

Pacific Media Freedom Challenges

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E Tonga Tapu, Te Whenua, Te Kingi, Te iwi katoa tena koutou katoa. Nga maata waka kua huihui mai nei tena tatou.

Oh sacred Tonga, the land, the King and the people, greetings to you. To all of us of the different canoes who have gathered here I greet us all.

There is no doubt technology has changed the freedom of media in the Pacific. Through new platforms such as IPOd, cell phones- Cell phones have just been introduced to Tonga and I must say I found it interesting to see so many cell phones being used at lunch. And internet, people are able to communicate cheaper and smarter, and share their stories with each other or as media organizations.

Tonga's Matangi and PIMA's websites are just two. In the last ten years there has been better access to Television in Fiji, Samoa, the Cooks and here in Tonga. The Sevens rugby tournament can be watched live on digital satellite tv at a number of places throughout the Pacific.

Some nations have gained the knowledge to use the medium of internet better for travel and tourism revenues.

However the lack of technology has worked against some countries. Yesterday we heard how Kiribati has had no short wave radio service for the last few months because although having the new gear ready to go, there has been no technician to install it.

Another challenge is retaining people. In Niue, in the past two weeks the only broadcast journalist has left the island state leaving the country without a mouthpiece to world.

There are pockets around the Pacific Rim where there are strong pressures by governments upon the editorial control of different forms of media. Fiji is a prime example with three editorial staff from the Fiji Times being evicted from the country and the paper even threatened with closure if it didn't toe the line. TVNZ felt the wrath of the Fijian government with a TVNZ reporter taken into custody then expelled the next day. There have been frequent attacks on journalists in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea. Some parts of Asia do not have any media except those controlled by the government. Mynamr is hot on this list.

Diplomacy can add a challenge to media freedom. Last night at the opening speech of the CBA Vice President when he mentioned about media freedom particularly in China in regard to the Olympic Games and the Milk scandal, the Chinese Ambassador left the function not happy and offended by the remarks.

It can be said too that palagi, pa a have not bothered to find out what is the traditions or the culture of Pacific nations and peoples they are doing stories on. It's too hard. They tell their readers, listeners, viewers what they want to hear.

It can be said it's not fair and isn't, but I would urge journalists, media organizations from the Pacific Rim or who are native to their lands to start telling their stories more, so they do reach out to the rest of the world. It amounts to strategy.

I note the remarks by the CEO of TVNZ, Rick Ellis about a Pacific Strategy. The influence of the media.

I have noted that the Cooks has made headway by passing the Official Information Act. This allows better access into the government's information by the media and public. Some might say because of media's ability to open up discussion in both Tonga and overseas in relation to this country's Royal house, the Commission for democracy was set up.

In my experience in most parts of the world media organizations push the line to get the story without being penalized through the law. That is a matter of nature of organizations who want to be first or get the most listeners or viewers so they get the advertising to expand the profit margin.

In New Zealand we have relatively free media and libel laws. The organization I work with and other indegious language news operations I have been part of, some people speaking in their own languages have sometimes crossed the boundaries of good journalism accuracy. They think they can say anything about anybody on any topic without any legal comeback. In most cases readers, listeners, and viewers don't let this carry on. They protest and we as managers have to fix it up.

Networking amongst media people and organizations around the Pacific is important to get past those media freedom challenges.

There still some major wrongs that have to be fixed in regard media freedom in the Pacific. However there have been a number of gains with the speed of technology developments. With Media freedom comes the responsibility of getting the story right and being accountable for it no matter what language it is in.

Kia ora.