are] the national officials, national agencies. We do not have the same access to national sources in the same way our counterparts in the mainland do.

In Palau, the information culture of government is more open but the journalistic culture underdeveloped to the point where, according to Palau-based correspondent and chair of media advocacy group Pacific Freedom Forum, Bernadette

Carreon, 'they are not well informed yet to ask questions. That's the tricky part here, confidence'. Professional interactions do not allow for reporters to build trust with their government sources. On the contrary, she says, 'Most of the time they scrutinise the media.'

Both women by necessity are generalists in what they report 'from politics to police'. This leaves few openings for developing specialist reporters in say, national security, diplomacy, or foreign affairs at a time when specialist knowledge and experience is most required. For the young reporters that Cagurangan supervises:

> [security is] kind of a strange concept for them since they're new to this field. If they have an understanding at all of security issues, it's very thin, not enough information for them to write a story that is as informative as it should be.

Large ocean media

Organised civil society has influenced how the new Pacific diplomacy frames regional interests – from ocean management, trade policy to what rights need protecting. But non-traditional threats compel us to recognise the media as civil society embedded in the fibre of an evolving Pacific regionalism. Protecting the oceans of the 'Blue Pacific' depends in part on staunching the flow of information pollution washing over the islands. A 'Blue Pacific' without these soft defences is as vulnerable as a small island unable to monitor and protect its vast marine habitat.

With expanded concepts of security, we need an expanded role for media. And within the chaotic attention economy, there are opportunities for Pacific journalists to survey their rich and nuanced security landscape and expand their storytelling for a more integrated region, consolidating information markets by multiplying consensus-style dialogues underwritten by principles of free expression.

This requires a confidence on their part to re-frame and re-package their own unique accounts and promote them through regional (and international) media markets. Media capacity building in the Pacific is nothing new but the speed and complexity of evolving security agendas will require a new way of telling to cut through the crowded and noisy transborder mediascape.

This dynamic landscape has the potential to profoundly impact Pacific identities, forge new cross border alliances and lead to new demographic patterns for island cultures. Pacific journalists have a critical role in explaining these changes to their publics in ways that harmonise with local conceptions of security.

Note

1   Due to publication dates, this journal does not include two very significant events that occurred in the Pacific on February 5, 2021. These were the Micronesian countries leaving the Pacific Island Forum and the unexplained deportation from Fiji of the Vice Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific.

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