



## The role of the media in conflict prevention and peace building in Tonga

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If there is a common accusation Pacific governments have made against the media, it is that the media create conflict rather than prevent it. Island governments are all too often quick to assert that the media play a key role in the destabilisation of society rather than building peace and harmony.

The common call by most Island governments is for the media to become 'responsible', to 'raise the standard of journalism' in the region. This expressed concern is illustrative of the belief most governments in the region hold that the media tend to have a destabilising effect, and indeed, in some cases the media are thought to have caused conflict that could have been prevented had the media been 'more responsible'.

The reaction by the current Fiji regime to media practices in Fiji is a case in point. The regime seems to be saying, 'We have a vision as to what we want Fiji society to be, and we want the media to assist [by reporting about us in positive and non-critical ways] in the process of getting there'. In short, the media in Fiji, according to the regime, have not been 'helpful' in working to develop Fiji society to the place the regime believes it needs to be at.

'Media responsibility' in this case, as well as the suggestion of 'raising standards of journalism', often means that media should be responsible to the objectives that the powers that be establish for them, rather than responsible to the community by informing people fully about what is going on.

The same principle is the basis of governments' calls for raising the standards of journalism. High standards of journalism mean different things to government and to media organisations. Media that align with the vision or objective of social development adhered to by any government are more likely to be regarded as 'responsible' and as having 'high standards of journalism'.



There have been times when the Fiji regime has bluntly stated that some of the media in Fiji have been disruptive, and in fact have been a destabilising force in regard to what the regime wants to achieve in Fiji. Numerous arguments have raged on both sides of this story, but the point that is being made here is that often governments and media work from different ends of the spectrum of social development. The tension is not so much centred on media practices per se, but rather on the perceived purpose of media operations.

The existing tension between governments and media generates a friction that sometimes blows up into full frontal confrontation, with media practitioners heavily leaning toward advocacy of media freedom (including the right to say what they want to say about any incident) and governments leaning heavily on the emphasis of media responsibility, content standards, and even ethical operational standards—which tends to mean peddling the government's line uncritically. That does not mean that media operators do not see the need to be responsible in their storytelling, or to maintain ethical and professional standards of journalism. In fact, most do. But many regional governments apparently take a position that the media often walk at the edge of irresponsibility.

There is, however, always a shift along the spectrum of emphasis according to what media believe to be important or of (or in) the public interest, versus the belief held by a government that it has a monopoly right on 'the correct interpretation'. The media push the perceived boundaries often – not so much legal boundaries as cultural ones. That is why some leaders of island governments may frequently be seen to use 'culture' as a defensive refuge in which to hide when they are scrutinised on issues of corruption and the lack of transparency and accountability in governance.

It has been well argued by media practitioners, however, that those who hide behind culture as an excuse for dishonesty have done injustice to—and perhaps even insulted—that culture by suggesting that the values of honesty, transparency and accountability are not found in the culture.

Tonga has had its share of tension between media and government, resulting in government attempts to regulate the media, and in legal challenges by the media. Some of the stories of this conflict have been thoroughly documented in books such as *Island Kingdom Strikes Back* (Moala 2002). Reference to government and media conflict has also been made in the book *In Search of the Friendly Islands* (Moala 2009; see book review in this issue), both books authored by the present writer.

In fact, at the time of writing of this article (September 2010), the Tongan government was preparing a bill to be introduced to parliament that would require newspapers to be licensed under a Communications Act, just like all electronic media. The licensing of newspapers would give government another level of control, that of deciding which newspapers may continue to operate, harking back to the time when the only newspaper, the government owned and run *Tonga Chronicle*, was to all intents and purposes the government newsheet. Most media operators in Tonga believe that in the contemporary context, the licensing control will in effect infringe on the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression and press freedom. This may lead to more confrontation in court between the government and media.

## Social development and journalism

To assume that the media have a role in conflict prevention and peace building is to assume also that they have a role in social development. If this is the case, then it is a role that may need to be specifically defined, and may need to be noted and taught as one of the fundamental aims of any media transmission.

The media can play a role in conflict prevention and peace building as part of a broader commitment to social development. One media sector that embraces this responsibility is that of so-called 'development journalism'. As Dinesh C. Sharma claims in his *Development Journalism – An Introduction* (2007), 'The goal of development journalism is to reach people and make a change in their lives'. He says: 'People who are well informed are able to exercise their rights and duties as citizens in a meaningful way'.

While it can be argued that all societies are in a constant, ongoing state of 'development', the term development journalism refers to a type of investigative reporting that focuses on the conditions in developing nations and ways to improve undesirable conditions.

Real, hard-core, in-depth investigative reporting seems to be on the decline around the world. However, the interest in the Pacific region in 'development journalism' might inspire a new generation of journalists and media practitioners who are dedicated to deep research and reporting for the purpose of creating informed and aware communities.

This will inevitably affect journalism training, and the on-going training of journalists. Aspiring journalists must learn how to do research and engage in investigative journalism. Sharma writes: 'Development writing does not fit into the "5 Ws and H" framework as it is not based on an event or a happening of the day. Rather, it is based on a development issue that is not an event but a process, and reporting on an issue has to reflect the process.'

If development journalism is aimed at reaching people and bringing change to their lives, then it is critical for media as a whole to determine what kind of changes it brings to people's lives as a result of the information that is delivered. Who are we reaching with the information that we have, and what are the changes we expect as a result of their consuming the content of our delivery?

It is a fact that as long as human life and relationships persist on this planet, there will always be reports or stories that do not necessarily fit the ideal aspirations of any ruling power in a particular society. That is the reality of life. Things do happen that are contrary to the ideals, and those things that happen must be reported. At the core of any media with a social consciousness is the belief that arriving at the truth, even if the process of getting there is rough, will in the end produce social harmony, the outcome of true peace building. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth. Social harmony or peace that is built on anything else but the truth will not hold up.

The tension between government and media in recent years in island nations such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tonga has to do primarily with the perceived social impact that the media have had on these island nations. The media tendency has traditionally been to point the finger at governments, blaming them as policy decision-makers for any negative social impact in society.

But the blame game may grow out of shallow or inadequate analysis: social ills can be wrongly blamed on governments, which often inherit social situations that have nothing to do with the exercise of administration or carrying out of policy decisions. The media have often failed to look at lived social experiences, the remembered history of a people, and even the historical and social make-up of that society in order to identify where the real source of conflict may lie.

Social ills that are seen on the surface may only be the symptoms of the brewing crisis of the moment. It is the role of the journalist to look deeper into the causes behind such conflict, so as to 'bring light' into the situation. 'Light' brings understanding, and understanding is the bridge that connects two opposing forces, preventing conflict and building peace.

### **Media with a purpose**

Media with a purpose that is linked directly to social development implies media that are mindful of the outcome or results produced by their service. Remove this notion of being purpose driven and media then becomes an end in itself rather than a tool for national social development. No medium, therefore, can be exempted from this need to define their purpose in social development, because it is in the nature of information delivery to shape thinking, and thus influence social development.

But there is a split in the general thinking about media, especially among media practitioners themselves. There are those who argue that media being a mode of information delivery is an end in itself, and to establish a purpose for that delivery is totally up to those who are owners and practitioners of such media. This is the utilitarian view regarding media—that they are just a tool. But this argument begs further questioning, as every tool does have a designated purpose. Tools are not created for display, but for use to fulfil a definite purpose.

The utilitarian thought likens the media to a product such as the car. The designers and producers of the car are more concerned that it be mechanically sound and work well to be able to perform the function of driving. The destination to which this car will drive, or who drives the car for that matter, is not their business. They just want to make sure the car works well and is safe to drive. For it to be roadworthy is all they are concerned about.

This is a view that is often adhered to and expressed by those who are media practitioners for government owned media. They say they are seeking to ensure their delivery of information is properly processed and professional. The bias that may inevitably be expressed in content is not a media issue in itself, they argue, but rather that of media ownership.

Media in this case are viewed as neutral professional tools used to fulfil the purpose established by those who 'drive' them, namely owners and practitioners. This concept suggests there is no such thing as government media or even independent media. You only have government 'owned' media or independently 'owned' media. Media in this case are 'free' to be whatever their owner wants them to be.

That puts the onus of determining the purpose of that particular medium, or what it is used for, on those who own it. And as the saying goes, 'press freedom belongs only to those who own one'. For that matter also, abuse of media freedom can be argued to belong to those who own one.

But there is also a trend of thinking and social interpretation today that points out the fact that media consumers or the people who subject themselves to the influence of media are the ones who in the end determine the purpose of those media: that if media were to perform their proper function, then it follows that people do have a say in determining the purpose of those media. In other words, the consumers or the citizens determine what and how they allow media to influence their thinking and behaviour.

Just as media purposes are often defined by owners and media practitioners, journalists (the storytellers) go through the challenges of redefining their trade in order to stay relevant to the new realities of media consumption. In most cases this involves the development of a renegotiated new identity for themselves so that there is a kind of paradigm shift, if you like, that will determine the way media respond to the forces that seem to inhibit what they set out to do.

The question of who journalists work for is one that needs some thought before an answer is pounced on. It is too simplistic to assume that journalists work for their employers. In a propaganda news organisation that may be the case. But in credible news organisations, journalists or media practitioners work for the public, who expect the information they get to be accurate and reliable. The informed decisions the citizens make had better be based on accurate information.

Accurate weather reporting, for example, or marketing stories, affect the decisions of farmers or exporters. These news consumers depend on accurate and reliable journalism for their livelihood.

### ***Responding to and reporting a crisis***

Proper reporting does not even involve tweaking the story to be able to prevent conflict or to facilitate peace building. To do so would be counterproductive because sooner or later the propagandist spin put into a story would become known and destroy the credibility of such a report.

What needs to be done in crisis reporting is not only to report the actual things that happen but also to give background and define the situation and factors that could have given rise to the event. Thus, asking the 'how' and the 'why' questions is always helpful. Such questions may be critical in the telling of such stories. The issues and the processes involved in an event are what need to be researched and reported on if what is told is 'to reach people and bring changes to their lives'.

An event in Tonga that still exercises the minds and tongues of many people today—one year later at the time of writing, and before the handing down of the findings of the commission of inquiry—is the sinking of a Tongan vessel, the MV *Princess Ashika*, in July 2009. Although, remarkably enough, there were 52 survivors, this is overshadowed by the fact that 74 people died in this tragedy.

The death of 74 people in an island nation with a population of just over 100,000 constitutes a huge loss of lives. Proportionately, in terms of population, that is like having a tragedy in New Zealand that kills 3,000 people. The *Ashika* sinking was a major crisis for Tonga because it touched many families. The loss of lives had an impact on the whole country.

The media faced a most challenging task in terms of how to report this tragedy in a way that would tell the truth but also not aggravate the deep pain and sadness associated with it. In Tonga, death is never an easy story to tell. It has to be handled delicately, like feeding a hungry man who

has not had food for several days. One would not feed a starving man a thick piece of steak as this will give rise to stomach complications. Such a man may need to be fed 'processed steak' in small amounts that can be digested properly. The same can be said of the reporting of the *Ashika* sinking. Tongans had no memory of ever having experienced a tragedy on this scale. The news had to be delivered in 'careful' doses.

The government response to this crisis was immediate and well planned. A Commission of Inquiry was set up to get to the truth of what happened, and covered all the issues and processes involved, ranging from the purchasing of the vessel, its certification and maintenance and the decisions to sail it that last time before it sank.

Often it is not so much the *what* of the story that is an issue in terms of social impact but *how* the story is told. There is a way—a Pacific way, the case of the *Ashika* sinking—through which such a story may be told so that it covers all the basics of the 'what' in the story, yet also conveys sociocultural meaning and understanding that helps to build the proper perspective in terms of understanding.

The truth is what any good storytelling reveals. And it is the truth, always, that builds proper perspective. It is proper perspective that contributes significantly to peace building. Perspective is the reality that media deal with all the time. Truth, however, does not exist in a vacuum; it is wrapped in sociocultural realities that give human understanding and thus develop perspective.

When perspective is built on inaccuracies and biased or inappropriate interpretation of facts, then one can expect there will be disharmony or conflict in social relationships. It could build a perspective that forms the basis upon which understanding and decisions are made, leading to undesired results. Or it could build a perspective of hope and just reconciliation, of peaceful anticipation for spiritual, emotional, and social answers.

When the news of the sinking of the MV *Ashika* broke, the news stories in the days that immediately followed covered what resulted from the sinking—how many died, who they were, and whether there were any survivors. The media reported on what kind of response was being made to the crisis, and the stories also included how the ship sank. A critical point in the storytelling was reached when the question of 'how?' was asked, followed by the question of 'why?' That is when the role of the media in conflict prevention and peace building becomes extremely important.

Stories that tell of how the ship sank, and what were the possible and probable factors that could explain why the ship sank, became the stuff of public dialogue and news dissemination.

Things started lining up as events and processes of the past were discussed publicly through the media. What were the recent events that led to the sinking, and why? What were the lived experiences of passengers, crew, those who operated the ship, the decision makers, all the way to the purchase of the ship? All kinds of facts came to the surface. But to disseminate the analysis of these facts and the public discussion of the issues that arose needed 'a free and responsible media'.

A Commission of Inquiry was held to look into the sinking of the boat. As more and more information became available about the process (or lack of it) the authorities went through in the purchase and operation of the sunken vessel, it became starkly clear that there were bad decisions made, that processes and procedures were violated, that the sinking of the ship could have been

prevented. The MV *Ashika* was not seaworthy. It should not have sailed. The crisis that happened could have been prevented if those responsible had done what they were supposed to do.

The Commission, as well as the Attorney General, asked the media, at the time, to be restrained in the reporting of what was revealed during the inquiry. The media were asked to be circumspect, at least until the end of the inquiry, in drawing conclusions about what the witnesses said. This was to enable a fair hearing for those who were exposed as having made bad decisions, rather than subjecting them to a trial by media.

The Commission of Inquiry was concluded, and a report of their findings issued. The media reported quite extensively on the Commission's Report despite the fact that the Ministry of Information held up its release to the public. But the Commission of Inquiry helped media provide the information that needed to be transmitted to a waiting public.

A year later, a number of key events took place—mostly spiritual and cultural—that helped to bring closure for the families that lost loved ones. This included the religious services and ceremonies held where the vessel sank; the services conducted by the royal family in which the royal family members, in an unprecedented manner, humbled themselves and literally 'embraced' the families of those who died, as well as the survivors.

A walled monument was set up at the waterfront of Nuku'alofa with the names of all those who were lost. The families of the deceased were also visited by government and church officials giving monetary help and giving moral support to those mourning their loved ones. The Tongan public and the overseas Tongan communities contributed generously to the affected families. All of these events were reported, and the people of Tonga were able share the experiences of those in mourning.

Those who violated the process and put to sail a vessel that was not seaworthy are being brought to justice. At the time of writing, five senior officials and a shipping company had been charged with manslaughter by neglect. Their trials began in September 2010 and sentences were handed down in March 2011.

The final action by the Government in recompensing the families of the deceased was a payout of \$80,000 pa'anga to the families of each person that died in the sinking of the MV *Ashika*. Together with monies that have been paid to the families earlier, the total payout reached over \$5 million pa'anga.

## Conclusion

The one thing that has come out of the MV *Ashika* tragedy was the concerted media effort to ensure that news reports were accurate, balanced and objective, without the unnecessary finger pointing often characteristic of reporting a crisis.

Local journalists who reported the tragedy over the 12 months' period were mindful of the purpose of media, and the obligation to truth, understanding that those for whom they work include feeling human citizens. The free flow of information and the culturally sensitive manner of reporting was exemplary.



As evidenced by the role of the Tongan media in the *Ashika* sinking, the media can play a key role in conflict prevention and resolution and in building peace in the face of destabilising events. The many roles of media—information provider, community mobiliser, watchdog, and even entertainer—provide media operators with the tools to enlighten communities and provide a forum for community dialogue. Informed dialogue is essential in order for any community to resolve its differences.

Generally, it can be said that the goal of conflict resolution and peace building efforts is to approach issues from a perspective of encouraging positive relationships rather than polarised ones. The reporting of the *Ashika* tragedy by the Tongan media, with its focus on accuracy and cultural perspective and sensitivity, managed to achieve this goal, and this has earned a place in Tongan media history as a model to be referenced for the future.

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