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The Watchdogs of the Blue Pacific: Media Accountability in Regional Security

By Lloyd Loji



Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown speaks to media on the sidelines of the 10th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM10). Tokyo, July 2024. Photo courtesy Pacific Islands Development Program, East-West Center.

The media landscape within the Blue Pacific has undergone drastic changes with the pressing issues of climate change and geopolitics which require a free and vigilant Pacific media in such crucial times. Pacific news media organizations do not simply report the news but are also serving as crucial watchdogs by holding leaders accountable, especially on critical security issues within their respective country. The Pacific media's role is not a theoretical ideal but actually has a practical impact through shaping of public discourse, influencing national policies, and safeguarding the region's fragile political stability.

One of the key areas of the media is investigative journalism which can be used as a powerful tool for exposing corruption, misuse of resources, and breaches of security protocols. For instance, the news media outlets in the Solomon Islands reported on the \$306

million audit report of the Economic Stimulus package (ESP), which was a fund allocated for the recovery of the economy from the impact of COVID-19. The report highlights breaching of the procurement process and other fraudulent activities and dubious payouts. Such reports exposed by the news media calls for the government to strengthen internal control procedures within its ministries and agencies and to be more transparent and accountable when conducting their role in such circumstances.

Moreover, Pacific media has an important responsibility in shaping public opinion and creating pressure for more accountability at the national and institutional level. One of the observable issues taking place in recent years is security agreements being established between Pacific Island countries and major economic powers like China, the US, and even Australia. As geopolitical tension is currently

at play within the Pacific, several countries, namely Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Samoa, have entered into security pacts with external actors. The media outlets in Vanuatu and Samoa had closely analyzed the content of their security agreements and highlighted the potential implications for national sovereignty and regionalism in the Pacific. In the Solomon Islands, rumors of China building a naval base was also raised, which was denied and deemed as misinformation by the Democratic Coalition for Change and Advancement Government (DCGA) by the then prime minister. The coverage of these sensitive issues raises public debate, which forces leaders to be more transparent and to address public concerns. The role that the media plays in reporting on those crucial security agreements ensures that the public remains informed and engaged, preventing decisions made behind closed doors from undermining regional identity.

Even though the Pacific media plays a fundamental role within the Blue Pacific as watchdogs, they are also faced with challenges including limited resources, a lack of capacity, and political and geopolitical pressures. Some of the Pacific Island countries lack the financial resources to support investigative journalism as well. Training in specialized areas like cybersecurity and maritime security is very limited, which hinders the ability for journalists to report on complex security issues in the Blue Pacific. Though investigative outlets like *In-depth Solomons* in the Solomon Islands are supported by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), other countries like Tuvalu and Nauru do not have the ability to conduct in-depth investigations due to financial resource constraints.

Furthermore, government restrictions and censorship of information and relevant documents further complicate the media's task. In some Pacific nations like Fiji, for example, they previously had media laws which were used to suppress critical reporting, commonly known as the *Media Industry Development Act 2010*, but was recently repealed by the Parliament. Journalists and media outlets may face legal threats, harassment, or even imprisonment for exposing sensitive information. The challenges are worsened in Pacific nations with less established democratic traditions. For instance, in certain parts of Melanesian countries, traditional power structures and political backing can create a climate of fear, discouraging journalists from reporting truth to power.

Another major challenge is the physical safety and security of journalists. Reporting on organized crime, corruption, or political instability can put journalists at risk of physical harm, which impacts them physically and mentally in the long term. The nature of reporting on these topics requires a careful balancing act between informing the public and ensuring the safety of journalists with available evidence. In the Solomon Islands, for example, tensions surrounding illegal extraction of natural resources can lead to volatile situations, placing journalists in potentially risky positions.

Despite these challenges, the impact of news media coverage on public trust in regional security institutions remains undeniable.

Exposing corruption or incompetence within the political government or public offices can erode public confidence and trigger debate, but it can also force the government and institutions to become more transparent and accountable. In turn, when media outlets report on the successful security initiatives or highlight the dedication of security personnel, it can build public trust.

Geopolitical competition among the major powers also adds ever-existing challenges for media outlets as they try to hold on to their independent status. As Pacific media grapples with the impact of the geopolitical tensions, the status of their independence becomes questionable as Pacific media are financially constrained and unable to expand and grow their operations. For instance, in the Solomon Islands, there has been media support for mainstream news outlets from China and Australia as well, giving rise to the question of legitimate independence of media outlets by the public.

The balancing act between national security and the public's right to know is a fundamental role that Pacific media must play. Sensationalism in media coverage can twist public perception of security threats, leading to fear and panic. Therefore, responsible reporting must be done by journalists and news media outlets, enabling the public to make informed decisions. The rise of citizen journalism and social media also adds to the complexities. While it can democratize information, it also raises challenges in verifying information and combating misinformation.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is often a focal point of media attention. Different media outlets portray the PIF from different perspectives contextually, sometimes highlighting its successes in regional cooperation, and other times criticizing its decisions and the responsibility that it holds. The media's role in reporting on PIF initiatives is crucial for raising public awareness and increasing support for regional efforts under its mandate. However, negative media coverage can undermine the PIF's credibility and hinder its ability to achieve its goals.

Overall, Pacific media plays a vital role in upholding democratic principles and safeguarding regional security. By holding leaders accountable, exposing corruption, and enhancing informed public debate, the media contributes to a more transparent, accountable, and secure vision of the Blue Pacific. It is a vital check on power and a crucial component of a healthy democratic society, especially given the diversity of the Blue Pacific.

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