

Submission to Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism

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About the author

Dr Tess Newton Cain is a dual citizen of both the United Kingdom and Vanuatu. She lived in Vanuatu 1997 – 2016 and during that time worked in a number of Pacific island countries (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Vanuatu), as a lecturer in Law at the University of the South Pacific and as an independent researcher & analyst focusing on policy development and implementation in the region. She is an acknowledged authority on Pacific regionalism and sub-regionalism, with a special interest in the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Tess is a Visiting Fellow to the Australian National University (Development Policy Centre).

Key Points

- Coverage of the Pacific island region is underserved by public interest journalism
- Public interest journalism is not serving the Pacific diasporas of Australia
- Lack of media coverage means the Australian public is uneducated about the Pacific island region
- Media outlets, especially those in the mainstream are not fulfilling their watchdog role in relation to decisions made in relation to the Pacific and Australia's relationships with the region
- Research should be commissioned to determine what the level of audience demand is in Australia for Pacific-focused journalism
- Funds should be sequestered to allow for Pacific-focused content to be commissioned, developed and distributed by Australian media outlets
- Exchanges between Australian media outlets and Pacific counterparts should be facilitated with a view to increasing the amount of Pacific content in public interest journalism.

1. Introduction

The focus of this submission is the future of public interest journalism as it relates to reporting of issues that affect the Pacific island region. This includes reporting of events that occur in the region and Australian issues and events that have an effect on the region and on Australia's bilateral and multilateral relationships in that part of the world.

This is an area of public interest journalism that is underserved across all media. More critically, it is an area that is being undermined at all levels. The levels of Pacific coverage are dropping and the quality of the reporting provided by the few journalists who persevere in this area is negatively affected by lack of funding, insufficient editorial support and a perception that there is no audience for material of this type.

2. Issues

2.1 The Pacific diasporas in Australia are not served by public interest journalism

In a 2014 analysis¹, Pryke calculated that there were 166,272 people in Australia who self-identified as being of Pacific island heritage. This is less than 1% of the overall population. However, there are parts of Australia in which the Pacific island diasporas constitute a much bigger proportion. For example, the '100% Brisbane' collection/project at the Museum of Brisbane records that 6% of the population were born in the Pacific islands, making them the second largest group after those born in Australia.

These groups are not served by public interest journalism. Events that happen in their home countries are not reported in the mainstream media on a regular basis. What is reported is often skewed to present a simplistic and unrealistic picture of what is happening in the countries of the region.

2.2 The Australian public is uneducated about the Pacific island region.

Australia and Australians are, by and large, well regarded in the Pacific island region. Pacific island people have a good general knowledge about Australia, and are often surprised to learn that the reverse is far from true. One of the main reasons for this is that mainstream media does not adequately cover the Pacific, its peoples, the issues that affect it and the challenges it faces.

¹ <http://devpolicy.org/pacific-islanders-in-australia-where-are-the-melanesians-20140828/>

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Whilst it is the case that there are a number of well qualified, committed and very experienced journalists who work to research and report on these issues, they are not given sufficient exposure within the mainstream media.

When those with higher profiles in the mainstream media do attempt to cover issues that pertain to the Pacific, it is evident that they are not properly prepared and briefed. They are unable to ask follow up questions of ministers (e.g. about cuts to the aid budget). Sometimes they have not taken the time to learn how to say the names of the countries they are discussing properly.

Here are two examples, they are provided for illustrative purposes only:

The ABC's *Q and A* has done two special broadcasts in recent years, one from Jakarta and the other from Beijing. There has been no such broadcast from either Suva or Port Moresby. During 2014, I (along with colleagues from ANU) spent 7 months working with the producers of the programme to put together a panel made up of Pacific island members who could discuss important regional issues. Having agreed to go ahead with the broadcast, it was then cancelled two weeks out from the scheduled date on the basis that the best people were not available. The reason we had not been able to secure the 'best people' as because the *Q and A* producers would not commit to the broadcast.

Recently, the PM of Australia visited Papua New Guinea, en route to India and accompanied by a number of Australian journalists. This visit did not rate a mention on ABC's *The Insiders*, which was broadcast concurrently with his visit.

This lack of general knowledge and education leads to a dilution of any knowledge base that may previously have existed and undermines the intellectual resources available to Australia in effectively prosecuting foreign policy.

2.3 The media is not holding government to account

The way in which Australia conducts its relationships with Pacific island countries is a matter of public interest. The media needs to be fulfilling its watchdog function in this area of policy just as it does (or should) in other areas. Public resources are expended on behalf of the people of Australia.

How Australia behaves in the Pacific island region is the primary means by which she is judged as a global citizen.

There is a strong and growing need for public interest journalism to focus on Australia's place in the Pacific island region and be able to hold decision-makers to account for what does or does not happen there in the name of Australia. Development assistance is a significant aspect of this, but it is far from the only area worthy and requiring of consideration.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Commission research to determine what the level of public interest is

There is something of a 'chicken and egg' situation in which editors and commissioners believe that there is insufficient audience demand for Pacific focused stories so don't allocate resources to them. Therefore there are insufficient stories about the Pacific provided via public interest journalism in Australia. A survey should be commissioned to establish exactly what the level of demand is among the Australian public and this can then form the basis of future allocations of funding and other resources. The Lowy Institute may be able to assist with this by adding appropriate questions to its annual Lowy Poll.

3.2 Commission journalism that focuses on Pacific island issues

Public resources should be devoted to commissioning material and content that focuses on Pacific island issues. Budgets for this type of work need to be realistic, taking into account the full costs associated with travel to and within the region. Commissioned material should cover a wide range of issues to provide Australian audiences with a full picture of what happens in the countries that are closest to them. Public interest journalism is expected (rightly) to avoid the sort of sensationalism that might be associated with commercial journalism. In order for public interest journalists to fulfil this mandate, appropriate resources are required.

Dedicated funds should be made available for media outlets or individual journalists to bid for in order to research, develop and distribute content that is focused solely on the Pacific island region.

There are opportunities for the Australian government to partner with intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the World Bank) or the private sector to increase the available resources for activities of this type. This will require

appropriate risk analysis and management to ensure that independence is maintained.

3.3 Facilitate exchanges between media outlets in Australia and the Pacific island region

Public funding should be made available to facilitate journalist exchanges between media outlets (of all types) in Australia and their counterparts in the Pacific island region. This will assist Australian journalists in developing good networks in the region and they will return with material they can use to develop stories for Australian audiences. Pacific journalists can contribute to media outlets in Australia by providing background material to their Australian colleagues and helping them access resources within the region.