

❖ **An examination into Australian news coverage of Papua New Guinea**

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Abstract

This paper examines Australian news coverage of Papua New Guinea (PNG), a country with which Australia shares geographic proximity and strong historical ties. Drawing on the results of a content analysis examining coverage of PNG by *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers from January 1 until June 30, 2010, this paper aims to demonstrate that PNG is a neglected news region. This neglect – in terms of quality reporting – has produced a limited and fragmentary portrayal of PNG in the Australian media, where the majority of news stories about PNG tend to lack analysis and contextual background. The key methodologies used in this paper are content analysis and in-depth interviews with a selected number of Australian journalists currently or previously based in PNG. The paper hopes to provide insight into a much broader examination of the changing trends in international news coverage of developing countries, particularly in the Asia-Pacific.

Introduction

Australia and PNG have a unique relationship. As Australia's only former colony, PNG is distinct to Australian history. It is Australia's closest neighbour and remains highly relevant to our political affairs – in 2010, the Australian Government developed a Joint Understanding with the PNG Government, and offered a loan of up to US\$500 million to support Australia's participation in the ExxonMobil-led PNG LNG project (Papua New Guinea country brief 2010).

Since PNG gained independence from Australia in 1975, the power imbalance created by colonialism has not disappeared. Thirty-five-years later, Australia is PNG's largest source of imports and its number one export market (Papua New Guinea country brief 2010). Australia is also PNG's largest bilateral aid donor with AU\$457.2 million pledged over 2010-11 (AusAID Papua New Guinea 2010). But despite this large-scale aid program, PNG continues to confront serious problems as a state. PNG ranks 129th out of 170 countries in the UNDP human development index, below all its Pacific neighbours (UNDP 1999: 110). Its political system is rife with corruption and education is a major problem (Rooney 2003: 79). Only 23 per cent of 15-19 year olds are enrolled at secondary school (UNDP 1999: 110). While Australia donates a significant amount to PNG, genuine public debate about Australia's responsibility to PNG is arguably dormant in Australian politics (Scott 2009).

Herein lies the paradox. While there may be strong historical ties and geographic proximity between the two countries, Australia's political outlook on PNG is principally defined as one of ambivalence (Scott 2009: 3). This reflects the Australian media's outlook towards PNG. Today, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Australian Associated Press (AAP) each have one correspondent based in Port Moresby. This is in sharp contrast to the past – before self-government was granted, the Australian media treated stories from PNG as domestic news and subsequently, at that time, there were a large number of Australian news organisations with correspondents based in Port Moresby. From World War II until 1975, there were journalists from a range of Australian media organisations, including Fairfax, *The Herald and Weekly Times* (News Limited), the ABC, Australian Associated Press, and a large number of freelancers. But by the 1980s, not even a decade after independence, this had all changed. Today, the ABC and AAP correspondents are not just the only media representatives from Australia, they are the only two foreign correspondents in PNG. It is possible to argue that PNG is not only a long way from Australia's public consciousness, it is also a long way from the rest of the world's attention.

This ambivalence has repercussions – as with many social and political issues, Australians are informed about international issues from the media. Furthermore, the media play a pivotal role in setting the agenda for what constitutes legitimate public discussion (Fraser 2007). In this sense, the way that PNG is constructed by the Australian media affects both Australian and PNG citizens.

Theoretical background

There is almost no detailed scholarly research on Australian media coverage of Papua New Guinea besides Peter Cronau's (1995) examination of one fortnight of Australia's reporting on the Bougainville crisis. Cronau's (1995: 163) study argued that

Australia's coverage of PNG was shallow, sensationalised and lacking in quality. Despite substantial research into the decline of foreign news coverage, and the representation of developing countries in Western media, scholarly considerations of Pacific people within western media are "virtually non-existent" (Loto et al. 2006: 102).

Perhaps this is because media representations of the Pacific, even in Australian media, are also virtually non-existent. In 1922, Walter Lippman argued that the news media determine our cognitive maps of the world. Evidence for the agenda-setting role of the media abounds (McCombs 2004: 3) and since the media act in some ways as our window to the 'outside' world, then it makes sense that they play a significant role in shaping our attitudes towards certain places and people. Adams (in Herbert 2001: 1) illustrates this by saying that the reported death of one Western European equals three Eastern Europeans, equals nine Latin Americans, equals 11 Middle Easterners, equals 12 Asians. Pacific Islanders don't even rate a mention in his head count of which lives matter most to the media.

This neglect is partially explained by Tony Nnaemeka and Jim Richstad's (1980) study of news flow in the Pacific Region. Drawing on Johan Galtung's (1971) "structural theory of imperialism", Nnaemeka and Richstad identify relationships of dominance and dependency between 'centre' and 'periphery' nations exerting power in the Pacific. Centre nations included Australia and New Zealand, while periphery nations included Papua New Guinea, Fiji and other smaller islands with a history of colonial domination.

The study found that colonial relationships exerted a strong influence over news patterns in the region. While periphery nations tended to focus on centre nations, like Australia, those same power-centres tended to focus on themselves or other centre nations (Nnaemeka and Richstad 1980: 250). Nnaemeka and Richstad (1980) argue that this demonstrates the unequal flow of news in the Pacific region. This is largely explained by Australia's position as an elite nation in the Pacific region. Australia is regarded as an elite nation because of its political and economic strengths, its comparatively larger size, and its relationships with other 'centre' nations such as the US and the UK.

Damien Kingsbury (2000) takes a similar argument, stating that the Australian news media have an overwhelming sense of "cultural chauvinism" in their reporting of Australia's near neighbours. Kingsbury (2000: 17) observes that this makes Australia a remnant of its colonial past, "an imperial outpost clinging to an unfounded sense of superiority and cast adrift in a rising sea of postcolonial states." Furthermore, 'elite' nations do not measure the news value of 'proximity' in terms of geographic proximity, but rather the intertwined factors of economic, political and cultural proximity (Johnson 1997). This approach to the notion of 'proximity' explains why PNG, which has strong historical ties and geographical proximity with Australia, remains largely neglected by Australian media.

Media coverage of PNG

Across a six-month period from January 1, 2010 until June 30, 2010, a total of 221 articles were coded for analysis. These articles were identified using Factiva, under the key word: 'Papua New Guinea' and/or 'PNG'. Of the total articles, 81 were published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and 140 were published in *The Australian*. Overwhelmingly, the most common category of stories related to PNG in the two newspapers was found in the 'business' and 'finance' news sections. Most of these stories were related to the share price movements of mining companies conducting work in PNG. Of the 62 total articles categorised as 'business', only three – one in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and two in *The Australian* – were not related to 'mining stories.' Figure 1 shows the seven most common key issues covered in *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

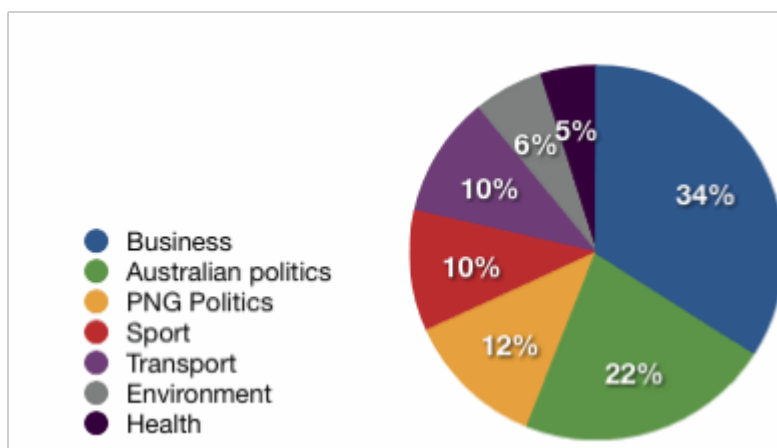


Figure 1: Breakdown of key issue coverage in *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*

"PNG politics", which accounted 22 articles, focused specifically on PNG's political sphere. It is very important to note that 18 of these articles were published in *The Australian*, meaning that *The Sydney Morning Herald* accounted for just four, or 18%, of these stories. One possible explanation for the dramatic difference in the level of coverage within this category between the two newspapers is due to the presence of a journalist from *The Australian* in PNG. Rowan Callick, Asia-Pacific Editor for *The Australian*, has a strong personal connection to PNG – he worked and lived in PNG for 11 years. In an interview for this paper, Callick explained that his title as 'Editor' does not mean that he actually edits, rather that he covers the Asia and Pacific regions as a writer. Callick says that after China – where he also worked – PNG is the place he writes about most:

Because I've got a particular interest, having lived there [...] I write quite a lot [...] because there's so many

stories and in my view they're quite interesting and colourful, and no one else is writing them (Interview 2010).

These seven most common categories shown in Figure 2 accounted for 182, or 82%, of the total articles analysed. Other identified categories included "Pacific politics" (seven articles), "Arts and Music" (six articles), "Travel" and "Science" (five articles each), "Kokoda and World War 2" and "Global Humanitarian Issues" (four articles each), "Food" (three articles), "History" (two articles), and "Religion" and "Education" (one article each).

On initial assessment, 221 articles published in a six-month period might suggest that PNG is not a "neglected" news region at all, in Australian media. As a matter of fact, a study completed in 1993 by Lowe (2000) ranked PNG at number 13 in *The Sydney Morning Herald's* foreign news coverage – a total of 99 articles were identified over a year, making PNG the most reported country in the Pacific, even placing it above New Zealand, and the economic powers of France and Germany.

While PNG may not be neglected in terms of relative quantity, this paper argues that it is neglected in terms of "quality coverage." The 221 articles analysed included any article that mentioned PNG at all. In order to measure the value given to 'PNG' across media coverage, the content analysis examined the "hierarchy of significance" (Grundy 2007: 8) that PNG was granted within each article.

The majority (54%) of articles coded were hard news stories that employed the traditional inverted pyramid style. This involves giving the most information at the top, as it is assumed the reader will not necessarily read to the end (Conley & Lambie 2006: 124). Considering this, each article was coded based on whether the whole article was "about PNG." When PNG was not a key actor in the article, the task was to determine how many paragraphs referred to this country. Further, the task aimed to determine whether PNG was mentioned either in the first or second halves of the story.

Figure 2 shows that the majority of articles – see 'A' on Figure 2 – (35%, or 77 articles) contained just one paragraph referring to PNG in the latter-half of the article. In other words, approximately one third of articles were not about PNG as such, but simply contained a passing reference to it near the end of the story. *The Sydney Morning Herald* accounted for 43 of these articles, while *The Australian* had 34 articles in this category.

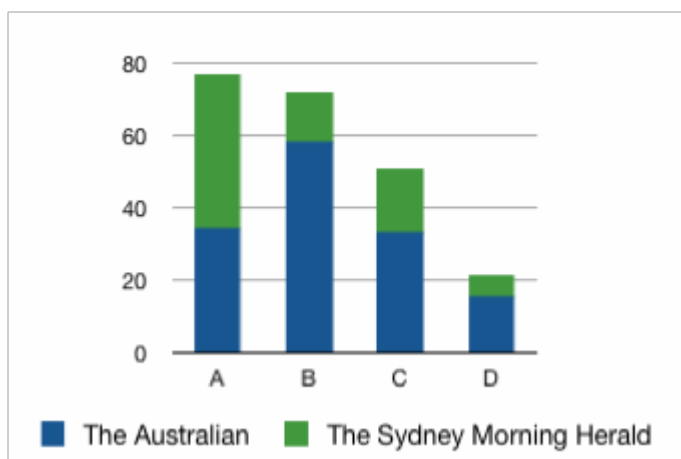


Figure 2: Percentage of articles with reference to PNG

The next largest category (33%, or 72) were articles which were entirely about PNG (see 'B' on Figure 2). They were variously a hard news story, a feature, or a commentary. Of this third category, *The Australian* was over-represented, contributing 58 articles compared to just 14 by *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Again, this could be at least partially explained by the presence of *The Australian's* journalist Rowan Callick. The personal interest, connection and expertise that Callick has with PNG give him a reasonable level of professional autonomy which allows him to pursue many stories that otherwise wouldn't be covered.

The remaining third represents articles that made reference to PNG in the first half of the article. Column 'C' on Figure 2 illustrates the 51 articles (23%) that contain one paragraph referring to PNG in the first half of the story. In this case, 33 of these stories were in *The Australian* and 18 were in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Column 'D' shows the smallest group, 21 articles (9%), which contained more than 2 paragraphs referring to PNG in the first half of the article. These articles tended to come from the "Australian politics" category. Most of these stories focused on the Labor government's proposal to deal with asylum seekers using a 'regional' approach, one of the key 2010 Federal Election issues. In these articles, the story was not solely about PNG, but it was mentioned as one of the key regional 'partners', alongside East Timor.

The process of categorising articles according to the "hierarchy of significance" given to PNG demonstrates that roughly two-thirds of the articles analysed – shown on Figure Three as categories A, C and D – were not wholly about PNG. Shanto Iyengar (1991) argues that news reporting is usually episodic or thematic and episodic coverage tends to be event-oriented, while thematic coverage provides background to a more abstract public issue (Iyengar 1991: 141). Features and commentary, which aim to provide more background and context, can be interpreted as thematic coverage.

Of the 72 articles that focus on PNG as a main subject, only 57% of these could be classified as thematic coverage, offering audiences insight and background into the issues – especially political matters – facing PNG. Of these, 10 articles from both newspapers could be categorised as commentary or analysis about PNG, and eight of these stories were published in *The*

Australian. Of the 10 articles offering background analysis, five focused on Australia's relationship with PNG (particularly looking at aid donations), three examined issues in PNG's domestic politics, and two examined mining-related issues.

The remainder of the articles that focused wholly on PNG could be classified as episodic reporting, which Iyengar (1991: 141) argues tend to be more fragmentary in nature. In other words, episodic reporting inhibits the audience's understanding of the big picture. Subsequently, the overwhelming majority of references to PNG occur in articles that cite it, but do not include any further explanation or details of the nation or its people. Of all 221 articles, five stories included interviews with individuals identified as PNG nationals, and three of these were politicians, speaking in their official capacity.

Making the news

The findings of the content analysis need to be considered alongside the context within which stories about PNG are produced. In the "information age", as Manuel Castells (2004) describes our current state of global communication and highly-developed information technologies, the abundance of stories available for reporting have created an insomniac media with an insatiable appetite for news. Yet, despite this hearty appetite, news is still the end result of a long process of selection – by choosing certain events as news and discarding others, media organisations engage in an "imperfect exchange of information" (Bennett 2001: 20) between themselves, politicians and people, who constantly negotiate changing definitions around what constitutes news.

Stories about PNG are subject to a particularly complicated set of economic and logistical factors that ensure the "imperfect exchange of information" continues. PNG faces some of the technological and resource limitations experienced by many developing countries. It also experiences security problems, particularly in urban areas. Since Australia is the only country that has permanent foreign correspondents based in PNG, the journalists employed by AAP and the ABC are confronted by a particularly unique set of workplace conditions.

According to Rowan Callick, Asia-Pacific Editor for *The Australian*, the visa application procedure for foreign journalists wanting to report on PNG is among the most difficult in the Asia-Pacific region. He says that getting a journalist's visa for PNG is similarly complicated to getting one for North Korea, a country he has also reported on:

This really puts people off going. The Prime Minister's older daughter decides who gets in and who doesn't (Interview 2010).

ABC correspondent Liam Fox describes the capital, Port Moresby, as a tough place to live and work. The ABC office, based in Port Moresby, has its own satellite installed allowing live reporting from PNG to the ABC studios in Australia. Fox describes the security situation as both a resident of Moresby and as a reporter:

We live behind a big razor wire fence, we've got big television cameras, [and] security guards. When you drive you're always winding your window up, you're looking out for car jackings or for something to happen. There's definitely an edge to the place, living here (Interview 2010).

PNG is a rugged, mountainous country, with limited transport options. Port Moresby is not connected by road to the rest of the country, so all stories outside of the capital require journalists to fly there. This operation can be both costly and time-consuming, as journalists wait for the approval of funds from their employers. Furthermore, the availability and reliability of news services have been slow to become established (Nash 1995: 35) and PNG, like much of the Pacific region, faces many difficulties in developing widespread media coverage.

Evangelia Papoutsaki and Dick Rooney (2006) argue that PNG is in a state of under communication, with limited take-up of communications technology and an urban-centred media that does not reflect the linguistic diversity of the country. The state of "under-communication" in which PNG exists has significant impacts on both local journalists and on the ability of foreign journalists to work there. According to ABC journalist Fox, the limited media infrastructure outside of Port Moresby means that when news breaks outside of the capital, covering it can be difficult. Fox has also found that being a foreign journalist often makes it harder for him to get interviews with government ministers and people in official positions:

I guess there might be a bit of colonial hangover on what the ABC represents, that idea of the old white masters (Interview 2010).

On one occasion, Fox had to chase the PNG Foreign Minister for an interview about a report on AusAid for three weeks.. Another time, he spent four weeks chasing an interview with the Health Minister, only to have the Minister refuse to appear on camera. On another occasion when he needed to access a local government member, he went through thirty numbers in the phone book before someone picked up – and that was a wrong number. AAP reporter Ilya Gridneff agreed that two of the biggest problems he faced on a daily basis were "can't make phone calls, [or] people aren't there" (Interview 2010). However, he also maintained that once he did make contact, PNG politicians were far more open than Australian politicians.

These circumstances have led to the establishment of close dialogue between local journalists and Australians reporters based in PNG. Former ABC correspondent Sean Dorney says that he worked with local journalists "a hell of a lot":

If you don't work with the local journalists and give them a bit of respect then you're really limiting your capacity to work. [...] And one of the good things about PNG is that there really are a lot of good local journalists up there (Interview 2010).

One of the biggest factors influencing the placement of foreign correspondents is cost (Herbert 2001: 61). PNG is a very expensive place to travel to, partly because of the transport costs involved with leaving Port Moresby, but also because rent

and hotels in the capital are very expensive. AAP journalist Gridneff says: "hotels are commonly worse than Fawlty Towers, and often more expensive than five-star hotels in Sydney" (Interview 2010).

The journalists consulted for the research all agreed that expense was one of the reasons that few foreign journalists worked in PNG. Fox explains that PNG is not "a Washington or London", where there are stories expected from correspondents on a daily basis. Instead, stories from PNG are less frequent. Therefore, the trade-off between the high costs of keeping a journalist there against the limited output expected from editors means that few news organisations are able to justify posting journalists to PNG.

The high cost of posting a foreign correspondent is a global dilemma for most Australian and foreign media organisations. One consequence of the increasing costs of global journalism has been the emergence of "parachute journalism." This term is used to describe the trend of western news organisations sending journalists in to cover a place, but only when an event happens. Since global news is often synonymous with conflict (Herbert 2001: 60) this means that foreign places only tend to be covered when something 'bad' happens, contributing further to negative stereotypes of distant places. PNG has not been affected by the parachute journalist trend – the timely visa process and high cost of sending journalists to PNG, coupled with the relatively low news value placed on the entire Pacific region, means that even parachute journalists are rarely sent to PNG. This means that while the limited number of journalists working in PNG are well-informed and highly experienced at reporting on issues in PNG, it is a difficult place to cover for journalists who do not have a solid network of local contacts and a well-resourced news organisation supporting them. The result is limited quality coverage of PNG and the issues it faces as a nation.

Conclusion

Despite PNG's historical ties and geographic proximity to Australia – along with its continued political relevance – PNG is neglected by Australian media in terms of "quality coverage." This is driven by PNG's perceived lack of news value as well as logistics. The greater consequence of a lack of analytical and well-contextualised coverage of PNG is the emergence of a fragmented picture of the country in the Australian media. Further, if we accept that the media play a key role in forming public opinion, it is possible to speculate that the fragmented and limited news construction of PNG is likely to influence the Australian public consciousness about its neighbour.

The lack of quality of news coverage is also recognised by Australian correspondents in PNG. ABC journalist Sean Dorney argues that only a small portion of events in PNG are considered newsworthy for Australian audiences:

One of our problems as Australians is that a lot of us, especially those who have an ex-European background, like to think that Australia is anchored somewhere between Ireland and North America. And to think that we're plonked here in the Pacific – you wouldn't believe it by reading the news, or that there are 15 other countries in this part of the world. Because they never get reported on (Interview 2010).

Asia-Pacific Editor for *The Australian*, Rowan Callick also argues that due to the nature of news, the problem is cyclical:

When you haven't had a story for ages from these places [like PNG] and a good story occurs, you haven't got a background, you haven't got someone who can explain it. So it [the story] just pops up, it looks weird, and they [news editors] don't know what to do with it. And that's a problem (Interview 2010).

This paper concludes with the suggestion that further research into PNG's portrayal in the Australian media is important. There is enormous scope for further academic investigation into PNG's representation in other Australian news media organisations. There is also scope for research into audience perceptions of PNG.

Research into Australia's limited and fragmentary coverage of PNG is important because, at the very least, further investigation can build a clearer picture of how and where inequalities in news representation exist between nations. If we truly wish to inhabit a postcolonial world, then understanding more about the Australian media's representations of our nearest neighbour would contribute to meaningful discussions about ensuring quality journalism and more balanced coverage in the future, particularly of the Asia-Pacific region.

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