

Fiji media moguls squashing media independence

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Part I Assessing the Fourth Estate: "media" and "journalists" are not the same

The Fourth Estate

The media can be so powerful in the molding of public opinion and national events, that a special term was coined to describe it- the "Fourth Estate".

[The first three sources of social and political power were supposed to be religious leaders, nobility and elected representatives in parliament- with some cynically thinking that lawyers should be in there as well].

Put crudely, the media can have three distinct roles in relation to the government of the day: it may protect the public interest by acting as a watchdog on both government and people; it can undermine governments in the interests of powerful lobby groups, or it can be a propaganda arm of the government itself.

Fiji's media has arguably performed all these roles over the last few decades.

Since 2009, however, the Regime's tight control and media self-censorship has prevented the media from being a "watch-dog" on government, while some media organizations have become largely propaganda arms for the Regime.

It is unfortunate, however, that some critics are targeting the hapless journalists, who surely are minor cogs in the media machine.

The reality is that journalists are totally under the control of editors and publishers, who in turn are ultimately controlled by the media owners.

The real weak link in Fiji's media industry is that *Fiji's media owners are not dedicated "independent media companies per se", but corporate entities with wider business interests, which are vulnerable to a variety of discretionary government policies.*

Currently, the dominant Fiji media owners have far more to lose financially if they allowed their media organizations to get on the wrong side of the Regime, by letting their publishers, editors and journalists maintain a robust independent and critical media organization.

The public should therefore scrutinize not the journalists, but the owners of the Fiji media.

One of the most shocking revelations about Fiji society since 2009 has been the virtual lack of public protest about the ongoing media censorship that has taken away our basic human right of freedom of speech and media.

To encourage our people to think more deeply about how far we have departed from the wonderful benefits bestowed by a free and open media, this article first outlines the criteria by

which the media and the journalists are objectively assessed internationally. I also give my personal impressionistic judgment about the recent performance of the media and journalists.

Part II of this article will then look at the role of media ownership in this sorry state of affairs.

But first, is the media really failing Fiji, as some allege?

Objectives of good public media

Pacific journalism students can get a good grounding on the objectives, principles and key issues by which public media may be judged, at any of the journalism schools in the Pacific, such as at The University of the South Pacific or the Auckland University of Technology.

The public can also look at freely available Internet sites such as at (http://pmintegrity.com/pm_docs/PrinciplesofPublicMedia.pdf) which offer useful criteria to judge any public media, whether in the Pacific or elsewhere.

For instance, does the Fiji media enable the public to:

- (a) have full and free access to public information relevant to their lives, especially in monitoring government activities with the tax-payers' funds
- (b) ask questions, provide answers, share viewpoints, and extend public education
- (c) ensure an informed and engaged public that enables a strong and effective democracy
- (d) produce original cultural material that strengthens local communities and their culture.

There certainly have been improvements on criterion (d) in recent years, driven largely by increased competition.

But the larger Fiji media organizations score quite poorly on the more important criteria (a), (b), and (c).

These weaknesses of the media are far more damaging to Fiji currently, because the Bainimarama Regime has operated unfettered for six years, without an elected parliament and opposition parties who would normally have scrutinized the government.

Current weaknesses of Fiji media

Some journalist educators in the region, and other external parties, have recently engaged in an acrimonious but interesting debate about the Fiji media, with the Canadian USP Head of Journalism (Marc Edge) being forced to leave.

Pacific Island journalism students should discipline themselves to go beyond the raw personalities, emotions and largely unsubstantiated allegations that surfaced, and clarify the journalism principles involved, so that they can understand better their own profession and the current media environment.

As someone who has contributed prolifically through the media for more than twenty five years (most of my writings are available on my website <https://narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/>) and

interviews are in the Fiji TV archives) my personal view is that the Fiji media has significantly deteriorated since 2009.

Journalism students might wish to do solid empirical analysis of the content (topics, objectivity, column inches, length of time) of the Fiji media output since 2006, to examine the extent to which my impressions below are substantiated by the data.

* Since 2006, there has been a tendency to suppress information that might throw the Regime in a negative light

* Citizens have not been allowed to ask critical questions, or give their own critical views even in Letters to the Editor (while huge space is given to entertainment).

* Reporting is totally unbalanced with Regime and pro-Regime statements given multiple times the exposure given to opposing views.

* views of Regime opponents or even serious academic criticisms of some specific Regime policies since 2009 have been either totally blanked out or receive a bare bones coverage (I have personally been a victim of this- I elaborate below) .

* Some media (editors and journalists) often present pro-Regime opinions as facts without any critical questioning.

I suspect that there would be general agreement that the Fiji media has not been a strong opponent of media censorship or a strong supporter of democracy.

Just five important examples

For those coming late into the debate, I give just four examples of the media's failure to scrutinize and question adequately the illegal unelected Regime's spending of tax-payers' funds:

* The Regime has bluntly refused to release its own Auditor General's reports on government revenues and expenditure since 2006, although it is clear from limited budget data that there has been serious over-spending and financial irregularities by the Military and Police, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars (while the Regime has jailed a former Prime Minister on alleged corruption amounting to a few thousand dollars some twenty years ago);.

* The Regime refuses to allow the audit of the Fiji Regimental Funds which are thought to have been seriously abused by several RFMF commanders.

* The Regime has refused to release the audits on the massive over-expenditures and capital write-downs at the FNPF's investments at Natadola and Momi Bay, by a Regime appointed Board.

* the Regime has not publicly denied that ministers' salaries were at one stage being paid through a private accounting firm owned by the aunt of the Regime's Attorney General (it may be regularized now but the evidence has yet to be presented).

* there have been several cases of nepotism involving the Bainimarama family.

Yet the media frequently articulates the Regime's statements that

* it did the 2006 coup because of alleged massive corruption in the Qarase Government (yet no evidence has yet been shown after six years);

* the country must be guided by the principles in the Charter, which include accountability and transparency of government.

The Regime, without practicing the principles itself,

* has demanded monthly financial audits from the Yash Ghai Constitution Review Commission which received its funding not from tax-payers but international donors;

* is now demanding total financial transparency from the political parties and leaders receiving voluntary funding from the public, while excluding its own Ministers for the last six years.

Since 2009, the media has not been able to point out the Regime's fundamental inconsistencies and gross hypocrisy, as it would have done in any free democratic country, whether developed or developing.

This is evident even by a cursory reading of my articles published in Fiji media just prior to 2009 and those that had to be published on blogs thereafter because of media censorship in Fiji.

How assess Fiji journalists?

Standards by which professional journalists, whether in the Pacific or elsewhere, may be assessed are easily available on the Internet and I quote extensively from this website of the Society of Professional Journalists based in US <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>. Journalists must:

* seek truth and report it.

* be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

* support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.

* give voice to the voiceless;

* recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

* act independently and be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

* as a profession, be accountable to the public: encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media, admit mistakes and correct them promptly, expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media, and abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

By these universally desirable criteria and even a cursory study of the actual media output, Fiji journalists come up very short indeed at this point in time.

But I certainly would not hold the journalists responsible for the current status quo, whatever the appearance of their failure.

For what comes out as the media's "output", is not the copy that journalists give to their editors or would like to give.

Journalists are at the lowest rung in the media machine, the front-line workers, told by the editors what to investigate and write up, giving their output to the *editors, who then edit and put their stamp on the final product, even if there is a personal byline given to an article.*

Furthermore, behind the editors are the publishers who exercise control over the editors and the media organization, on the broad nature of what ultimately goes into print or on the airwaves.

There is no public information, and not likely to be any, on the inter-reactions between publishers and editors (Bookmark: this is a great research topic for Pacific journalism students).

But even publishers have to do what the media owners tell them to do. Again, there is no public information, and not likely to be, on the inter-reaction between media owners and publishers. (Bookmark: what a great research topic for Pacific journalism students).

The harsh reality in Fiji is that any journalist or editor or publisher, who insists on maintaining his or her media independence is soon out of a job or thrown out of the country, with no legal redress, or even total circumvention of judicial decisions. It has happened in recent years.

Journalists and editors soon get the message. Jobs are scarce in Fiji and there is no dole to look after your family if you do not have a job.

Despite these constraints, there are a few journalists, editors, publishers, and indeed, even a small media owner or two, who courageously attempt to be professional, without committing *hari-kari*.

Bottom line: it is totally unfair to point the finger at journalists, editors, or even publishers, for the weaknesses of the Fiji media industry.

The public must therefore demand that the hitherto silent media owners behind the scenes, come out of the shadows, and be publicly accountable for their media's output and failures outlined above.

The unfortunate reality is that these media owners have severe conflicts of business interests in Fiji, with their media interests.

I will briefly look at the dominant media payers: *The Fiji Times, Fiji Sun, Fiji TV, Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), Communications Fiji Limited*, all of which practice some form of self-censorship or other.

At a USP journalism meeting not too long ago, a radio journalist strangely demanded proof that the media was practicing self-censorship, while the Regime's Permanent Secretary simultaneously was pleading with journalists not to practice self-censorship.

The section below presents my personal experience with respect to television, newspapers and radio which throws a little personal light on the matter.

Part II

The practice and predicament of the Fiji media owners

The Fiji Times predicament

The two major print outlets are *The Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*.

The Fiji Times, once owned by the Murdoch empire, recently changed hands because of a Regime decree requiring local ownership.

The Regime has been penalizing *The Fiji Times* by arbitrarily denying it advertising revenue amounting to more than a million dollars a year, all (or probably more) diverted to the *Fiji Sun*.

A *Fiji Times* editor and publisher have been hauled into court and faced heavy penalties over what many would see as minor infringements.

Since 2009, its senior writers have been reluctant to take articles from me, or even reply to emails.

The Fiji Times new owner is a local business mogul, Motibhai and Company Limited, whose leading director and multi-millionaire Motibhai Patel, was recently found guilty of corruption and jailed over a relatively minor matter involving a Government corporation of which he was Board Chairman.

Motibhai Patel is currently in Australia for medical treatment, while a bench warrant has been issued for him to return to Fiji to face additional charges of abuse of office arising out of the same chairmanship of the Government corporation. Here is stress indeed.

An additional factor is that Motibhai Patel has a considerably larger financial interest in leasing duty free outlets at the Nadi Airport from Airports Fiji Limited (AFL) which is under the direct control of the Regime.

Once enjoying a complete monopoly, these lucrative duty free outlets were recently opened up to competition through the entry of another local company (Tappoos) which also happens to have large business deals with the Fiji National Provident Fund, the largest financial institution in Fiji, and also under the direct control of the Regime.

All airport leases were recently dissolved by Decree (not challengeable in court) and reallocations are pending.

Any further reduction of space for Motibhai Patel by AFL (which may occur purely with the commercial objective of increasing government revenue) has the potential to significantly reduce Motibhai's profits by amounts which are far greater than the profits from *The Fiji Times* which has already taken a beating because of the denial of Government advertising.

It is totally understandable if the current publisher and editor of *The Fiji Times* were to take great care to minimize newspaper content critical of the Regime.

This would not even require any instruction from the owner- merely human sensitivity on the part of the publisher and editor to their elderly owner's predicament.

The *Fiji Sun*

The *Fiji Sun* is owned by the CJ Patel family (key director Sandip Patel), a large corporate player in the Fiji economy with major importing and franchising interests involving many international brands.

CJ Patel recently purchased the monopoly Rewa Dairy company, concurrently with the receipt of substantial discriminatory assistance from the Regime, thereby raising the price of milk and milk products.

CJ Patel's Financial Controller (a Sri Lankan) has been appointed by and serves the Regime on a wide range of influential Government Boards often as the chair.

On the Fiji National Provident Fund, the Board with the direction and support of the Regime, has rammed through massive reductions to existing pensions by Decree, with an already existing legal challenge being thrown out of court (although under the ill-fated Ghai Draft Constitution, such challenges would have been re-allowed- thereby sealing its own fate).

The *Fiji Sun* owners therefore face the prospect of enjoying many financial incentives (including a monopoly on government advertising revenues) to be totally supportive of the Regime through the newspaper, and censor opposite views, as it has blatantly done for the last four years.

I can testify that the *Fiji Sun* not only will not print most articles by me questioning Regime policies (thereby driving me to the blogs and ultimately my own website), but freely prints pro-Regime articles viciously attacking me and my views, while refusing me the right of reply in my own country.

[I acknowledge that they have allowed an article from me on electoral reform (when the Ghai Commission was still in favour) and a letter to the editor on the destruction of mangroves by developers, completely counter to established environment policy planning].

Television and radio

There are two television stations of which two will be discussed here: Fiji Television, and the government-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, which started off as a radio station.

The historically dominant Fiji Television is independently owned by Fijian provincial councils (Yasana Holdings) and other private shareholders including the local business mogul and tycoon Hari Punja.

Hari Punja has a wide variety of business interests in Fiji, many vulnerable to discretionary government policies or tariffs and other measures with potential costs far outweighing any profits from Fiji TV.

Negatively perceived by the Regime, Fiji TV faces the trauma of having its license currently renewed on a six monthly basis, arguably a blatant policy of intimidation.

Its management and senior staff have been subjected to intimidation by the Regime and it now practices self-censorship on many programs which previously would have been called good "investigative journalism".

Fiji TV Management has told me (and understandably they had to think about their employees' jobs) that they regretted I was *persona non-grata* on many programs which used to previously seek my contribution as an economist commenting on current policy matters.

They also could not run any more special programs which previously performed the valuable task of publicizing and popularizing the results and policy implications of several Fiji Bureau of Statistics Reports which I have authored over the last three years. There was nothing particularly political in these reports.

Fiji Broadcasting Corporation

The FBC, which originally had trilingual radio stations (Fijian, Hindi, English), has recently ventured into television, and is totally under the control of the Military Regime.

The current CEO who is the brother of the Regime's Attorney General, was appointed after the Regime sacked the previous CEO with no apparent justification.

In the absence of publicly available financial statements, it may be surmised that FBC only survives because of massive subsidies from Government advertising, ultimately paid for by tax-payers.

Neither the FBC radio stations nor the FBC television station has over the last three years sought my views on any economic matter, which they used to do routinely before media censorship began in 2009.

The other independent radio company also with trilingual radio stations, and probably more popularity, is owned privately with local magnate, Hari Punja originally having substantial shares and the chairmanship until last year, when the Regime's Decree banned media cross-ownership.

This is a largely profit-oriented entertainment based media outlet, with little emphasis on public education programs, hence little possibility of raising the ire of the Regime, while a few clearly pro-Regime staffers easily achieve the opposite.

[Punja chose to sell his shares in the radio stations in order to keep his television shares which probably offer greater financial benefits to his company throughout Fiji and Sky Pacific.]

All these media organizations have virtually stopped the kinds of critical analysis of the Military Regime or news items, they regularly and responsibly carried before the 2009 abrogation of the 1997 Constitution.

A large part of the explanation has to be that none of the "owners" of the major media outlets are purely dedicated to the media, and instead have other far more valuable economic interests which are extremely vulnerable to discretionary policies by the Regime.

This is a problem not just for Fiji, but also internationally.

Media ownership and media independence

Those interested in the Fiji media debate and journalists especially, might want to read a most recent and excellent study by Michelle Foster, *Calling the Shots: how media ownership affects the independence of the news media*. A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance. November 27, 2012, available here:

<http://cima.ned.org/publications/calling-shots-how-ownership-structures-affect-independence-news-media>

Following a study of four diverse countries (US, China, Serbia and Honduras), Foster concluded that "Who owns the media and its infrastructure and who controls its sources of capital and revenue are crucial for any media system" with possibly "adverse consequences for the ability of citizens and communities to hold their governments accountable".

Foster concluded that while governments' control of media markets can bring about greater transparency and diversity (and I quote directly from her study):

"yet the entire system can also be designed to limit independent reporting:

** Regulators can allocate the broadcast spectrum in ways that lack transparency.*

** Government agencies can use political criteria for issuing media licenses.*

** Cross-ownership restrictions can prevent independent voices from gaining traction.*

** Government agencies can direct advertising budgets as rewards and punishments.*

** State organs can transform public service media into ruling-party mouthpieces.*

**State news agencies can simultaneously access tax-free government funding while competing against independent media for advertising revenue. "*

Fiji media observers will know how applicable these findings also are to Fiji.

One would have need to add real physical intimidation of editors and journalists by the Military Regime, resulting in eventual departure (resignations) of some of them from their jobs or deportation from the country.

[Bookmark: Another great PhD research topic in journalism: the impact of media ownership on media independence in Fiji and Pacific Islands.]

An ethics code for media owners?

This country is in the throes of developing codes of ethics for non-existent parliamentarians, political parties and leaders (although not apparently for unelected Regime Ministers who have totally controlled the country with an iron fist for the last six years, with no end in sight).

When, if ever, is the Media Authority of Fiji and Professor Subramani going to develop a code of ethics for media owners, publishers, editors and journalists?

Why is it that despite three years of controversy over media censorship, Professor Subramani is not to be seen or heard?

Subramani certainly has not come to the defense of the vulnerable journalists and editors who have been at the total mercy of the Regime, and who are being made scapegoats for the failings of the media owners.

There are also crucial policy matters which need to be clarified and guidelines established.

Given the problems caused by conflicts of interest in business ownership, that should be a central item on the agenda: media owners should not have any other substantial business interests in the economy.

It has also been the experience elsewhere in the world, that the selection of a government owned media organization is not the most economically efficient mode of delivery of public services which a purely profit-oriented company would not engage in, and for which there will always be an unfilled need.

As such, there is a clear need for competitive bidding for tax-payers'/government resources to enable "not-for-profit" services to be made available to the public.

If Professor Subramani is not up to these and other responsibilities as the Head of the Media Development Authority, he needs to resign and let someone more committed do the job instead of further tarnishing his reputation.

Currently, his total silence on media censorship conveys the message that he is yet another embittered Indo-Fijian academic emigrant who has come back to Fiji to blindly assist the Bainimarama Regime deny Fiji people their basic human right of freedom of speech, perhaps driven by tired empty mantra of racial equality.

Perhaps the Fiji public one should be grateful that he has not gone the whole hog with Regime propaganda, as did Dr Shaista Shameem during her charade as Director of the Human Rights Commission.

The most depressing aspect of all this is that the educated Fiji public have shown no concern whatsoever over the loss of their basic human right and liberty of freedom of expression.