

Pacific Media Freedom Challenges

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Things have changed a lot since I started out in journalism more than 35 years ago. It seemed to me then – and I think this was largely true at that time – that journalists occupied a privileged position in society, respected as impartial observers of the stories they covered.

But over recent decades the lines between arms-length reporting of news – and inadvertently becoming caught up in that news – have blurred considerably. Increasingly, journalists do not have the luxury of standing on the sidelines enjoying the professional respect and personal protection that comes from a position of neutrality.

Increasingly, it seems, not only are journalists becoming innocent victims of the stories they're covering but their very status as reporters marks them out – in the eyes of some – as legitimate targets for attack. According to the International News Safety Institute, more than 100 news media staff were killed last year just doing their jobs reporting the news. The death toll for newsgatherers since 1996 is estimated at almost 14-hundred – and according to the Institute, this current year 2009 has had the worst start of any year on record. Five journalists were killed in the first eight days of January alone. Four more have been killed in recent weeks.

Alarming, the Institute says there's significant evidence that journalists are being deliberately targeted to silence their work. Five of those who died were working in war zones or areas of armed conflict. The other four however were local investigative journalists including a prominent Sri Lankan newspaper editor, a broadcaster in Venezuela who campaigned against the drug cartels, a Kenyan newspaper reporter who'd exposed police corruption and a young Russian journalist.

At the tender age of just 25, she was the fourth reporter from her Moscow newspaper to have been murdered in the past ten years. Despite the obvious risks for foreign correspondents working in dangerous war zones, UNESCO says the vast majority of journalists killed – 85% in fact – are local journalists - many of them covering local politics and involved in exposing corruption. After the most recent murder in Moscow, there are now serious suggestions in some quarters that journalists should carry weapons for their own protection.

An official approach has been made to Russian authorities and similar requests have been made by news organizations in Iraq and Mexico where in recent years journalists have been attacked and killed in high numbers. The suggestion that journalists arm themselves – which would almost certainly be counter-productive – is a sad but vivid illustration of the growing threat to the personal security of working journalists and the desperation many in international news journalism are now feeling.

I have to say that in my 35 years as a journalist – as a reporter, as a Head of News and Current Affairs and now as Chief Executive of a major public service broadcaster – I never for one moment thought I would see the day when such a chilling proposal was being seriously debated within our industry. But what, you might ask, has all this to do with this conference and the relative peace and tranquility of the Pacific? Certainly no-one is suggesting for one moment that the lives of journalists in this region are seriously at risk. But the targeting of journalists through fear and intimidation does not necessarily have to be life-threatening to be a major concern to our industry.

In April last year I was invited to address the Pacific Media and Human Rights Summit in Samoa on the role of public service broadcasting and the need for local news media to be free from political and other interference. The conference was well-attended, with senior representatives from media organizations from virtually all the South Pacific nations. We spent a lot of time talking about editorial independence and integrity, the need for freedom of information legislation and the responsibility of journalists and news organizations to maintain the highest possible professional standards. But around the edges of that conference there was another conversation taking place. Stories emerged of the enormous day-to-day challenges being faced by working journalists in this region. Personal threats and intimidation - in some cases instances of physical violence – designed to either prevent news being covered or as retribution for work already published. It soon became clear that while we were discussing the lofty Reithian values of quality public service broadcasting – to inform, to educate and to entertain - and the need for news organizations to be fair and impartial – there was a very large elephant in the room with us.

The reality of life for at least some Pacific journalists, broadcasters and news executives were instances of physical assault, criminal property damage and, at times, violent interrogation. The communiqué issued after the Pacific Media and Human Rights Summit sought to highlight this growing threat to media independence in the region. It said in part: *"The Summit expressed grave concern about incidents of violence and intimidation directed at Pacific media workers in the course of their job. The rights of journalists to work without fear of abuse, intimidation and violence are fundamental to democracy. The Summit emphasized the United Nations condemnation of the frequent acts of violence against journalists and media professionals in violation of international humanitarian law."* *"The Summit also expressed serious concerns about political interference in editorial decision-making."* That was almost 12 months ago. If we look back over the past year then, has anything changed? Has media freedom in the Pacific improved – or have things got worse?

Sadly, it does appear to be the latter. In Fiji, three newspaper publishers have been deported in the space of one year. A newspaper editor has been sentenced to three months jail for publishing a letter-to-the-editor relating to the 2006 military coup. And a reporter was arrested and detained after writing a story critical of a government minister. In Vanuatu,

a newspaper publisher was physically assaulted after publishing an editorial criticizing prison authorities. And only a week ago, a female reporter in Vanuatu was punched and kicked by a local identity who didn't like the story she'd written about him. There's been an assault on a journalist in the Solomon Islands, a threat to expel journalists from Papua New Guinea, media censorship in Samoa and sedition charges against journalists here in Tonga. And it's probably fair to say that this represents only the tip of an iceberg – those instances of threat or attack that have been serious enough to attract international news coverage.

Thankfully the Pacific does not yet figure in the global roll call of media professionals who've lost their lives reporting the news - but it's clear that media freedom and the personal security of working journalists in our region are far from ideal. We know that threats and intimidation are relatively commonplace – but what can we in the media do about it – particularly those of us operating in far more protected and privileged environments? I'll come back to that in a moment. For most major news organizations, the high costs of operating overseas news bureaux, combined with the greater availability and accessibility of global news and information, is fundamentally changing the way international issues and events are being reported. For those news organizations that can still afford it, major international stories tend to be covered on a short-term fly-in, fly-out basis.

The longer-term aftermath of those stories – and the day-to-day issues which fall just a little short of the major news threshold – often go unreported. Technology is however working in our favour. The easier availability of mobile phones and internet connections makes it more feasible for international broadcasters such as Radio New Zealand, the ABC or the BBC to stay in touch with local and regional issues - and to report on them from a distance. And the benefits of that relatively new technology flow both ways. While we are able to access timely and reliable information from across the Pacific, our broadcasts – and especially our websites – make that information instantly available to other news organizations and individuals throughout the region. Although internet access in the Pacific is still very low by world standards, it is available to many journalists, broadcasters and publishers. It's also available to key decision-makers and people of influence.

Despite the recent punishment meted out to newspaper publishers in Fiji, there can still be greater protection for journalists in quoting well-sourced overseas-based news reports – even when that news is about your own country. Over the past year or so Radio New Zealand has noticed a significant increase in the volume of our coverage being picked up and re-published by locally-based Pacific news media. This has been particularly the case in Fiji where local media are using Radio New Zealand International as a source of news and information about events in Fiji on a daily basis. There is no doubt that our position as an international news organization broadcasting to Fiji - rather than from Fiji – affords us the luxury of dealing more openly with events that would be considered highly sensitive or contentious in Fiji itself.

So I come back to the key question about media interference and intimidation – and what can realistically be done about it? I believe that those of us who enjoy editorial independence and freedom of information have an obligation to support – wherever we can – our colleagues in the Pacific who are operating under far greater pressures and restrictions than we are. When journalists and broadcasters are prevented from reporting without fear or favour, we have an obligation to bring their plight to the attention of a global audience. We also have an obligation to tell the stories they themselves are prevented from telling. As all of us here know, the media can be a very powerful tool – and governments and other powerful institutions and individuals are not immune to public opinion. Publicly exposing threats and intimidation experienced by Pacific journalists might not stop the problem – but it will force the perpetrators to think very carefully before they do it again.