

David Robie

*Mekim Nius: South Pacific media, politics, and education.*

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Reviewed by Asha Chand

Although the South Pacific enjoys one of the best tropical climates in the world with tranquil beaches and swaying palm trees, the volcanic political climate in which the Fourth Estate operates here underscores the need for urgent attention to this region by those who value the role of independent journalism in society. *Mekim Nius* has taken the bull by the horns with an exposé of Pacific journalism that has suffered at the hands of entrenched attitudes, deep rooted cultural practice, general laxity and poor ethical decision making at the hands of bottom line cost factors in market-driven monopolies. The book, by Associate Professor David Robie of the Auckland University of Technology, in New Zealand, is an insightful and timely replay of past and current challenges facing Pacific journalism.

The media's role as the Fourth Estate is under more constant and serious threat now than it ever was as the Pacific countries grapple with terrorism and globalisation and their real impacts on local cultures and ways of life in many smaller economies. Robie puts the political effects of globalisation under the microscope and argues that improving professional integrity among journalists can occur only through intensive training in independent institutions (like universities) accompanied by serious commitment from media owners and governments in the region.

To underscore the political situations that pose the greatest challenges to Pacific journalism, Robie cites a wealth of examples, including the three coups in Fiji (two in 1987 and one in 2000) and continued terrorist threats in this country, corruption and the legacy of Papua New Guinea's Bougainville conflict and the Sandline mercenary affair, and armed conflict and terrorism in New Caledonia, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Robie, a veteran on Pacific issues, having worked, researched and taught in the region over several decades, gives the world a glimpse of how regional and international journalists were subjects of immediate political realities at the height of the 2000 coup in Fiji. He writes:

“By day seven, The *Fiji Sun* was already calling the rebels the ‘Taukei civilian government.’ Criticism of the media was beginning to emerge. The fact is that some journalists had basked in the glow of coup-master Speight – something that is hard to imagine in hostage situations in other countries. And this raises ethical questions

about how cosy the media was with the terrorists. Said one foreign journalist: ‘They (rebels) feed us, give us a bathroom and look after us. I like them.’”

Robie notes that journalists “came in and lived with Speight and his supporters in the government house. It was like Stockholm syndrome where the hostages begin to sympathise with their antagonists. Journalists believed what they were told.” This example of poor journalistic decision-making is symptomatic of larger trends. Throughout the book, Robie argues that, in situations such as these, journalists need to understand how their countries operate and to better explain the society in transition around them. The two countries under close scrutiny in *Mekim Nius* – Fiji and Papua New Guinea – have encountered coups and continuous serious political upheaval for almost two decades.

Robie also claims that, during these crises, some governments failed to accept the role of journalists in society while some politicians had little understanding of the workings of the media. In fact, some journalists played straight into the hands of politicians and corporate spinners. Politicians work to marginalize critical journalism as well by “publicly castigat[ing] journalists, personally nam[ing] them and giv[ing] them flak.” So what are the leaders/decision makers and the press doing in Papua New Guinea and Fiji which claim to be democracies but in reality are thwarting any challenge to leadership and the status quo?

As a former chief of staff on the national News Ltd daily, *The Fiji Times*, from 1994 to 1998 and as a practicing journalist in Fiji for more than 15 years, I can relate to some of the crippling issues Robie raises in his book. I have lived those experiences of frustration such as when you embark on an investigative story, only to be threatened, gagged, and prevented from obtaining the information that the public has a right to know. This is often followed by a lack of outrage following publication of a story among a public that does not even bat an eye because it has become too complacent and accepting of corruption and unethical behaviour. How then, can journalists function as “normal” inquisitive individuals and groups, inspired to guard the media’s role as the Fourth Estate – keeping the church, state and judiciary under check and being motivated to do so?

Robie warns that pressure from governments, rebel or terrorist movements, and corporate world and non-government organisations threatens the independence of journalism in the Pacific. He points out that journalists are too easily intimidated by these forces, particularly when there is a lack of experience and professionalism in the young journalists covering the story. In close-knit Pacific societies where everyone knows everyone else or can easily trace connections – at the chiefly, village or family level – the challenges facing journalists are much more complex than in secular societies of New Zealand or Australia. Robie himself, together with a dozen other journalism academics and professionals, lived on the edge while serving their few years’ stints in Fiji as they were under constant threat – to be sent packing because of allegations that they breached their work permit conditions. He writes that these allegations were never proved.

Compounding the lack of journalistic experience, many Pacific media professionals and editors expect their cadet journalists to learn the craft as they are thrown into sometimes daunting situations. For these young journalists, it is a case of sink or swim, for the pressures are too high and there is always a looming threat of a coup or political unrest. While journalism cadets in New Zealand or Australia may begin their career with a university education followed by intensive in-house training where they learn to master the house rules on style, defamation laws and journalism practice generally, in Fiji, notes Robie, journalists

covering major stories are young with no or little experience with the realities of their work environment. Utilizing this “on the job” training for journalists may have worked a few decades ago where there was a constant supply of locally trained or expatriate supervisors and globalisation did not have the degree of impact it has today. With a shrinking world order and so much mobility, argues Robie, especially of trained and experienced professionals out of Fiji since the 1987 coups, the revolving door syndrome has become an unfortunate reality within the local journalistic environment.

Although university training could become a catalyst for more engaged journalism in the Pacific region, Robie spends time assessing the state of journalism education in the region, lamenting the brain-drain in journalism and the lack of training in research skills. Adding further hurdles to the already facing would-be journalists in the region, the staff at Fiji’s University of the South Pacific (USP) has long held the belief that journalism was not a worthwhile addition to the curriculum and that the money spent on its journalism program could have been better spent elsewhere. Despite these challenges, Robie observes that USP journalism students working on Pacific Journalism Online rose to the challenge of providing high quality reports and displayed their craft in an excellent manner during the 2000 coup. The online site broke the news of the coup to the world and provided coverage from the ground until forced to close under threats of attack on USP. In stark contrast, the professional media, even after the first anniversary of the coup, did not want to be engaged in any critical analysis or reflection on this important event.

Along with recording three decades of media education history, its birthing problems, long-held myths and attitude towards journalism education, Robie includes comments and observations of seasoned professionals as well as working journalists. He finds that many journalists in the region “have had little or no tertiary education” and consequently “give little thought to the wider social responsibilities of the media in a developing society.” Robie also says that while the media in some Pacific countries is refreshingly outspoken and courageous, in others, there is a worrying trend towards self-censorship. Low wages are also a serious threat to the autonomy of journalists. Over time, he argues, journalists could become part of the corruption problem instead of the solution.

For journalists, the book is a wake-up call to protect their own rights in the work environment. The book also calls for an active public to respond to the media. Robie argues that “it is vital that no political or social institution has absolute authority over the media.” Perhaps the first lesson in journalism training should be on standing up for oneself – only then will journalists be in a stronger position to look out for the weaker members of society as globalisation sweeps everyone off their feet. Perhaps Robie’s book can encourage greater self-reflection among journalists in the region – it is better late than never.

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