

Paper

“Voice of the Voiceless”: The Pacific Media Centre as a Case Study of Academic and Research Advocacy and Activism

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Abstract: For more than a decade, the pioneering Pacific Media Centre at Aotearoa’s Auckland University of Technology led the way in journalism research and publication, publishing the globally ranked peer-reviewed journal *Pacific Journalism Review*, monographs, and a series of media and social justice books and documentaries. Perhaps even more important was the centre’s role in nurturing young and challenging Asia-Pacific student journalists and communicators seeking social change and providing them with the opportunity, support, and encouragement to enable them to become confident changemakers and community advocates. This article is a case study of a style of academic advocacy and activism that was characterised by its own multiethnic stakeholders’ advisory board as “the voice of the voiceless.” A feature was the “Talanoa journalism” model (Robie 2014), focused more on grassroots people and community resilience, especially faced with the global COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis. The inspired initiative ended with a change of management to a more neoliberal approach to education at the university with scant appreciation for the vision.

Keywords: Case studies, climate activism, communication, decolonization, human rights, talanoa journalism

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24564/0002019736>

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Introduction

“The Pacific Islands have long been a refuge,” wrote celebrated Vanuatu-based investigative photojournalist Ben Bohane in the introduction to his extraordinary 2013 image collection *The Black Islands*, “for eccentric foreigners and castaways too, who often fell into one (or several) of these categories: mercenary, missionary, or misfit.” Adding to his message of how the region was a magnet for mystics and mayhem, he wrote:

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through these shimmering islands, perhaps I am a crude mix of all of the above. I was drawn to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of its conflicts were largely unreported. There were family connections too.

So beginning in 1994, I ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomon and coups in Fiji. (Bohane 2013, 13)

Bohane (see fig. 1) began his long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal (and thus the Pacific Media Centre) with an illustrated investigative article in 2001 about the complex, divided loyalties within the Fiji military following the George Speight attempted coup debacle in May 2000. He characterised the crux of the divide to be between the “professional” soldiers, typified by then Commander Voreqe Bainimarama (later coup leader and ultimately elected prime minister until he was defeated at the polls in December 2022), who believed the military should stay out of politics, and the “political” military, who sought to ensure the supremacy of Indigenous (*iTaukei*) Fijian rights (Bohane 2001). He followed this with two powerfully evocative portfolios of photographs published in the journal (Bohane and Dean 2006) and (Bohane 2014). In the former, Bohane featured some of his photos from the Bougainville war, which started in 1989 in response to an environmental crisis over the massive Panguna copper mine; a troop deployment of Australian troops (and other Pacific forces, including from Fiji and New Zealand); the controversial arrival of forty-three West Papuan refugees in 2006, and the “ethnic cleansing” in the Solomon Islands the same year.



FIGURE 1. Several of the cross-cultural teams involved in one of the Pacific Media Centre’s core publications, the *Pacific Journalism Review*, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. The cartoonist Malcolm Evans (riding a dolphin) has portrayed the crew on board a traditional double-hulled Polynesian environmental *waka* (canoe). Vanuatu photographer Ben Bohane sports sunglasses and an inevitable camera. The bearded author and founding editor, David Robie, is at the tiller. Current editor Philip Cass wears a hat and is carrying binoculars.

Bec Dean, curator of Bohane’s original Black Islands exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, noted that the photographer’s long-standing journalistic focus in the region had been to explore the connections between *kastom* and resistance movements. As she described it, *kastom* is a broad term “derived from the Tok Pisin (Melanesian pidgin) for ‘custom,’ used to describe dynamic new religious movements with a traditional and spiritual base.” As Bohane himself explained:

As an Australian, resident in Vanuatu, I see myself as a Pacific Islander and reject the grandiose claims of Australia being a “continent.” I believe that this notion has blinded Australians to the reality that we remain forever linked to other Pacific islands through the blood and songlines of our Indigenous people and our historical and military legacy in the region. (Dean 2006, 158)

Another influential Indigenous activist photographer, this time in Aotearoa New Zealand, has also had a long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* and the Pacific Media Centre, with his trajectory of civil rights, anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear, social justice, political transformation, and Indigenous struggle. John Miller (Ngāpuhi) received New Zealand’s Media Peace Prize

Lifetime Award in 2003 for his contribution to the struggle for peace as a “sympathetic observer.” His enormous archive—and he has a prodigious memory—on events such as the Springbok tour of 1981, the *hikoi* (Māori Land March), Waitangi protests, and the 2006 *tangi* of the Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Ataiangikaahu, has been developed into an iconic collection. He has been a frequent guest lecturer for the Pacific Media Centre and was one of the recipients of the first centre research grants in 2007, which led to publication of the photo essay “Seeing the Wood for the Trees—Ngatihine” (Miller 2011).

The first Nga Tamatoa protest at Waitangi in 1971 launched a new era of assertiveness in the struggle for Māori Treaty, land, and cultural rights. Such events as the Māori Land March (1975) and the Indigenous occupations at Bastion Point and Raglan (1978) received prominent treatment in mainstream media of the day, noted *Pacific Journalism Review*. However, how well equipped were the then predominantly monocultural news organisations in understanding underlying issues behind such protests? Miller sought some answers:

My own interest in issues of media coverage comes from an involvement in a complex legal dispute over a Māori-owned land block 35 years ago, during which I had much contact with journalists of the day, at a time when the media landscape was much less ethnically diverse. Of the forty-one or so “mainstream” journalists I had varying contact with over a twenty-four-month period from 1976 to 1978, thirty-six were Pākehā, three were Māori (one of these a trainee), and two were Samoan. I was effectively presenting a minority culture issue to media workers overwhelmingly of the majority culture. I discovered that the subject was virtually unknown territory to these journalists. This was certainly a “blind spot” issue. (Miller 2011, 177)

Social psychologist Emily Pronin first coined the term in research relating to the bias blind spot in 2001. While the research was primarily about the bias of the average person (eighty-five percent of a sample of six hundred people considered that they were less biased than the average American), it has a particular applicability to news media too (Pronin et.al., 2001). Situations abound where editors and news directors fail to provide coverage or analysis of issues and thus create blind spots for their audience. Marginalisation by mainstream news media in New Zealand of the West Papua human rights crisis is an obvious example of this (Robie 2017) (fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. Multiethnic members of the Pacific Media Centre collectively defiantly raise the West Papuan *Morning Star* flag, banned by Indonesian authorities, at a public seminar at Auckland University of Technology on 1 December 2020. (Photo by Jim Marbrook/*Asia-Pacific Report*.)

In the past 13 years, the Pacific Media Centre-Te Amokura, especially through its publications, *Pacific Journalism Review*, *Pacific Journalism Monographs*, books, documentaries, and news websites, has sought to challenge “blind spots” in Oceania¹ It has sought to offer a “voice for the voiceless” (as its own multiethnic stakeholders’ advisory board has described its desired objective). In its most recent annual report, the PMC advisory board chair, Professor Camille Nakhid, argued: “The advocacy and activism, struggle and resilience, struggle and resilience to continually bring current, relevant, and soul-awakening news to the public are embedded in the mission of the centre” (Nakhid 2020 6). The “diversity” and “inclusive” journalism coverage and methodologies in the Asia Pacific region have been a key rationale for the establishment and evolution of the Pacific Media Centre during its existence. It has been unique among Australia’s twenty-two and New Zealand’s three university-based journalism schools. It set a high benchmark for both Asia Pacific collaborative media research and innovative journalism, featuring several publications and a weekly radio programme, *Southern Cross*, on the neighbouring Auckland University’s campus radio station 95bFM.² As a recent article in *Independent Australia* argued,

[PMC] was popular with Pasifika students, especially post-grads who would go on [Pacific Island] reporting ventures for practice-led research; it was a base for online news, for example prolific outlets including a regular Pacific Media Watch; it had international standing primarily through the well-rated, SCOPUS-listed, academic journal the *Pacific*

Journalism Review; and it was a cultural hub, where guests might receive a sung greeting from the staff, Pacific-style, or see fascinating artworks and craft.

Its uptake across the “Blue Continent” showed up gaps in mainstream media services and in Australia’s case famously the backlog in promoting economic and cultural ties. (Duffield 2022)

This essay outlines and examines how the centre enabled and theorised the students’ activism through their journalism and bore witness to struggles in the region. The PMC ensured that students engaged with often forgotten and ignored histories of activism for civil, social, cultural, and environmental rights, such as the Bougainville conflict, Kanak independence, and the West Papuan peoples’ struggle for self-determination. In recent years, responding to how Pacific Islanders have adapted their lives in complex and nuanced ways to cope with the climate crisis and the COVID health pandemic has become a critical part of the centre’s work (Robie & Krishnamurthi 2019). The paper addresses the multiplatform methods the students adopted for their assignments, “real time” newsgathering, current affairs and documentary projects, and media advocacy. The first section provides background to the establishment of the centre; the second section discusses the Talanoa model and strategic activist approach to journalism followed by a discussion of seven components of the centre’s programme and finally a conclusion.

My own advocacy and research-work background in developing countries and a decade living in Fiji and Papua New Guinea have certainly assisted my focus on media blind spots and human rights as founding director of the centre, which has led to photographic exhibitions in Kenya (a social justice portrayal of Madagascar); Auckland (“Faces of Africa” and “Nuclear Exodus: The Rongelap Evacuation,” with the latter being turned into a video broadcast on *Tagata Pasifika*); and Wellington; and books including *Eyes of Fire: The Last Voyage of the Rainbow Warrior* (Robie 1986), *Blood on Their Banner* (1989), *Mekim Nius* (2004) and *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (2014).

Western journalism schools prioritise journalists as detached observers, keeping their distance, and they frequently underperform over cultural diversity. However, we need to examine our media role more closely and more critically. Does our journalism perpetuate human rights violations or conflict, or does it contribute to restoring peace and justice? *Nepali Times* publisher Kunda Dixit is the author of the journalism text *Dateline Earth*, a critique of Western mainstream media and the control of news by multinational corporations reflecting the interests and preoccupations of industrialised countries. The original edition of his book (in 1997) was essentially before the rise of the internet and social media networking, but the lessons remain similar today: “News was whatever happened in the US, Western Europe, Australia, and the periphery wasn’t deemed to be important.” As Dixit warned: “This is not just the ‘end of history,’ it is the end of geography. No place is too near or too far; a Uighur *yurt* could as well be in your backyard” (Dixit 1997, 6). When his revised edition emerged (Dixit 2010), he argued that the mediascape was not any better; corporate media control still persisted in the internet age, although by then it was also struggling to maintain a successful business model.

However, with the cybernet revolution, believes Dixit, photojournalism, especially with an investigative edge, is enjoying a resurgence. Dixit was keynote speaker at the Pacific Media Centre’s “Investigative Journalism and Technology” conference at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), which later provided an incentive for the founding of New Zealand’s Centre for Investigative Journalism. His inspirational exhibition of “peace photographs” by a range of photojournalists featuring the ten-year Maoist civil war in his country created interest. Some of the images, including the cover, were featured in the collection *Conflict, Custom & Conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017* (Marbrook et al. 2017), published to mark the tenth anniversary of the centre. They were drawn from his trilogy *The People War* (Dixit 2007). I wrote in a review analysing the influence of his works:

Dixit’s prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste, and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a [norm]. Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. (Robie 2009, 230)

Postgraduate students, mostly female, ranging from their early twenties to forties, from Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and West Papua have been involved, including one from Myanmar. Research associates and lecturers have been from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Singapore. Many staff, students, and volunteers affiliated with the Pacific Media Centre achieved outstanding results in investigative photojournalism and documentary work, including Karen Abplanalp (2012), whose investigative feature “Blood Money” in *Metro* magazine, forced the NZ Superannuation Fund (NZSF), which has an ethical investment policy, to withdraw from the then American and Indonesian-owned Freeport copper and gold mine at Grasberg in West Papua. This feature won several investigative journalism awards. Del Abcede has organised public seminars and chronicled visually the personalities, cultural diversity, and initiatives of the centre for the past decade with empathy, depth, and passion. Filmmaker Jim Marbrook’s feature length documentary *Cap Bocage* on a New Caledonian environmental saga began its genesis with a small—and inaugural—seed grant of \$10,000 from the PMC in 2007 to create a pilot programme (Marbrook 2015). His initiative created the impetus for the *Conflict, Custom & Conscience* book (Marbrook et al. 2017), and he inspired a documentary dimension to the Pacific Media Centre’s work through Te Ara Motuhenga.

Talanoa and Strategic Activist Journalism Education

For thirteen years, the Pacific Media Centre research and publication unit published journalism with an “activist” edge to its eclectic style of reportage, raising issues of social justice and climate justice in New Zealand’s regional backyard (fig. 3). It achieved this through partnerships with progressive sections of news media and a non-profit model of critical and

challenging assignments for postgraduate students in the context of coups, civil war, climate change, human rights, sustainable development, and neo-colonialism (Robie 2018a; Pacific Media Centre 2020). One of the models characteristic of PMC media initiatives had evolved from the “existentialist journalism” philosophy articulated by the late American professor emeritus John C. Merrill, a pioneer in international journalism education. He argued that in contrast to the usual “objectivity” stressed at journalism schools, journalists should “not shun the subjective” or be afraid of “rocking the corporate boat” (Merrill 1977, 7). He encouraged them to “feel and act as well as think and act.” Lauding the “lonely rebel with a conscience” approach, Merrill explained:

The existential journalist . . . has an attitude of commitment, of rebellion, of individuality, of creativity, and of freedom. The existential journalist is committed to personal standards, not to the often asinine rules and practices of the organisation. . . . This journalist revels in the ethical code that is personally internalised, not in the framed corporate code hanging on the wall. The existentialist stands, chooses, acts, and is willing to take the consequences of these choices and actions. This is often painful. (Merrill 1977, 8)

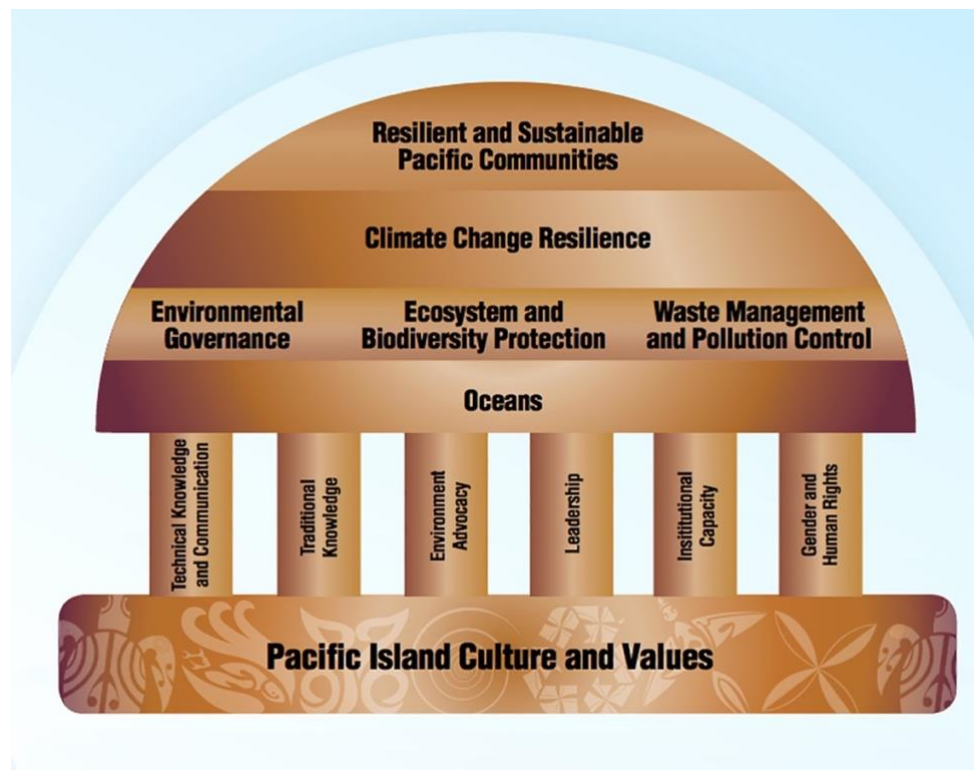


FIGURE 3. Pacific Island culture and values: Traditional knowledge and resilience reflected in “Talanoa journalism.” (Image from the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.)

In January 2016, an earlier *Pacific Scoop* venture (2009-2015) that was initiated by the PMC in partnership with the New Zealand digital innovator Scoop Media (<https://pacific.scoop.co.nz/>) which was premised on these existential values, morphed into a pioneering journalism school

venture for the digital era, *Asia Pacific Report (APR)* (<http://asiapacificreport.nz/>). Amid the current global climate of controversy over “fake news” and a “war on truth” and declining credibility among some mainstream media, the *APR* project has demonstrated on many occasions the value of independent niche media based at a university, questioning and challenging Establishment and corporate agendas. In the next section of this article, a series of case studies examines how the collective experience of citizen journalism, digital engagement, and an innovative public empowerment journalism course can develop unique student-based online publications. The examples traverse some of the region’s thorny political and social issues—including the controversial police shootings of students in Papua New Guinea in June 2016 and the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-22.

Underpinning the methodology have been the twin pillars of *critical development journalism*—a blend of empowerment, existential, watchdog, and transparency strategies—and “*Talanoa journalism*” (Robie 2014, 2019; Singh 2020), a “Pacific Way” approach to reportage that is more suited to Island cultures. The concept of *talanoa*, or frank face-to-face discussion with no hidden agenda, became popularised in the contemporary Pacific through the initiatives of East-West Centre academic Dr. Sitiveni Halapua (2013; Robie 2019, 11). For the Pacific Media Centre’s *Talanoa journalism* approach in the Asia-Pacific region, the model contrasts with normative, or orthodox, “Western” journalism in that it has a greater focus on grassroots sources and less attachment to elite and Establishment sources (Robie 2019, 12; Fairbairn-Dunlop and Coxon 2014). Singh (2020, 472) argues that *Talanoa* is a time-honoured Pacific storytelling practice based on communal values such as open dialogue, discussion, consensus, and conflict avoidance in decision making. The following matrix (Table 1) outlines some of the key differences between *Talanoa* and normative journalism.

TABLE 1. The Talanoa Journalism matrix contrasting with normative, or “Western,” journalism.

Talanoa journalism matrix

Mainstream Journalism Western	Talanoa Journalism Pacific
Élite-source oriented	Grassroots source oriented
Hard news description	Hard news with context, cultural interpretations
Objective, detached, uninvolved stance	Reflexive stance
Solutions not an issue	Possible solutions for identified problems
Top-down mainstream vertical public opinion	Grassroots, citizen public opinion, horizontal views
Emphasises individualist achievement	Emphasises community achievement
Unfettered free media focused on conflict	Free media, but balanced with social responsibility
Consumer, business orientation	Public interest, civil society, community empowerment focus
Entertainment or sensational angles	Focus on positive outcomes for wider community
Focus on crime, disaster and deviant behaviour	Focus on socio-economic development, community needs, wellbeing and progress
Normative mainstream ethical codes	Community ethics with recognition of indigenous, diversity, cultural values

Source: “Karoronga, Kele’a, Talanoa, Tapoetethakot, and Va: Expanding Millennial Notions of a ‘Pacific Way’ Journalism Education and Media Research Culture” in *Media Asia* (Robie 2019, p. 11).

Strategic Directions Deployed in Various Pacific Media Centre Project Case Studies

Asia Pacific Internships

China Daily, Cook Islands News, Philippine Star, Jakarta Daily Post, Wansolwara, and others

For thirteen years, the Pacific Media Centre organised, funded, and supervised international Asia-Pacific internships, either with news media in the region or on standalone projects, mostly in partnership with the University of the South Pacific Regional Journalism Programme but also with the Asia New Zealand Foundation and AUT’s International Office. This was a unique programme at New Zealand journalism schools (fig. 4). It began with an internship at the English-language

China Daily in Beijing in 2007, pioneered by postgraduate student Felicity Brown, who later became a diplomat and is currently New Zealand's current consul in Noumea, Kanaky New Caledonia. More than thirty internships were coordinated with students going as far afield as the *Cook Islands News* in Rarotonga, *Jakarta Post* in Jakarta, *Philippine Star* in Manila, and the *Vanuatu Daily Post* in Port Vila.



FIGURE 4: The Pacific Media Centre logo.

The internships were underpinned by two postgraduate papers—one for Asia-Pacific Journalism Studies, JOUR801, an introduction to the region's cultures and languages; political and social systems; the legal systems as they related to journalism; and critical media studies in the various countries, and the other for International Journalism Project, JOUR810, offering an advanced postgraduate assignment or media exposure.

According to the JOUR801 course description prescriptor section, the course:

Introduces advanced studies in comparative journalism and media globalisation with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The political economy of the media in selected regional countries is examined. As well as the contextual media environment, this paper offers opportunities for in-depth regional reportage on cultural, climate change, environmental, political, governance, national development, social, media freedom, and legal issues. (JOUR801)

The companion paper for JOUR810, requiring a special application after successfully completing the introductory Asia Pacific Journalism paper: “Enables an advanced international journalism assignment or project, usually in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper would usually be a two-week fulltime block assignment or internship in the mid-semester break or linked to a Summer School programme, or equivalent.” Learning outcomes included: “1. Plan and execute an international journalism assignment/[project]; 2. Critically engage with an important International event or process; 3. Demonstrate quality reportage in a culturally and/or challenging environment; 4. Demonstrate critical engagement with international issues; and 5. Analyse and reflect on a topical cross-cultural assignment” (JOUR810).

Arguably, one of the most successful internship projects was the recruitment of a cohort of thirteen students from the JOUR801 course who teamed up under the leadership of Alex Perrottet to cover the 2011 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders conference in Auckland on the eve of the World Rugby Cup. The reportage was robust, nuanced, and indepth, especially compared with the

mainstream media at the time. A student scoop was recorded about West Papua by asking a pointed “decolonisation” question of then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and Papua New Guinean student Henry Yamo’s story reverberated around the world (Robie 2013, 155). This prompted then Green MP Catherine Delahunty to declare in a letter to AUT: “The coverage produced by [the students’] efforts was world class and their participation in press events was outstanding. . . . New Zealand media was shallow and lacked the robust approach led by the students from the Pacific Media Centre. . . . The PMC website became the “go to” place for the real stories of the Forum” (Delahunty 2011).

Bearing Witness

David Robie and Jim Marbrook

A three-year Pacific climate research storytelling documentary and journalism project contributed to a disruption and renewal theme in Pacific Islands countries’ development. The project was an offshoot of the Asia Pacific Internships but had a course structure and credits towards postgraduate degrees at AUT. It adopted the name “[Bearing Witness](#),” drawing on the Quaker tradition of taking action over “truth,” based on conscience and being present at the sites of injustice. This seemed highly appropriate given that the field trips sought to provide an alternative framing of climate change journalism in terms of resilience and human rights. An inspiring example of this “bearing witness” frame for climate change media action is the Collectif Argos (2010) photojournalism portfolio on climate refugees; many of the images were portrayed in their book with the same title. The bearing witness theme was also explored in the Pacific Media Centre’s photojournalism collection, *Conflict, Custom and Conscience*, published to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Centre (Marbrook et al. 2017).

Focused initially on Fiji, the project involved three pairs of postgraduate students engaging with climate change challenges. Responding originally to the devastation and tragedy wrought in Fiji by Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016, the Pacific Media Centre embarked on the Bearing Witness journalism project by sending two postgraduate students to Viti Levu, Fiji, to document and report on the impact of climate change in rural communities (Robie and Chand 2017). Their main component was a multimedia report on Daku Village in the Rewa River delta area (fig. 5).



FIGURE 5: Daku Village boat moorings amid mangroves.

This was followed in 2017 by a series of reports leading to a multimedia package on the relocation of the remote inland village of Tukuraki (Robie 2018b). The third episode focused far more strongly on documentation, with reports on waka navigation and climate change, the “ghost village” of Vunidogoloa, and a “homecoming” short feature about the Banaban people of Rabi and the impact on them caused by climate change. The project explored Paulo Friere’s notions of “critical consciousness” as they might relate to teaching documentary-making and also drew on the concept of Talanoa journalism.

Our experience with the Bearing Witness project has demonstrated that the process of independent learning while engaged in praxis (making the work) is the key step up in the learning process. While the newsroom or web platform remained a key structure in the dissemination of student work, the challenges had “more to do with students’ abilities to improvise and to use tacit knowledge to negotiate their way through stories. (Robie and Marbrook 2020, 85)

The notion of “bearing witness” was at the core of this project. Climate justice expresses the notion of the “moral and/or ethical consideration of addressing climate change” (Harris 2019, 101), and bearing witness provides the opportunity for reporters or filmmakers to experience the injustice and share this with a wider audience (Robie and Chand 2017, 192). The experience can be both strengthening for the community sharing their story and transformative for the students. Towards the end of the Banaban film *Banabans of Rabi: A Story of Survival* (Ikimotu and Tom 2019), there is a moment during an interview with elder Tom Corrie when he clearly addresses the filmmakers (and, by extension, the audience) (Robie and Marbrook 2020, 10): “People [on remote Pacific Islands such as Rabi] still do not know. They are not aware of the facts of climate change. It is only when you [the filmmakers/journalists] come in and tell us and report what we go through that they know the effects of climate change” (Ikimotu and Tom 2019).

Papers published about the first two years of the Bearing Witness project highlighted some of the challenges and triumphs the students faced as they reported on issues in Fiji (Robie and Chand 2017; Robie 2018b). The students described the rich and challenging environment of reporting in Fiji; they described technical challenges and on the demands of working stories as they happen. Both sets of students described being “considerably enriched” by the process and also described how they saw the challenge of this project as a sound preparation for future employment. In the case of the first pair, Taylor Aumua, herself of Pacific heritage, reflected on the enriching experience of being immersed in “intertwining cultures and religions” and how that had helped prepare her for her future Pacific media career (she became a reporter with the Sunpix television programme *Tagata Pasifika* and then a photographer for the Nuku project, celebrating the creativity and courage of Indigenous women). She and her assignment partner, Ami Dhabuwala, added their impressions about their experiential visit to the Rewa River floodwaters-impacted village Daku and came face to face with how villagers lived daily with the realities of climate change:

Arriving [there, we] bore witness to flood waters lapping on the doorsteps of village homes. Remnants of Super Tropical Cyclone Winston [in 2016] that savaged Fiji two months [earlier], and other tropical depressions which have left parts of the nation drenched in heavy rainfall, have left their mark. Waterlogged land leaves the village vulnerable to water-borne infections like dengue, filariasis, and diarrhoea, and in the worse-case scenario, cholera, and typhoid. (Dhabuwala and Aumua 2016)

Digital media “encourages intergenerational knowledge exchange between young people and elders of a community,” argues researcher and former journalist Usha Harris, who featured the work of the Pacific Media Centre as a case study in her 2019 book *Participatory Media in Environmental Communication*. “Many young people are leaving traditional ways of life to live and work in urban areas and losing interest in old ways” (169).

This has been a feature experienced by the students on all three incarnations of the Bearing Witness project so far—the exchanges with elders in Rewa Village of Daku, the harrowing tale of survival through the mudslide and cyclones of Tukuraki Village near Ba, and finally, even more so with filmmakers Hele Ikimotu and Blessen Tom’s engagement with the villagers of Rabi. The presence of Ikimotu’s mother, Janet, on a “personal journey of rediscovery and the shock of the environmental degradation in the intervening years adds a certain poignancy” (Robie and Marbrook 12). The two-way exchange of intergenerational knowledge and skills gives a balanced share in the storytelling (*Pacific Climate Bearing Witness 2017, 2019*).

Climate and COVID-19: The Pacific project

David Robie and Sri Krishnamuthi

While many of the international plaudits have been enthusiastic and generous about then Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s handling of the COVID crisis—ranging from “master class” (*The New York Times*) to “squashing the curve” and a decisive “voice of reason” (TV presenter Whoopi Goldberg)—several analysts and commentators have been less kind about New Zealand’s news media, one describing their “machinations” as “leav[ing] much to be desired” (Forrester 2020). According to Al Jazeera English contributor Glen Johnson:

Taken over time, New Zealand’s reporters have appeared focused on managing perceptions, berating and cajoling a fearful public on numerous fronts. In doing so, and from the earliest stages of a four-level alert system, public health concerns have been eclipsed by a clamouring commentariat, all seeking to score political points and undermine the government’s health-first priorities.

A case can be made that the nation’s media, laundering many of the opposition’s attack lines and big business talking points, have repeatedly endangered public health. (Johnson 2020)

The Pacific Media Centre (PMC) adapted early in its response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic (fig. 6). Recognising the rapidly expanding global nature of the crisis, the centre laid the groundwork and prepared to embark on its Coronavirus Plus Project in early March 2020, more than two weeks before New Zealand went into its first national lockdown on March 25, including the closure of university campuses. The PMC deployed its Pacific Media Watch Coronavirus Plus project with its small team working from home and using various sharing software programmes to communicate and to continue publishing on the centre’s websites *Asia Pacific Report* and *PMC Online* (Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020, 193). It was critically important to provide basic information on how to survive and persevere during this pandemic and to counter the “disinfodemic.” Using a long-established network of media partnerships and collaborations along with contributing student journalists from Aotearoa New Zealand, Fiji , and the Philippines, the project was able to establish a credible and innovative news coverage.



FIGURE 6: The climate project logo.

While the Pacific Media Centre did not embark on a project with the Internews’ Asia-Pacific affiliate Earth Journalism Network until June 2020, the Internews guidelines had already been adopted for an earlier ten-week project under the PMC’s Pacific Media Watch umbrella (Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020) between March 19 and May 31. The strategic guidelines included a five-point plan: 1. Good, accurate, evidence-based information; 2. That everyone can access safely; 3. That consumers know how to critically access; 4. That is valued by communities and sustained by business models that work; and 5. Where governments and businesses are accountable for keeping it that way. During the earlier period, the project published 268 articles (sixty-five in March, 120 in April and eighty in May) about the coronavirus involving analysis, news, health, science, media, political, and social issues on *Asia Pacific Report* and on the centre’s own weekly *Southern Cross* radio programme broadcast in partnership with Radio 95bFM at the neighbouring University of Auckland.

Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koakoa and the PJ Monographs

David Robie, Philip Cass, Khairiah Rahman, Del Abcede, Chris Nash, Wendy Bacon, and Nicole Gooch

One of the core projects at the Pacific Media Centre has been the *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal, founded in 1994 at the University of Papua New Guinea. It was published for four years at UPNG and then relocated to the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, where it remained for a further four years before being published until 2020 by the PMC. It has now been adopted by a new incorporated non-profit, [Asia Pacific Media Network](#). Traditional with a moderately radical edge, the journal has maintained a strong reflexive journalism stance as a research publication. According to its website’s declared ethos,

While one objective of *Pacific Journalism Review* is research into Pacific journalism theory and practice, the journal has also expanded its interest into new areas of research and inquiry that reflect the broader impact of contemporary media practice and education. A particular focus is on the cultural politics of the media, including the following issues: new media and social movements, indigenous cultures in the age of globalisation, the politics of tourism and development, the role of the media and the formation of national identity, and the cultural influence of New Zealand as a branch of the global economy within the Pacific region. It also has a special interest in climate change, environmental and development studies in the media, and communication and vernacular media in the region. (*Pacific Journalism Review*, n.d.)

In a research commentary published after the celebration of the journal’s twentieth anniversary at AUT in 2014 marking “twenty years on the frontline of regional identity and freedom,” Lee Duffield (2015, 18) noted: “Eclectic, not partisan, it has nevertheless been vigilant over rights, such as monitoring the Fiji coups d’etat. Watching through a media lens, it follows a ‘Pacific way,’ handling hard information through understanding and consensus.”

Striking sections of the journal include impressive photojournalism essays/galleries featuring leading “activist” photographers in the region, such as Vanuatu-based Ben Bohane, Ngāpuhi resistance icon John Miller, and Todd Henry, whose latest portfolio featured “kava culture” in Aotearoa New Zealand. Sydney academic and investigative journalist Wendy Bacon pioneered a regular section called “Frontline,” which has focused on reflexive journalism and journalism-as-research (Bacon 2012; Robie 2015). Chris Nash, author of *What is Journalism? The Art and Politics of a Rupture* (2016)—which argues that journalism should treat itself as an academic discipline on a par with history, geography, and sociology—has been another pioneering figure and adviser of Frontline. Taking the helm of *PJR* as editor in 2021, Philip Cass declared in his opening editorial: “We have established a strong presence in the academic marketplace, scoring extremely well across a range of academic publication indicators and providing space for voices from Asia, Australia and the Pacific as well as Aotearoa New Zealand” (Cass and Robie, 2020, 10).

A companion research series, the [Pacific Journalism Monographs](#), was launched in 2012, offering journalists, journalism academics, and researchers an outlet for quality research and analysis with long-form articles of up to 15,000 words (fig. 7). So far, the series has produced seven editions, with topics covering a diverse range of journalism research from media freedom and human rights in the Asia-Pacific to Asia-Pacific research methodologies, climate change,

vernacular Pasifika media research in New Zealand, and post-coup self-censorship in Fiji. Titles include *Pacific Media Freedom 2011: A Status Report* (Perrottet and Robie 2011), *Coups, Conflicts and Human Rights: Pacific Media Challenges in the Digital Age* (Robie 2012), *Pacific Way: Auckland's Pasifika Community Diaspora Media* (Neilson 2016), *Watching Our Words: Perceptions of Self-Censorship and Media Freedom in Fiji* (Morris 2017), and *Science Writing and Climate Change* (Maslog, Robie, and Adriano 2019).



FIGURE 7: *Pacific Journalism Monographs* logo.

Pacific Media Watch

David Robie, Alex Perrottet, Daniel Drageset, Alistar Kata, Sri Krishnamurthi, and others

Pacific Media Watch (PMW) was founded originally as an independent, non-profit, and non-government network by two journalism academics (Peter Cronau and David Robie) based at the University of Technology Sydney (fig. 8). In 1996, the kingdom of Tonga jailed two journalists and a pro-democracy parliamentarian in an event that shattered any illusions about press freedom and democracy in the South Pacific. The two *Taimi 'o Tonga* editors, 'Ekalafi Moala and Filokalafi 'Akau'ola, had been accused of contempt. The late 'Akilisi Pohiva (at the time Member of Parliament and who eventually became prime minister) was the best-known whistleblower in the region at the time, having waged a decade-long campaign for open government and democracy (Robie 2016a, 220).



FIGURE 8: The Pacific Media Watch logo.

Many media commentators saw the jailings in Tonga as the most serious threat to media freedom in the South Pacific since the Fiji coups in 1987 (Moala 2010). Then a fledgling media freedom monitoring group, Pacific Media Watch launched a campaign in support of the so-called “Tongan three,” eventually helping secure their release from jail. PMW later became a regional, independent Pacific media freedom monitor based at the University of Papua New Guinea (1996–1998), University of the South Pacific (1998–2002), AUT (2002–2007), and was finally adopted as the Pacific Media Watch Freedom Project at AUT’s new Pacific Media Centre (PMC) (2007 onwards). It received its first development grant in 2007 when it was adopted by the PMC, hiring postgraduate student interns. It was subsequently awarded a grant by the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust of New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2009 (Robie 2016a, 221).

Pacific Media Watch coverage has featured a blend of social media and citizen journalism “breaks,” such as Japan’s Tōhoku tsunami in 2011 and its impact on the Pacific Island microstates; coup renegade Colonel Ratu Tevita Mara’s “escape” from Fiji to Tonga (also in 2011); and the brutal torture of recaptured prisoners by Fiji security forces in 2013, and dedicated inquiries and investigations by postgraduate student journalists and analysis by media commentators. Standout PMW postgraduate student editors have included Alex Perrottet, who moved on to a stellar career at Radio New Zealand Pacific; Daniel Drageset, a Norwegian public broadcast journalist who won the Dart Asia Pacific Journalism and Trauma Centre’s award for PMW in 2013 for his media investigation into Fiji torture (Pacific Media Watch 2013); and Alistar Kata, who covered the Fiji back-to-democracy election in 2014 and made a series of powerful activist mini-documentaries on the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific Movement (NFIP) (Kata 2016). She is now a consumer investigative reporter with TVNZ’s *Fair Go* programme. Sri Krishnamurthi followed on PMW, covering the 2018 Fiji general election and reporting on the global climate crisis and COVID-19 project. Pacific Media Watch has gained a reputation of taking on “underdog” cases over media freedom, especially those involving Indigenous and cultural rights (*Pacific Media Watch Project* 2019)

Publishing

David Robie, Del Abcede, Camille Nakhid, Philip Cass, Allison Oosterman, and Khairiah A. Rahman

Apart from the research journals, the Pacific Media Centre has published a remarkably diverse range of more than ten Asia-Pacific cultural, media, and sociopolitical books (fig. 9), including *Being the First: Storis Blong Oloketa Mere Lo Solomon Aelen*; *Disasters, Cyclones and Communication*; *Dreadlocks*; *Journalism Education in the Pacific*; *Mekim Nius: South Pacific Media, Politics and Education*; and *Tonga: In Search of the Friendly Islands*. Del Abcede, an AUT design graduate, played a key role in the production of these books, including designing *Pacific Journalism Review* with a distinctive format, and she also edited the quarterly newsletter *Toktok*. Project Link: Pacific Media Centre Books, 2020.

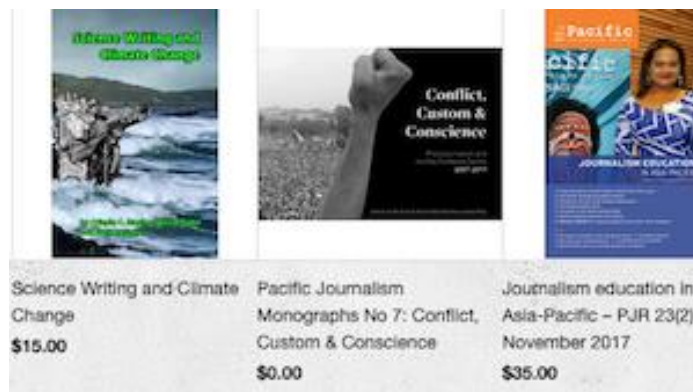


FIGURE 9: Ten Asia-Pacific books published.

Rainbow Warrior and Nuclear-Free Activism

David Robie, Alistar Kata and Little Island Press

Marking the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing of the Greenpeace environmental flagship *Rainbow Warrior* on 10 July 1985, I teamed up with Pacific Media Watch editor Alistar Kata, more than forty journalism and television students from AUT, and Little Island Press publisher Tony Murrow to produce a remarkable microsite, [*Eyes Of Fire: 30 Years On*](#) (fig. 10).



FIGURE 10: The *Eyes of Fire* microsite.

As I was on board the bombed ship and wrote the book *Eyes of Fire* about the last voyage, it was logical for me to be a resource person and a link to the many living history stories compiled by the students on video. Telling the stories of many of the nuclear-free activists and crew members involved in the *Rainbow Warrior* saga and a new generation of climate crisis campaigners was the ambitious goal in this unprecedented media school collaboration coordinated by the Pacific Media Centre in mid-2015 (Robie 2016b).

In an interview with student Hayley Becht as part of this project, I reflected:

[As] a nation, this was a coming of age for us. I think we lost our innocence then. The idea that a friendly nation could commit an act of state terrorism against us, a small nation in the Southern Hemisphere and against a peaceful ship and against people who were trying

to make a better world and trying to make a better environment—that shock was shared by everybody in the country for a long time. And there was a lot of hostility towards France. (Robie 2016b, 210)

Although that hostility eased, especially after the halt to nuclear testing in 1996, there is still ongoing environmental fallout from both nuclear testing and climate change that makes it imperative that this sort of deeper journalism practice and protest continues (Robie 2014).

Project Link: *Eyes of Fire: Thirty Years On*. [Microsite, 2015].

Conclusion

News media ought to be vigilant in countering elected despots who use their mandate to destroy the very institutions that allowed them to be voted into power in the first place, argues Kunda Dixit. The Pacific has its fair share. When Dixit spoke in Auckland at the Pacific Media Centre’s conference in 2011, he issued a challenge that is just as valid today: “Let’s work on a paradigm shift in the way we in the media approach stories. We should strive to cover deprivation and the causes of social injustice, not just its effect. It means each of us having a conscience and using it—by striving to be fair in an unfair world” (Dixit 2011, 19).

His challenge underpins the very foundations that have carried the Pacific Media Centre for thirteen years, foundations that have been reflected in the centre’s educational and student-driven independent approach to Asia-Pacific existential journalism, empowerment, and Talanoa journalism with strong social media tools (see fig. 11).

PMC twitter news feed



FIGURE 11: End of an era. The Pacific Media Centre made strong use of social media and this was its final tweet on 16 December 2020. (Image from a PMC screenshot.)

The centre has also been an example of what can be achieved in spite of limited resources and declining institutional support. It has been a “creative nest,” nurturing both students and staff. Perhaps the centre’s most important role has been unleashing the potential of young and challenging Asia-Pacific student journalists and communicators seeking social change and providing them with the opportunity, support, and encouragement to enable them to become confident changemakers and community advocates. Staff have been supported by providing seed grants and enabling resources for independent journalism and documentary making. At the core of

their outputs has been a commitment to marginalised and under-represented community groups in the Asia Pacific region and telling–“hidden stories” or forgotten histories of activism for civil, social, cultural, and environmental rights.

However, at the beginning of 2021, the university effectively abandoned the centre eight weeks after the director had retired in spite of the talented PMC team’s enthusiastic desire to carry on and to realise the plans for future development (Duffield 2022; Fuatai 2021; Robie 2022). Neoliberal changes to the university management and restructuring had a devastating impact on the institution, culminating in the planned retrenchment in 2022 of 170 academic staff after AUT had made a NZ\$12 million surplus in 2020 and 2021. The plan was described as “flawed” and “outrageous” by critics, and the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) ordered the university to scrap the redundancies (*New Zealand Herald* 2023; Ruru 2023). Tertiary educational unions and Indigenous Māori and Pacific academics also criticised the cuts, describing the campus as a “morgue” (Tovao 2022).

None of the original management team involved in establishing the centre in 2007 remained at the institution in 2020, and their neoliberal successors did not share the original vision. Writing in the *Independent Australia* about the demise of the PMC in the face of neoliberal changes, Lee Duffield noted that the PMC had been placed in the journalism academic discipline, a “professional” and “teaching” field that traditionally drew in high-achieving students interested in its practice-led approach. He argued that there was little support from line academics in disciplines that lacked professional linkages but that were offered because of professional interests in the hierarchical arrangements and power relations within the confined space of their universities: “The Pacific Media Centre frequently challenged ‘ethnocentric journalistic practice’ and placed Māori, Pacific, and indigenous and cultural diversity at the heart of the centre’s experiential knowledge and critical-thinking news narratives” (Duffield 2022; Robie 2021).

However, the initiatives and progress made by the centre are not entirely lost. The good news is that a non-profit NGO, the [Asia Pacific Media Network | Te Koakoa Inc.](#), comprising many of the former team, both staff academics and student volunteers, has been established to carry on the *mahi* (work) with at least two of the publications, *Pacific Journalism Review* and *Asia Pacific Report*, continuing. They are keeping alive the “voice of the voiceless” vision.

Notes

¹ Oceania studies, or Pacific studies in the context of this essay and the Pacific Media Centre, largely refers to the broad region from a journalism perspective. As a geographical area, it includes Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, and the centre. It also includes in its “Asia Pacific” project zone five Asian countries in particular, where policies, economic, or geopolitical interests intersect with Pacific states, i.e., China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Taiwan. Excluding the five Asian countries, Oceania is estimated to have a land mass of almost nine million square kilometers and a population of just under forty-five million.

² The student short-documentary, *Pacific Media Centre 10 Years On—Journalism Under Duress*, made by Sasya Wreksono: <https://youtu.be/UWwWEDYyTkM>.

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