Journalism Can Be an Agent of Peace

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Journalists often face threats when reporting from the Pacific. Embracing 'peace journalism' will help them be part of the solution.

In the wake of the Bougainville Civil War, the Solomon Islands ethnic conflict, four coups d'état in Fiji in two decades, paramilitary revolts in Vanuatu, riots in Tahiti and Tonga, protracted strife in Papua New Guinea's Highlands, and the pro-independence insurrection in New Caledonia in the 1980s, models of reporting have come under scrutiny.

In his 2013 memoir, on his experience as the first New Zealand diplomat to be declared persona non grata by any country, Michael Green was critical of media coverage of Fiji: "The quality of New Zealand [and Australian] media reporting and commentary on the [2006] coup and its implications was, by and large, disappointing."

"As a result," he wrote, "public debate around the issues raised by the coup was not well-informed."

Peace journalism is one approach that can arguably make sense of a region that has become increasingly complex, politically strained and violent, yet the concept is generally eschewed by the legacy media as a threat to the core values of "traditional journalism" itself.

As Australian investigative journalist John Pilger wrote in a foreword to a book reporting conflict from a peace perspective, "so-called mainstream journalism [is] committed almost exclusively to the interests of power, not people".

Journalists can take a more constructive approach to reporting conflict in the region. It is certainly not "soft" journalism as some have sought to misrepresent it; the approach in fact involves a higher level of committed and investigative journalism.

The study of wars and news media portrayal and reportage of conflict has been well developed as an academic discipline, termed by some as "war journalism".

But the study of peace journalism lags far behind.

While a primary Australian view of the region projects a "more demanding and potentially dangerous neighbourhood", New Zealand argues from a far more "Pacific" perspective that sees the region as perhaps less threatening.

However, an Australian media conflict perspective that eschews notions of peace journalism generally prevails.

War journalism often focuses on violence as its own cause and is less open to examining the deep structural origins of the conflict. Heavy reliance on official sources leads to a general zero-sum analysis and deepens divisions.

“Peace” is defined as victory plus ceasefire. It is of little consequence that the deeper causes of the conflict remain unresolved, condemned to resurface again later.

After a period of violent conflict, such as during the decade-long Bougainville Civil War, war journalism concentrates on visible effects — those killed or wounded and damage to physical surroundings, not the impact on the people’s health, psychology, sociology or culture.

More than a decade after the end of the Bougainville war, the people are still recovering and rebuilding their lives in the autonomous region, emerging from under the shadow of a struggle popularised by New Zealand author Lloyd Jones in his 2006 novel Mister Pip (followed by a feature film in 2013).

War journalism dehumanises the “enemy” and is “propaganda-oriented, elite-focused and victory oriented, and tend[s] to concentrate on institutions”, as Richard Keeble, John Tulloch and Florian Zollmann express it in a book advancing the theoretical framework for journalism and conflict resolution.

In contrast, the notion of peace journalism offers a “voice to all parties”, focused on the invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to the social structures), aimed to expose “untruths on all sides”, is “people-oriented”, gives “a voice to the voiceless” and is solution-oriented.

In essence, much of this is good practice in traditional journalism but in times of conflict journalists do not always adhere to good practice and ethical guidelines and there have been frequent examples of this in the South Pacific.

In a Fiji context, flawed news media responses to the George Speight attempted coup of 19 May 2000 illustrated this.

As seasoned Fiji Daily Post editor Jale Moala noted later:

"[That] coup polarised the races in Fiji, or so it seemed. And in seeming to do so, it created a situation in which many reporters found it difficult to focus on the issues from a totally impartial point of view as they were swept away by the euphoria of the moment and the tension and the emotion that charged the event. This was true of both indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian reporters alike.

"Fear may have also played a role. As a result, the perpetrators of the terrorist action, led by George Speight, received publicity that at the time seemed to legitimise their actions and their existence."

For journalists and the news media in the South Pacific, there are growing opportunities for seeking alternative models that are more appropriate for the region's realities than Australian or New Zealand newsroom experience where peace journalism is rarely debated. The Philippines is one such notable example.

One of the cradles of the development of peace journalism studies has been in the Philippines where advocates of the discipline have been forced to contend with both a culture of suspicion — due to a protracted Maoist insurgency being waged by the New People's Army (NPA) against the authorities — and a culture of impunity over the widespread murders of news workers.

Suspicion and scepticism has led to peace journalism being branded as variously either a "left-wing" or "right-wing" manipulation and journalism educators have often been more comfortable using the term conflict-sensitive journalism instead.

Paradoxically, while having one of the "freest and least fettered" media systems in Asia, as analyst Jeanette Patindol described it, the Philippines also ranks as one of the most dangerous countries for news media, after Iraq, because of the high death rate of local journalists.

Journalists have been assassinated in the Philippines with impunity for almost a quarter-century, ever since the end of martial law and the flight of ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos into exile in 1986. The media played a critical role in the people power revolution that led to the downfall of Marcos.

In more than 23 years since democracy was restored, the National Union of Journalists

of the Philippines (NUJP) recorded 136 killings of journalists, or an average of one killing every two months. The NUJP and other groups monitoring media freedom noted "the killings have worsened under the Macapagal-Arroyo administration [until defeated at the polls in 2010 and replaced by President Benigno Aquino] as an average of one journalist got murdered every month from 2001 to 2009".

The NUJP said in its year-end statement after the slaughter of 34 ambushed journalists that 2009 would be "forever remembered as a year of unprecedented tribulation for the Philippine press, with the November 23 massacre in Ampatuan town in Maguindanao [a province on the southern island of Mindanao] making its grisly mark in history as the worst ever attack on the media".

The long-awaited start of the trial on 1 September 2010 was postponed after just one hour by Judge Jocelyn Solis Reyes, after a defence lawyer argued more time was needed to comment on pre-trial documents. A key witness for the prosecution was also murdered.

Ampatuan town mayor Andal Ampatuan Junior and 16 police officers, who allegedly served as members of the Ampatuan clan's private army in Maguindanao, in the southern Philippines, are accused. They face murder charges for the massacre of 58 people, including the journalists and media workers, who were travelling in a convoy with a political candidate running against Ampatuan Junior for Governor of Maguindanao.

In a recent survey of the fate of Filipino journalists since Marcos, 206 have been murdered.

In the context of such killings of journalists, media educators have questioned how to advance peace journalism as a discipline when practitioners are faced with opposition, "not just from individuals and groups but from the entire media system itself".

Columnist Danny Arao raised a key question in his weekly commentary in Asian Correspondent: How should journalism be taught at a time when journalists are killed with impunity and the government remains hostile to press freedom?

"Cold neutrality," argues Arao, simply cannot be observed in a situation where the killings of journalists "become[s] the highest form of censorship ... The stakes are too high for journalists to practise indifference in the culture of impunity that gives rise to

media repression."

While reporting in the South Pacific in the past three decades, I covered the assassination of Pierre Declercq, secretary-general of the pro-independence Union Caledonienne in New Caledonia (1981), the “Black Friday” rioting in Pape’ete (1983), the Hienghene massacre in New Caledonia (1984), the assassination of Kanak independence leader Éloi Machoro (1985), the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior by French secret agents (1985), military coups in Fiji (1987) and the start of the Bougainville Civil War (1989/1990).

On assignment covering coups and conflict in the Philippines in 1988, I shared a room in Manila with former Protestant pastor Djoubelly Wea, the assassin who gunned down Kanak independence leaders Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yéiwene Yéiwene for what he and other Kanak activists perceived to be a betrayal of the independence movement by their signing of the 1989 Matignon Accord. Wea himself was shot dead by one of Tjibaou’s bodyguards.

Subsequently, as a journalism educator from 1993 (when I joined the University of Papua New Guinea after being an independent foreign correspondent for many years) onwards, the emphasis was more on what our student journalist newsroom focused on covering.

Examples included the then ongoing Bougainville Civil War, including the Sandline mercenary crisis (1997) and the shooting of three students at UPNG (2001).

I was appointed to the University of the South Pacific in 1998, where the students covered the George Speight attempted coup in Fiji (May 2000) and other major news events on their website Pacific Journalism Online and in their newspaper Wansolwara.

The major conflict in the region has been West Papua, often billed as the “forgotten war”, yet this issue has been largely neglected by international media and the issue of state terrorism has rarely been addressed.

Since a security treaty was signed with Indonesia in November 2006, Australia has been becoming even more overtly involved in the repression of pro-independence activists.

Australia has been involved in funding and training for an elite counter-terrorism force

in Indonesia known as Densus 88, or Detachment 88, which is notorious for its brutal suppression of suspected pro-independence activists.

In May 2013, the force was accused of killing 11 people and a further 20 disappeared after a combined military and police crackdown on the Free Papua Movement (OPM) in the Central Highlands, in an area dubbed the “Gaza Strip”. This was denied by Indonesian authorities.

While Australia and other Western nations have followed a policy actually supporting Indonesian suppression of protesters and movements seeking self-determination, New Zealand since the Lange Labour Government took office in 1999 has been “focused on avoiding any disruption to New Zealand’s relationship with Indonesia”.

This policy is fairly similar to an accommodation that New Zealand practised in relation to Timor-Leste after it was invaded by the Indonesians in 1975.

A Pacific Media Watch report on press freedom in the region, which included scathing sections on West Papua, warned that the two Indonesian-ruled provinces posed the worst situation confronting journalists.

Nick Chesterfield, editor of West Papua Media, which has long provided the most consistent and in-depth reportage, detailed some of these issues:

"Jakarta still upholds its prohibition on all foreign journalists and media workers from entering either province in West Papua, unless pre-approved under a slow and bureaucratic process from the Ministry of Information. Even after approval, journalists are always accompanied by a minder from the Badan Intelijen Nasional (National Intelligence Body). Only three foreign journalists [were] allowed access to West Papua in 2011."

Unsurprisingly, few journalists choose this official route, with many opting to travel into West Papua via unofficial means, a process unavailable to Jakarta-based correspondents under threat of immediate expulsion. Human rights workers regularly report that security forces harass and intimidate those seen talking to foreign journalists, though many still take the risk when a foreign journalist is present.

Journalists committed to covering the Pacific region frequently find it frustrating working with news media that don’t employ sufficient resources, or misread or

interpret events simplistically.

This is an edited extract from David Robie's new book Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific (Little Island Press).

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