

Threats to Media Freedom and Freedom of Information in the South Pacific

(A Papua New Guinea Perspective Delivered at the WPF 2010 Global Forum on Sunday, May 2, 2010 at the University of Queensland, St Lucia Campus)

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By way of introduction, my name is Susuve Laumaea. I have been a practising newspaper journalist – on and off -- for 34 years. During the off times, I have served the Government of Papua New Guinea in various political policy, public affairs advisory and public administrator roles.

Thank you to UNESCO for making it possible for a media voice from Papua New Guinea to be heard at this year's World Press Freedom Day global forum, here at the University of Queensland.

I bring to you, my Pacific colleagues, warm greetings and best wishes for successful WPF 2010 celebrations from fraternity friends and the Papua New Guinea Media Council.

The views I express here are based on 34 years of personal experience in the print media and in mainstream government administration in Papua New Guinea.

I shall draw on my nation's experiences in relation to the panel's topic of discussion. I shall also take this opportunity to provide an overview on the Pacific Freedom Forum (PFF) of which I am Interim Chair.

Pacific participants and members of this panel are familiar with PFF which is an online network of Pacific journalists, media advocates, trainers and academics dedicated to the advocacy of Freedom of Information and the Right to Know, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, Democracy and Human Rights as espoused in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

PFF spans the Pacific from New Zealand and Australia, covering the islands of the Melanesian sub-region, Polynesia, Micronesia and stretching as far as Hawaii and the US mainland. PFF operates as an appendage of Pacific Islands News Association (PINA). PFF also networks with other global press freedom organisations, societies of journalists and freedom advocacies. This year is PFF's third year in operation.

The topic for our Pacific panel discussion is familiar and it reflects the theme of this year's UNESCO World Press Freedom Day which is 'Freedom of Information – the Right to Know'. Freedom of Information and the right to know is a universal right of every man, woman and child on God Almighty's Planet Earth. That freedom and right is aptly pronounced in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and I quote: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

The UNESCO World Press Freedom Day theme is noble and for Freedom of Information and Right to Know to be embraced universally but more so in evolving and emerging nations such as in the Pacific region, the UNESCO campaign must come with funding and technical

resources give strength and capacity to outreach programs, advocacies, skills training and capacity building programs. Mere lip-service and then to expect media practitioners, media freedom advocates, academics and trainers of freedom of information, right to know, freedom of expression and freedom of the press to work with nothing to achieve something is an exercise in futility. UNESCO outreach programs with respect to the theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day and with respect to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be well funded, proactive and objective-driven. Those nations that receive UNESCO assistance to implement the World Press Freedom Day theme must then report progress of their endeavours at next year's World Press Freedom Day global summit.

Having said the foregoing I now turn to our panel discussion topic. What we have been given to discuss and share is really an opportunity to revisit the sacred values of freedom of information and freedom to express, analyse, interpret and disseminate information that can inform, educate and shape society for the betterment of all humankind. I view freedom of information, the right to know vital information and data on public and national affairs and the freedom to express such information simply and effectively for understanding and use by the community at large as central to the role of journalists and news mediums they work for.

So, what are the threats to media freedom and freedom of information in the Pacific? The response to this question may vary from nation to nation subject to prevailing economic, social and political and cultural situations in respective Pacific states. In order to identify and understand what may be perceived as threats to media freedom and freedom of information in the context of the Pacific region outside of Australia and New Zealand, it is equally important also to identify and understand the underlying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats confronting media and media practitioners in small island states of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia.

In the context of Papua New Guinea especially, and the Pacific Freedom Forum in general, let me say that there are strengths we can draw on, weakness we can convert to positives, opportunities we can harness and share and threats we can neutralise.

Media content – whether written for newspaper, radio or television – is a mirror-reflection of events and developments in our respective nation states. Those wielding powerful political and economic influences often not like the written, spoken or viewed journalism about their actions and their public utterances and deny that they in fact did or said what was published by a newspaper, announced on the radio or viewed on the television. When powerful economic and political forces turn against the media for what is written, said or viewed, they forget that they create the news and the media merely reports what's said and done by the same economic and political players.

In my considered view, the threat to freedom of the media and freedom of information are:

- **Political and economic threats against and patronage of journalists.**

Journalists become silenced or become “tamed” in the sense that they are paid by powerful individuals, corporations, political parties and corrupt institutions to see nothing, hear nothing and say or write nothing about the illegal and corrupt excesses of powerful political and economic players. Wealthy advertisers may threaten to withdraw their advertising accounts thereby effectively forcing editors to declare public interest stories viewed to be negative image story that would affect the corporate image of the advertiser to be “spiked”. Further threats in this category include lawsuits, threats to deport journalists if they are foreigners and threats to expropriate media ownership if they are foreign-owned.

- **Management Prerogative**

Management Prerogative is a situation where the management of newspapers, radio and television decide what should be the news content. It is a form of in-house censorship where editors, publishers and the top management team of respective media organisations choose what story goes and what does not. They declare and put up a “no-go-zone” on certain news stories affecting power individuals, advertisers and corporations. It may be done subtly but over time it builds up to becoming a permanent culture of bias and manipulation of the truth so that news is written in such a way – the management way – to appease advertisers and sources of revenue streams for a respective newspaper, radio and television station, government officials and other political influences desist from applying censorship pressures on news outlets, the chances of wealthy individuals and business corporations taking out lawsuits against respective media houses is either minimised or neutralised.

- **Military Dictatorships**

Freedom of information, freedom of expression and freedom of the press become manipulated to serve the interest of the military dictatorship. Rules become changed or freedom to information and to express viewpoints freely or to publish and broadcast these viewpoints freely become curtailed or totally removed. One Pacific Island nation is under a military dictatorship at present and press freedom, freedom of information and freedom of expression has become a very rare luxury for the people of that island nation.

Generally, much of the perceived threats against press freedom, freedom of information and the right to know as well as freedom of expression comes in the pursuit by journalists to monitor, scrutinise, interpret and assess political and economic power, to analyse whether or not power becomes self-serving for the wielder and whether or not power is used corruptly to the detriment of the people’s livelihood and their right to happiness, good health and prosperity.

Papua New Guinea media and media practitioners’ strength comes from Section 46 of our National Constitution which provides for Freedom of Expression as a qualified right of every citizen. That right has been there since the PNG National Constitution came into application on September 16, 1975 – the date upon which Papua New Guinea became an Independent Nation State.

Armed with this constitutionally guaranteed freedom the impression one would get would be that the PNG media is relatively free and open, up-beat and lively, robust and vibrant to the extent that we have lively sparring sessions with the governing executive, the legislature and the judiciary of our nation.

We are also blessed with having a stable, vibrant and forward-looking PNG Media Council that is committed to instilling in media organisations and media practitioners best practice media conduct and upholding and adhering to universal best practice ethics of the journalism profession. A sub-committee of the Media Council of PNG is called the Media Standards Committee which is a form of media ombudsman and its task is to ensure fair and factual reporting by PNG media and that highest ethical standards are adhered to by media organisations and media practitioners. The PNG Media Council is recipient of generous funding support from AusAID to assist its media capacity building training and programs in Papua New Guinea.

In speaking to the topic, let me say that journalists in PNG, the Pacific and the world over, for that matter, are free to write news stories and commentaries as long as what is written for newspapers, radio and television are in keeping with the recognised ethical standards of journalism. Where there is freedom there is also bound to be schemes to usurp that freedom. Often times those wielding economic and political power concoct schemes to harass, intimidate and threaten media organisations and media workers for allegedly meddling with their so-called “holier than thou” corporate, political and public image.

The PNG experience is that once or twice in the last 35 years, resident foreign correspondents have been threatened by the government with deportation for so-called negative journalism on PNG affairs. An well known Australian journalist and Pacific correspondent of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and married to a PNG woman actually got deported – not because he had misreported offensively on PNG affairs. His crime was that ABC television went to air on an alleged military coup story which – in the assessment of the movers and shakers in the PNG government – reflected negatively on the reputation of PNG political leaders of that time.

As I was saying, there are, from time to time lawsuits threatened or taken against media organisations, journalists and editors but in most cases, these fizzle out to non-issue. In terms of weaknesses confronting PNG media and media workers, let me say that the absence of quality training for journalists, poor pay and conditions of work drive away promising and upcoming journalists from mainstream media into public relations and other spin jobs in the government and private sector where pay, conditions of employment and superannuation are more attractive and secure. A further weakness is the absence of a professional organisation such as a society of journalists to be used a vehicle to promote professional and survival concerns of journalists in a media ownership environment that is dominated by foreigners.

Our opportunity to thrive as a free, vibrant and robust media industry in PNG hangs on our two J-schools producing quality future journalists. The Divine Word University has surpassed the University of Papua New Guinea J-school to become the bigger school. UPNG J-school has suffered and deteriorated to a stage where it needs immediate financial and teaching resources such as teaching materials and quality lecturers and tutorial mentors. Divine Word University J-school is a recipient of generous UNESCO financial assistance and is an improved J-school that has benefited from such assistance. The same assistance would do well and be most appreciated by the UPNG J-school and in that regard I appeal to UNESCO to give UPNG J-school such consideration for assistance.

I am not here to rattle off statistics and data on media freedom and lack of such freedom nor am I here to belittle harrowing experiences in conflict situations populations do not experience freedom of information, are denied right to knowledge, have no freedom to express their viewpoints and do not have the luxury of a free and democratic media. We in the Pacific are very lucky and privileged people. We live in a peaceful part of the world and we must always be grateful for what we have despite the limitations and challenges of not having access to all the modern life-support conditions enjoyed by economically more affluent and well developed nations. Our ancestors have lived in Pasifika since time immemorial and we, and generations after us shall do likewise if rising sea levels and climate change do not render us extinct.

In terms of where I come from, let me say without any malice or aspersion that my own nation, PNG, is not a perfect nation by any standard but we are proud of who we are, how many we are and what we have in terms of natural wealth, cultural, political and social diversity. We are an ethnically diverse society as well with over one thousand tribal groupings who speak over 800 language dialects.

From a Pacific standpoint, PNG is an integral member of the Pacific community of tiny island states. We are lumped into sub-regions known as Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia in a vast Pacific Ocean. Some of these island nations – including Papua New Guinea – have been independent for less than 50 years. This year, Papua New Guinea is in its 35th year as an independent nation.

As emerging and evolving nations, we have leap-frogged into a modern internet age without having faced the trials and tribulations of various cultural and industrial revolutions experienced by today's mature democracies or the so-called developed world.

The perception that we are “cut-and-paste or copy-cat democracies” is furthest from the truth. Such dismissive perceptions should therefore not negatively influence resources assistance that peoples of the Pacific need to build educational, political, social and cultural depth and capacity or to preserve the richness of their ancient cultural, political and social norms.

In our own way, today’s Pacific people are proud standard bearers of colourful ancient cultures and civilisations that practised a variety societal democracies based on what modern anthropologists, political and social scientists like to call rule by consensus. We in the Pacific had and we still have in some island states powerful chieftaincy structures and systems that oversaw communal and societal peace, harmony, good order and basic survival.

Freedom of Information and the Right to Know has been priceless value that has underpinned existence the community of Pacific island states since time immemorial. UNESCO would do Pacific peoples proud by involve our media people more prominently in its media training and awareness programs and support Pacific media generously in our quest to develop skills, capacity and media institutional knowledge.

Thank you.

Ends.