

Broadcasting: The New Zealand-Pacific relationship

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Kia ora tatou

Greetings from New Zealand

Thank you Commonwealth Broadcasting Association Secretary General Elizabeth Smith for the invitation to speak today and thank you Joseph for your introduction.

It's fitting, I think, that we are gathered here as part of the Commonwealth – but drawn together in our own part of the world for a Regional Conference to discuss topics that matter in the Pacific.

TVNZ has just celebrated 20 years' service to Pacific Islands.

We installed TV in Niue late in 1988.

It was the first of what was called the mini-stations.

It was a success and provided a model showing that television was possible even on small and remote atolls.

Other Pacific governments quickly grasped that television was within their means and they, too, were keen to usher in a new era in communications knowing that TV would be a popular move among their people.

They looked to TVNZ for know-how and assistance to establish television and we spent the next 10 years, on and off, designing, constructing and commissioning TV facilities in the Pacific.

TVNZ often sent trainers to these new broadcasters to hone local skills or sometimes to provide short-term management, sales or production expertise.

There are some worthy academic studies of the social implications of introducing TV as late as the 1980s and 1990s to these comparatively remote communities.

TV was a relatively late arrival in the region compared with the rest of the world.

Being late-adopters of TV meant VCRs had beaten broadcast television in almost every island that had a power supply.

Imported movies and sports videos, often pirated, were most popular among viewers who came to believe that this staple diet, videos laced with violence and other unsuitable family viewing, was what TV was all about.

They knew no other.

A Ministerial Task Force Study in the Cook Islands in 1990 said “foreign videos had been more influential on a typical Rarotongan child than family, school and church put together and was in the process of re-defining habits, customs, lifestyle and values of Rarotongan youth”.

Others, questioning, pointed out the influence generated by videos that extended to shoes, designer T shirts and other clothing being sold and worn in downtown Avarua, “and just listen to the changes in vocabulary learned off these videos”.

With television, it was pointed out, Governments could now have a say ensuring suitability of the programmes being shown whereas with videos they had lost control.

It was time to reclaim ground for family viewing.

Despite their criticism, the prevalence of VCRs did have an up side.

I think it's interesting to note the different catalysts that drove Governments to introduce TV.

In Niue it was decided to replace a broken-down privately-owned station because the Prime Minister thought that television would stop the flow of Niueans to New Zealand, and, indeed could persuade others to return to the island.

In the Cook Islands it was a Christmas present that hastened local television.

TVNZ installed and commissioned equipment in record time so that the station could go to air on Christmas Day, 1990, a gift to the nation unwrapped with due ceremony and celebration by the then Prime Minister.

Nauru, in its most prosperous of times, wanted television and could well afford it. TVNZ was invited to provide the mini-station.

Both Fiji and Samoa had entered teams in the 1991 Rugby World Cup and both nations wanted live coverage of the games played half a world away in Britain and France.

TVNZ was contracted to build a new station which could be received in all the main islands of Fiji. Fiji TV Ltd was born.

Meanwhile, in Samoa there wasn't enough time to set up a TV station before the Rugby World Cup so TVNZ put in a receiving dish and big screens in Apia Park, and the grandstands were packed even though the fans had to turn out in the middle of the night because of the time difference.

TVNZ was invited by the Government to set up a full TV station soon after.

This was followed by a contract to help Tonga Broadcasting Commission build its station in Nuku'alofa.

In each case TVNZ sourced the equipment and infrastructure, oversaw the installation and commissioning, trained local staff and then stood down.

For many years we provided taped programmes to many stations in the Pacific.

That service was a commercial undertaking on our part and continued until there was re-arrangement of production company agencies and sales territories in the Pacific.

The region's a very different place today.

Technology, commercial enterprise and partnerships have changed the face of television in the Pacific.

Fiji TV, having successfully developed domestic terrestrial channels, expanded its reach right across the Pacific with its Sky pay channels.

A commercial venture started pay-TV in Tonga, a private broadcaster has recently been allocated time in Tonga's TV2 and for a time there were three free-to-air channels competing in Samoa.

RFO has expanded operations beyond both Tahiti and New Caledonia and more opportunity for local TV has recently been created in the Solomons.

Satellite broadcasts have been offered by countries from outside the region sometimes accompanied by gifts of technical equipment.

In return for capital items, stations often agree to broadcast the benefactor's channel for a greater part of the day.

Churches and religious organisations have also made a presence with their telecasts in some islands.

For its part, New Zealand (and TVNZ) maintains a close relationship with broadcasters in the Pacific.

For 20 years we have assisted broadcasters in the region and we still maintain a close relationship through the very successful Pacific Service which provides daily news, current affairs and other content to 14 stations throughout the region.

Providing our daily news programmes by satellite goes back many years but just three years ago the value of this service to Pacific Island broadcasters was finally recognised by the New Zealand Government, extended a little and fully funded.

When the currency exchange rates are favourable we often add sports and other regional events to the service.

A record 20 Pacific stations received coverage from Beijing last year, which meant they had live coverage of Olympic events for the first time, around the clock for a total of 420 hours.

With a contribution from the IOC towards our costs, we were able to provide all that coverage to these broadcasters without charge.

We have also distributed rugby, league and netball whenever rights can be negotiated.

We know it's a popular service because we frequently receive emails and phone calls of thanks from broadcasters and individual viewers.

I want to move now to discuss something the rest of the world, including New Zealand, is grappling with – digital tv.

In most countries around the world, governments are providing funding and regulatory support for broadcasters to transition to “digital switch on” or “analogue switch off” (same thing).

The New Zealand government response has been to support a pan industry establishment of a “freeview” consortium of broadcasting interests to introduce and promote digital television and radio channels, both standard definition and high definition, on a digital satellite platform and a digital terrestrial platform.

In addition, the New Zealand Government provided funding to TVNZ to launch two commercial free digital channels, TVNZ 6 and TVNZ 7.

Whilst the transition to digital in the Pacific Islands is likely to be some years out, I believe it would be strategically beneficial for the Pacific Forum of Leaders to consider establishing a working group to agree a common pan Pacific approach to digital transition and standards, so that the Pacific can reap the benefits of standardization and economies of scale.

Some sort of harmonization with Australia and New Zealand would also make sense, so that technical support, equipment supply etc can continue to be provided in the same way that TVNZ has supported the analogue services in the Pacific over the past several years.

As TVNZ progresses its digital infrastructure transition over the next 24 months I pledge access to Pacific broadcasters to our decommissioned equipment, where that can be of immediate benefit to you.

TVNZ believes that after more than 20 years in the region we are very much part of the local scene, regarded as a stakeholder in the Pacific, and a special friend to all our neighbouring broadcasters.

On behalf of TVNZ, I look forward to continuing, and strengthening, that relationship with you all.

Thank you.