

The Role of Fiji Media Watch”Fiji’s Media Profile

For a small country, with a population of three-quarters of a million people, Fiji has a relatively extensive media infrastructure. There are three major dailies (The Fiji Times, The Daily Post and The Sun), one commercial television station (Fiji One), eight commercial radio stations, three monthly business magazines and a number of other commercial publications. A research media survey carried out in 2000 showed that newspaper readership is generally falling (Pacific Media Watch, April 2000). Yet, although Fiji One TV station claims to access 80% of Fiji’s population, newspapers have still a major role to play in Fiji society as a source of information. (Source: Lynda Duncan, Pacific Journalism Review June 2002, p. 10-11). While the image media and dailies exert the greatest impact, radio probably still has the highest rate of penetration of Fiji’s homes and grass roots communities. Unfortunately, due to financial constrictions, radio has lost much of its public service ethos, with mostly music-heavy programmes and little thought provoking reporting.



The full impact of the mass media came upon Fiji in the course of a relatively short period of time. Until the eighties, Fiji had escaped the brunt of this worldwide phenomenon, mainly because of geographical isolation. Video came in the eighties and spread fast. The advent of broadcast television in 1991 was a watershed and marked the final phase of Fiji’s initiation into the world of mass media.

Shift in Values

The effects of the mass media on Fiji society are obvious to see, in

relationships, family life and life-style. The consumer philosophy and global market forces are fast making inroads in the traditional structures and values of Fiji society. Through the mass media, the world as global market reduces people to consumers. By standardising production and taste and by homogenising cultural values, consumers are in turn reduced to a kind of universal 'sameness'. This has already caused a noticeable shift in the value spectrum of Fiji in a matter of ten years. Some of the effects are: diminution of personal and corporate integrity, the “might is right” philosophy, consumer acquisitiveness, breakdown of law and order, trivialisation of sex, increased prevalence of abuse and commodification of women, to name a few.

The modern mass media and popular culture are slowly molding Fiji’s communities into a different kind of people. Quite unconsciously, they erode those cultural values which give them their identity. The visual media, particularly television and video, have targeted the most vulnerable groups in society with values and advertising that are intrinsically detrimental to traditional values.

Fiji, along with other Pacific countries, is renowned worldwide for the beauty and diversity of its physical and cultural environments. We live in these two interlocking environments. In the pressure to modernise, we may find too late we have sold our

patrimony, and left ourselves impoverished through the trivialisation of the things of the spirit. How to preserve what is perennially good in the old and assimilate what is truly useful in the new, so as to form an authentic new culture - that is an ongoing challenge before us.

Need for Research

Because the process is happening imperceptibly and painlessly, there is little awareness of the long-term effects on Fiji as a multi-cultural society. There is little questioning because it is taking place at the deep level of human values and attitudes.

To our knowledge no one has as yet made an exhaustive study of the ways in which the media impact on people's lives in the Fiji context. Until we are able to recognise comprehensively the values that give meaning and identity to the peoples of Fiji, it will be difficult to pinpoint what are the values the mass media portray which conflict with the deeply held cultural/spiritual values.

TV Local Content

After nearly a decade in operation there is still little local content in Fiji television, little which would help a visiting Martian know where he had landed. Our single station was designed on the New Zealand model, with most programmes being imported from the US, NZ and Australia. Like a mirror, television and video reflect us back to ourselves. What children in Fiji have seen until now does not identify who they are, typical Fiji children involved in mostly outdoor activities that distinguish them culturally and socially. How are they to find the heroes they need so badly to identify with?

It is argued that the high cost of production relative to our small population makes economically unviable. However, I believe this is an area where there is room for creativity and innovation. One solution, which has proved successful in several South American countries is introducing young people to script-writing and production skills at an early age. Things happen when the young see themselves in their own creation.

"We have moved away from the historic experience of humankind. Children used to grow up in a house where parents told most of the stories. Today television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time." -Dr George Gerbner, Annenberg School for Communication. The risk is that we abandon our children and their imaginations to cultural images from other countries in the total absence of our own stories and pictures. No country – not least Fiji - can afford that.

Training for Media Users Long Overdue

When television was introduced into Fiji in 1991 there was a concerted effort to train local media practitioners and technicians for this new medium of communication. Little was done to prepare the consumers - the silent passive partners in the enterprise – for what was a radically new language, the image language. There has been no acknowledgement of their need for training to empower them to become informed critical users through media education.

Legislation or Self-regulation?

We hear from time to time that new media laws are in the process of enactment. A Media Council was established in 1999. It is a self-regulatory body, made of an equal number of media representatives and members of the public. It is funded by its media industry members and has a Code of Ethics and General Practice.

However, no amount of regulation will of itself counter the manipulative hazards of the mass

media. The users themselves need to become aware of their power to influence the media and hold the operators to their self-imposed standards whenever they tend to overstep the boundaries of propriety and cultural sensitivity. For this to happen, media education is essential. Anthropologist Margaret Meade's dictum comes to mind, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only way that it has been done."

It is not in the media operator's interest to promote the skills necessary to understand, analyse, and interpret the meaning behind the message. This applies especially to advertising. "After it has socialised people into the commodity form, television has no interest in any kind of self-transcendence not even much change. It is in television's interest to keep people as they are." - Paul Soukup in *Media Development* 3/93, p.7. The initiative has to come from the users themselves, with the help of media education. The "culture of silence" continues to bedevil the people of Fiji. It is only by creating a media literate public that this can be dispelled. The essence of democracy is that people can speak their minds - that there are means of getting their ideas across.

Technologies are neither good nor bad. They wait to be used, and the people who seize the opportunities to use them will be the ones to influence our future.

Enter Fiji Media Watch

Fiji Media Watch is a non-denominational civil society organisation consisting of ordinary people who are concerned that the mass media be used for the benefit of society, and to contribute towards making Fiji a good place to live in. How does Fiji Media Watch fit into the context of our theme? It is one of a number of CSOs endeavouring to find ways of bringing about reconciliation.

Fiji Media Watch's vision is a media literate Fiji. (Media literacy is a skill needed for effective living in today's society. People have a right to information but also a right to know how to interpret information, through critical media awareness). Our mission is to raise awareness of the power of the media, to inculcate skills to deal with it, and to encourage ways in which the media can enrich people's lives.

How did Fiji Media begin?

In 1993 a public outcry against what was considered irresponsible practices and cultural insensitivity in the media led to the formation of Fiji Media Watch. Although the organisation began as a monitoring body and a forum for airing media concerns, members soon came to realise that there were larger issues relating to the mass media which needed addressing. Setting ethical or regulatory standards was only a partial answer to a wider problem. A more likely long-term strategy lay in promoting media education programmes that would empower people to counter the consumer mentality and adopt a critical selective attitude towards the media.

Members began by holding a series of consultations with representatives of the cinema proprietors, media owners and members of the Film Censorship Board of Fiji in order to see the other side of the media coin.

In 1995 Fiji Media Watch commenced holding media awareness workshops in Suva and in other major population centres as well as some tertiary institutes. The workshops targeted teachers, parents and community leaders.

At the request of the Attorney General's Office, Fiji Media Watch organises a two-day workshop for the Fiji Films Censors on the appointment of a new batch of censors on the principles and practice of censorship and the classification of films

Fiji Media Watch publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Media Awareness*, which is circulated to members, community leaders and to all the schools in Fiji. Media education mini-kits are supplied

to a growing number of senior secondary school students seeking resource material for English Language projects.

In 1999 Fiji Media Watch opened an office in Suva and employs a coordinator.

A Media Awareness Video

The launch took place recently of a 35 minutes video on media awareness, produced by SIGNIS Pacific in conjunction with Fiji Media Watch. Entitled Media, the Pacific Way, it aims at raising awareness of the nature, role and influence of the media in the Pacific and to 'empower Pacific people to take action to shape the form of the media they want for their culture.' Order forms available: price US\$10.00.

Website

A website (www.fijimediawatch.connect.com) has been set up recently, although it has yet to be completed. Through this Fiji Media Watch hopes to secure a larger outreach. Although popular use of the Internet is still limited the urban centres, the website will assist in raising awareness and promoting media literacy as well as acting as a forum for complaints and exchange of views. It will also include a film review section.

Training Media Educators

Fiji Media Watch's educational role embraces both the public and the media industry. Training of trainer workshops began in 1999 and are held annually whenever possible, mostly for teachers and NGO workers. In August this year two workshops will take place - an introductory workshop as well as a follow-up workshop. Preference is being given to rural based candidates. The purpose is to establish a core group of creative teachers and leaders, who have assimilated the concepts of media education, acquired the basic transfer skills and can create "instant curriculum" from thoughtful reflection on the daily headlines, that week's movie hit and the latest popular culture fad. It is not something one can acquire in one sitting; it is a "consciousness" one grows into. Len Masterson, English pioneer in media education, puts it this way, "effective media teaching requires a new kind of teacher, one who may possess few formal qualifications in the subject, but who is committed to a continuous process of self-education, and up-dating of information and research in the field of complex change and development."

Educating the Media Industry

Fiji Media Watch's educational role endeavours to embrace the media industry as well as the public. An important activity of Fiji Media Watch, as stated in its Constitution, is "to facilitate dialogue between media owners and media users." We believe it is vital that the public feel they are partners in the media, with a participative role to play; each needs the other. Open fora on media issues have been organised from time to time with both media producers and media users taking part. These have helped to demystify the media, dissipate misunderstandings and encourage critical thinking.

There has been relatively little analysis done by the media of their own reporting on conflict situations. An article in the June 2002 issue of Pacific Journalism Review analyses editorials of the two established newspapers (The Fiji Times and The Daily Post) during the period covering the take-over of the Fiji Parliament (19 May – 31 July 2000). Following the coup Fiji Media Watch asked The Fiji Times to explain why its editorials had vacillated so widely over a six weeks period and how this reflected owner's policy stance. It was also suggested that the media as a body carry out a common analysis on the quality and effectiveness of their reporting.

There are two levels of education needed for the industry: a) the need to balance the profit driven agenda of the secular media and b) the need to adhere to certain principles of reporting.

Workshop for Journalists

"Steering Fiji Back To Democracy: A Challenge To The Journalists Of Fiji" was the title given to two workshops organised by Fiji Media Watch in May-June 2001. The purpose of the workshops was to bring together civil society organizations and journalists and discuss how best to work together in a post-conflict situation that included the lead up to Fiji's general elections in August, and the actual electoral coverage. A year had passed since the 2000 coup. As the current issue of the Pacific Journalism Review points out: "The only serious post-Speight workshop on media reporting and accountability was never run by the industry itself. It was left to the community standards lobby group Fiji Media Watch – which hosted a workshop run by The Australian's respected Honiara-based Mary-Louise O'Callaghan in May 2001 – to make an attempt." (PJR page.8)

At this time, relative calm existed. Deep down in the corporate conscience, however, there was an awareness that all is not well. There was a lot of unfinished business, issues not faced up, wrong-doings not acknowledged and taken responsibility for, forgiveness sought, given and accepted. These realities simply would not go away. As long as this need remained unattended to, distrust and deep-seated hurt would persist, relationships be soured and people become moribund. It was a recipe for long-term disharmony and instability, where 'coup philosophy' pervaded all levels of public life, where human rights and rule of law being eroded and democracy seriously diminishing.

One of the greatest challenges for civil society organisations in Fiji after the events of May 19, 2000, was to 'promote advocacy and civic awareness at the community level'. Fiji Media Watch was one of the civil society organisations which believed that the media can promote very effectively basic human rights and advocacy, since they are a powerful means of disseminating information. Thus the media could contribute much to the process of national reconciliation.

It was during these difficult times that the Citizen's Constitutional Forum, a civil society organisation, increased its campaign to educate the people of Fiji about the 1997 Constitution. Their booklet 'Your Constitution Your Rights' published in three languages became the basis for educating people on their Constitutional Rights. Through it, fear in the minds of the indigenous community could be eased. It is regrettable that the media did not take a more reasoned stand and inform the public in their daily publications of this very important aspect of their lives.

It has often been said that the ones most to benefit from the 2000 coup were the Fiji media. One could hardly visualise a more challenging scenario for exercising investigative and interpretive reporting. While the media were to be commended for their efforts to get the news out to the nation under difficult circumstances, the impulse to sensationalise got the better of them. They often failed to report on the many instances of human courage and compassion which occurred in the most unlikely places. Likewise, they chose not to give due publicity to such positive endeavours of community groups and NGOs, such as the 'Peace and Prayer Vigils', organised by the National Council of Women of Fiji.

It is the role of a democratic media to take responsibility for clearly defining what is democracy and educating in a creative yet simple way what was contained in the 1997 Constitution. This would have removed much of the mystery surrounding the Constitution. Through default, the Constitution became the scapegoat for perceived wrongs.

It was in this context that the two workshops were organised (in Suva and Lautoka), in order to help journalists to improve their investigative journalism techniques and human rights skills in their reporting and deepen their understanding of the conflict resolution process.

The workshops attracted thirty participants, mostly young journalists. They responded enthusiastically to the experience and produced an admirable final communique. What happened to them when they got back to the treadmill is another matter. As junior reporters I suspect their idealism was somewhat dampened. Unfortunately it was not possible to monitor the short-term

effect. It is planned do a survey among the journalists shortly. Most media outlets supported the workshops, although two major ones chose not to participate. Mary-Louise's final words of advice were: accuracy, accuracy, accuracy. A report of the workshops exists; copies are available.

The secular media, to a large extent, shape the thinking and perceptions of people in regards to conflict situations. They can either polarise communities to take sides and heighten tensions or help to educate people on the causes and consequences of conflicts and the need for dialogue. The present trend in Fiji seems to be to facilitate political dialogue, especially between our major political parties. The theme how the secular media shape public opinion on conflict issues needs thorough investigation, for example on land, constitution, multi-party government, human rights, etc. The question we ask ourselves is: how can Fiji Media Watch in collaboration with other concerned CSOs facilitate discussions and dialogue on these themes with the secular media?

A Christian Perspective

As Christian communicators we enjoy the ability of perceiving events in the light of the Gospel, to search together for what tragic events are telling us. Confident that God goes on working under the surface of life, despite our blunders. He never gives up on us. It takes time and patience to discern what God may be doing in a crazy, divided, multi-faith world. He incorporates our mistakes into his plan - even in these days when religion seems too often a cause of division and hatred rather than a energising source of communication across cultures.

The Master Craftsman

The tapestry maker weaves his artwork on a piece of gauze stretched across the centre of a room. He is on one side of this while on the other are a number of small boys, each with his own colour of thread from which the tapestry is woven. The tapestry maker indicates where he requires the particular colour he wants to be pushed through the gauze, and the little boy with that colour follows his instruction. But from time to time one of the little boys loses concentration or pushes through the wrong colour or not at the place indicated. It is very difficult to undo this mistake but the master craftsman, being so skilled, can incorporate it into his plan and even make it a feature of the tapestry.

A Reflection

I was confirmed in this belief when I received from a colleague in the Solomons at the height the crises which struck both our countries, wrote: "Our own period of trouble could turn out to be a moment of grace... a time when we could all become better as a people for the suffering we now experience. To come out of this time of agony, and on top, we have to search. Doing and acting as we have done so far is not the answer. We have got to search as we have never done before.

One of our first searching steps is that of justice. We as a nation have a lot of catching up to do. We've got to show justice towards everyone. Justice is less about law, courts and judges but more about how our little ones are treated. The measure of justice is always how the powerless and weak are respected. This is the Biblical yardstick – care for the widow and the orphan and the other things will follow.

We have the special duty to be the leaders of the voiceless, those who are always society's last and least people. Don't worry about the winners. The winners can take care of themselves pretty well and have already done so. Those who are hurting have to be heard first. Their voices are heard in our own family, in our own village, in our own country." John Roughan, Solomon Islands Trust, Honiara.

The Wounded Reconciler

To contribute to the solution of conflict, to be a truly effective reconciler, the Christian communicator needs to be becoming an ever more reconciled person within him/herself. One has

to have made the journey from the head to the heart, to have accepted one's brokenness, to allow oneself to be changed and to have learned to walk as a forgiven person. It is not only computers that need regular defragmenting.

A reconciler is more than a clinical professional. Her presence speaks compassion. She is a unifier, a "gatherer", for whom communion is an integral component of communication - that inner spark of light and love which humanises and hopefully divinises her work and relationships. She incarnates those qualities that speak before a word is uttered.

A Plea To the Image Makers

Oh do not bombard us further with your images

that feed our greed and vanity

seed our discontent

and starve our hungering spirit.

Rather, challenge us with images of substance

images of hope and promise and beauty

that have us wrestling with our freedom

and call us from deep within our being

to heights that only love can reach.

With acknowledgement to Noel Davis, Heart Gone Walkabout, Thornleigh, N.S.W.
Australia: Shekinah Creative Ministry Co-op, 1991), p.72 Larry Hannan Nadi, Fiji Islands

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