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**Island Nations in the South Pacific and their
Communication Needs: From a Journalism Education
Perspective**

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Island Nations in the South Pacific and their Communication Needs: From a Journalism Education Perspective

A major issue facing Pacific journalists is how to improve their educational standards, professionalism and standing in society (Robie, 2004:10)

This paper discusses how journalism education addresses the information/communication needs of island nations in the South Pacific region. It provides with an overview of the communication situation in these nations, identifies the information needs they have and how/if they are addressed by the existing journalism and communication higher education programs.

Vast distances, scattered populations, diverse traditions, ethnic conflicts, persisting colonial influences, poor economies and unstable political regimes, lack of infrastructure, fragmented and insignificant market places for both goods and ideas, are some of the reasons why most of the Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian microstates have been underdeveloped and also left out of the main communication developments.

Taking into account these countries' distinctiveness, one needs to ask what purpose Higher Education specializations such as journalism and communication serve and how they can best contribute to the development of these countries. Examining the position of journalism education within HE in PNG, Fiji and the other south pacific countries, we get a better understanding of the priority these countries give to address their communication needs.

The paper takes as case studies two major journalism and communication programs in the region, the Communication Arts Department at Divine Word University and the Journalism Program at the University of South Pacific. They are approached through curriculum analysis by looking at their different components (media literacy, general education, academic and vocational nature), and their appropriateness for these societies needs and institutional and external support through foreign aid (discussing the practical and ideological influences that have shaped their construction). The paper concludes with identifying the common issues regarding journalism education in the region and suggesting mechanisms of addressing them.

I. The South Pacific Context

The problems of 'smallness' are well known. 'Islandness', however, is often explained away as the 'Pacific Way' [...], yet it is to do with our interactions, with communication. Just as our academics are beginning to realise that 'islandness' is important, so too must those who seek to contribute to media development and communication in our region (Wickham, 1996).

The South Pacific covers a very large area (30 million square miles of ocean) containing a large number of scattered island groups with a wide diversity of cultures, economies, political regimes and a combined population of approximately 8 million people (Philpott, 1994:3). Countries with very small populations such as Palau, Niue, Tonga and Solomon Islands, experience difficulties in sustaining a healthy indigenous communication and information flow. In terms of communication, most of them cannot afford to have diverse media and this has had consequences for their regional integration and most importantly their development as societies.

The noticeable trends are the top-down flow of content from economically and socially powerful groups to less privileged and disadvantaged groups, from bigger and wealthier countries and media houses to the smaller and poorer countries and networks in the region. Because of technological development small countries with limited local media outlets are able to receive media content from neighbouring countries or international channels. The impact of these media is changing concepts of identity, often at the cost of local cultural expression and social cohesion, especially in countries with a small population, often linguistically very diverse such as the Pacific Islands.

The south pacific media and journalism practitioners have been the target of criticism with some arguing that the media is too ‘Western’ and not the ‘Pacific way’ and focusing on the “lack of professional training of journalists, poor education standards, lack of knowledge of the political and social institutions, cultural insensitivities and what is perceived as a questionable grasp of ethical issues” (Robie, 2004:9).

Some even argue that the blind adherence to and acceptance of the western style of reporting reflects the western-influenced journalism training that journalists and editors receive in the most of these countries. This argument is based on the position that the western style of reporting cannot be transplanted into a fragile developing South Pacific society and economy and assume that it would serve the same purpose, meet the same objectives and be absorbed by the public in the same way (Rooney, Papoustaki, Pamba, 2003). The ‘blind imitation’ of the Western style of reporting in PNG for instance by an urban-based media is seen as a ‘tragedy’ that does not help the national development cause of the country (Pamba, 2003:15). This has given pretext to certain governments in the region to exercise pressure regarding regulatory controls.

One could argue that if journalism practise is facing such criticism it is partly because of lack of appropriate, to the region, education and professional training. Research on media literacy and education in the South Pacific has put emphasis on tertiary education’s critical influence on how Pacific journalists in the region’s two major economies and largest media industries, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, practice their professions and perceive their political and social role in a developing society (Robie, 2004, a, b).

With the exception of Papua New Guinea, university education for journalists is a rather new phenomenon, a decade old, with most media depending on a system of ad hoc course training funded by international donors (Robie, 2004, a: 3). A large number of Fiji journalists have received their training through professional and industry short courses run by regional or donor organizations. Papua New Guinea has been less reliant on donor organizations because of the country’s media organizations have been more integrated with the university journalism schools (Robie, 2004,b: 23).

A number of short training programs have been taking place over the years in the South Pacific through PINA and other regional and national organizations but their value has been questioned as it has been found that this kind of trainings are often bereft of new ideas, bound by custom and they replicate old knowledge (Morgan in Rooney, 2003b: 84).

In addition, as Wickham argued, these training courses allow little space for local input into media practices. The sentiment that others know better is often reinforced by donor preferences to send in their own chosen people to conduct training. When things go wrong it is often the journalists, the producers, the practitioners who are blamed, but rarely, if at all, those who create the conditions, perceptions and climate with which and within which the media work. More often than not, the prescription is ‘more training is needed’ (Wickham, 1996). Even in the case where journalism programs exist at higher education level, you can find the external/western influence reflected in the curriculum, as the case studies will show further below.

II. A Papua New Guinean Approach to Journalism Education

An Australian protectorate until 1975, Papua New Guinea has an extremely diverse society with a staggering number of distinctive cultures and more than 800 spoken languages. The majority of the population, estimated at 5 million, lives in rural areas, largely dependent on subsistence agriculture. Half of the adult population is non-literate and the many disadvantaged populations do not speak English, the main language of education, administration and media (Rooney et al, 2004).

In spite of being the biggest and richest island in natural resources in the Pacific, PNG ranks below its Pacific neighbours in many areas (UNDP, 1999). The country faces serious development challenges, most notably a weak institutional environment with poor control of government spending and a serious law and order problem. A difficult geographical terrain and weak transportation services isolate whole regions with little access to basic services such as education and health (The Joint Country Strategy,

2003). Isolation, linguistic and cultural diversity and a highly expensive and differential implementation of official policies have made nation-building a difficult task.

Despite its comparatively low living standards, PNG has the largest and most vibrant media industry in the south pacific. This could be because the size of its population, the largest amongst the south pacific islands, allows it to be more versatile, as well as a comparatively freer regulatory framework that allows freedom of expression. It has three national newspapers (two English language dailies, one weekly in Pidgin), one TV station, a national radio system, and several commercial and church based radio stations (Rooney et al, 2003).

However, penetration of media is low. The distribution of newspapers is extremely limited outside urban centres. High rates of illiteracy make newspapers inaccessible to many people, not to mention that the cost of a daily newspaper is not affordable for most poor people. Television ownership is limited by the extent of electricity coverage throughout the country and by its prohibitive cost. Radio is the most common form of modern communication in PNG. Regarding information and communication technologies, PNG has some of the lowest levels in the developing world (UNDP, 1998; AusAID, 2004).

It is not only access to information that is problematic, but the content as well. Foreign ownership, colonial legacies in journalism attitudes and training, lack of interest from government and civil society in public information, poor communication amongst civil society and media organizations and dominance of Western news values have all contributed to the production of news content that is not reflecting the needs of the people (Rooney et al, 2004). As Pamba argues PNG is a developing country and the media ought to give more focus to the ordinary people and how their lives are being affected by various factors including decisions and actions of governments (2003).

AusAID has recently launched a major Media for Development initiative which aims to reinvigorate the malfunctioning national radio system (NBC) through a partnership with Radio Australia (ABC), and assist with the production of appropriate programming, media research and training in the country (AusAID, 2005). However, this initiative is again driven by outside forces, depending on a donor agency and a very sensitive relationship between Australia and PNG.

Journalism Training

Papua New Guinea has been leading in this area. It was the first to establish a journalism program at a university level in 1975 with support from the New Zealand government. Journalism is now taught at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and at Divine Word University (DWU). UPNG offers a degree with major or minor in journalism and students can study at a MA and PhD level.

DWU offers a Diploma and a Degree in Communications (Journalism) and is planning to start an MA program. Most of the students come straight from high school, with women outnumbering men by a ratio of two to one. Some mature age students are also enrolled after working in the media, business, education or public relations. At the diploma level, journalism has been treated as a craft to be learned by hands-on practice (DWU, 2002:56). The degree level essentially vocational up until recently is increasingly putting more emphasis on academic courses and research.

Students at both programs produce student newspapers and radio and TV material. DWU operates a news bureau that enables the students to send their material on a daily basis to the national media and has two staff members that are regular columnists. Industry work attachment programs are well supported.

Although PINA (Pacific Islands News Association) has been the main training provider in the region, PNG journalists have often been left out on the argument that they have access to two formal training schools and therefore priority was given to journalists from the smaller islands. This prompted the Media Council of PNG to establish its own separate training programs, ranging from one-day seminars to full week intensive training and covers areas such as reporting AIDS, investigative reporting and law

and order. Funds come from donor agencies and overseas missions operating in PNG. On going training in the workplace is not a priority for most of the media, as they cannot afford it.

Previous research on PNG journalists has paint a profile that distinguishes them from their colleagues in the region and one of the marked differences is in education and professional formation, as well as professional attitudes. PNG journalists are older, better educated and more experienced. Most of the journalists in PNG are graduates of the two University programs (81%) with the few in the older age group (45 to over 50) trained under a cadetship program. They also appear to have more sophisticated values in their relationship and role within the community, which is attributed to tertiary education. They are attracted to journalism because it gives the power to expose abuses of power and corruption and mostly because they want to communicate knowledge to community. Although the western media watchdog view is predominant amongst PNG journalists, there is awareness about the role of development journalism (Robie, 2004, b: 22).

Despite all the positive characteristics of PNG journalists, one could say by observation of their media output that they lack critical and analytical skills and in depth knowledge of crucial issues that dominate their country's development. Reporting is often superficial, not properly researched, based on one source and lacking in-depth analysis and follow up (Rooney, 2002; 2003b: 82). Although they are vocal against corruption, journalists only report what they have heard and there is lack of initiative to conduct investigations and publish their findings (Melham & Alloi, 2003:35.78).

Taking into account the country's distinctiveness, one needs to ask what purpose Higher Education specializations such as journalism and communication serve and how they can best contribute to the development of the country. In response to the aspirations outlined in the National Goals and Directive Principles, the country's Higher Education Institutes are called to contribute to national capacity building by improving their relevance to PNG's development needs. They are expected to demonstrate intellectual leadership, engaging themselves in the vigorous exercise of critical enquiry and the dissemination of knowledge (Robins, 2000). Does journalism education prepare the graduates of this specialization for the needs of the country and can they demonstrate leadership beyond their vocational training?

Western Influences in Journalism Training and the New Trend in Communication and Development: DWU case study

Divine Word University, one of the newest tertiary institutions in PNG, gathers itself from many contexts (western, private, vocational, postcolonial, Christian) (Papoutsaki & Rooney, 2004). Journalism, taught since 1979 at a diploma level, was identified from the beginning as an important component of the University's goal in contributing to the democratic development of the nation and has been attracting strong support by international organizations and aid programs with placements of teaching and administrative staff and funds for developing an electronic training centre.

It could be argued that the program was the creation of these, exogenous to PNG and mainly western, contributors who continue to maintain a strong presence. The very strong links with the industry have also helped to shape the content of the journalism program to the extent that the training given has been based on the western model that the country's media follow (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

External Influences

The first curriculum, based on the development communication model developed by Maslog from the Philippines in the late 1980s, was considered at the time an appropriate approach to the communication needs of the country, offering courses such as educational broadcasting and rural development, community newspaper management and production (Maslog, 1988). In spite of its strengths, especially its plan to educate students away from the western hegemonic model of media and place a lot more emphasis on communication for the people, the program was not driven by the realities of communication in PNG (McManus, 2004: 18). Its expatriate contributors remained only a short time in the country, leaving no person qualified to continue the program. Most importantly, it lacked the support of the media in PNG, the majority of which are foreign owned and predominantly western in

style and wanted journalists trained in the western model of vocational journalism. With the benefit of hindsight, the course could have become relevant and sustainable in PNG if given enough time (ibid).

Following a curriculum review in 1998 undertaken by former BBC editorial executive John Jefferson, the Maslog program was criticised as unhelpful for students who were to take up work in the existing PNG media, calling for more practical training and linking to the media industry (Jefferson, 1998). While it was agreed that this program helped the students to develop practical skills directly relevant to the media industry, there were concerns that the other skills it emphasised bear no relation to the needs of the majority of people in PNG.

Jefferson's new program came directly from the model used for newspaper training in England and it was premised on four misunderstandings (Rooney, 2003,b: 77). Firstly, it assumed that a program of journalism training suitable for the needs of English press could be transported to the Pacific. Secondly, the reliance on leisure reporting, cinema, television and telephone interviewing all revealed a lack of knowledge of the reality of life in PNG. Thirdly, the heavy reliance on official sources ignored the ordinary people in PNG. The ordinary people in PNG were not seen as capable of generating material for stories in community reporting. Fourthly, it took for granted that there is an international consensus that journalism education should be essentially vocational rather than academic (Rooney, 2003,b: 78; McManus, 2004: 20; Jefferson, 1998:1).

By focusing on meeting the needs of the mainstream media in PNG, the University was prevented from looking at the wider information needs of the people and civil society organizations. This re-emphasised the need for a stronger communication and development component, which could prepare graduates to address the communication needs of a developing country and contribute to the development of a civil society. There was therefore a need to expand the curriculum beyond the craft elements of journalism, strengthening the general education component, critical thinking skills, research skills and knowledge on development issues (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

External influences continue to have a strong presence in the program, which has been relying too heavily on foreign, mostly British and Australian volunteers. Although most of them have worked as journalists in their countries, they lack experience in teaching and academic understanding of media issues, especially in a developing country context. The predominance of expatriate lecturers makes it difficult for culturally relevant approaches to learning to be met (McLaughlin, 1996: 287). This could be especially the case with journalism educators who transfer Western news values to the often-unsuitable PNG environment as Jefferson did (Ronney, 2003). There is currently an effort to train local staff however the tendency is to send them to western countries, either Australia or Britain, for further studies, which emphasises further western hegemonic practices.

Which Model for Journalism Education in PNG?

In 2004, in response to the University's decision to strengthen the academic component of its programs, the Communication Arts Department undertook a comprehensive curriculum review, taking into consideration the communication needs of ordinary people in PNG, the educational needs of its students and career prospects of its graduates. An extensive survey was carried out by McManus, including for the first time former and current students, as well former and current staff, journalists and media managers (McManus, 2004). As a result the newly revised curriculum is trying to readdress the lack of balance between academic and vocational, strengthen general knowledge and critical thinking and draw attention to the development needs of the country.

• Balance Between Practice and Theory

The dilemma encountered during the revision process is also a reflection of the different approaches that have so far influenced the program. Is journalism a vocational profession and if so how do we incorporate general education and academic skills, essential for producing well educated individuals who can apply themselves in any work environment? Are there international standards in journalism, as Jefferson argued, that are universal to all, or should developing countries develop their own model that responds better to their needs, and what are these needs? While the Maslog curriculum aimed to produce 'well-educated' people who would be trained in the technical skills after they joined the

workforce, Jefferson recommended that the technical skills should be well taught first in a profession that is essentially vocational. Both models have had their strengths and weaknesses but neither addressed fully the realities of the PNG context (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

Much has been written on whether the emphasis should be on the theoretical or the practical in journalism education (Adam, 2001, 2004; Bromley, 2001; Burns, 2001; Day 2002; Oakham, 1998). There is a schism within academia about what is the best preparation for journalism; although there is some recognition that journalism needs to build connections with academic culture and a broader education (Day, 2002:1; Adam, 2001:324). Adam argues that there should be a focus on the intellectual development of students so that they will understand the complex forms of thinking and expressing used in the profession (2004:13).

While acknowledging the benefits of learning practical skills, students and ex-students, staff, academics and employers have expressed concerns about the curriculum on the grounds that it does not adequately prepare graduates for work in the communication sector in PNG. Its overspecialised program based on a western vocational model has already produced more graduates than the small media industry can absorb. The vocational and overspecialised training has given them only a limited academic and general education background, reducing not only their employment opportunities but also their intellectual growth (Papoutsaki & Rooney, 2004: 11).

Most of the students in the survey indicated that the curriculum should offer a wider range of subjects. A DWU graduate responded to the question about how the course could have been improved: "More emphasis should have been given to theory. DWU has always been practical about its journalism. I reckon a balanced input on theory would be good". It was also indicated that the curriculum lacked intellectual stimulation: "The course prepares us to enter the workforce. It teaches us the basic skills. But it is not challenging"; "The new course on Media and Society helps us to critically analyse what we read and helps us write better articles" (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004). Introducing academic courses into the curriculum is making a difference in the students work, in terms of increased vocabulary and better argumentation.

- **Meeting the Needs of the Students: General Education & Critical Thinking Skills**

The widely acknowledged weakness of the curriculum was its lack of general education and academic courses. There has been an overwhelming response from all stakeholders in favour of including more academic units. It is hoped that a balanced education can provide them with life-long critical thinking skills that can apply in any working environment. Students are now encouraged to develop in-depth knowledge in an area of their choice through the electives system. Taking courses, for instance, on PNG and regional politics and organizations from the PNG Studies Department can help produce better-informed political reporters.

Addressing the communication needs of the country has to go hand in hand with addressing the needs of the students. Many students come to DWU from areas where the influence of the media is minimal. When students take up the Communication Arts course, they therefore need to develop media literacy skills, understand the concept of information and study how the media impact upon both traditional and modern societies.

Journalism students and professionals have trouble overcoming the traditional norms of their societies. There is a tendency in accepting uncritically traditional knowledge and procedures, with deference given to elders and those in positions of authority, which is often at odds with the values of modern societies. Critical thinking and problem solving are not generally taught in schools and the indigenous languages, including Tok Pisin, do not include vocabulary that facilitates questioning and critical thinking (McLaughlin, 1996). Students have indicated they experience a genuine lack of background knowledge about PNG. Their natural reluctance to ask questions is exacerbated by what they perceive as an inability to ask questions of substance. This strengthens further the argument of introducing a strong general education component with more emphasis on the PNG context.

Strong cultural pressures on journalists need to be recognised (Rooney, 2003b: 79). Students have argued that the confrontational approach to journalism that is generally accepted in western countries is

not appropriate in PNG. Confrontational journalism can do more harm than good in a country like PNG, PNG journalists have argued (Kolma, 2001:3). They would like to see a more collaborative model proposed for journalism in the country. However, they say, this new model will not emerge until truly indigenous forms of media are operating in PNG. These comments do cause us to reflect on how much pressure we should put on students to ask searching questions.

Analysing, evaluating and applying information includes a sceptical questioning of evidence, authority and interpretation. To do this, as Withnall argues, requires specialist reporters who can understand and explain complex topics. With specialist subject knowledge and critical thinking skills journalists can evaluate the credibility or reliability of a source, question assumptions, synthesise ideas and analyse stories (Withnall, 1996).

- **Raising Awareness on Development and Communication Issues**

We cannot separate the needs of journalists and of journalism education from the context of the country as a whole. The development context for communication practices in PNG had to be taken into consideration as well. Relevant theories argue that communication is a vital element in the development process (Goonasekera, 1987:64; also see Melkote, 1991; MacBride, 1980; Jayaweera & Amunugama, 1987). The latest approach to development communication, aiming to inform instead of persuading people to change what they do or educating them in order to change social values, believes in empowering people to change by increasing knowledge. Western journalism's much argued "commitment to objectivity" can be replaced by a commitment to the local community and communicators can be seen more as mere neutral observers but rather participants in community affairs (Bowd, 2003:126).

In order to understand the wider communication needs of the country, students need to have a deeper knowledge of development. Special courses on communication and development and Asia Pacific development issues are essential items to a journalism curriculum in the region. Creating sensitivity on the role of the journalist in a developing country should be a topic of discussion for most courses. Engaging students in community publications that address the needs of the local population are important tools of applying theory into practice. The revised curriculum at DWU has now a stronger 'Development' component believing that training the students to think critically about the communication needs of their country and giving them the practical skills to apply their university knowledge in a wider area of communications, spanning from journalists with the mainstream media to communication officers in the NGO sector, offers a better service to all.

Many students (79%) noted that they were interested in working in development communication to help isolated communities. This agrees with Robie's research on PNG journalists' wider awareness on their role in a developing country (2004). They offered some incisive comments on the real effects of the media on PNG society: "The media is not serving the information needs of all sectors of society"; "The media reflects the interests of a small elite of PNG society - politicians, businessmen, city residents, expatriates and English speakers"; "The voice of the average Papua New Guinean is rarely heard. So the media is actually a barrier to development in the country"; "The media forces us to believe that the Western cultures are superior to our traditional lifestyles" (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

Since the mainstream media can be seen as having failed as agencies of information for empowerment, one needs to ask what are the alternatives in reaching the ordinary people of PNG and how best can one train communicators. There is a general perception among staff and students that the needs of PNG centre on issues of governance, participation and organization within the general context of development.

There is an increasing tendency to choose work in the NGO sector. In 2004, 21 students chose to work in the mainstream media, while the remaining 16 worked with NGOs, media units and information offices. A student wrote: "I did my experience with an NGO because I did not want to be in the mainstream media". The student learned that the organization was committed to delivering a high level of service to the community and found working there rewarding: "Day in and day out local villagers entered the office to speak to someone about their problems, to use the phone, to photocopy, to do some

typing or just to chat. It was surprising to see that they felt free and at ease to do this” (McManus & Papoutsaki, 2004).

However, the members of the focus groups tended (with a few exceptions) to contradict these noble aspirations by placing comfortable jobs, good wages and opportunities for career enhancement higher on their priority list than such things as giving service to the community and living in an isolated place. It is, therefore, a challenge for us to interrupt our students' plans for their own upward social mobility, and to promote the values of PNG village cosmology through the study of development communication (McManus, 2004:23).

- **Research Skills**

Along with the lack of general education knowledge, critical thinking and writing skills, as well as in depth knowledge in specialized areas, comes also a noticeable lack in research skills that rely on the above. By addressing them in the new curriculum and introducing an applied social research methods course, students are provided with the opportunity to reflect on the media itself and to begin their careers instilled with positive notions of responsibility and understanding of the media and with an enhanced ability to analyze new situations and come to reasonable conclusions for action (Hukill, 1994:201).

There has been a noticeable lack of research into PNG media and almost no information about how people in PNG use the media. Lack of proper research in this field has further contributed to a general perception that communication is not a priority for the country's development (Rooney et al, 2004:6). Graduates suggested to “Let students do more research into what journalism really is” and regretted that “More research theories and methodologies should have been included”(Manus & Papoutsaki, 2003).

Since applied social research methods was introduced as a course in the journalism program at DWU, media research in PNG has been greatly enhanced in terms of producing original research into areas such as community media and their impact on community development, development news and their use in national media, violence and media coverage etc. But most importantly, the impact it has had on the students was immensely positive, in terms of generating a greater understanding of their country's communication needs, increasing awareness of its importance, sharpening their critical thinking and writing skills and giving them skills to oversee a complex project that requires attention to the detail, in depth analysis and time management. Having a theoretical perspective of how media work enhanced their research skills.

The move from the strictly craft model of journalism education is supported by Wickham who suggests that communication courses should not only be more academic, but much more firmly situated in the local context: “The key is a fully-fledged communication programme to facilitate high levels of study and research. The programme would need to be firmly grounded in a philosophy that recognises the uniqueness of our people...” (Wickham, 2004:3). General education and academic skills are essential for a journalism program, but most essential is the need to put all these skills into a local and regional context. Students should know the realities of their country; understand the socio-cultural and economic complexities in order to be able to report on them in a manner that is more suitable to the needs of their fellow citizens.

II. Beyond Pacific Isolation – a Development Model for Region-Wide Communication: A Case Study from the University of South Pacific

This part of the paper examines the successes and limitations of university based journalism education and training in the South Pacific based on my USP experience. It weighs the varying emphases on studying the media as an institution and industrial system versus skills training for making product for (poorly understood) media markets. The importance of understanding communication networks and needs as a basis for directing curriculum development is recognised, as is the need to forge productive relationships with industry employers.

The lack of research on South Pacific media as an intellectual impediment to curriculum development is closely linked to poor or non-existent media industry policy and planning in both public and private sectors. USP's centralised approach to education with satellite distribution of educational content from its main campus in Fiji will be examined in relation to media education.

We would argue for a new approach - untested in the Pacific and hampered by infrastructure and regulation – to use educational infrastructure (inside and outside the universities in many countries rather than a few) as a base from which to expand media literacy. This involves well-resourced systems of media production & distribution spread across the expanses of ocean to allow for high volume exchange of multimedia content – between Fiji and PNG to French Polynesia and Hawai'i.

This region-wide approach to media production and distribution, it will be argued, does not necessarily neglect the information needs of local or national audiences nor sidetrack existing media employers. It does, however, rely on the idea that region-wide systems, properly designed and underpinned by appropriate digital technology, can drive expanding media markets within the Pacific as a prelude to redressing the imbalance in media flow between the Pacific and its larger donor and investor neighbours.

For researchers, merely describing social and political formations can be fraught with risk. Take the public diplomacy in recent years involving interventions in the Pacific where descriptions of various developing states – Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands – sparked both elite and grassroots resistance. The term 'failed state' – in the hands of Australian politicians and policy makers – has more than once had to be qualified and corrected according to the degree of offence caused in the target countries (Nguyen 2005). The academic language has been more temperate when the Solomon Islands - in law-and-order free-fall in 2003 - was described in a seminal policy report as 'failing' (Wainwright 2003). Most recently, these recipients of large interventionist aid packages are simply called 'fragile' (Downer, 2005).

This example is raised to draw attention to the sensitivities of defining institutional conditions in development settings where concepts like 'state failure' carry strategic baggage and are "highly nuanced" (Nguyen, 2005: 10). One newspaper editor was more blunt and called these tags "ethnocentric" (Gomez, 2005). Unsurprisingly, the interventions that follow meet with resistance (Dowa 2005; AFP 2005), sometimes fuelled by reaction to these 'expert' representations (Radio Australia 2005). The Pacific is especially susceptible because of a lack of consensus on what constitutes institutional progress, perceptions of which vary widely across a chains of islands spanning The Republic of Palau in the west, the huge Melanesian archipelago, Micronesia, Polynesia, east to French Polynesia and Hawai'i in the North Pacific.

Likewise, national entities vary from independent states¹ to overseas territories of France² and the United States³ to self-governing states in free association with the US⁴ and New Zealand⁵. Political formations are just as diverse based on divergent colonial histories which some states are in the process of shedding in their quest for economic development and regional integration⁶. Degrees of hereditary influence remain at the heart of political discourse in some parts of the region, for example, in the Kingdom of Tonga. These histories along with geo-political divisions have also reproduced language differences and shaped multilateral groupings and policy⁷, as well as patterns of economic dependency, most notably through foreign aid.

The Media as a 'Weak Pacific Institution'

Someone working in a well-paid position within a profitable and expanding media company, enjoying job security and good workplace relationships with access to employer-funded training might be surprised to hear they are part of an 'institutionally weak' media sector.

That's because such media people in the Pacific are a minority. No economic sector is autonomous and Pacific media workers rely heavily on both public and private investment for employment. Pacific economies also set the tempo for media business expansion, which fluctuates widely between the larger economies of PNG and Fiji down to the micro-states of Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru.

Institutional strength is not just about business success and in the case of media, influence is subtly entwined with audience numbers and cash flow to make it strong. With news – the foundation product in many media entities – influence become credibility, a hugely difficult concept to measure but one which certainly has enduring commercial value. But institutions often stand or fall often on the strength and influence of their support systems – linkages and alliances that sustain it.

The lack of detailed baseline data on Pacific media industries and product (and how these data gaps inhibits educational initiatives) will be addressed later but it is first worth considering some of the non-media factors impinging on the development of a media education sector for the Pacific region.

Educational Infrastructure

The University of the South Pacific, is owned by the governments of 12 of the region's nation states. The regional university possesses a number of strategic advantage that would normally lend itself to a strong and productive media infrastructure. It has a satellite network - USPNet – linking classroom in the 12 regional centres outside Suva. This is designed for distance education but has the capacity to deliver audiovisual content in media formats derived from radio and TV.

It has a well appointed Media Centre with broadcast infrastructure, a large technical staff and a television studio which Hooper described in 1998 as “technical superior to those found in many television departments at Australian, American and New Zealand universities” (Hooper, 1998: 18). As with the University of Papua New Guinea, he attributes the failure of media training at these two tertiary institutions at this time to “chronic lack of institutional leadership and support” (17-18).

In 2001, the USP earmarked funds for a new building to house journalism and its infrastructural needs. However, the following year the plans were shelved and the programme was left with space and equipment shortages along with rising student demand. It echoes Hooper's chronicle of donor-driven media education failures in the 1980s and 90s (18-19).

A history of media education programmes within Pacific universities reveal a number of trends in the development of professional skills and conditions for journalists (Robie, 2004; 2005): pay levels, formal qualifications, age and gender, to name a few. But the success of any educational initiatives over time will always depend on the level and quality of institutional support. Support here encompasses financial, organisational, technical and policy and includes formal linkages, if any, to government and non-government agencies.

For the largest of four tertiary journalism ‘schools’⁸ – the Journalism Programme of the University of the South Pacific (USP) – its recent achievements have largely been secured in spite of poor institutional support from within its host university. Further financial neglect could see it go into decline. Linkages with its key constituencies – media industries of the South Pacific – have, on the other hand, strengthened but are undermined by the programme's low status within the USP's decision-making hierarchy. This same structural disadvantage has degraded the programme's strong support from foreign donors and left it vulnerable to ad hoc university planning and the vagaries of donor allocations.

Its core problem remains its low status within and department/school structure, which denies the programme and its qualified teachers a degree of autonomy in allocating financial and administrative resources. Without knowledge of available funds, ad hoc planning is institutionalised. An independent review in 2002 identified the potential for growth and recommended a staged increase in financial autonomy and eventual elevation to a department or institute (Pearson 2002). The review was shelved, not released to the programme's media industry partners and therefore not discussed even at industry advisory committee level. Notwithstanding this disjuncture with university management, the teaching staff, who have typically been qualified journalists and editors, continued to attempt to operate a media production unit geared to outcomes. The teaching environment sometimes had the look and feel (and staff turnover) of an under funded community centre.

Its focus on the professional training of regional journalists relied on a permanent digital infrastructure supported by donors. Key strategic decisions made from 1997-2000 (including choice of technology) meant that its pedagogy was underpinned by the *production* of multimedia content with training based on professional production outcomes. Such outcomes were integrated into the courses and with the primary academic assessment tools. Students were to 'learn by doing' by producing journalism (content) into various media markets of print newspaper, online, radio and television news and feature programs. Such markets were experimental and unresearched but they were real, not simulated.

Introductory courses for the Bachelor of Arts degree and diploma including those covering media law and ethics were tested through formal exams. Tests were introduced after 2002 for some production subjects but overall the majority of assessment was of market-based production output. Such an approach to professional training led the USP's programme to win a number of region-wide awards from 1999 - judged less by academics than senior industry editors who graded professional product rather than academic artefact.⁹

Positioning itself within the local Fiji industry as a content producer and market player over and above its educational status led it in 2003 to be admitted as a member of the Fiji Media Council. The developing nature of the sector allowed the programme a closeness to the industry not afforded the journalism schools of more developed nations.¹⁰

But creating a 'hothouse' environment governed by multiple deadlines had its downside. Technology backed by supervision allowed for an intense educational experience but one which, according to a former lecturer, was "without a direct connection to the educational needs of the population" (Kerry, 2001). While this environment creates opportunities to attain excellence (to step up), it also promoted "unrealistic performance expectations" on those who couldn't attain it.

This reflects an imbalance, which is partly a result of the 'hand-on' production ethos that produced such impressive results. While working to deadlines to produce coursework for publication¹¹, students also had to fit in their other degree subjects. Students in full-time media employment were even more taxed to accommodate work and education. Insufficient foundation subjects in media and communication translated into lack of preparation at the sharp end of the courses (producing work for publication and broadcast of a high intellectual standard).

The Pearson Review anticipated these issues and recommended a staged introduction of new foundation media courses and took up the idea to allow new students to prove themselves in these introductory courses before contesting places in the journalism production and advanced reporting streams (Pearson 2002)

In keeping with the 'professional training' emphasis on production outcomes, teachings loosely follows a 'problem-based learning' approach (Sheridan Burns, 2001)¹². This was especially suited to the teaching of applied media law and ethics, which required students to ponder the consequences of their decisions-in-action (Sheridan Burns, 2002: Ch 2), rather than simply absorb the received knowledge of experts.

However, this essential analytical training, which is inherently reflective and gradual, was collapsed into just one year (two subjects) before the onset of the production stream. Again, the external review addressed this but its prescriptions have never been implemented. Nor were its calls to increase staff to cater for the increased teaching and supervision. Such academic changes were required to rebalance the study of the media 'as an institution and industrial/commercial system' (the why) with skills training (the how to) for making product for (poorly understood) media markets.

- **Research Culture**

Why such markets and systems remain poorly understood has been alluded to earlier (lack of baseline data). Finding out how the media system functions in the orbit of powerful institutions is about "connecting media studies to the debate over mass culture and popular culture" (Carey, 1989: 95)

USP could now be playing the leading role in developing robust knowledge of Pacific media cultures if it heeded its external advisor's report. Part of this academic failure was to knobble a new postgraduate diploma in Pacific media studies, which, having been approved in 2001 was never resourced and lies dormant to this day.¹³

The belated development of these postgraduate courses could still enrich the strategically positioned regional university in a number of ways. It could create a career path for bright journalism graduates to continue study of Pacific media, producing important academic research to feed back into the undergraduate programme. It also holds the promise of attracting working journalists back to study the industries that employ them. Such courses are well placed to take advantage of the local knowledge and language skills of Pacific students for research into their (vernacular) media sectors. The expansion of media and cultural studies from a Pacific perspective would contribute to developing interlinked indigenous research cultures in media and non-media disciplines. The traffic of media researchers in and out of public and private institutions could help prise open the information cultures of the Pacific and promote understanding and cooperation between them and academe.

Finally, the USP could use this research to develop new courses deliverable via satellite and online modes. It might even set off ventures in peripheral member countries in new information services (using USP multimedia content, including its journalism), creating employment in the regional centres and driving decentralisation.¹⁴

- **News Culture**

The dearth of Pacific media research¹⁵ will continue to undercut the intellectual and creative energies of its people by degrading its status as useful knowledge and limiting collaboration with other dynamic sectors of society and economy. The new USP leadership has proposed to raise revenue by foreign fee-paying students from North America and Europe (Tarr, 2005) but such marketing will need to demonstrate why a Pacific university should be the first choice. Excellence in Pacific studies (including media and communications) might appear to be an obvious comparative advantage, but equally apparent are the imbalances in intellectual resources (themselves driven by an open educational market)¹⁶.

A parallel argument can be mounted for the region's news services that first must meet the demands of its own populations and then make an impact in the wider world. There are a number of trends which work against the expansion of the sectors on both these fronts. The most obvious is the relative unimportance of Pacific economics in global terms where even the media coverage of Pacific affairs in Australia (a close neighbour) is generally poor (Ali, 2003).¹⁷

A cursory review of Pacific news online gives the impression of abundance and a roaring trade in information. However, on closer inspection, several things become apparent. Firstly, it's almost entirely in English. And much of the news is re-circulated around various sites, both Pacific and global ones. A number of sites and mailing lists are dedicated almost entirely to re-posting other people's news.¹⁸

While this is nothing new and shows how Pacific news is taking advantage of global online distribution, it tell us little about the production of original content. Pacnews is the only region-specific news agency that employs a team of journalists to gather news and its product infiltrates every corner of the region's news culture.¹⁹

The USP Journalism Programme by virtue of its industry partners whom it supplied with reporters enjoyed privileged access to knowledge about the internal operations of (at least the Fiji) media through in-class off-the-record briefings. These points of access for students to understand and analyse media behaviour at close quarters is itself part of institutional strengthening that is yet to take root anywhere in the Pacific. The reasons why USP is best placed to lead this area has already been identified and are consistent with ones enunciated by Hooper (1998: 17).

But in 2004, the programme gave its support an aid initiative to build a database of the Pacific media's organisational base and an analysis of its core (news) product. The Pacific Media and Communication

Facility (PMCF) was seen, in light of what's been said about media research, as a long overdue, comprehensive baseline study of 33 media organizations across 13 countries. The method was to collect data on organizations and their personnel as well as conduct a 'content analysis' of 3500 news items. The project results will be used to design training programmes over a two year period (PMCF – to be updated with results).

Such raw data will also allow researchers to identify structural weaknesses in news management and production, identify relationships between news-sources categories and news outcomes. It is anticipated such data will also assist in identifying areas of unmet information demand and assist media businesses to make full use of media technologies to up-skill their staff and expand and deepen their connections to audiences.

For these worthy goals to be realised, the project's media reference group will need to be intellectually engaged with the data and develop a consensus around the choice and design of training schemes to avoid the many pitfalls Hooper identifies (1998: 10-15).

Such a focus should not however neglect the media research from other developing regions including Asia. Development theories as applied to media have yielded mixed and qualified results. The Pacific media needs to engage with these debates as it too positions itself within its transitional societies.

In addition to the dysfunction around the way media education was implemented, geo-political forces have conspired to white-wash the very best intentions of the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO), a promising school of thought centred around Non-Aligned developing countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The corruption of its ideals has been explained elsewhere (Thomas, 2000:11-12) but it has resurfaced in the digital age as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), again with UNESCO backing.

And yet there are some fundamental forces of political economy that the Pacific media must come to terms with if it is to share in the spoils of globalisation. Gunaratne (1999) investigate the key connections between information and economic progress. Media policy will be a tool of modernization in the Pacific like anywhere else but elites will find political power – with or without public consensus – a blunt and imprecise instrument for controlling information towards the goals of nation-building.

Gunaratne dissects the different strains of media freedom and responsibility within Asian media systems and concludes that that in Asia's wildly uneven economic history, information flow tends to follow trade flow (1999: 220). Media trainers must engage students on the nuances of political manipulation that shape their professional ethics by appealing to identities those that grow within media cultures.

The liberal consensus on the media, markets and accountability (Schweitzer 1999), which now drive aid policy is also open to political influence and assertions of sovereignty against the 'media imperialism' of big and powerful friends and commercialised mass culture that comes with it.

Educators need to assume an abundance of media images and narrative techniques will continue to bombard the media sphere; but they need to teach students to recognise and extract meaningful content and thus turn it to their own storytelling ends. This will involve the development of new literacies, especially visual ones. Within cultural and linguistically diverse communities, this a major challenge (Hooper, 1998: 9). Rather than imposing homogenised production formulae, training strategies need to be adapted to the untested talent where diversity is regarded as an asset to creativity.

No such creativity is likely to flourish where producers are constrained from using their core literacies such as their mother tongue or vernacular speech. Cass (2004) argues that an indigenous language press has grown since the colonial period and predates English language press (94). He says it was the missionary press that adopted local languages that had a profound effect on literacy and identity. Pacific cultivated a highly diverse communication culture and "adapted to Western-style media technology and products on their own terms, just as their ancestors did to 19th century technology in the period of European colonisation (93).

Paul Geraghty, a linguist at the USP, however, laments the commercial dominance of the English language press in Fiji whose origin was to service the expatriates:

Literacy is relatively new, and very imperfectly developed. For the first 90 years of literacy in Fijian, education in Fiji was largely in the hands of the missions, and Fijian was used as the main language of instruction.

In the 1920s there were Fijian language text-books for all the subjects that were then being taught – arithmetic, history, geography, health science, Fijian, English and even Latin. But since the entrusting of education to New Zealand authorities around 1930, Fijian (like Maori was then in New Zealand) has been practically banned from Fiji's schools.

There are still, incredibly, many schools where students are punished for speaking their native language. The end result is that many Fijian-speakers are only minimally literate, that is, they can read and write in Fijian, but actually use that literacy very little, if at all (Geraghty, 2001).

This negative assessment has a positive side, that is, that there is unexploited potential around vernacular press to open what Tehranian calls “new moral spaces for exploring new communities of affinity rather than vicinity” (1999: 60). Such techniques have already been successfully applied to commercial radio where vernacular programs in Fijian and Hindi are the most popular and reach beyond national boundaries to expatriates audiences.²¹

Globalisation compels the Pacific media to project itself into the ‘transnational public sphere’ (Kitley & Mules, 1998), that is, to globalise its own stories and images. For this, media producers need new competencies in both creative techniques and market analysis. The Fiji Government has shown itself willing to use its natural environment to service one part of the global entertainment industry.²² However, this is likely to have minimal impact on the creative skills of local producers who need to engender a *local content* production industry with access to markets.

Conversely, it is imperative that Pacific islanders do not miss out on developing broader literacies relating to patterns of global and strategic power by localising and making complex events intelligible to its own citizens. That its media is currently ill-prepared to do so can be illustrated by two examples. Pacific news reporters were caught off-guard in October 2002 when the Bali bombing shook the region. The media was slow to develop analytical stories that explained the strategic threats to Pacific islanders. In their absence, news reporting focussed on the good news story of flow-on benefits to Pacific tourism.

Secondly, overall Fiji's media has failed to investigate the risks and business practices of private contractors following the invasion of Iraq. Many Fijian men have been recruited by agents to work in Iraq and Kuwait on dubious contractual arrangements. Only recently has Fiji reporters given the transnational story serious investigation.²³

Much of USP's Journalism Programme in recent years has dedicated untold hours to the craft of cultivating and negotiating sources. Again, the endeavour is fertile ground for media studies as it is the arena of power that ultimately shapes the form and content of news product. It is as much about the mysteries of personal chemistry and emotional intelligence as it is about applying the wisdom of experienced mentors. Pacific encounters in journalism are profoundly mediated by cultural protocols. If there is a professional practice most suited to learning through reflective practice, it is relationships with sources.

Much poor journalism is often the result of mutual ignorance between journalist and source – a failure to communicate their respective roles, the nature of their business. Hence one approach in Suva has been to arrange briefings by key sources/officials to journalism classes, designed to put both sides at ease and create a dialogue that mimics the one that occurs at greater speed in the field. The analysis of modes of official speech, language style and the ubiquitous bureaucratic forms of paper exchange constitute an important political dimension to journalistic practice (Orwell, 1984). This is as true as the volume of information flow is an indicator of economic status and market power. With linguistic diversity, say in Melanesia where it is most pronounced, you have another power dimension that the reporter must negotiate.

There is also a more sinister reason for the persistence in the media and elsewhere of a language very few people speak – the existence of a post-colonial elite who believe it to be to their advantage to be more colonial than the actual colonists ever were.

Many Fijian-speakers in positions of power do not want to see access to information or to government services made easier to ordinary Fijians through the use of their language, for the simple reason that the elite derive much of their own power from their knowledge of English, and expanded use of Fijian would make them redundant (Geraghty, 2001).

This conception of journalism as a kind of negotiated cultural politics is similar to Meadow's formulation of journalism as a "cultural resource" (1998: 14-18). The development potential of new forms of media expression produced and received through expanded communication networks, often in vernacular languages, are the unexplored terrain of Pacific media studies. Such expressive forms have been largely locked out of popular global culture on account of occupying a peripheral place on the edges of global media infrastructure. As in transitional Asian societies like Indonesia, the Pacific is undergoing the stresses of globalisation where the media is "a site of constant struggle between the homogenising tendencies of national cultural policy and the various parochial, regional, localised interests, histories and identities" (Sen & Hill, 2000). But in the so-called fragile states of Melanesia, the pull of centralised national integration is much weakened, leaving grassroots communities with vast reserves of 'social capital' which has allowed them to weather violent upheaval.

It is this reserve of social capital – reciprocal social and family networks of obligation and social control – that is critical to the uptake of new communication technologies and practices. In fact, it is the glue that allows information networks to function. Communications needs are met because the users retain access and control using the media flexibly as a cultural resource, thus replenishing social capital.

Conclusion

The intellectual under nourishment of journalism education and research is part of a wider problem in Pacific academic culture, which are mutually reinforcing. On a macro level, the Pacific media communities can apply their own social capital to the task of media development according to their own agendas drawing on sound data and analysis and donor assistance.

Much can be learnt from the diverse media development experiences in Asia driven by rising intellectual skills, technological innovation and strategic alliances based on exploitation of social capital and expanding media markets.

The methodology of teaching, history suggests, that will be most effective is one where educators start by gathering data on the demand-side where information needs, once identified, become the catalyst for creative production, harnessing the inherent capacity and collective wisdom of communities.

Distribution systems are now allowing Pacific entrepreneurs to experiment with region-wide coverage e.g. satellite TV. This is not to neglect the information needs of local or national audiences nor sidetrack existing media players but to 'blaze a trail' for all of the above. It does, however, rely on the idea that region-wide systems, properly designed and underpinned by appropriate digital technology, can drive expanding media markets within the Pacific as a prelude to redressing the imbalance in media flow between the Pacific and its larger donor and investor neighbours.

"Pacific islanders cannot compete with the economies of scale enjoyed by large media conglomerates in providing a vast array of programming at low cost. What they are in a better position to do than anyone else, however, is utilize what they know best: the stunning diversity of their environments, the histories and cultures of those who live there, and the unique viewpoints of Pacific Islanders, often at odds with the stereotypes presenting by Western media. Possessing the technology of production, and the training to apply it effectively, creates at least the potential for presenting small island communities in their own voices – for themselves initially, and eventually for the outside world" (Hooper, 1998: 20).

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- ¹ (Melanesia) Papua New Guinea; Solomon Islands, Vanuatu; Fiji; (Polynesia) Tonga; Samoa; (Micronesia) Kiribati; Nauru
- ² (Melanesia) New Caledonia; (Polynesia) French Polynesia; Wallis & Futuna
- ³ Guam; Northern Mariana Islands; American Samoa
- ⁴ Federated States of Micronesia; Marshall Islands; Palau
- ⁵ Cook Islands; Tokelau; Niue
- ⁶ On these issues, see the Pacific Plan <http://www.forumsec.org.fj/>
- ⁷ The Pacific Islands Forum is a grouping of independent states which excludes French Polynesia and New Caledonia and includes Australia and New Zealand
- ⁸ University of the South Pacific; Divine Word University; University of Papua New Guinea; National University of Samoa
- ⁹ See Wansolwara hard copy pdf editions: p2 for lists of awards <http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/>
- ¹⁰ For example, Australia and New Zealand. USP students seconded to media organisations would regularly appear in print or be heard in the broadcast media from their first day as trainees
- ¹¹ E.g. Wansolwara training newspaper
- ¹² Sheridan Burns calls it "think by doing" or "reflective practice", an approach preferred to "the application of an expert body of knowledge".
- ¹³ There has been one graduating student in 2005
- ¹⁴ See Wansolwara, Vol 7 No 4, November 2002: p1 at <http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/wansol/7402/7402.html> on USP's decentralisation policy
- ¹⁵ See also Robie, D & Singh, S. (2002), From Campus to Newsroom in the South Pacific, UNESCO Journal conference, Newcastle, February 2004: 13
www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspac/journetusp.aut04SLIDE.pdf
- ¹⁶ Compare, for example, USP or UPNG's research resources and output in Pacific studies with the ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/>
- ¹⁷ See comments by Hamish McDonald, foreign editor, Sydney Morning Herald
- ¹⁸ These include - Pacific Islands Report <http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport/>
Asia Pacific Media Network <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/>
Pacific Media Watch <http://www.pmw.c2o.org/>
WN Network <http://www.wnpacific.com/>
Islands Business <http://www.islandsbusiness.com/> ('latest news': re- postings)
Pacific Magazine <http://www.pacificislands.cc/> ('daily updates': re-postings)
Pacific islands News Association <http://www.pinanius.org/> (mailing list is sourced from members and re-distributed to them)
- ¹⁹ Pacnews, a subscription news agency <http://www.pacnews.org> has been caught in a dispute for more than two years between its parent body (Pacific islands Broadcasting Association) and PINA (Pacific Islands News Association) over the merging of the two bodies which was finalised late last year.
- ²⁰ See, for example, the debate about university and donor funded short-course training in –The PINA Papers Asia-Pacific Network: 12 July 2002
<http://www.asiapac.org.fj/cafepacific/resources/aspac/fijipinapapers.html>
- ²¹ See Communications Fiji Ltd's Fijivillage.com
- ²² Finding Hollywood movie projects that want to shoot in Fiji the mission of the Fiji Audiovisual Commission
- ²³ See Pareti, S. (2005), A Risky Business: Gambling for Kuwait jobs, Islands Business, May

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