The Role of the Media in Reporting Conflicts

Background

New communications technologies such as mobile/video phones and laptop computers are allowing journalists to gather and disseminate information with ease from many parts of the world. The digitization of the news industry, which has led to a compression of time and space, means we see news images of demonstrations, riots or coups within minutes of these occurring in the streets of Jakarta, Suva, or Port Moresby. These images not only inform global audiences, but may instigate further campaigns of violence at home. Chin Saik Yoon cites an example of this in India when the BBC World Television News Service relayed, almost instantly, footage of violent clashes during an attack on a Hindu shrine by Muslim fundamentalists. The horrific scenes were seen by a large number of Indians and triggered widespread clashes around the country.[1] As a result, the media's reporting of a conflict became central to the unfolding of the conflict itself. While technology has reduced the tyranny of distance, the commercial realities of news gathering have also affected the reporting of conflicts. The higher cost of news gathering in remote regions, coupled with the geopolitical and economic priorities of the West, mean that conflicts occurring at close proximity to the metropolitan centers receive coverage at the expense of those occurring further away in less developed regions of the world. A study of conflict reporting in the world's major news outlets in 2000 shows that the Israel Palestine conflict was by far the most covered - five times greater than the next most covered conflict. Virgil Hawkins, the researcher who conducted the study, notes: 'By contrast, conflict in Africa, which has been, in the post-Cold-War world, responsible for up to 90 percent of the world's total war dead, suffered an almost complete media blackout. Coverage of the massive war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which caused in excess of one million deaths in the year 2000, was almost insignificant.'[2]

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With the international news agenda controlled by the world's major media giants, it has become crucial to develop and strengthen media at the local level to maintain diversity of opinion. As media in many developing nations, such as Indonesia, move away from state control towards private enterprise, it is essential for local media to find their own voice and professional codes. A well developed media system with professionally trained journalists usually benefits both global and local audiences and provides a vital link to the outside world during conflict situations. For example, the civilian coup d`etat that occurred in Fiji on 19 May 2000 brought world-wide attention to a small web publisher, Fijilive.com, which provided the only communication link out of Suva during the critical first 48 hours of this crisis. The Fijilive publisher, Yashwant Gaunder, a journalist by profession instantly recognized the power of the Internet in maintaining the global communication flow. In an amazing example of reverse news flow, the world's news media took direct feeds from Fijilive.com to inform international audiences about the events unraveling in Fiji's Parliamentary compounds. Gaunder himself was surprised by the interest his website generated worldwide.[3]

Situation Analysis

1. Conflicts In the Pacific

The Pacific Region has experienced growing instability and political unrest over the past 20 years. Some of the worst conflicts in the region occurred in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Bougainville in Papua New Guinea between 1987 and 2000. Although the media has largely portrayed these conflicts as inter-ethnic and pro-indigenous in nature, there are other causes which have found expression in political and armed rebellion. Sensitive questions of land rights, unequal distribution of political power and economic resources, and endemic corruption are at the core of the conflicts. The ensuing breakdown in law and order has had a sustained negative impact on the operation of local media and media practitioners.

In Fiji the media came under intense pressure during the coups of 1987 and 2000. In 1987, following the military coup d'etat led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, armed troops and police occupied the offices of the two daily newspapers, The Fiji Times and the Fiji Sun and ordered them to cease publishing indefinitely.[4] Then owners of the Fiji Sun decided to close down their operation rather than publish in an environment of self-censorship. In the civilian coup d`etat of May 2000, the television studios of Fiji TV One were attacked and destroyed after the station aired a scathing analysis of the coup. Many senior journalists left Fiji following the coups in 1987 and again in 2000. The journalists who are currently employed are relatively young compared to their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand. The average age of journalists covering the May 2000 coup d`etat was 24 and none of them had tertiary qualifications.

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In the Solomon Islands, journalists have been targeted on the basis of their ethnicity. One Solomon island journalist reported that the situation was made so untenable for him and his family that he had to seek exile in Australia. Corrupt politicians have used their power to silence the press. A Solomon Islands Cabinet minister, Daniel Faafunua was sentenced to three years jail for demanding money with menace from the country's only daily newspaper the Solomon Star. Faafunua was angry about a story that gave a brief account of an unnamed Cabinet minister who had been involved in a fight at the town market.[5]

Papua New Guinea enjoys one of the freest media environments in the region, yet is not immune from violence. An armed gang attacked the independent weekly newspaper, the Wantok, and burned down its offices in February 2004. The president of the PNG Media Council, Peter Aitsi, described it as another terrorist attack on the media in PNG.[6]

2. Media in the Pacific

In the past decade, media in Pacific Island countries have faced a range of challenges affecting their development and operation. Internal strife, state control, and the chronic problems of poor working conditions and lack

The Role of the Media in Reporting Conflicts

of training for journalists have been some of the key issues of concern. With diverse language and cultural groups and a dispersed geography, the region's media have struggled to develop effective communication channels to serve the region. The distance between islands has not only inhibited inter-island flows of information but also intra-country communication. Under-developed transport and communications infrastructure precludes media coverage of outer island communities thus creating a centre-periphery divide. As in many other developing countries, the news of industrialized nations still dominates the television and newspapers, which carry a greater coverage of news and analysis of conflicts in faraway lands than of those in neighboring countries. The establishment of regional news services such as Pacnews in 1999 and online information services offered by Pacific Media Watch and Pacific Islands News Association has assisted in regional news exchanges.

Country or Region	Conflict or Rebellion
Vanuatu	The Santo Rebellion, intervention by PNG at the request of the Vanuatu government, 1979-80
New Caledonia	Ethnic turmoil concerning independence from France, 1980s Fiji: coups d'etat, 1987 and 2000
Fiji	Coups d'etat, 1987 and 2000
Papua New Guinea	Insurgency in Bougainville, 1990s; independence movement for Oro; 'tribal fighting' in the Highlands; mutiny, including the Sandline Affair
French Polynesia	Riots and burning of Papeete, 1990s
New Caledonia	Violence concerning independence and French rule
Solomon Islands	Ethnic conflict in Guadalcanal, 1999-2000
Tonga	Attacks on Chinese and Asian immigrants
East Timor	Secession from Indonesia
West Papua	Independence movement
Hawaii, Kiribati, Rotuma, Tuvalu	No overt conflict, but independence movements and threats of secession

Table 1. Intraregional Pacific Conflicts: A Selection
Source: Robert Seward, 2002. 'Regional Security in the Pacific Islands."[7]
http://www.meijigakuin.ac.jp/~iism/sisp/security01.htm

3. Issues of control

Despite the constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press and free speech, journalists and media organizations have come under increasing attack from a variety of sources in the Pacific recently. Journalists have been threatened with physical violence, newspaper offices and television studios have been burned down or trashed by mobs, and politicians have threatened to impose regulatory control. Politicians have also used their positions in the traditional system of hierarchy to muzzle media criticism or call upon the tribal loyalties of journalists. The Tongan Government has made unsuccessful attempts to ban Times of Tonga, a privately-owned newspaper published from New Zealand, which has been openly critical of the monarchy. In recent months there has been an increasing debate by government leaders, media organizations and civil society groups about the regulation of media in the Pacific. While there is general consensus about the need to develop a code of ethics and improve journalism standards, media practitioners fear that government-driven initiatives could lead to censorship. Media councils have been established in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Fiji with the boards made up of members of media organizations and, in the case of Fiji, including members of the public. While the establishment of media councils in the region is a positive development, media practitioners have cautioned that they should remain independent of government control.

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4. Training

One of the enduring problems in Pacific media has been a lack of training for local journalists who are usually not tertiary educated and lack the ability to critically analyze and go beyond the event. In their analysis of the conflicts in Fiji, some commentators have highlighted lack of leadership in news rooms, inability to correct misperceptions in reporting key issues, and tribal loyalties as significant factors which affected media reporting of the May 2000 coup.[8] Fijian journalist Jale Moala points out, ' …the perpetrators of the terrorist action, led by George Speight, received publicity that at the time seemed to legitimize their actions and their existence. Some argued that the situation may not have deteriorated as quickly as it did if the media had played a more responsible role.'[9] Media executives need to invest more resources in nurturing the talents of news workers to form a core group of senior journalists. News workers also need training in conflict resolution and peace-building as well as investigative journalism. In recent years, the media councils in PNG[10] and Fiji[11] have placed greater emphasis on the training of journalists. Their efforts have been supplemented by the training initiatives of non-government organizations such as the Fiji Media Watch Group.

5. Economic considerations

Small market size, diversity of languages and peoples, as well as low levels of literacy have all impacted on media development and practices in the region. Publishing a daily newspaper is not viable economically for many Pacific nations. High cost of newsprint, difficulties in distribution to remote areas and low circulation figures affect the profit margins of independent publishers. As a result, publishing is the domain of the State in a majority of Pacific Island countries. For example, Kiribati, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Tuvalu and

Tonga do not have daily newspapers. They have either weekly or monthly publications in the form of government information bulletins, and in rare cases, supplemented by private publications.[12] Computerization, which has led to lower production costs, is encouraging more entrepreneurs in the market. Radio is the most popular form of media in the islands with its ability to broadcast in different languages and reach scattered and isolated populations. For many islanders radio not only provides the main source of news and entertainment, but helps them to communicate with relatives and friends. Announcements of private messages have become significant sources of income for media operators. Television is a relatively new medium and services range from national free-to-air, subscription or satellite distribution of overseas services such as Australia's ABC, the BBC or other satellite TV channels.

Papua New Guinea and Fiji enjoy a more vibrant media environment, yet provide a challenging market for commercial media operators in terms of audiences. They have to contend with significant blocks of audiences who are of different cultures and speak different languages - the traditional markets on the one hand and the burgeoning westernized group on the other. Commercial operators tend to target mainly the middle to high income group in urban areas with programming geared towards the young westernized group.[13]

The news paradigms and the reporting of conflicts in the Pacific.

The prime news value of the media is conflict or disorder i.e. negative events. A familiar adage in journalism is 'bad news is good news and usually good news is no news' unless of course it happens to the most powerful. The media coverage is also event-driven. In other words a coup or an outbreak of disease or a cyclone will receive immediate coverage but the ongoing reconciliation efforts, or the rebuilding of the economy, which may take many years, won't receive the same coverage, if any.

Stories of conflict are framed within binary categories of good vs. evil, or one ethnic race against another, thus leading to an over simplification of issues. This style of reporting came into favor during the Cold War era when two giant hegemonic systems - capitalism and communism - were in ideological confrontation. It has become further entrenched since 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' speeches by American President George W. Bush.

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Much of the news coverage is about the elite, be they government officials, military or freedom fighters. Many of the atrocities are planned at the top level of government or the military. It is ironic then that these are the very people international media turn to as a source of information.

The need of the media to personify a conflict, so that an act of evil or good is attributed to one person, overlooks the consequences of violence on ordinary people.

At the global level, the merger of media corporations has meant that the global flow of information is controlled by fewer and fewer media.

Recommendations

Media, both at international and local levels, can play a significant role in the reporting of conflicts thus helping to bring about peace and stability in a number of ways:

1. Many nations in the Asia Pacific region are plural societies and while reflecting this plurality and diversity of opinions, local media should report with sensitivity, issues which may be the catalyst for further instability.

2. Journalists in the region should question if the conflict-event orientation of Western journalism really is right for them in their reporting of conflicts. By choosing story pegs which promote reconciliation journalists can assist in breaking the cycle of violence.

3. Pacific journalists need to integrate notions of community-building and consensus-building into their own practice.

4. There is an urgent need to develop training programs which not only teach writing skills but develop critical and analytical abilities of journalists.

5. A short term exchange program (say three months) of journalists working in large metropolitan media organizations exchanging positions with journalists from regional media will provide much greater understanding of each other's society and professional practices.

6. Media workers reporting in conflict situations can bring other perspectives by training in Peace Journalism which promotes alternative methods such as mediation and co-operation.[14]

7. Journalists often overlook people at the community level. A community worker, a farmer, a school teacher, a mother may bring very different perspectives to a story and when placed alongside elite sources, those perspectives would bring greater balance in stories.

8. Media should document the experiences of women in armed conflict, as well as support and publicize women's peace initiatives. The role of women as peace builders, and the unique contributions that women bring to the peace-table, should be highlighted, and not sidelined by the mass media.[15]

9. Community media such as radio can be used to enable communities to participate in projects of reconciliation and peace building.

10. Overall it can be stated that a strong independent local media, with journalists who have skill and sensitivity in peace-building, is essential in the Pacific region.

Endnotes

1. Chin Saik Yoon, 'Development Communication in Asia' in Jan Servaes, ed. *Walking On The Other Side Of The Information Highway*. (Penang: Southbound, 2000)

2. Virgil Hawkins, 'The Other Side of the CNN Factor: the media and conflict' *Journalism Studies*, Volume 3, Number 2 (2002), pp. 225-240.

3. Yashwant Gaunder, Personal Interview, Suva, Fiji (February 2003).

4. For a discussion of journalistic training and conflict reporting in Fiji see David Robie, 'The Speight Spectre: 'free and fair' elections as a Pacific development journalism challenge,' *Australian Journalism Review*, v.25, no.1, (July 2003), pp.33-50

5. Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, 'Media Gets Rough Ride In Pacific Island Hot Spots.' February 12, 2004, Pacific Media Watch Online 2004, http://www.pmw.c2o.org

6. Ibid.

7. Robert Seward. *Regional Security In The Pacific Islands*, (June 2004) retrieved May 6, 2004 from http://www.meijigakuin.ac.jp/~iism/sisp/security01.htm

8. Robie, 2003 p.36 and 3.

9. Ibid., p.37

10. PNG Media Council and Solomon Islands Media Council have developed a website in partnership. It carries information about training, events, links to PNG-based media and other related organizations. http://www.png-simediacouncil.org/

11. The Media Council of Fiji website carries useful information about Media code of ethics, complaint procedures and council press releases. http://www.fijimediacouncil.com/

12. BBC News Online provides country profile on Pacific Island nations with details of media operation in each country at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/

13. Usha Sundar Harris, *Television in Fiji: In Whose Interest*?, MA Thesis (unpublished), Centre for International Communication, Macquarie University, Sydney (1994).

14. Annabel McGoldrick and Jake Lynch, *Peace Journalism: How To Do It?* (2000) Retrieved May 6, 2004 from http://www.transcend.org/pjmanual.htm

15. Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, '*The Impact of New Information Communication Technology on the Media: A Community Media Perspective from the Pacific Island Region.*' Paper presented at United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting 'Participation and access of women to the media, and the impact of media on, and its use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women' Beirut, Lebanon, November 12 to 15 2002.

EPS Policy Brief #3
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About Economists for Peace and Security

Economists for Peace and Security, formerly ECAAR, works to inform social scientists, citizens, journalists and policy-makers worldwide about the full costs of war and conflict, and to propose feasible alternative approaches to building international security. EPS is a UN-registered NGO with consultative status to the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information. Founded in 1989, its Board of Directors and Trustees includes 10 Nobel laureates and other distinguished economists.

About this policy brief

This policy brief was prepared in conjunction with a symposium held April 9, 2004 in Sydney, Australia, to discuss how far economic concerns are implicated in internal strife within the countries of the region, and what sorts of strategies might offer promise for bringing about peaceful resolution of these problems. As well as a focus on economic issues, an important theme running through the symposium was the role of the media in reporting on conflict and in playing a constructive role in processes of conflict resolution.

The symposium was made possible as a result of the generous financial support of the Ford Foundation. It was organized by the Australian affiliate of EPS, with the cooperation and assistance of the Department of Economics at Macquarie University, the Economic Society of Australia, and the Australian overseas development agency AusAID through its International Seminar Support Scheme.

Please see the related policy brief, 'Beyond Greed and Curses,' at http://www.epsusa.org/publications/policy-briefs/banks.pdf