

# State of the Media Review in Four Melanesian Countries — Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu — in 2015



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SSGM DISCUSSION PAPER 2017/1

## Introduction

This Discussion Paper looks at the shifting media landscapes in four Melanesian countries in 2015 — Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It charts and links the key developments, and considers their potentially wide-ranging impacts on policy, politics, free speech and good governance. Of the many profound and rapid changes experienced in 2015, some of the most significant can be linked to the growing use and influence of social media. This is discernable from internet statistics, research reports, media advocacy group statements, news items and the reaction of governments (see Internet World Stats 2015; International Federation of Journalists 2015; Pacific Freedom Forum 11/4/2015; Radio New Zealand International 16/10/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015; Shing 4/7/2015; Tahana 21/1/2015; Tarai et al. 2015; *The National* 27/3/2015; UNESCO 2015; Wood 22/1/2015).

The social media trend included the international phenomenon known as ‘citizen journalism’, which is evidently picking up pace in Melanesia. Bowman and Willis (2003) describe citizen journalism as citizens ‘playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information’, ranging from commenting on an existing news piece to publishing an article. The social media tools include podcast, photo or video on a personal blog, Twitter or Facebook. The trends in 2015 indicate that social media and citizen journalism in Melanesia offer both opportunities and threats to the mainstream media sector. Melanesian governments, apparently alarmed by the proliferation of inflammatory and abusive material on social media, and the potentially destabilising impact on their comparatively small and fragile societies, are proposing harsher controls (Radio New Zealand International 16/10/2015;

Shing 4/7/2015). Governments accused of corruption are also stung by the unprecedented level of public criticism on cyberspace, which analysts say is another motivation for the proposed laws (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/4/2015; Radio Australia 22/1/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015).

Mainstream media have been lumped with social media in the crackdown, and are also at risk of censorship (Shing 4/7/2015). In 2015, all four Melanesian governments made fresh calls for journalism to focus on a developmental, nation-building role, rather than indiscriminately applying the classical watchdog model, which they denounced as overly critical, even destructive. On their part, media advocacy groups and the news media sector emphasised the importance of media’s watchdog role in keeping governments accountable (Aatai 29/5/2015; Loop PNG 9/2/2015; Morris 2015; Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015; Pokiton 9/12/2015; Sayed-Khaiyum 2015). This longstanding ideological divide underpinned the tensions that led to constant clashes between the government and the news media sector in the four countries.

Other important themes and findings to emerge from the survey are the lack of professional capacity in the journalistic corps; poor remuneration, possibly resulting in high turnover of staff in the sector; the dilapidated state of the broadcast sector in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and some political economy concerns. While governments seemed to favour punitive legislation, this on its own was deemed insufficient to address structural problems in journalism, such as poor working conditions and lack of training and development opportunities (International Federation of Journalists 2015).

This discussion paper outlines this study’s methodology and data analysis framework, before sum-



marising some of the key media developments in each country, and the potential consequences. This is followed by discussion and analysis, which compare and contrast the situation in each country, in the context of international trends where relevant.

### Methodology

Developments in the four countries' media sectors were monitored from 1 January to 31 December 2015, from the University of the South Pacific Laucala Campus in Suva, Fiji. Data included news coverage of some major issues and reactions to the coverage; national debates and discussions about the media; infrastructural developments; and social media trends. The major sources of information were the national news media outlets, regional news bulletins and some social media sites.

An effective method of monitoring developments was through the Pacific Island News Association (PINA) daily news service, PACNEWS. According to its website, [PINA](#) is the 'premier regional organisation representing the interests of media professionals in the Pacific' (PINA 2008). It facilitates information exchange through PACNEWS, compiled from news articles contributed by PINA members, and redistributed to the network and to paid subscribers twice daily. Through PACNEWS, PINA links radio, television, newspapers, online services, national associations and journalism schools in 23 Pacific Island countries (PINA 2008). PACNEWS was usually the first point of reference for monitoring daily developments in the four countries. After a relevant article was identified, it was retrieved from its original online source.

The *Pacific Islands Report* (PIR), a free, non-profit news publication of the [Pacific Islands Development Program](#) at the [East-West Center](#) in Honolulu, Hawai'i, was utilised as a supplementary source. The PIR provides an edited digest of news, commentary and analysis from across the Pacific, Monday to Friday. Radio Australia and Radio New Zealand International were also monitored. Both regularly cover Pacific news, including developments in the media sector. They provided some unique stories and news angles, which complemented local coverage and helped fill any gaps.

The data evaluation was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. Initially, the news items were organised in chronological order under each country. This was followed by a more thorough and conscious reading of the data to identify any standout themes and/or patterns nationally. The articles were edited, and then realigned on a thematic basis. Some interrelated themes were grouped and examined collectively, such as social media and media legislation. After additional reviews and revisions, the final thematic outlines were finalised for the write-up on a country-by-country basis, followed by a comparative analysis in the discussion section.

This review follows an alphabetical order, beginning with Fiji.

### Fiji

In 2015, Fiji's media sector endured various challenges, including strident government criticism and alleged interference from the state, while attempting to cover news critically, within the confines of the punitive Media Industry Development Decree 2010 (see Morris 2015). More recent legislation, such as the Television (Cross Carriage of Designated Events) Decree 2014, added to the complications, confusion and consternations. Social media grew in influence, shaping debate and quite possibly affecting policy (Morris 2015; Tarai et al. 2015; Vuibau 8/1/2015).

One of the first casualties of the trying conditions was the private broadcaster, Fiji Television Limited, whose operating licence was once again renewed for just six months instead of the full 12-year term since expiry in May 2012 (Morris 2015). This was allegedly in retaliation for airing interviews with two former prime ministers critical of the Bainimarama government (fijilive 4/1/2015; US Department of State 2013). Fiji Television acting chairman Iowane Naiveli blamed the licensing dispute on former CEO Tevita Gonelevu and head of content Tanya Waqanika, earlier sacked for refusing to comply with the Television (Cross Carriage of Designated Events) Decree (fijilive 4/1/2015).

In promulgating the decree on May 2014, the Attorney-General and Minister for Communications Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum had stated that it would

allow all citizens to view events of national significance on free-to-air television. The decree compelled Fiji Television to share with other broadcasters its exclusive 2015 World Rugby Sevens Series broadcast rights (fijilive 4/1/2015; Morris 2015). However, World Rugby, owner of the international rugby sevens series, saw the decree as a breach of its exclusive contract with Fiji Television, and threatened to cancel the broadcast rights altogether (Kumar 6/12/2014).

This ultimatum placed the government in a fraught situation given that rugby sevens is Fiji's national sport, and the loss of broadcast rights could result in much public anger. To complicate things further for government, the sacked Fiji Television executives Gonelevu and Waqanika called a media conference and made startling claims about direct government pressure on the television company's board and the executives to accept the broadcast rights sharing deal. They also asserted that the attorney-general and Fiji Television director Nouzab Fareed colluded to effect their sacking. The two complainants tabled a paper trail of emails as purported evidence (Baoba 8/1/2015; Vuibau 8/1/2015).

However, Fareed denied the accusations; Gonelevu and Waqanika's demand for a commission of inquiry was ignored, and their police complaint did not result in any substantive action either. Still, the saga highlighted potential conflict of interest situations in Fiji Television's corporate structure, including direct and indirect ties with government and the business sector. Fiji Television director Fareed is the group chief executive of Fijian Holdings Limited, Fiji Television's largest shareholder, with a 57.26 per cent stake (Fijian Holdings 2013, 2014). In 1989, Fijian Holdings received a FJ\$20 million interest-free government loan to buy shares in successful companies as part of affirmative action plans for indigenous Fijian advancement. The loan was later converted into a grant by the Qarase government (Ratuva 2013). As a major benefactor of Fijian Holdings, the government appoints the company's board and the chairman (Fijian Holdings 2013; Ratuva 2013). This gives government considerable traction within Fijian Holdings and, through it, possibly Fiji Television.

As one of the country's major commercial entities, Fijian Holdings reported consolidated

total assets of FJ\$421 million in 2013, and a FJ\$87 million investment portfolio spread across 22 companies (Fijian Holdings 2013, 2014; Lal 2013). The media arm of Fijian Holdings' business was a minuscule 2.1 per cent of its total investment portfolio (Fijian Holdings 2013). The question is whether the Fijian Holdings group would be prepared to compromise the position of the whole company through Fiji Television playing any kind of genuine watchdog role (see Narsey 2013).

Fiji Television was finally given a 12-year licence and the government eventually amended the Television (Cross Carriage of Designated Events) Decree 2014. Fareed stated that the amendment suited all parties, although critics claimed that the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation stood to benefit the most (Morris 2015; Radio Australia 4/5/2015).

The Fiji Television–government kerfuffle had hardly subsided when the *Fiji Sun* clashed with the government-appointed media regulator, the Media Industry Development Authority, over an unfavourable ruling (Pacific Media Centre 25/2/2015). It involved a complaint by the opposition Social Democratic Liberal Party youth spokesman, Pita Waqavonovono, about two *Sun* articles – a *Coconut Wireless* gossip item that referred to him personally and a page one report that accused his party of ethnicising the land issue. Media authority chair Ashwin Raj upheld the complaint, describing the items as 'thoroughly yoked in the logic of race and bereft of facts' (Pacific Media Centre 25/2/2015).

However, *Sun* publisher and chief executive Peter Lomas claimed that Raj had not constituted a proper meeting of the media authority, while company lawyer Suruj Sharma contended that the decision was 'without jurisdictional basis of facts and law' (Delaibatiki 23/2/2015, 11/3/1015). Sharma warned that the ruling had 'prejudicially' impacted on the *Sun's* corporate standing, and demanded an apology in lieu of legal action. This saw Raj admit to making a unilateral decision, retract his ruling and apologise to the *Sun* (Delaibatiki 11/3/2015). This clash highlighted gaps in the media authority's setup, structure and operations; the power bestowed on the media regulator and its chair; and how such power might be deployed.

During the year, there were other disagreements worth revisiting for a deeper understanding of Fiji's potentially treacherous social and political terrain, particularly from a news media perspective. In April, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama criticised *The Fiji Times* for reporting Opposition Leader Ro Temumu Kepa's stance on the education ministry's plans to prioritise rural students at three Suva-based government-run boarding schools. Kepa portrayed the policy as a sinister move designed to 're-engineer' and 'weaken' the indigenous community, and warned of a push back (Swami 15/4/2015). Bainimarama not only attacked Kepa for allegedly ethnicising the issue and threatening national unity, he also accused the *Times* of colluding with her:

*The Fiji Times* also stands condemned for yet another grossly irresponsible piece of journalism. Rather than report dispassionately and in the interests of national stability, the *Fiji Times* is controlled by a cabal that manipulates the news agenda and uses inflammatory language to create disunity, division and instability and to advance its own political interests. (Radio New Zealand International 16/4/2015; Swami 15/4/2015).

Fiji's national media would be wary of government accusations of creating communal discord, a jailable offence under the media decree (Media Industry Development Decree 2010, s. 24). *The Fiji Times* editor-in-chief Fred Wesley pointed out that the newspaper did not necessarily share Kepa's opinion, but it was still obliged to report it. The media advocacy group, Pacific Freedom Forum, described the government's response as an 'over-reaction' to a 'fairly straight piece of reporting'. It argued that because of years of media censorship, government needed to adjust its thinking about the media's role in society (Radio New Zealand International 16/4/2015).

With regards to media's role, the Fijian Government has been very clear that it favours a developmental function, and this was reiterated by Attorney-General Sayed-Khaiyum at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March. Sayed-Khaiyum stated that Fiji's constitu-

tion unequivocally recognised 'freedom of expression, but not the freedom to incite violence or racial hatred' (2015:10–11). He argued the media had 'played a pivotal and negative role' in Fiji's 'historical past of racism and religious prejudice', which cannot be repeated. Furthermore, the government preferred the 'development model' with the media playing an important part in nation-building (ibid.).

The government's vision of the media's role is enforced by legislation: section 22 of the media decree bars any content that is 'against public interest or order; against the national interest; or creates communal discord' (Media Industry Development Decree 2010). However, critics describe this provision as sweeping and ill-defined (Morris 2015), which could make the media feel vulnerable over any differences in opinion with government. A difference in views did arise again, in June, when the attorney-general criticised the *Fiji Times* over its reportage of a new national flag design (Swami 29/6/2015). The attorney-general cast doubt on the sample size and urban–rural participation ratio of a *Times*-commissioned Tebbutt Research poll, which showed that 86 per cent of Fijians preferred a vote on the flag design, while 53 per cent wanted the current design retained (Swami 29/6/2015).

The *Times*'s editor-in-chief Wesley pointed out that their company had been using Tebbutt since 1992, and that they were confident about its credibility (Radio New Zealand International 30/6/2015; Swami 29/6/2015). This exchange exemplified the government's sensitivity to news reports that questioned its policies. Ordinarily, the media would be expected to take such criticism in their stride, but the punitive media decree had amplified the risks, resulting in a cagier media. As Morris noted:

Do we continue to report views and issues critical of the government – no matter how constructive –and risk a breach that could potentially land an editor or journalist with a fine of up to \$10,000 and/or up to two years in jail, and the media company a fine of up to \$100,000? Or do we adopt pragmatism and self-censorship and live another day? (2015:36)

For much of 2015, the media decree remained a major point of contention, with opposition parties demanding a review, even as the year began, particularly in light of the 2014 elections, the first since the 2006 coup. Opposition Leader Kepa described the decree as a source of fear for the media (Radio New Zealand International 20/1/2015). National Federation Party leader Professor Biman Prasad took issue with what he regarded as a major loophole in the legal requirement for ‘balanced reporting’: people simply ignored media queries, which meant the story could not be reported because it was deemed to lack balance (ibid.). Veteran *Fiji Sun* journalist Nemani Delaibatiki stated that the decree’s punitive measures should be reviewed, but parts of it should be retained to deter ‘irresponsible reporting’ (ibid.).

The government heeded at least one major concern about the decree when in July it removed the two-year prison terms and FJ\$1000 fines stipulated for journalists. However, some observers saw this as a half-measure since fines and jail terms for editors and publishers were retained. Citizens’ Constitutional Forum program manager Ken Cokanasiga encapsulated the concerns when he stated that the amendment was insufficient as media organisations would continue to self-censor to avoid fines and/or imprisonment (Moceituba 14/7/2015).

During the year, political economy concerns also surfaced in relation to the government’s ongoing policy to advertise exclusively in the allegedly pro-government *Fiji Sun*. The National Federation Party leader Prasad moved a parliamentary motion for a review, only to be defeated 26–17 (Vuibau 11/7/2015). This issue highlighted the government’s clout and influence as a major advertiser, with the *Times* reportedly losing millions of dollars in state advertising due to its allegedly anti-government stance (Lagan 14/3/2013; Morris 2015).

Towards the close of the year, social media’s growing influence in Fiji’s political landscape was further confirmed. A paper entitled ‘Political Social Media Campaigning in Fiji’s 2014 Elections’ (Tarai et al. 2015) highlighted the growing use of Facebook by political parties as a major platform for campaigning. Social media usage was fuelled by increased mobile phone and internet penetration,

driven by cheaper rates. The authors noted how political parties used Facebook as a tool to attract the vote of Fiji’s 47 per cent youth population (Tarai et al. 2015). Statistics showed that by 2014, more than a third of Fiji’s population was using the internet, compared to 10 per cent during the 2006 elections (Bola-Bari 23/10/2015; Round 25/3/2014).

While 2015 was a trying year for the Fiji media sector, there were a few positive developments. Pacific media scholar Professor David Robie listed the adoption of a new constitution in 2013, followed by the general election in 2014, as signs of progress. He noted that the media were more critical of the government through online commentaries and letters to the editor. However, the ‘harsh’ media decree was still a ‘spectre’ and ‘many challenges still lay ahead’ (Robie 1/5/2015).

### Papua New Guinea

The Papua New Guinea news media sector dealt with some significant challenges in 2015, including the encroachment of social media, the threat of stronger government controls, and fallout from the coverage of some major political scandals.

The increasing clout of social media and citizen journalism, a major theme in 2015, was evident during the Manus Island Detention Centre controversy in January. With 734 detainees on hunger strike and the centre declared a no-go zone, both the national and international media faced major hurdles sourcing news from the location (Evershed and Doherty 13/1/2015; Tahana 21/1/2015). Footage aired by Radio New Zealand International appeared to show guards in riot gear entering the compound, followed by sounds of screaming, shouting and thumping. Immigration Minister Rimbink Pato blamed refugee activists of using the internet to directly link up with asylum seekers to stoke unrest (Evershed and Doherty 13/1/2015; Tahana 21/1/2015).

The negative effect of social media was also felt in 2015, when the Papua New Guinea national rugby football league chief executive, Brad Tassell became the target of trolls (*The National* 11/3/2015). Tassell resigned in March, stating that the defamatory allegations and death threats were too distressing for him and his family (ibid.). He

accused the social media site, Worldwide Papua New Guinea RL, and former and current rugby league administrators, of instigating the campaign. Tassell added that social media in Papua New Guinea was 'literally out of control' (Radio Australia 11/3/2015; *The National* 11/3/2015).

On his part, Papua New Guinea Sports Minister Justin Tkatchenko blamed 'faceless' social media users, and warned of stronger laws to contain the problem. Even a mainstream newspaper like *The National* recommended sterner legislation, including 'monitoring mechanisms' (*The National* 27/3/2015). However, the Pacific Freedom Forum chair, Titi Gabi, stated that restricting social media use would remove an essential check and balance on the abuse of power. Gabi argued that the free-flowing and often very critical debate on Facebook and Twitter, which were hugely popular in Papua New Guinea, had alarmed the government. The forum co-chair, Monica Miller, stated that news media should be careful that their owners' interests did not conflict with their watchdog role (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/4/2015). This statement was obviously aimed at *The National*, owned by Malaysian logging interests sometimes linked to environmental damage in the country.

A more nuanced appraisal of social media came during the World Media Freedom Day celebrations in May. While addressing journalism students at the Divine Word University in Madang, the keynote speaker, Papua New Guinea Media Council president, Alexander Rheeney, discussed possible collaboration between mainstream media and social media for the country's benefit. Such comments from the editor-in-chief of a leading daily newspaper were a clear signal that the mainstream media were awakening to the growing power of social media and were keen to harness it (UNESCO 2015).

Social media was to remain the focus of discussions throughout the year, with the international journalists' advocacy group, Reporters Without Borders, rebuffing government proposals to make it compulsory for social media users to disclose their identities, as it was seen to constitute a 'serious threat' to online freedom of expression. The government's intention to create a special media tribunal to deal with 'deliberate misinformation,

and spreading of falsities and malice', could 'encourage widespread self-censorship' (Reporters Without Borders 2015).

Some other major themes related to media ownership and the quality of journalism. As early as February, Communications and Information Minister Miringtoro gave clear signals about the intention to introduce cross-media ownership laws. Towards this end, the minister expressed concern about the loss of Australian National Rugby League games on free-to-air television (through the national broadcaster EMTV) to the privately, Irish-owned telecommunication company, Digicel (EMTV Online 10/2/2015).

With regards to journalists' welfare, the formation of the Papua New Guinea Media Workers Association was a major development. The association secured a meeting with Prime Minister Peter O'Neill early in the year, and raised various issues of concern. These included training and educational opportunities; establishing a public complaints body; reviewing the out-dated national code of ethics; the demise of the Papua New Guinea Media Council; unaddressed media rights abuses; and the industry's poor public image (Loop PNG 9/2/2015). O'Neill stressed that a fair and independent media sector was important for national development, and proposed monthly media luncheons, which was accepted (*ibid.*).

Issues concerning journalistic standards took centre stage when the national daily, the *Post-Courier*, was accused of committing a major ethical breach. This was in relation to a 20 February page one lead story about Asian prostitutes working illegally in Papua New Guinea. There was a public outcry when the *Papua New Guinea Today* website revealed that the images used in the story were not of local girls, but lifted from a Nigerian news website (Papua New Guinea Today 2015). Public anger at such a blatant ethical breach was rampant on social media, with the newspaper accused of sensationalising and falsifying information for profit (Pacific Media Centre 23/2/2015; Papua New Guinea Today 2015).

The media's alleged shortcomings surfaced again in October in a United Kingdom-based human rights organisation report. Entitled, 'The

Spin Cycle: How Papua New Guinea's Media Washes Dirty Stories' (Lasslett 30/9/2015), the article highlighted the alleged dearth of in-depth journalism, and labelled the national media as an 'unfiltered communications mouthpiece' for government and corporate interests. The claims were made on the basis of a comparative analysis of the *Post-Courier* and three Australian media outlets – Radio Australia, SBS World News and *The Australian* (Lasslett 30/9/2015; Pacific Media Centre 5/10/2015). The *Post-Courier's* editor-in-chief, Rheeney, countered that they had a solid record in the coverage of corruption and human rights abuses (Pacific Media Centre 5/10/2015).

While the government emphasised the need for the media to focus on national development and sought to improve media standards through stronger legislation, media advocacy groups labelled this strategy a guise for government control (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/4/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015). The concerns of civil society groups could be viewed in the context of the numerous scandals involving the Papua New Guinea government over the years. The suspicions resurfaced in June 2015 in relation to a 'fishy' US\$95 million Chinese deal to build the southern hemisphere's largest tuna landing/processing hub in Madang (Pacific Freedom Forum 26/6/2015; Sullivan 26/6/2015).

While the development promised employment with the construction of up to 10 canneries and other industrial plants, there were concerns about risks to the environment and threats to subsistence fishing. As grassroots opposition increased, the government responded with a restraining order (Sullivan 26/6/2015). This drew a response from the Pacific Freedom Forum, which asserted that 'gagging citizens ... strikes to the heart of democratic rights', and urged the courts to uphold people's constitutional rights (Pacific Freedom Forum 26/6/2015).

The cannery dispute encapsulated some major issues relating to the media sector – the alleged shortage of critical journalism to address major public interest issues, highlighted in the Lasslett report; the need to improve the skills and educational standards of journalists, raised by the national media association; and increasing concerns

about government threats to introduce stronger media legislation (see International Federation of Journalists 2015).

There were some positive developments in 2015, such as the revival of the Media Council of Papua New Guinea after a five-year hiatus. The council consisted of mainstream media representatives with the *Post-Courier's* Rheeney as president (PINA 2/3/2015). Media self-regulation through an independent, properly constituted and active media council could provide a buffer of sorts against government regulation, even if it could not guarantee full protection. In the broadcast sector, two new initiatives were announced: the confirmed launching of the National Broadcasting Corporation's new youth station, Tribe FM, and the national television company EMTV's establishment of partnerships with key government and private stakeholders to boost the reporting of national disasters (Pacific Islands Report 1/2/2015).

Towards the end of the year, the sector was on the defensive again, with the government signalling that tighter controls were imminent, including a media tribunal, laws to summon journalists before parliament, and stronger legislation pertaining to the usage of the internet (see Reporters Without Borders 2015). The newly revived Media Council described the proposals as a 'dangerous precedent' (Pokiton 9/12/2015). It contended that the requirement to report to the national parliament could see politicians – through the national parliament – determine and influence news content. The council pointed out that the proposed legislation breached section 46 of the constitution on freedom of expression and information. Instead of a government-installed tribunal, the council proposed self-regulation through a press complaints committee (*ibid.*). By year's end, there was no firm government response to the media council, and the news media sector was left in a limbo as it entered 2016.

### Solomon Islands

Like Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands media also faced government threats of stronger legislation. The rising influence of social media was also evident in 2015, as was government's keenness to impose some manner of control over the free and open discourse in cyberspace.

A noticeable theme was the palpable lack of confidence in media circles about governance issues. This was despite a new government taking office in November 2014, with incoming Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare promising a raft of measures to improve transparency and accountability, including the formation of an Independent Commission Against Corruption (Osifelo 5/1/2015).

Prominent bloggers such as Terence Wood sounded sceptical about any dramatic changes under Sogavare, back for a third term. In an opinion piece on the *Devpolicy* website, Wood stated that the country was 'trapped by clientelist politics', and faced 'many serious' and ongoing development problems stemming from 'poor political governance, dysfunctional civil service, and corrupt businesses' (Wood 22/1/2015).

For much of 2015, the government continued to struggle with negative media coverage, partly due to criticism from leading citizens and officials. This included the Chief Justice, Sir Albert Palmer, who called on the government to 'get its house in order', and warned that corruption would be the High Court's top priority (Radio Australia 22/1/2015). The fact that the chief justice timed his comments to coincide with the opening of the new legal year, when he would receive maximum media coverage, was telling. Sir Palmer's comments followed the auditor-general's revelations about the SB\$54.1 million discrepancy in government accounts between 2012 and 2013 (Palmer 15/1/2015; Radio Australia 22/1/2015).

Some of the government's public image problems were of its own making. These included its handling of the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi's tour in March, reportedly to 'scuttle Melanesian recognition of Papua as "Occupied State"' (Jakarta Globe 2/3/2015). The carefully managed visit infuriated journalists like Ofani Eremae, who claimed that the government shielded the minister from the media (Radio Australia 3/3/2015). Historically, the Solomon Islands Government had been a strong and vocal supporter of the Papuan cause, and the apparent softening of this policy had not gone unnoticed by the national media, which had a tradition of solidarity with West Papua, in line with the general Melanesian sentiment (see *Solomon Star* 13/5/2016).

In the following months, the government's public standing continued to suffer. In April, the national news was dominated by reports of members of parliament (MPs) granting themselves tax-free salary benefits. The tax exemption was universally condemned, before being annulled by a court ruling. The country's leading newspaper, the *Solomon Star*, led the charge with a page one story revealing an annual potential loss to the nation of about SB\$2.2 million as a result of the tax holiday (Aatai 24/4/2015).

In addition, the *Solomon Star* ran three critical editorials in April alone, which was indicative of the high level of public discontent. The first on 17 April entitled, 'MPs' Benefits Keep Increasing', condemned the ongoing 'enrichment' of MPs at public expense (*Solomon Star* 17/4/2015) while the second, on 24 April, entitled, 'Time to Say Enough is Enough', attacked the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission for approving another increase in emoluments in just two years (*Solomon Star* 24/4/2015).

During the year, the broadcasting sector's achievements and failures also came into focus. The state-owned Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation achieved a major milestone with its 63rd anniversary commemoration on 23 September (Hadlow 25/9/2015). However, an ambitious plan to launch a national television station in time for 38th Independence celebrations in July 2016 faced a setback, with a feasibility study highlighting a chronic shortage of expertise (Radio Australia 22/1/2015). Consultant Glen Hughes's report stated that a lot of money and effort would be needed to get a television station off the ground in the capital (Radio New Zealand International 2/3/2015).

Besides the state broadcaster's dilapidated state, complaints about the alleged lack of professionalism in the news media corps were standout issues. The key complainant, government, threatened to impose tougher legislation. Initially, Prime Minister Sogavare raised the issue in a constructive manner as chief guest at World Media Freedom Day celebrations in Honiara in May. During the Media Association of Solomon Islands-organised event, Sogavare spoke of 'breeding good journalism' to hold public trust, and the media's vital role in promoting good governance and national development (Aatai 29/5/2015).

Sogavare urged the media to use their freedoms as a ‘force for good ... lift our nation, rather than dwell heavily on innuendos with their destructive influences’. The prime minister stated that the challenge to improve the country was a ‘shared responsibility’ (Aatai 29/5/2015).

However, Sogavare was more strident in a parliamentary address later in the year. He stated that without checks on bad reporting, the Solomon Islands risked creating a society with no respect for authority, and vowed to root out government whistleblowers (Radio New Zealand International 16/10/2015). Besides the mainstream media, Sogavare singled out the watchdog group, Forum Solomon Islands International, for alleged inaccurate reports and statements. Since the 2014 election, the Forum Solomon Islands International blog had highlighted what it saw as rampant government malpractice. Its president, Benjamin Afuga, had stated that corruption in the country had ‘gone viral’ (Radio Australia 22/1/2015). But the prime minister dismissed the group as a ‘listed charity’, which should not be interfering in national politics (Radio New Zealand International 16/10/2015).

Overall, media development and media freedom were much-debated topics in 2015. An International Federation of Journalists (2015) situational report gave deeper insights into some of the issues, including: the prolific rise of social media and its contribution to the diversity of public opinion; the Honiara-centric location and outlook of the mainstream news media; the high staff turnover in the industry; and the youthful make-up of the journalist corps. The majority (85 per cent) of journalists surveyed had 10 years or less media industry experience. With regards to media freedom, 48 per cent of the media sector respondents gave a ‘good’ rating (ibid.). But when asked if they felt restricted reporting on sensitive topics, 63 per cent answered in the affirmative, while another 48 per cent felt that journalists in their organisation sometimes practiced self-censorship (ibid.).

The report also picked on the apparent connections between the government and the Media Association Solomon Islands. It pointed out that the media association’s patron was the prime minister, and its president was a leading journalist in

the state-owned national broadcaster, which called into question the media association’s independence (International Federation of Journalists 2015). The report did highlight that ‘headlines around government and transparency issues and fiscal accountability’ attest to a willingness to keep media independence separate (ibid.).

Generally, the situational report was a stark reminder of the major fault lines in the Solomon Islands media landscape, including the lack of professional capacity and journalist attrition, plausibly caused by insufficient remuneration and career prospects. Some of these deficiencies could be linked to the lack of standards that Sogavare had complained about. The question that arises is whether stronger media legislation is in itself sufficient to address the issues on hand, or more likely to exacerbate journalist attrition and result in an even more subdued media, as reportedly the case in Fiji (see Morris 2015).

A major finding was the growing influence of social media. A clear signal that the government was taking stock of this development came on 31 December, when Sogavare launched a new ‘Prime Minister’s’ website dedicated to ‘informing and educating’ Solomon Islanders about government policies (Prime Minister’s Press 31/12/2015). Sogavare stated that with the ever-growing popularity of social media, the government must rise to the challenge of providing timely information to the public. The website demonstrated the government’s commitment to ‘an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability’ (ibid.).

The website’s launch indicated a two-pronged approach to counter social media – a tough attitude founded on warnings of punitive legislation and a softer line based on the internet to reach out to people. Its launch showed that social media was forcing governments to be more proactive, transparent and accountable to its citizens, although this did not annul the possibility of harsher media legislation in future.

### Vanuatu

In 2015, media in Vanuatu were largely occupied by a mega cyclone and a massive political scandal. During the year, it became even more evident

that the social media movement was growing. One indicator was government threats of restrictions on social media usage. Mainstream media, too, weathered government threats of stronger legislation. Also apparent was the parlous state of the national broadcaster. Cyclone Pam, the major story of the year, further damaged Vanuatu's fragile communications infrastructure.

The year began on a sombre note for the employees of the state broadcaster, Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation, with the government indicating in January that 20 to 60 staff could be retired as part of a major revamp (Radio New Zealand International 26/1/2015). A feasibility report had highlighted the national broadcaster's poor condition, with the government calling for a new general manager to save the situation. Particularly concerning was Radio Vanuatu's ongoing failure to transmit to some outer islands, especially during the peak cyclone season (ibid.).

The government issued a call for partners to help upgrade the broadcaster, including to fix radio transmission problems and move from analogue to digital TV. A taskforce was also looking at separating the dual television and radio functions of the broadcaster, changing its structure, and recruiting staff with the appropriate technological skills and knowledge (Radio New Zealand International 26/1/2015).

Some commentators pointed out that successive governments were partly responsible for the dilapidated condition of state broadcasters in the Pacific through neglect, lack of re-capitalisation and using the service for political purposes. The Pacific Freedom Forum co-chair, Monica Miller, stated that Pacific governments needed to properly fund state broadcasters (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015). According to Miller: 'Pacific governments all too often cut back resources for national broadcasters while insisting on better standards (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015). Miller blamed 'this lack of consistency' for creating the 'very instability that governments complain of' (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015).

While the state broadcaster appeared to be in the doldrums, there were some new developments in the print sector in January, with the emergence

Vanuatu's first English-Chinese newspaper, the weekly *Vila Times*. Editor Nancy Zhang said that the aim of the *Vila Times* was to facilitate greater links between Vanuatu and China, as well as reach out to other Asian countries (Joshua 21/1/2015). The paper would focus on providing locals with more information about China, and also the Vanuatu economy, including the tourism and education sectors. The then prime minister Joe Natuman and other government ministers welcomed the paper's launch (ibid.). The arrival of the paper, and the presence of senior government members at the launch, was another indication of the Chinese population's growth and influence in Vanuatu.

With regards to training and development, there was some activity in February, with a major media workshop on corruption, a chronic problem in the country (Larmour 2012). The training, sponsored by Transparency International, was held in Port Vila. It included participants from Transparency International Chapters' in Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand and Vanuatu (TIVNews 12/2/2015). Facilitator Farid Farid stated that the workshop aimed to encourage the kind of reporting that would lead to changes regarding corruption issues at a local level, based on sustained media pressure through the use of simple but powerful language. The focus of this training showed how civil society organisations and donor agencies were emphasising media's watchdog role, while government had showed a preference for the developmental role, ostensibly to support nation-building.

The importance of media's watchdog role was also tackled by the Ombudsman, Kalkot Mataskelekele, when he addressed journalism students from the local school. The students heard, first-hand, about the seriousness of corruption in the country (*Vanuatu Daily Post* 24/5/2015). Mataskelekele highlighted the structural weaknesses in the procedures, which had seen a number of cases stuck in the system for years and others 'simply disappear' (ibid.). For Mataskelekele, the journalism students were an important audience: over the years, the Vanuatu media have played a key role in highlighting the Ombudsman's report in the face of intimidation and assaults (ibid.).

Issues relating to corruption took a back stage temporarily as the country braced itself for a major natural disaster, which was to become the story of the year. Cyclone Pam, with gusting winds of up to 320 km/hr, cut a swathe through the country between 12 and 14 March (ABC News 17/3/2015). Media were preoccupied with the coverage of the devastation, which included 15 deaths, 75,000 homeless and 96 per cent of food crops destroyed. Vanuatu's already crumbling communications facilities suffered further damage, with links to the outer islands severed. In the worst affected areas, the towers crashed, and the National Disaster Management Office resorted to satellite phones to assess damage and direct relief operations (ABC News 17/3/2015; Makin 24/3/2015).

Widespread coverage by both domestic and foreign media was instrumental in galvanising local and international relief efforts in the cyclone's wake, although the state broadcaster faced some criticism for failing to provide adequate and timely information. This forced locals to turn to other sources, such as Radio New Zealand International (Makin 29/12/2015). Mobile phone technology also helped to address communication gaps, with SMS warnings sent to Vanuatu's 160,000 mobile phone users on at least four occasions. This highlighted the growing importance of communications technology in Vanuatu, considered the world's most at-risk country for natural disasters (World Bank 29/9/2015). Among other things, Cyclone Pam was a stark reminder about the urgent need to recapitalise and revamp the national broadcast service, particularly with predictions about more erratic weather patterns due to global warming (Makin 29/12/2015).

Another issue that stood out in 2015 was the government's concerns about the abuse of social media and its attempts to control usage. Government also warned about regulating mainstream media (International Federation of Journalists 2015). Indeed, one of the first announcements Sato Kilman made after taking the prime ministership from Joe Natuman in a no-confidence motion was about media reforms.

The Kilman government announced a blanket ban on the use of social media by all civil servants, unless prior approval was gained from the Secretar-

iat (Radio Australia 29/6/2015). The decision was criticised by the social media blog, *Vanuatu Daily Digest*, which pointed out that social media was an important public sphere for debate, and an essential source of news for many civil servants (Makin 28/6/2015). The restriction placed on civil servants was indicative of the government's growing concern about the mounting use of social media and the type of conversations that were taking place (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Radio Australia 29/6/2015). The government warned of a law to curb 'excessive liberty', including unwarranted allegations and abusive comments made on radio talkback shows and social media (Shing 4/7/2015).

The Kilman government's determination to rein in both social and mainstream news media became more evident over the course of the year. In his meeting with the state broadcaster's general manager Fred Vurobaravu, who is also the National Broadcast Regulator, Kilman stated that a draft Media Regulation Bill would be tabled in the next session of parliament to cover cross-media ownership and disciplinary action against media that breached the regulatory requirements (Shing 4/7/2015).

Kilman also slated Radio Vanuatu for 'stimulating instability' through talkback shows and other public forums, and threatened to close down radio shows and Facebook forums that defamed leaders (Shing 4/7/2015). He singled out the *Yumi Toktok Stret* Facebook group, and accused it of 'inciting social anarchy, instability and social disorder'. The wrong use of media could 'easily destabilise' the social peace and order in a vulnerable country like Vanuatu, said Kilman (*ibid.*).

Kilman's comments generated a major discussion about the relationship between media freedom, media responsibility and democracy in Vanuatu. News media editors and publishers reacted with predictable anxiety. The general feeling was that while some concerns about some of the excesses were justified, the government reaction was disproportionately strong (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Shing 4/7/2015).

The *Vanuatu Daily Post* media director Dan McGarry acknowledged that certain individuals had made disparaging remarks but shutting down public discourse was unnecessary since there

were laws to address libelous comments (Shing 4/7/2015). The *Vanuatu Daily Post* publisher Marc Neil-Jones added that since independence, this was the first ever attempt to control the media through legislation. Kilman's proposal also generated negative reactions on social media, with people stating that leaders should humble themselves and accept criticism (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Shing 4/7/2015).

The opposition joined the debate, with its leader, Edward Natapei, stating that while they supported the regulation of social media, any further limits on mainstream news media would be 'detrimental to the country at large' (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015; Radio New Zealand International 7/7/2015). That was one of the last statements by the three-time former prime minister Natapei before he died suddenly at Vila Central Hospital on July 28, aged 61.

Government's call for stronger media curbs was also opposed by regional and international media watch groups. The Pacific Freedom Forum stated that government must give more time for consultation since 'one week is nowhere near enough for such important legislation' (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015). Transparency International Vanuatu stated that the media must be independent to be able to provide constructive criticism (TIVNews 7/7/2015). It noted that since communication technology in Vanuatu was developing rapidly, access to online discussion forums and mainstream news sites will continue to grow. Such a platform for public discussions was not just crucial for democracy, but also a resourceful information hub for decision makers (ibid.).

Concerns about media regulation can be linked to the country's experience with government corruption, an entrenched problem in Vanuatu for years (Ferrieux-Patterson 2014; Larmour 2012). In 2015, the country was gripped by a bribery scandal implicating 14 MPs that was due in court. It was alleged that Moana Carcasses, prime minister from March 2013 to May 2014, and the deputy prime minister in 2015, paid the accused MPs a sum totalling VT35 million in an attempt to oust then Prime Minister Joe Natuman in a no-confidence vote (Joshua 22/7/2015).

During the trial, the culture of impunity for assaults against journalists in Vanuatu (Robie 8/3/2011) was again on full display. The then minister of foreign affairs, Serge Vohor, charged in the bribery case, bashed young photographer Nicky Kuautonga outside court before driving away (Willie 8/9/2015). It was reported that instead of stopping Vohor, police at the scene advised the photographer to file a formal complaint (Radio New Zealand International 9/9/2015).

In October, the Supreme Court convicted Carcasses, parliamentary speaker Marcelino Pipite and 12 other MPs, of bribery. The lineup included five government ministers. Following the conviction, Pipite used his interim executive powers as acting Head of State to pardon himself and all 13 MPs (Naime 11/10/2015). This audacious move outraged citizens, shocked the international community, and put Vanuatu even more conspicuously under the domestic and regional media spotlight (Radio Australia 12/10/2015).

Pipite's actions underscored the sense of impunity among some local politicians. Even a senior journalist like Tony Wilson, editor of the *Vanuatu Independent*, appeared stunned. In a Radio Australia interview, Wilson, who was the first to report the pardons, described the move as a 'shocking development in what has been an incredible few days in the political history of Vanuatu' (ibid.). It all came to naught for Pipite and his co-accused when their pardons were overturned, and on 22 October they were sentenced to between three and four years in prison (Joshua 23/10/2015).

At the height of the corruption scandal, the problems at Radio Vanuatu came to the fore again. The *Vanuatu Daily Digest* reported that the state broadcaster had failed to cover the initial court appearance, apparently due to a lack of equipment and planning (Makin 22/7/2015). The failure to report the opening proceedings of one of the biggest public interest stories of the year brought back into stark focus the urgent need to address the deep-rooted problems at the apparently underfunded national broadcaster. It highlighted that in some island countries, media freedom and the public right to information is not just undermined by harsh legislation, but also under-resourced state

broadcasters, which usually provide a lifeline to the rural areas and outer islands.

The year ended as it began for the state broadcaster, with more revelations in November about the financial and organisational chaos at the station. The cash-strapped broadcaster had an outstanding debt of VT12 million, which it was struggling to pay back (Makin 4/11/2015). There were further disruptions when staff at both the radio and television stations went on a short strike before eventually returning to work. From a promised annual budget of VT60 million, the central government had only provided VT18 million by November, which underscored the problems faced by the station. For the ailing national broadcaster, 2015 ended as it had begun, with still no firm solution in sight (ibid.).

### Discussion

A clear, cross-cutting theme of this review is the deteriorating media–government relationship due to alleged misreporting and critique of government. While such tensions are not new, the presence of social media has ratcheted the conflict due to the increased volume and uninhibited nature of public criticism taking place on cyberspace. This has seen Melanesian governments come under unprecedented public scrutiny. Governments, particularly in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, were struggling to deal with the unparalleled volume of criticism. They reacted by threatening to legislate both mainstream news media and social media (Finau et al. 2014; International Federation of Journalists 2015; Tarai et al. 2015).

In Fiji's case, the punitive media decree has been in place since April 2010, and the Fijian Government did not threaten to impose new legislation in 2015. However, the government was quick and strong in its criticism of the news media on certain issues. This had Fiji's news media on the edge, particularly with the punitive 2010 media decree in the backdrop (Swami 15/4/2015, 29/6/2015). Trends in 2015 indicated that the three other Melanesian countries intended to follow Fiji's example in introducing punitive media legislation (Pokiton 9/12/2015; Radio New Zealand International 16/10/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015;

Shing 4/7/2015). Governments touted national stability and development as the prime motivations for stronger controls. The media sector and civil society organisations reacted coolly to such justifications. Their concern was the negative effect of harsher media laws on government accountability. This would seem a valid enough concern, with corruption regarded as an entrenched problem in Melanesia (see Larmour 2012) and 2015 had some major scandals of its own.

The apparent threats to the freedoms enjoyed by the news media in Melanesia was comparable to a global decline documented by the independent media freedom watchdog, Freedom House. The report found that media freedom in 2015 had dipped to its lowest point in 12 years. In part, the steep worldwide decline reflected the degree of 'extralegal intimidation' and 'physical violence' faced by journalists (Freedom House 2015). This mirrored some problems faced by journalists in Melanesia, as this survey has indicated.

In some cases, government grievances about the lack of professional journalistic standards and the destructive impacts of social media were vindicated. These included the *Post Courier's* misuse of images in the Asian sex workers article and the cyber attacks on the Papua New Guinea national rugby football league chief executive (Papua New Guinea Today 2015; *The National* 11/3/2015). Scholars such as Coronel (2001) have highlighted what they regard as the antidemocratic tendencies of media, such as sowing fear, division and violence, particularly in fragile, developing states. Media in Fiji have been implicated in misreporting the 2000 coup and exacerbating ethnic tensions (Ratuva 2002). Media in the Solomon Islands stand similarly accused in relation to the country's ethnic disturbances between 1998 and 2003 (Iroga 2008).

Government concerns about social media are also valid to some extent. Social media's powerful communicative tools are said to have fuelled social change across the globe, sometimes for the better, at other times for the worse (Hougland 6/10/2014; Yang 2013). Some analysts argue that social media's myriad benefits can sometimes come at the expense of peace and stability, and they conditionally support government censorship if the protection of the state is at stake (Hougland 6/10/2014).

The prime ministers of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu all stressed the importance of social stability. They highlighted their preference for the developmental model of journalism over the media's watchdog model (Aatai 29/5/2015; Loop PNG 9/2/2015; Shing 4/7/2015). On the other hand, civil society organisations and media advocacy groups emphasised media's watchdog role and linked it with good governance (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015; TIV News 7/7/2015).

Civil society groups argue that harsher media legislation could stifle free speech, curtail scrutiny of government, obstruct and weaken mainstream media, and engender authoritarianism (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Pacific Freedom Forum 11/7/2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015; TIVNews 7/7/2015). This, in turn, could encourage bad governance, which is considered a longstanding problem in the region (Larmour 2012). The contrasting views of Melanesian governments on the one hand, and civil society groups on the other, led to the constant, unsettled arguments about media's role in society. It reflected the complex balancing equation that is required to safeguard social stability without unduly compromising the right to free speech. Social media has been liberating in some respects. However, it has also heightened pre-existing tensions between governments and news media, which could be the catalyst for all-encompassing, sterner media laws.

A certain level of antagonism in the government-media relationship is usually considered normal, even healthy, in accordance with media's watchdog role (Coronel 2001). However, in the Melanesian context, there was an ominous backdrop to the tension-filled atmosphere. This was due to the restrictive media laws in Fiji, and the threats, assaults and other forms of intimidation directed at journalists in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. These developments heightened the sense of danger in an already coercive environment (Finau et al. 2014; Morris 2015; Reporters Without Borders 2015; Willie 8/9/2015).

Based on the 2015 trends, government-media tensions look set to increase in future, with fairly

clear evidence that the social media movement is gaining momentum. Internet World Stats (2015, 2016) shows increased connectivity and penetration in all four Melanesian countries. By June 2016, Fiji had nearly 420,000 internet and 380,000 Facebook users, representing 45.9 per cent and 41.5 per cent penetration respectively (Internet World Stats 2016). As a percentage, this was the highest among the four countries. Next was Vanuatu with 82,764 internet users and 34,000 Facebook users, representing 29.8 per cent and 12.2 per cent penetration respectively. Papua New Guinea had 906,695 internet users and 380,000 Facebook users, representing 13.4 per cent and 5.6 per cent penetration. Solomon Islands had 58,423 internet users and 41,000 Facebook users, representing 9.2 per cent and 6.5 per cent penetration respectively (ibid.).

Melanesia was part of the worldwide trend in 2015 that saw increased connectivity: the *Global Internet Report 2015* recorded over three billion people online, with mobile phone services now available to more than 90 per cent of the world population (Internet Society 2015). Facebook dominated the global social media landscape, with 1.366 billion active users in January 2015 (Kemp 21/1/2015).

The social media movement also challenges mainstream media's traditional, self-appointed role of watchdog of society and its monopoly on determining what is news (Alejandro 2010). For example, in Fiji, the 2014 election candidates bypassed mainstream media to connect directly with voters via Facebook (Tarai et al. 2015) whereas in Papua New Guinea, Facebook and Twitter had become an 'essential check and balance' on abuse of power (Pacific Freedom Forum 11/4/2015).

However, trends in Melanesia also indicated that social media was becoming a victim of its own popularity. Melanesian governments saw social media more as a threat than an opportunity, and appeared keen to impose controls (Morris 2015; Shing 4/7/2015). Government threats against the media are not new in Melanesia. But social media has changed the game radically. Governments seem more determined to push through with their plans to control the media, than perhaps ever before.

The Melanesian governments' reactions are predictable. Social media's participatory elements

allow citizens to not only communicate and network, but also to mobilise, agitate, and even force the ouster of leaders. During Philippine President Joseph Estrada's impeachment trial in January 2001, texting was used to mobilise over a million people in Manila to protest a congress vote to disregard key evidence against the leader. The panicked congress reversed its decision, resulting in Estrada's ouster (Shirky 2011).

Usually social media is regarded as a commercial threat to the mainstream media (Alejandro 2010). In Melanesia, the situation is not so straightforward — social media is also emerging as an unintended threat to the freedoms enjoyed by mainstream media. Melanesian governments are using the abuse of social media to call for the introduction of tougher laws to cover not just social media, but also mainstream news media, which are comparatively more restrained. This indicates that in Melanesia social media indirectly compromises the freedoms enjoyed by the mainstream news media.

However, there is the question of whether Melanesian governments are overreacting. Some analysts insist that social media's role in fermenting social change may be exaggerated. They point out that social media lacks the discipline and strategy that social change requires, and that the fascination with social media removes focus from understanding the powerful social discontent that really drive revolutions (Yang 2013).

With regards to mainstream media, Lent (1981) has noted how governments in various Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia are sceptical about watchdog journalism. These governments have taken some form of control over their media industries, usually in the name of national security and social stability (Coronel 2001). Fiji has followed the Asian example with its media law, and the other Melanesian countries could go down the same track. Fiji's punitive media legislation, justified on the basis of communal harmony and national stability, has been associated with self-censorship and journalist flight (Morris 2015). Similar outcomes in the other Melanesian countries are foreseeable, especially when the International Federation of Journalists survey (2015) in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands alluded

to a measure of tentativeness in covering various sensitive topics.

It is difficult to see how stronger controls will address some of the root causes of what is often described as poor journalistic standards. These include insufficient training, qualifications and experience, and poor remuneration. Investments in training and development are needed to deal with low capacity, rather than relying on punitive legislation alone (see International Federation of Journalists 2015).

The deep-rooted problems in the broadcast sector, particularly in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, which are in an apparent state of neglect, need addressing. In this regard, Fiji could serve as an inspiration. An injection of funds revived and revitalised the state-owned broadcaster, boosting facilities, introducing a new television channel, fostering competition and improving public sector broadcasting.

Political economy concerns that surfaced in this review are cause for concern. These include the Fijian Government's exclusive advertising deal with the *Fiji Sun*, the Solomon Island Government's ties with its national media association and the Melanesian states' relations with their national broadcasters (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Morris 2015). Some national media associations asked for, and received, assurances of government support. In its appraisal of any offers, the media sector would want to address any potential conflict of interest scenarios. Media need to maintain their independence or risk being labelled mouthpiece of government and corporate interests, as in the case of the *Post-Courier* and the *Fiji Sun*, who deny such allegations (Lasslett 30/9/2015; Morris 2015). Political economy situations could become an insidious threat to media freedom and independence in Melanesia unless they are identified and addressed. This is a fertile area for further research.

## Conclusion

This review shows growing tenseness between government and media in 2015, and a subsequent drift towards stronger media laws, justified on the basis of national stability. This trend mirrors the Asian experience (Lent 1981). The development is fuelled partly by the ongoing growth of social media and

the increasing public criticism of government on cyberspace, which is at unprecedented levels (International Federation of Journalists 2015; Internet World Stats 2016). Governments appeared unable to cope with the increased volume of scrutiny by both social media and news media, and reacted with threats of stronger media legislation. This apparent weakening of media freedoms in Melanesia was part of a global trend in 2015 (Freedom House 2015).

Governments in Melanesia declared their preference for the developmental model of journalism while the media sector and civil society organisations pushed for the retention of the adversarial watchdog model. This ideological divide underpinned government–media sector tensions across Melanesia. Some scholars agree that the watchdog approach can be overly critical and negative (Cornel 2001). However, critics associate stronger media laws with greater state control, which is deemed unhealthy due to the pre-existing problem of corruption in Melanesia (Larmour 2012). In Fiji, punitive legislation is associated with alleged self-censorship and a cowed media (Morris 2015). Moreover, it was felt that stronger controls would also exacerbate some political economy situations that were found to exist in the Melanesian media sector.

The social media phenomenon that has reached Melanesia is empowering citizens and challenging mainstream media's monopoly on publishing and distributing news and views (Alejandro 2010). However, social media has become too popular for governments' liking. Usually social media is regarded as a commercial threat to the mainstream media but in Melanesia it is also posing as a threat to the freedoms enjoyed by mainstream media.

Government complaints about the damaging impacts of uncontrolled social media use are valid in some respects. The challenge before all governments is dealing with the abuse and acrimony on social media without excessively curtailing free speech, and penalising mainstream media, which are comparatively more restrained than social media due to professional codes of conduct. Critics contended that the net effect of punitive legislation would be stifled debate and bad governance. The root causes of poor journalism, such as lack of

training and development (International Federation of Journalists 2015), would remain unaddressed. Another area in need of investment is the declining broadcast sector.

While 2015 was a testing year for the news media sector, there were some positive developments, such as the lifting of fines and jail terms for journalists in Fiji and the formation of a national journalist association in Papua New Guinea. Based on 2015 trends, government–media tensions look set to increase in future, with clear evidence that the social media movement is gaining momentum (Internet World Stats 2015). As such, the prospect of stronger media laws remains a grim reality.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank former Papua New Guinea *Post-Courier* editor-in-chief Alexander Rheehey, *Solomon Star* editor Moffat Mamu and journalist Eddie Osifelo, and Vanuatu Government spokesperson Kiery Manasseh for their valuable feedback.

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The State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program acknowledges the generous support from the Australian Government for the production of this Discussion Paper.

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