

Freedom of speech in the Pacific: Don't shoot the messenger

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Abstract

Customary obligations and pressures are frequently a burden on journalists in the South Pacific. Such obstacles create difficulties for many journalists. The early stages of the reporting of George Speight's attempted coup in Fiji during May 2000 posed ethical and cultural issues about independence and impartiality. Such issues and reporting conflict pose dilemmas for journalism education and training in the region. Often it takes raw courage to be a neophyte journalist in the Pacific. This article argues that a more pressing problem than government pressures in the Pacific is often self-censorship and manipulation of the media by a small clique.

Two years ago masked Fijian gunmen seized a consignment of books from the US bound for the University of the South Pacific journalism program in Suva. The small cardboard box was stashed in a courier mail van hijacked by coup front man George Speight's supporters hoping to find hard cash. Two months later the carton was recovered by police from the ransacked parliament and handed over to me; torn open but intact. Ironically, inside were six copies of Betty Medsger's *Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education*. This was a poignant reminder of the realities facing Pacific media. Politics in the region are increasingly being determined by terrorism, particularly in Melanesia; such as in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. And with this development comes a greater demand on the region's media and journalists for more training and professionalism. Most journalists are young, relatively inexperienced and lowly paid.

Since Speight's illegal seizure of Parliament on 19 May, 2000, politics in Fiji has remained under the spectre of terrorism. While the Speight upheaval cost a relatively modest fifteen lives--all Fijian--the fear of it happening again, and next time being even bloodier, is still a concern today.

Fiji politics are still driven by fear and a continuing threat to reinvoke terrorism if governments do not pursue a narrow particular direction, defined as ensuring "indigenous paramountcy". Deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour Party leader, has taken a principled stand over the Constitution and a multicultural future.

Independent Sydney journalist, Ben Bohane, who recently became editor of the new regional newspaper *Pacific Weekly Review*, remarked in an article questioning the loyalty of the military to the Constitution on the eve of the election and a court-martial:

Some weeks ago Chaudhry said that if he returned to power he would "purge" the army of any rebels within its ranks. In such a confrontational atmosphere, the fruits of reconciliation seem some way off yet and there is real apprehension about the election outcome.

As the army band trooped off the parade ground with all the pomp of a colonial era brass band in full swing, many of those watching hope it can keep playing the old anthems, rather than the Last Post for any more soldiers killed by their own (Bohane, 2001, p. 72).

Bohane, of course, was referring to the special forces killed when a mutiny on 2 November, 2000, was ruthlessly crushed by the military, including the alleged beating to death of five rebels taken prisoner. This was an extraordinarily sinister outcome given the proud reputation the Fiji military has enjoyed internationally as a peacemaker force.

Fiji is already a country prone to having coups (three so far) and risks becoming consigned to a fate of economic, political, and legal instability; a "banana republic". Respect for the law is rapidly diminishing.

Although Speight was eventually condemned to death for treason, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment within five hours by the Prerogative of Mercy Commission. But few believe he will serve more than a token symbolic period in "prison"; he is detained on the tropical isle of Nukulau off Suva, a former haven for local picnickers. Ten of his co-conspirators pleaded guilty to lesser charges and were given minor jail sentences (none will serve more than three years), while two--leading

journalist Jo Nata and chiefly politician Ratu Timoci Silatolu--have denied the treason charges and at the time of writing await trial.

The role of Nata--"I was just a public relations consultant"--is at the centre of crucial issues in Fiji over journalism ethics, integrity, and independence (Nata, 2002). Nata, one of Fiji's first journalism graduates (at an Australian university), was formerly coordinator of the Fiji Journalism Institute, a training centre established by media industry people that eventually closed under a cloud about accountability over donor agency funding. Another Fijian journalist, Margaret Wise, who is currently chief-of-staff of *The Fiji Times*, has also recently been at the centre of debate over ethics and her paternity action against former coup leader and prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

When a prominent Indo-Fijian lawyer, feminist activist and onetime *Fiji Times* columnist, Imrana Jalal, spoke out at a public seminar on the future of Fiji after the polarised election on strategies to break the coup cycle, she talked of a need for anti-coup provisions in the constitution. But she also called for visionary younger leaders for a new Fiji who were not locked into the communal thinking, and she urged Indo-Fijians to change more than indigenous Fijians, saying "multiracial schools are one key (not the only key) to multiracialism and integration. Communalism and ethnic divisions bring about the Bosnias of the world". Fijian should be compulsory in schools and with Hindi as an optional subject (Jalal, 2001, p. 28).

Some of her suggestions were perhaps worth closer consideration. However, other Indo-Fijian community leaders and politicians on radio and in the newspapers attacked her in vitriolic terms over the next few days. In one typical letter to the editor she was accused of "blaming the victim". The writer went on to say:

She belongs to a class and circulates in a social circle that insulates her from the dehumanising experience of ordinary Indo-Fijians every time racism raises its ugly head in Fiji; and that is fairly frequently in recent times in case she hasn't noticed (Devi, 2001, p. 6).

The Fiji Times sprang to her defence. In an editorial, Imrana Jalal was described as a "welcome yet lonely voice in the wilderness of race relations" (September 22, 2001). The newspaper described the attacks on her as a pitiful indictment of her own community leaders and quite rightly pointed out that she had also called on the indigenous community to be more understanding of the views and needs of others.

However, the editorial headline 'Don't shoot the messenger' highlighted the hypocrisy over a paper only ten months earlier that I had presented at the annual Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference in Mooloolaba, Queensland, in which I was critical of some of the reporting of Speight's coup. In the paper, titled "Coup coup land: The press and the putsch in Fiji," I also questioned the role of some elements of the media in the coverage of the year of the Labour-led People's Coalition government leading up to the coup, arguing that this was a factor in the climate of destabilisation climaxing with Speight and his military henchman storming Parliament (Robie, 2000).

I believe my paper made a very compelling case about issues of ethics, fairness, and balance in reporting conflict in the Pacific and should have been debated. Instead, there was a howl of outrage by the very media executives who claim to be champions of a free press in the Pacific, particularly the Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times* and the Pacific Islands News Association.

Clumsy attempts were made to gag me, or at least deflect public opinion. Nasty and abusive attacks were made against me on Commonwealth media email listservers (including JEAnet), and an editorial deputation went from *The Fiji Times* newspaper to my university in a bullying and futile attempt to have me ousted. The state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation reporters also denied an opportunity for the president of the Association of USP Staff, Dr Biman Prasad to set the record straight. Biman wanted to be interviewed to tell of the university staff support for me and explain the international principles of academic freedom.

In spite of the hot air about governments pressuring the media in Pacific countries--although this does happen all too frequently--I believe a greater threat to press freedom comes from a small clique of media veterans, many of whom are of palagi origin, who have disproportionate influence, and who routinely practise self-censorship and manipulative control. On three separate occasions, unsuccessful attempts were made by supporters of this group to manipulate Fiji authorities into denying or revoking my work permit. Another journalism educator, Ingrid Leary, who is also a qualified a lawyer was also a target over her work permit (see Manukia, 1998, p. 5; Robie, 1999, pp. 112-120).

As award-winning documentary maker Senator 'Atu Emberson-Bain said after Fiji Television refused to show her excellent documentary, *In the Name of Growth*, exposing the appalling exploitation of indigenous women workers by an indigenous owned Pafco (Pacific Fishing Company) tuna canning plant on Ovalau Island:

So much for the free (television) media in this country--the debate always focuses on freedom from government interference. What about freedom from the big (private sector) boys on the block with their vested interests? (A. Emberson-Bain, personal communication, September 26, 2001)

While Fiji TV turned down 'Atu's programme on spurious grounds, SBS TV broadcast it in Australia and bought exclusive broadcast rights for four years. It was also nominated in the best documentary category at the 21st Annual Hawai'i International Film Festival.

After more than two and a half decades reporting and teaching journalism in the region, at times involving controversy, I have never actually been barred from any Pacific country, although this happened to me as a journalist with two African nations in the early 1970s; Zaire and apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, I was twice arrested in New Caledonia during 1987 by French military forces, once at gunpoint near the east coast village of Canala. At the time I was covering the militarisation of indigenous Kanak villages in an attempt to suppress the struggle for independence. One of the problems was my book on the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing, *Eyes of Fire*, which was not popular with French colonial authorities (see Robie, 1986).

But the real obstacle to Pacific media freedom that I have encountered as a journalist and educator is organisational attempts to censor or gag. One unfortunate example of this was during the Fiji crisis in May 2000. Our *Pacific Journalism Online* training website was closed temporarily for 30 days without warning, and initially without explanation, by university authorities on May 29 (see Robie, 2001, pp. 47-56). This happened the day after a mob of Speight's supporters attacked Fiji Television studios and put the station off air for two days.

The final story posted on our website <<http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/>> before we were suddenly pulled offline was a transcript of a controversial Fiji TV *Close-Up* programme discussing Speight and the media coverage of the crisis at that point. Political columnist and researcher Jone Dakuvula remarked:

George Speight is a two-day wonder who has just decided to champion indigenous rights for his own personal reasons in a matter of two days ... he has no real track record of fighting for indigenous rights (Ofotalau, 2001, p. 43).

Two days later, the then Vice-Chancellor, Esekia Solofa, said in a media conference with our student reporters that the decision was made for "security reasons", but added the shut-down would be temporary. When I finally did get a meeting with university administrators to discuss reopening the website, they were more interested in censoring our newspaper, *Wansolwara*, which had just gone to press. But the University of Technology, Sydney, came to our rescue by hosting a website for our journalism students' Fiji coverage on their homepage (www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html). This continued until August.

Several international media freedom organisations and other journalism schools protested to the USP administration over our closure, with Associate Professor Chris Nash at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism saying:

The suggestion that journalism staff and students, and indeed any academics, might somehow desist from reporting, commenting and publishing on the current situation is akin to suggesting that doctors and nurses should turn their backs on wounded people in a conflict. It's unconscionable (C. Nash, personal communication, June 13, 2000).

However, my efforts at restoring the website and defending the student journalists' right to carry on their coverage of the coup were not popular with the administration. I received a letter from Vice-Chancellor Solofa, saying:

The [Journalism] Programme "publications"--*Wansolwara* and the website [*Pacific Journalism Online*]-can be justified on one purpose only: to support a training function. That is, they provide a trial medium for practical skills training and for simulation work. They should not be regarded as a media outlet for students (E. Solofa, personal communication, June 22, 2000).

Covering the Fiji coup and the three months of intensive trauma that followed has been the toughest call faced by the eight-year-old USP journalism program and me personally (Gounder, 2001). But the

delightful irony is that although we were chastised by our own senior administration for doing real instead of "simulated" journalism, Australian media judges awarded us the Dr Charles Stuart Prize at the JEA's Ossie Awards 2000 for our coup coverage. To be fair, I don't believe USP's current Vice-Chancellor, Savenaca Siwatibau, would have ever closed us. He is an enthusiastic supporter of journalism education and believes it has an important role to play in Pacific good governance.

The Fiji crisis highlighted many dilemmas about culture and conflict. Customary obligations can be a burden on journalists. "Under pressure they can succumb to the demands of traditional loyalties," said former *Fiji Daily Post* editor Jale Moala (2001, p. 127). He wrote about the putsch in my book *The Pacific Journalist*:

The problem that arose here was not so much one of reporters taking sides, as it may have seemed at the time, but the inability of many reporters to function objectively under the pressures of the crisis. A lack of leadership in newsrooms was one reason.

One media organisation that came under early criticism was the state-owned Radio Fiji, which seemed to suffer from a combination of confusion over who was in power or who was going to end up in power, and lack of newsroom discipline and leadership, especially in the first two days of the hostage crisis (*ibid.*).

According to Agence France-Presse correspondent Michael Field--who has had the biggest share of bannings of any journalist in the Pacific, having being shut out of Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and even Fiji at one stage--the region is going through something of an unprecedented crackdown against journalists. For one of the most travelled and most aware journalists to be arbitrarily banned like this is an indictment of many of the region's politicians. Journalists with long-standing experience and commitment to the Pacific should be encouraged not gagged.

Student journalists have also faced victimisation over their reporting. After publication of one edition of *Wansolwara*, one of our Samoan journalists, Vicky Lepou, was subjected to a nasty whispering campaign because of her front page lead story about a joint Samoa and New Zealand probe into a sudden high failure rate among first year students at USP (Lepou, 2001, p. 1). Among reasons cited were uncertainty in the wake of Speight's attempted coup. But some Samoan students targetted the reporter for having written the report, and the Samoan students' association patron denounced publication of the story. During the coup a gunman roughed up one of the *Wansolwara* trainee journalists. Ironically, the reporter was a police inspector when he was off campus.

The "shooting the messenger" syndrome always had more serious consequences in Papua New Guinea. Two University of PNG student journalists, reporters of the training newspaper *Uni Tavor*, gave testimony last year before a commission of inquiry examining the causes of the shooting to death of four young Papua New Guineans during the protests over structural adjustment (Wakus, 2001, p. 127-128).

While I was at UPNG, the chief-of-staff, Kevin Pamba, and political reporter Jameson Bere of *Uni Tavor*, were beaten up one night because of their front page report on a political dispute between two national student leaders, both from the province of Enga. (Kevin is now a journalism lecturer in the Communication Arts Department at Divine Word University). On another occasion, drunken off-duty officers attacked a group of *Uni Tavor* students and me inside a police barracks. One student journalist was forced to go into hiding after he reported a funding scandal involving the then Miss UPNG. The beauty queen's wantoks led an angry protest on the newspaper office trying to track down the reporter. They posted threatening "wanted" signs around campus.

Rarely do Australian or New Zealand journalism schools encounter this degree of "direct action" over stories. For many Pacific Islands neophyte journalists, it is a baptism of fire. Not only does truth hurt, it can sometimes lead to a brutal act of retribution. It often takes raw courage to be a journalist in the Pacific.

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