

CYBERSPACE DEMOCRACY: FREEDOM OF SPEECH DILEMMAS IN PACIFIC JOURNALISM EDUCATION

A case study of Pacific Journalism Online and Wansolwara

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Student journalists Laufa Eli (Samoa, left) and Noora Ali (Maldives) with Fiji putsch leader George Speight in May 2000. Pacific Journalism Online (USP)

Abstract: University journalism schools have been at the forefront of free expression and media debates in the South Pacific region for the past two decades. But as civil and ethnic conflict have worsened in the region in the past ten years, particularly in the western Melanesian states, free speech and free media have become more than rhetorical issues. A growing schism has developed between notions of a homogenous regional “free media” as championed by some industry voices sheltering under the umbrella of donor funding and cultural traditions, and a “critical media studies” and “academic freedom” as advocated by the journalism schools. In some cases, media industry leaders have sided with institutional attempts to silence debate, including the temporary closure of the University of the South Pacific’s journalism training website *Pacific Journalism Online* in the wake of the George Speight attempted coup in May 2000. This paper examines the dilemmas faced by the region’s journalism educators in balancing critical media “reality” with “simulation” strategies.

Introduction

University journalism schools have been at the forefront of free expression and media debates in the South Pacific for the past two decades. But as civil and ethnic conflict have worsened in the region in the past ten years, particularly in the western Melanesian states, free speech and free media have become more than rhetorical issues. A growing schism has developed between notions of a homogenous regional “free media” as championed by some industry voices sheltering under the umbrella of donor funding and cultural traditions, and a “critical media studies” and “academic freedom” as advocated by the journalism schools. In some cases, media industry leaders have sided with institutional attempts to silence debate, including the temporary closure of the University of the South Pacific’s journalism training website *Pacific Journalism Online* in the wake of the George Speight attempted coup in May 2000. This paper examines the dilemmas faced by the region’s journalism educators in balancing critical media “reality” with “simulation” strategies.

Three South Pacific universities have offered tertiary level journalism including training publications for varying periods over the past three decades: University of Papua New Guinea (course founded in 1975 at the state-run secular national university, publisher of *Uni Tavour*), Divine Word University (a 1982 course set up at a private Catholic tertiary institution in Madang, publisher of *Liklik Diwai*), and the University of the South Pacific (a 1994 course founded at the 12-nation regional secular university, publisher of *Pacific Journalism Online*, *Wansolwara* and *Spicol Daily*) (see Robie, 2000a). The nature of the publications and experience with university, media and political authorities has varied. For example, the oldest of the papers, *Uni Tavour*, has been characterised by fiercely independent reporting on university affairs, national and regional political and social issues, and the student community (see Robie, 1995; 1997). It has been independent of the student body and was a competitor to the weekly publication, *The University This Week*, published by the administration’s public relations office. *Liklik Diwai*, while a training publication, has also filled the role of a university newsletter for DWU (see Weber, 2001). *Wansolwara* was founded in 1996 by the USP students themselves and sought independence from both the USP Students’ Association publication, *The Voice*, and the university’s own official newsletter, *USP Beat*. Journalism courses have also been established at the Samoa Polytechnic (2001) and at the Fiji Institute of Technology (due to commence in early 2003) but they do not have training newspapers.

Few South Pacific newspapers have large staff and many journalists are relatively untrained. Starting salaries are low in many Pacific news organisations — in Fiji, for example, a journalist can be paid as low as F\$6000 a year, less than half the starting salary of a secondary schoolteacher with a degree (Robie, 2001a: 151; Yaya, 2002: 13). Often there is little money and resources for training of Pacific islands journalists in the work place and media organisations have a high dependency on foreign aid donors, such as Ausaid, to run short courses. Papua New Guinea has the highest proportion of formally trained and educated journalists in the region. According to a 1998-99 survey of newsrooms in the two major Pacific media countries, Fiji and PNG, 73 percent of PNG

journalists were found to have tertiary degrees or diplomas, while only 14 percent of journalists in Fiji had comparable qualifications (*see* Robie, 1999).

While constitutions usually guarantee media freedom and freedom of speech in Pacific countries, on paper at least, media freedom for campus newspapers has been less certain. In fact, the issue has been severely tested in the region and seemingly is a right that still needs to be defended. The apparent conflicts of interest in journalism training newspapers have increasingly become an issue in the United States. In 1998, American student newspaper adviser Garret L Boatman became a test case himself after having previously kept an eye on any legal case that threatened the rights of the college press. After eleven years at Essex County College, New Jersey, he was told his position as associate director of student life and activities had been eliminated as part of a restructuring of the student affairs office. But the real reason he lost his job, he believes, was his refusal to play a part in "editing" (effectively self-censoring) the student paper, *ECCO*.

Mr Boatman is one of several student newspaper advisers across the country who say they have been forced out of their jobs unfairly. In response to the growing number of complaints, the College Media Advisers, an organisation of faculty and staff members who work with campus newspapers, yearbooks and magazines, has set up a committee of advocates to assist its members (Reisberg, 1998).

A member of the group's advocacy committee, David L Knott, adviser to Ball State University's student newspaper, blamed the growing problem on the corporate image emphasis of many universities: "If a [student] newspaper published things that are considered negative and unhelpful, one of the easiest things to do is to get rid of the adviser." Boatman's clash with his university authorities was not over crusading journalism, but about typographical and other errors. In another case, Barbara Lach-Smith, former adviser of the *Muleskinner* at Central Missouri State University, in July 2002 settled out of court over a writ she had filed against the institution for failure to renew her contract in response to stories in the campus newspaper. The news reports apparently exposed unusual provisions in the contract of the outgoing president, or vice-chancellor. (Student Press Law Centre, 2002a). *The Oracle*, a 35-year-old student newspaper at the University of South Florida, is giving up its student-fee funding in an effort to distance itself from the student government (Student Press Law Centre, 2002b).

In many cases at universities in the United States, student journalism advisers "complain administrators are punishing them for allowing the newspaper to publish investigative stories or strong editorials that paint the college in a bad light" (Reisberg). The advisers say it is often easier for administrators to get away with that kind of retaliation than to seize copies of newspapers or actually reprimand student journalists.

In the Pacific, there has long been a tradition of vigorous debate, uncompromising stories, investigations and outspoken editorials at the trail-blazing *Uni Tavur*. The paper won the Journalism Education Association's Ossie Award for best publication in 1995. However, while *Uni Tavur* established its reputation with stories about national politics, independence struggles and controversies over UPNG administration and education policies, *Wansolwara* reporters cut their teeth on investigations of corruption by student

leaderships. During the past five years, the USP Journalism Programme has faced relentless political pressure and opposition by some of the media establishment who felt threatened by student and staff achievements.

Media skirmishes with the USP campus

In November 1997, the USP Journalism Programme sailed into a storm when the author was appointed journalism coordinator to succeed François Turmel, a former BBC French language journalist. Turmel himself, who was founding coordinator from 1994 during an initial four-year period of French Government aid, had also faced some opposition (Craddock, 2000). Now there was stronger opposition to the author's appointment from the University of Papua New Guinea by a small group of journalists lobbying in support of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) secretariat in Suva, which was opposed to him joining USP. A campaign began along with a series of unsigned articles purporting to be “news stories” planted by PINA officials in the *Daily Post*. The editor at the time was Laisa Taga, a former treasurer of PINA and the confidante of *Islands Business* editor-in-chief Peter Lomas. The main objections to the author were apparently that he had been a critic of then Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka in his 1989 book *Blood on their Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific*, he had been involved with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) efforts to support the establishment of journalist unions in the Pacific; he had been an outspoken critic of PINA on past occasions; and was an expatriate New Zealander, not a Pacific Islander. This particular coterie was also apparently insecure over a likelihood that the USP Journalism Programme might rival PINA's UNESCO Pacific Journalism Development Centre with both an independent public perspective on the profession and practice of journalism in the Pacific, and as a perceived competitor for international donor funding.

Several people publicly protested at the smear campaign in the *Daily Post*. Among them was Josefa Nata, a graduate from the University of Technology, Sydney, who was then coordinator of the Fiji Journalism Institute. He wrote a complaint to the Fiji News Council appealing for an inquiry into the “insidious manner in which the [PINA] campaigners ... are advocating against freedom of expression in Fiji” (Nata, 1997).

While Fiji News Council chairperson Daryl Tarte conceded that the articles were “slanted”, he declined to accept Nata's complaint for council adjudication (Tarte, 1998). However, after taking up his position as the new journalism coordinator at USP in March 1998, the author did file a letter of complaint to the Fiji News Council. Although the council avoided taking the complaint to the full Complaints Committee, where an adjudication would have been required, after mediation the new *Daily Post* editor, Jale Moala, published a public apology seven months later. He also privately admitted to the author that the newspaper should never have published the articles. But his predecessor, Laisa Taga, was never asked to account for the lack of ethics in her actions.

Journalism students petitioned the Fiji Government in support of the appointment of both Ingrid Leary, another New Zealand lecturer who had been news director at Fiji Television and who had an honours law degree as well as a journalism diploma, and the author. Ironically, the programme had doubled in size with the appointment of the two new staff

— 32 new enrolments for 1998. The suspense over the future of the programme was captured in a Fiji *Sunday Times* article by Earnest Heatley two weeks after the start of the semester:

Both [David Robie and Ingrid Leary] are still awaiting the Fiji Immigration Department's verdict, which might even cripple the newly formed [journalism] department, just into the first semester and trying to gather momentum.

USP journalism students aired their grievances this week on the issue, presenting a petition to the Prime Minister's Office, requesting Mr Robie and Ms Leary be granted work permits (Heatley, 1998).

Heatley also highlighted the smear campaign (1998b). Once the work permit issue was resolved (at least for the time being), Ingrid Leary and the author set about consolidating the Journalism Programme and laying the foundations for its future development. The second semester course Introduction to Journalism II was redesigned as a dedicated Media Law and Ethics course. Six-week fulltime professional attachments with news media organisations were also introduced for the first time in Fiji with a redesigned final semester Journalism Production course. By the end of 1997, before the arrival of the new staff, the programme had produced six graduates. Over the next four years it turned out a further forty nine graduates for the region, eight of them with a new industry based Diploma in Pacific Journalism with ten course credits (*See Tables 1 and 2*). But the opponents of the programme remained in the background, biding their time, and three further political controversies blew up over journalism education in the next three years.

Table 1: Journalism graduates at USP by qualification and year (*programme founded in 1994*)

Year	BA* (1994)	DPJ* (1997)	GDPMS§ (2000)	Masters§ (2000)
1994	—	—	—	—
1995	—	—	—	—
1996	3	—	—	—
1997	3	—	—	—
1998	11	2	—	—
1999	6	3	—	—
2000	14	1	—	—
2001	10	2	—	—
Total	47	8	—	—

* The original BA with a double major including journalism (20 course credits) was introduced in 1994 with the first three graduates in 1996.

** In 1997, the programme introduced a two-year Diploma in Pacific Journalism with 10 course credits for the benefit of working journalists.

§ In 2000, Postgraduate Diploma In Pacific Media Studies and Masters in Pacific Media Studies programmes were introduced, but they were hindered by the George Speight-led attempted coup and a staff shortage.

Table 2: BA, certificate and diploma journalism graduates at USP by qualification and country

Country	BA* (1994)	DPJ * (1997)	GDPMS§ (2000)	Masters§ (2000)
Fiji	33	5	—	—
FSM	2	—	—	—
PNG	—	1	—	—
Samoa	4	—	—	—
Solomon Is	3	—	—	—
Tahiti	1	—	—	—
Tonga	—	1	—	—
USA	—	1	—	—
Vanuatu	4	—	—	—
Total	47	8	—	—

The rapid developments in the Journalism Programme, and also the problems and political sensitivities faced, were acknowledged in an external review of the Department of Literature and Language in 1998/9 by Professor Andrew Pawley of the Australian National University. He noted:

The Journalism Programme was in crisis in 1997 ... With the arrival early in 1998 of two experienced and accomplished journalists, David Robie (coordinator) and Ingrid Leary, the programme has been salvaged and reinvigorated (Pawley, 1999).

He remarked about the political climate:

There are certain political tensions inherent in the programme. Journalism is by its very nature a discipline with a high public profile; both lecturers are themselves practising journalists and students in the process of learning their craft are themselves likely to become involved in media debates. Given the sensitive political environment in Fiji, and the programme's dependence on good relations with the Fiji media, both staff and students need to play a fairly cool hand if this extremely important enterprise is to run smoothly (*Ibid.*, p 9).

The Journalism Programme quickly established strong links with individual news media organisations, especially with its attachment programme. The ties were developed mainly with the *Daily Post*, which had a controlling Government interest while retaining editorial independence, Fiji Television Ltd, and to some degree with Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and Communications Fiji Ltd. But some elements of the media remained a “closed shop”, particularly the Fiji Media Council, which was dominated by the influence of the *Islands Business* group and *The Fiji Times*. Both were negative towards tertiary education and graduate journalists, although *Islands Business* had in fact employed graduates from USP but failed to keep them.¹

Work permits, take two

The Fiji Times was responsible for stirring up a second work permit controversy in August 1998 through the “captive” reporting by one of its controversial, but influential, reporters, Margaret Wise². According to Wise, the Fiji Government had launched an “investigation” into complaints that both Leary and the author were breaching their work permit conditions (Wise, 1998a). The inquiry was said to be directed towards revoking their work permits. (Robie, 1999a: 115; 2000a: 90) It apparently focused on a report on the author’s independent *Café Pacific* website <www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/>, a media and politics commentary and current affairs netzine³. The article provided an overview of South Pacific news media and criticised the Fiji Government plans to legislate for a statutory Media Council to replace the independent and self-regulated council already in place. Complaints were also said to be against Ingrid Leary over her weekly “Media Watch” column in the *Daily Post* and tutorials conducted at the Fiji Journalism Institute. *The Fiji Times'* report claimed that they were “using their positions at the USP to lend authority to their work outside it”.

The following day, Wise again reported similar vague claims against the USP staff. This time her report also quoted the Home Affairs Ministry's Permanent Secretary, Emitai Boladuadua, as saying the Government “would withdraw their work permits if they were found to have breached the terms under which they were given” (Wise, 1998b). The Secretary said some Government departments and some “members of the public” had made “complaints”, Wise never interviewed Leary or the author. The same day an official statement was issued by the USP Registrar, Sarojini Pillay, stating that the USP journalism staff were not in breach of their work permits (USP, 1998). Pillay added that their activities were within the normal roles of research and publication carried out by academics. The Head of the Literature and Language Department, Professor Subramani, was also cited as saying that they were doing “outstanding” work. This statement was widely published and broadcast in the other Fiji news media, but was not published by

The Fiji Times. Invoking the principles of academic freedom, the president of the USP Staff Association, Dr Ganeshwar Chand, said the journalism lecturers had “perfect freedom” to carry out research and publish in areas of their expertise (Chand, 1998).

The Fiji Times published a letter by the author criticising the newspaper for “blatant bias”. Ironically, *The Fiji Times* also published an editorial the same day, entitled “A draconian response”, in support of the lecturers and academic freedom (*Fiji Times*, 1998). It said that when academic research involved journalism “anything published takes on a more sensitive aspect as far as officialdom is concerned”. The editorial argued that if there had been a breach, “the threat to withdraw their work permits is far too draconian a response”.

Jone Dakuvula, a former press secretary to Prime Minister Rabuka, stressed in a letter to *The Sunday Times* that under the new Fiji Constitution [Section 30(1)]:

Every person has the right to freedom of expression, including: freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas; and freedom of the press and other media.

He added:

Our new Constitution has been in force for barely one month and here we have some news media people attempting to suppress two well-qualified journalists' freedom of expression, perhaps in the hope that they could be expelled from this country for the 'crime' of writing, publishing and teaching journalism. (Dakuvula, 1998)

In a letter published in both *The Fiji Times* and the *Daily Post* on September 1, the Assistant Information Minister, Ratu Josefa Dimuri, confirmed the Ministry had “received complaints from both local journalists and regional media organisations who were of the view that their interests were being jeopardised by the involvement of these two people in other areas of work not stipulated in their work permits” (Dimuri, 1998). The same day, Information Minister Senator Filipe Bole also used parliamentary privilege to make similar allegations in the Senate against the USP staff (Bole, 1998). But a *Daily Post* editorial commended the Journalism Programme and the lecturers personally for the improvements they had made in a short time. Editor Jale Moala added:

The saddest thing is the deafening silence from the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) and the Fiji Media Council. By failing to support the rights of journalists, like Mr Robie and Ms Leary, whether they be teachers, students or whatever, these organisations are helping to destroy the very freedom of expression they have so often said they protect (*Fiji's Daily Post*, 1998a).

International reaction criticising the pressure on the academics started to flow with news services and newspapers abroad running news stories on the issue. The Paris-based media freedom group Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) wrote to Senator Bole protesting against the harassment and asking that the lecturers be allowed to work freely without fear of pressure, as the 1997 Constitution allowed (RSF, 1998). The New Zealand Association of University Staff (NZAUS) also wrote to both Prime Minister Rabuka and Senator Bole,

pointing out Fiji's obligations as a signatory under the Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel⁵ adopted by UNESCO in November 1997 (Crozier, 1998).

In contrast, PINA confirmed that some of its "members" had complained to the Fiji Government about the work permits (Parkinson, 1998). In spite of international condemnation, PINA president William Parkinson alleged in a statement distributed to editors around the region that many of the "complaints relate to breaches of their work permit conditions with regards to outside work for local media organizations" (*Ibid*). Parkinson also questioned whether the website content of *Café Pacific* would cover stories in a "fair and balanced manner".

Finally, Senator Bole admitted on September 8 that there was no foundation to the allegations when he told reporters no investigation was being carried out (*Fiji's Daily Post*, 1998b). The work permit issue was dropped after a heated two weeks of media debate.

The post-coup website closure

After restructuring the undergraduate Journalism Programme, an additional ninth course, Special Topics in Journalism, was added as an elective to the eight compulsory core courses. Also, an UNESCO-assisted training and resource website, *Pacific Journalism Online* <www.usp.ac.fj/journ/>, and a postgraduate diploma and degree in Pacific Media Studies were introduced. An emphasis in this new programme was on practical, analytical, critical and professional studies in Asia-Pacific Journalism, Advanced Media Law and Ethics, Online Policy, Research and Publishing, and Special Topics in Journalism. But implementation of the postgraduate plans were disrupted by George Speight's putsch in May 2000.

Media industry critics continued to snipe at the USP programme with *Islands Business* publisher Robert Keith-Reid (2000) devoting an entire editorial column in his magazine criticising news of the postgraduate plans. He claimed that "the trouble with today's academic training for journalists, as the USP effort is starting to show, is that it can produce not journalists but academic anaemics, far removed from the real world".

[USP] is talking of a full post-graduate programme towards a "specialist Pacific masters degree in media" and of there being "a crucial need for more research" into the region's media. The new course will have "emphasis on investigative journalism, resource development journalism, and advanced economic and political reporting". By gum, all this for kids who may not be able to competently report the fact of one cat sitting on one mat.

The ill-informed editorial was so full of misrepresentations and factual errors that radio lecturer Pat Craddock and the author wrote an open letter to the Fiji media, pointing out that Keith-Reid had never visited the USP programme (*Pacific Islands Report*, 2000). Craddock, also personally attacked by *Islands Business*, protested to the USP administration:

You will be aware of the attacks on the USP Journalism Programme in the time of François Turmel on the grounds that it was French [Government] supported. When Philip Cass was appointed as journalism lecturer there were attacks upon him. A sustained campaign was taken against the appointment of David Robie and then Ingrid Leary. I am next in line to be attacked.

... The attacks are racial or anti-expatriate or anti-intellectual, or written by men trying to hold on to foreign aid dollars, power and trying to control the whole direction of media education (Craddock, 2000).

On Friday, 19 May 2000, almost to the day of the first military coup in 1987, George Speight, a *kailoma* (mixed race) and bankrupt businessman, tore off his balaclava to reveal his identity after seizing Parliament and the elected government at gunpoint. Within minutes of the hostage taking, the news was being flashed on Radio Fiji News' 10am bulletin — scooped by one of the USP final-year students on attachment (Tamani Nair).

After quick phone calls to confirm the facts, sketchy as they were at that stage, the author met senior student editors to decide on what ought to be done. It was believed the crisis would be over in a few days. A decision was made to go all out to cover the events — but with a campus and regional perspective. The rear of the university grounds is close to Parliament. Three months later the USP student journalists were still covering the crisis (*see* Robie, 2001b; Cass, 2002).

Wansolwara already had a team of reporters deployed at the protest march in Suva that morning (which later erupted into rioting); the news editors set up radio and television monitors; reporters were dispatched to Parliament; the television class was cancelled and a crew sent to downtown Suva where they filmed footage of the riots and arson in the capital. As reporters came back with their stories and digital pictures, most of their work was posted on the journalism website, *Pacific Journalism Online*. By the time martial law was declared ten days later, on May 29, the Journalism Programme staff and students had posted 109 stories, dozens of soundbites and scores of digital photographs. (*see* Robie, 2001b: 50) Student online editor Christine Gounder noted:

Student journalists chose to be on the job. But it hasn't been easy. They survived threats, bureaucratic attempts to gag their website and newspaper, and a shutdown of the university to deliver the news.

Grabbing the opportunity to hone their skills, the young journalists didn't waste any time rushing to be on the spot at Parliament on May 19 and the looting and arson sites, around the capital, Suva (Gounder, 2000).

On Sunday, May 29, hours after a mob attacked Fiji Television and cut transmission for almost 48 hours, the university pulled the plug on the website, fearing a similar raid on the sprawling Laucala campus. The students were offered an alternative site hosted by the Department of Social Communication and Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, and carried on publishing <www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html> through a

committed effort by Fran Molloy, of the Australian Centre for Investigative Journalism, and other staff at UTS. Journalist Phil Thornton was also dispatched by the ACIJ to USP to provide professional support for the students and, among other reports, he broke the “freedom bus” story about human rights violations.

ACIJ director Associate Professor Chris Nash (2000) said: “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” .

At a meeting three days after the shutdown of the website, sought by the Journalism Programme with the Vice-Chancellor, Esekia Solofa, senior university administrators said they wanted “self-censorship” and for the newspaper *Wansolwara* to be “postponed”. When told that *Wansolwara* had already gone to press, the authorities wanted distribution stopped and for the paper to be inspected with a view to removing articles. This was declined by programme staff. An American graphics designer, Mara Fulmer, who had worked with the Media Centre at USP in the mid-1990s, independently hosted the students’ gagged newspaper *Wansolwara Online* at her *Looking Glass* website in the US. “I consider it an honour and privilege to do this for freedom of the press,” said Fulmer. “The students have worked so hard on this. They have truly earned their journo stripes”

After a series of letters of protest to the university administration from groups and organisations as diverse as Reporters Sans Frontières in Paris, the Commonwealth Journalists’ Association, the NZ Journalism Education Association, Queensland University’s Journalism Department, PEN New Zealand and the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, the author was sent a letter by then Vice-Chancellor Solofa — after *Wansolwara* had been distributed in defiance of the attempt to ban it. He wrote:

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 (Solofa, 2000).

Three senior academic staff protested and the president of the Association of USP Staff (AUSPS), Dr Biman Prasad, called for the letter to be withdrawn, saying it was “unjustified” and condemning “self-censorship”. Prasad added: “Academic freedom is always fundamental to the survival and operation of a university, even more so when there is a crisis and threats to academic freedom” (Prasad, 2000). Prasad later described the incident in a paper about the “crisis of conscience” for USP academic staff when addressing the annual conference of the New Zealand Association of University Staff (NZAUS) in Wellington:

The staff association was vigilant and took a firm stand on issues that we felt were designed to promote self-censorship. For example, soon after the May 19 coup, the

university administration in panic and unilaterally decided to close the journalism programme website. The journalism students were provided with a fabulous opportunity to practise skills in the real life situation what they were learning in theory. Their reporting on the crisis was appreciated around the world.

The administration's drastic move to shut the website down was rather regrettable from the point of view of both staff and students of journalism. The Association of USP Staff protested vigorously against the closure and it was allowed to continue. (Prasad, 2000)

In contrast to the international condemnation, PINA officials in Suva were not only opposed to the journalism website, but actively celebrated its closure, an extraordinary move given its claims to support media freedom (*Islands Business*, 2000; *Panpa Bulletin*, 2000).

On June 28, the website was allowed to reopen (to enable students to access its resources and *Online Classroom*), providing no further news was posted about the Fiji coup. An ironic footnote to the affair came during the annual Ossie Awards for the best in student journalism in Australia on December 6. Student journalists of USP "dominated" the awards for their reporting of the Fiji coup. Publication category judge, deputy editor Mike van Niekerk of the *Melbourne Age Online*, said the student journalists working on *Pacific Journalism Online* "rose to the challenge of providing high quality reports of a dramatic international news event on their doorstep" (Pearson, 2001).

The press and the putsch affair

A sequel followed at the Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference at Mooloolaba, Queensland, in early December after the author presented a 7600 word paper analysing Fiji (and international) media coverage of the Chaudhry Government's year in office and the Speight coup period. Perhaps provocatively entitled, "Coups and land: The press and the putsch in Fiji", the author concluded:

When Chaudhry was released from captivity on July 14, he partly blamed the media for the overthrow of his Government. Some sectors of the media were alleged to have waged a bitter campaign against the Coalition Government and its roll-back of privatisation in the year after the Fiji Labour Party-led coalition had been elected in a landslide victory in May 1999. In the early weeks of the insurrection, the media enjoyed an unusually close relationship with Speight and the hostage-takers, raising ethical questions (Robie, 2000).

The author also highlighted the role of the country's largest news organisation, the Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times*:

Critics regard *The Fiji Times*, in particular, as having had a hostile editorial stance towards the Chaudhry Government...

While the news media was fairly diligent, and at times courageous when reporting hard news developments, and the views of prominent politicians and political parties, during the conflict, it was not so effective at covering civil society's perspectives.

Fiji lacks enough critically thinking journalists who can provide in-depth, perceptive and balanced articles and commentaries. Most serious commentaries and analysis during the crisis were provided by non-journalists (*Ibid.*)

A *PINA Nius Online* email misrepresenting the contents was distributed to Pacific newspapers five days later, stirring up a media and political storm. A campaign of bitter personal attacks against the author followed on the JEANet and Penang Commonwealth editors email list-serves over the next two weeks. A two-page unsigned article in *Pacific Islands Business* magazine (2001) presented the furore as a 12-round “boxing match” fought out on the internet, with the account heavily slanted in favour of *The Fiji Times* and PINA criticisms. The magazine did not interview the author or seek a copy of the actual paper, nor did it canvas views of other media commentators supporting the author's analysis.

In an interview with Myra Mortensen, broadcast on Radio Australia's *Pacific Beat*, the author said it was an irony that news organisations claiming to support media freedom were trying to gag a journalism academic (Mortensen, 2000). Rejecting *The Fiji Times* criticisms and protesting against *Pacific Islands Business* magazine's misrepresentations, AUSPS spokesperson Associate Professor Scott MacWilliam wrote in a letter to the editor: “[USP staff are] concerned that, while *The Fiji Times* and other news organisations purport to support the freedom to express opinions, such opinions are only acceptable if they sustain the same organisations' views of themselves” (MacWilliam, 2001). Michael Field remarked in *The Fiji Times*: “The problem is that in Fiji there are more and more politicians, supported by a cabal in the local media that makes war on other reporters, who say they are not part of this world and wish to be left alone (Field, 2001).”

Just nine months after the *Fiji Times* attack on the USP Journalism Programme, departing publisher Alan Robinson reaffirmed his opposition to the critical studies component of journalism education at USP. Interviewed by Fiji Television's *Close-Up* current affairs host Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Robinson, with no direct personal knowledge or experience of the USP programme, misrepresented the teaching and implicitly called for an inquiry by authorities.

AR: Well, the training that is being put in place must — the authorities really need to have a good look at it because the quality of the training is going to be shown in the end product. What I am saying is our experience is that a lot of the graduates come out with very, very false hopes and false views. And it is obviously part of the training but they seem to have a distorted view of what journalism is about.

RSK: When you say false views, what sort of ..?

AR: Well, I think they feel that their mission in life is to save the world and they are going to be crusaders. They seem to have a very, very distorted view. I'd like to see them concentrate on the basics.

RSK: Isn't it good to have that drive though, isn't this what journalism is about?

AR: Journalism needs drive. It needs commitment. But that isn't all you need to survive and make it as a journalist. (Robinson, 2001)

The Aftermath

In March 2001, new Vice-Chancellor Savenaca Siwatibau, a former Governor of the Reserve Bank and previously chairman of the University Council, took over at the helm of the university and this was marked by a more committed and positive approach to journalism education. Throughout 2001, the USP Journalism Programme continued to grow, relaunching its news website hosted on *Pacific Journalism Online* as *Wansolwara Online* <www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/index.html> More than thirty students were involved in an intensive five-week exercise covering the Fiji General Election during August in both online and print editions. On 18 October 2001, Siwatibau pledged to upgrade staff and facilities for the Journalism Programme, including agreement in principle to a new \$250,000 building extension to house journalism. In March 2002, two new staff were recruited — broadcast lecturer Steve Sharp, who was completing a doctorate in conflict reporting at Griffith University, Queensland, and who had extensive background in community radio and in radio training in Indonesia; and assistant lecturer Shailendra Singh, former editor of *The Review* news magazine in Fiji and who had been on an MBA scholarship with Ausaid's Pacific Media Initiative (PMI) project.

Conclusion

From its degree beginnings in 1994, the USP Journalism Programme, has faced political pressure and opposition from some influential news media organisations with an anti-intellectual tradition. Several high calibre staff have been employed on the programme at various stages but they have at times been frustrated through efforts by these media organisations to obstruct and, in some cases, sabotage the programme.

Almost every staff member of the degree Journalism Programme has faced political pressure manipulated by one sector of the media industry that shelters under the umbrella of donor funding and cultural traditions. This group appears threatened by the development of critical studies and university-based journalism education. The conflict was complicated at times when administration pressure centred on a notion of “simulated” journalism while the programme itself promoted problem-based learning and “real” experience. At times, political pressure became strongly overt with demands to review or revoke work permits, attempts to censure the programme, and even demands for the sacking of prominent journalism education staff. Key players in this campaign were personalities in the Suva secretariat of Pacific Islands News Association, who had a vested interest in fostering an image that they were the region's only “educators”. In fact, they are largely unqualified as educators and had no first-hand experience of the USP programme.

Nevertheless, in March 2001 a change at the top level of the USP administration ushered in a period of more committed support in terms of facilities and funding from the new Vice-Chancellor and his colleagues. In spite of the political pressure and harassment from

some sectors of the media industry, the programme has continued to develop and mature, and by the end of 2001 had produced some 55 degree (and diploma) graduates for the Pacific media industry. Many of the graduates have already become established and influential journalists in Fiji and the South Pacific. And the university will continue to play a growing and valuable role in future media development with a critique of professional and ethical standards.

Notes:

¹ Award-winning USP reporter Nicholas Cornelius (1998-9) and Vasemaca Tuisawau (1999) worked at *Islands Business* then left; Donna Hoerder was offered a job in 2000 after contributing as a freelance for the magazine, but she declined in favour of a job with Air Pacific in Los Angeles. By 2001, *The Fiji Times* had not employed any USP graduate and reputedly had the lowest starting salary of any Fiji news media organisation. (see "The media industry: Fiji journalists 'underpaid'," *Wansolwara*, November 2000, p 7.)

² Untrained and with no formal journalism qualifications, Margaret Wise had an affair with former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and was widely regarded as a "captive" reporter for Rabuka and his Soqosoqo Ni Vakavulewa Ni Taukei (SVT) party and their policies. Later, while acting chief-of-staff of *The Fiji Times*, she brought a paternity action against Rabuka, seeking maintenance for her son who was born in 2000 (see "'Skirt journalism' allegations", *Pacific Media Watch*, 12 February 2002):

<http://www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspac/fiji3519.html>

According to the *Fiji Times* (26 July 2002), Rabuka agreed to "pay F\$32 a week in alimony". On 12 September 2002, the *Daily Post* reported that Wise had been sacked for what the newspaper's managing director had described as "grossly unprofessional" conduct over the alleged release of editorial material to other news organisations.

³ The *Café Pacific* website is currently on a New Zealand server, PlaNet, but has a Fiji domain. It is also known as Asia-Pacific Network. It was originally established at the University of Technology, Sydney, as a postgraduate project while completing my Masters in Journalism degree in 1996. It is independent of the USP training website, *Pacific Journalism Online*, but is linked to it. The article cited in this controversy, "Pacific press freedom on the rocks ", 9 August 1998, was also published in *Reportage* media magazine at UTS, and is online at *Café Pacific* at:

<http://www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspac/pacmedia.html>

⁴ Ratu Josefa Dimuri, a former *Fiji Times* journalist, later gained notoriety as a rebel leader on the northern island of Vanua Levu supporting the George Speight-led insurrection in May 2000.

⁵ The NZAUS letter to Rabuka and Bole, signed by executive director Rob Crozier, detailed the relevant sections of the RSHETP, and were also sent to *The Fiji Times* and the *Daily Post*. The letter stated in part: "I am writing on behalf of university staff in New Zealand in defence of David Robie and Ingrid Leary, both of whom have come under attack in recent days. I wish to draw your attention (and that of your Government) to the fact that the issue of academic freedom is involved and we view very seriously attacks on that freedom. I note that the University of the South Pacific recognises the academic freedom rights of the staff concerned."

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www.usp.ac.fj/journ/

Pacific Journalism Online coup web archive:

<http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/coup74.html>

Department of Social Communication and Journalism (hosted USP Fiji coup archive):

www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html

Looking Glass Design website (in the US, hosting the special *Wansolwara* coup edition):

www.lookingglassdesign.com/wansolwara/wansol.html

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