

## University of Melbourne Centre for Advancing Journalism



### CAJ Submission to the Joint Standing Committee - Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee - Inquiry into Supporting Democracy in Our Region

December 2022

#### Who We Are

The Centre for Advancing Journalism (CAJ) was established in 2009 as a research centre within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. It is the home of the Master of Journalism and the Master of International Journalism degrees and fosters and encourages journalism that is useful, ethical and engaging. In an era of profound change across established and emerging media, we are committed to teaching and supporting journalism that honours the profession's primary obligations of reporting truthfully, fearlessly and serving the public good. Through our research, teaching, advocacy and engagement we support the mission of journalism as a monitor on power and a vital means of ensuring citizens are informed and can participate fully in democratic decision making.

#### Executive Summary

CAJ welcomes this inquiry. It comes as the Asia Pacific region faces new and complex geopolitical challenges, some of which pose existential threats to its media sector, media freedom, the safety of journalists, and public interest journalism.

There are significant challenges for Australia and our regional neighbors' interests and values posed by a range of factors, including: the rapid digitisation of media, eroding newsroom budgets, the contest of ideas between democratic nations and China, online misinformation, disinformation and extremist propaganda, and the global economic downturn.

Free and open media reporting and debate is vital to developing and sustaining democracy, good governance and economic development in the Asia-Pacific region. It provides access to independent information that equips and empowers citizens to make informed decisions about their governments and the function of civil and social institutions and networks.

As frontline witnesses to natural disasters and conflict, and during health emergencies, journalists provide information that can save lives, property and critical infrastructure and inform timely, useful responses. In their fact-checking role, journalists debunk mis- and disinformation and counter political and extremist propaganda. Above all, journalists hold power to account, raising awareness of national, regional and international issues, giving people and communities a voice and engaging them in the debates that shape their lives.

Independent reporting on and in the region is also crucial for Australia to achieve its foreign policy objectives because it provides objective reporting and feedback on Australia's activities in the region, including on its development assistance program.

Yet, successive Australian governments have failed to adequately recognise the profound importance of strong public interest media to building and sustaining democracy in the region.

An outstanding example of this blind spot in foreign policy is DFAT's submission to the JSCFAD&T Committee's 2018 *Inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the*

*Indo-Pacific and its role in supporting Australia's regional interests*<sup>1</sup>. The submission made no mention of public interest media or, even broadly, the role of communications in achieving the strategic objectives of Australia's aid program or securing its national interests. A recent and devastating example of the critical importance of reliable public interest media networks can be found in the experience of Papua New Guinea during the Covid emergency, where [vaccination rates](#) have languished at less than 4% of the adult population – one of the lowest in the world – which experts largely attribute to rampant social media misinformation.

Attacks on media freedom in the region have been ever present and are increasing. This includes physical and online violence against journalists, unjust legal threats and incarceration. Examples of this alarming trend and increased political interference in public discourse by domestic and external players are outlined in more detail below (see page 4). In this context, CAJ reminds the Committee of the landmark 2013 UN [General Assembly Resolution A/RES/68/163](#) which calls on member states “to do their utmost to prevent violence against journalists and media workers [and] promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference”.

When Australia signed the [Global Pledge on Media Freedom](#) on 10 July, 2019 it agreed “to supporting the development of diverse, independent, public interest media”. In joining this international partnership, formed at the Global Conference for Media Freedom, Australia agreed it would “defend media freedom where it is under threat” and advocate for journalists' safety. This was a serious step taken in the context of increasing attacks and threats to public interest journalism, including in our own region. The government must demonstrate these international commitments by actively supporting the development and sustainability of public interest media in Asia and the Pacific. CAJ would also urge the government to speak out against restrictions and attacks on independent journalists and media.

Supporting the free movement of journalists within and across the Asia Pacific region, or at a minimum not inhibiting their travel, is critical to ensuring they gain close access to the unfolding stories of people and places. This is imperative to informing matters of public interest, and powerfully broadcasts Australia's bona fides by walking the talk on media freedom as constraints on journalist visas and movements tighten.

Educating and supporting journalists is also imperative. By providing increased, long-term funding to train and support independent, locally situated journalism and by helping sustain professional media organisations in the region, Australia would equip journalists to report on and discuss Australia's and their own government's policies and actions while fortifying them against creeping political and commercial interference.

Media organisations in the region, particularly in our close Pacific neighbourhood, are also now grappling with a significant loss of revenue due to the diversion of advertising funds to global digital media competitors. The digital disruption that has caused upheaval across the politics and society of wealthy nations over the past twenty years now looms as an immediate and existential threat to Pacific media production and exposes the fragility of journalists' employment opportunities. For audiences, this trend tends to result in less local content, leaving communities with fragmented communications. Funding for media business training and development in this highly competitive digital environment would support established media houses to survive, perhaps using new formats and media platforms, and for local media start-ups to emerge.

CAJ welcomes the government's initiative to develop an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy and the work being done by DFAT and the Department of Infrastructure. The strategy must include funding to support

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<sup>1</sup> DFAT Submission No. 8. *Inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the Indo Pacific and its role in supporting our regional interests*. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. June 2018. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/~link.aspx?id=1600155C731F4ACBAE94F702745696FC&\\_z=z](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/~link.aspx?id=1600155C731F4ACBAE94F702745696FC&_z=z)

public interest journalism and media infrastructure development in the region, including training opportunities, here and in-country. To fulfill the government's objectives, it should integrate its 'broadcasting' strategy into its foreign policy strategy and development assistance strategy.

Pacific countries need the skills and resources to tell their own stories. The meeting of Pacific leaders with US President Biden in September provides a timely example of the challenges local media face covering a highly significant local story. All media coverage came from foreign media, mostly US news services, as no Pacific journalists accompanied their leaders' delegations to the US. Despite its geopolitical significance, Pacific media organisations had no capacity to send journalists to report on the meeting and interpret, through their local lens and languages, its meaning for their audiences. Similarly at the recent COP26 in Egypt, in the first week of talks there was a single Pacific journalist present. By the second week, there were a total of three. This despite the high stakes at play for the Pacific communities, where many people remain substantially uninformed about the causes and consequences of climate change even as they deal with the reality.

The following recommendations have been informed by the Australian Asian Pacific Media Initiative's submission to this inquiry. CAJ would like to acknowledge and thank AAPMI for its research and advice.

## **Recommendations:**

### CAJ recommends the government:

- enshrine the principle that media freedom is a fundamental cornerstone of democratic society in the government's foreign policy and development assistance strategies, and wherever possible model and enable open media policies within development assistance programs and Australia's bilateral and contractual relationships across the Asia Pacific region.
- allocate a [minimum of 0.6%](#) of Australian development assistance to train and support journalists, technicians and media organisations, digital distribution technologies and infrastructure and creative content production. Of the \$4.549 billion allocated to development assistance in the 2022-23 budget, this should amount to an annual allocation of \$27.294 million for regional media assistance.
- ensure that organisations provided with Australian Government media development funds adopt the core principle of aid effectiveness i.e., that it is locally owned, locally driven and produced.
- allocate funding to tertiary education institutions to research the Pacific media environment to ensure media development assistance is well targeted and evidence-based.
- develop scholarship programs that cater for Pacific journalists in a range of circumstances to advance the quality of journalism and skill-up practising journalists to work effectively in the digital environment.
- provide funding to support professional media organisations in the region to build their capacity to represent journalists and defend public interest journalism.
- support training for journalists on reporting on conflict and in emergencies
- support training in specialist areas as identified by media organisations and journalists including investigative reporting, data visualisation, mobile journalism, countering dis- and misinformation, health reporting and pitching local stories for international outlets.
- consider and support initiatives that amplify stories and voices from the Pacific for wider audiences in order to better represent the region, particularly on topics that most affect local people and communities.
- support training for journalists in the region on protection from online and physical violence, in particular women journalists. Noting that one of the key concerns emerging from the Melanesia Media Freedom

Forum (Brisbane 2019), in which CAJ participated, was that women are underrepresented in many newsrooms and in media management. They can face additional challenges in being recognised and responded to by people in authority. Operating in close-knit communities, sometimes in contexts where the role and responsibilities of journalists are not widely understood, they also report threats to their safety within their own close networks, including sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

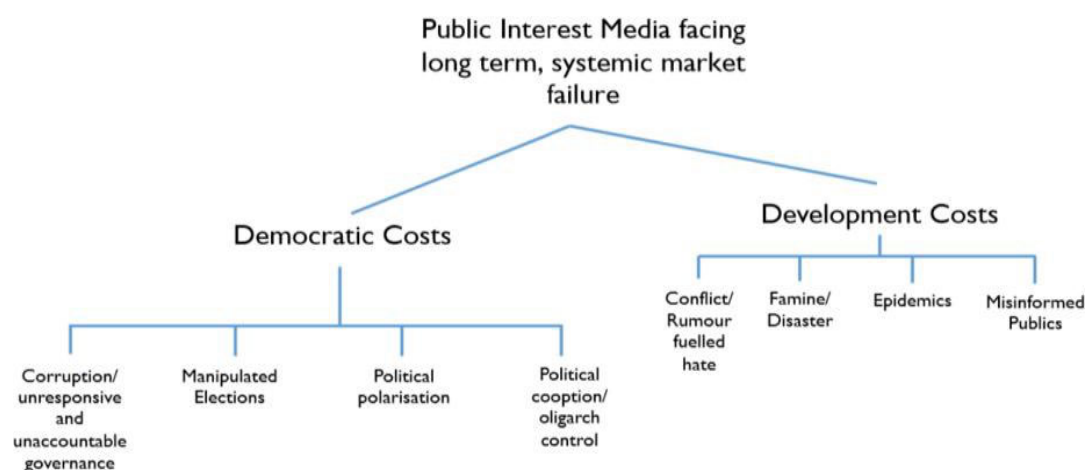
- support for newsrooms reporting on climate change. Editors and reporters in the Pacific region particularly, where climate impacts are fierce and frequent, indicate that they require ongoing resources and training to help them communicate the complexities of the issues – from the science to the policy jargon and the political spin – to communities urgently requiring this information.

## Media's Critical Role Supporting Democracy

Independent public interest media is a cornerstone of democracy. As UN Secretary-General, António Guterres [noted](#) on 3 May 2022 : “Without freedom of the press, there are no real democratic societies. Without freedom of the press, there is no freedom.” Access to independent media is a universal human right<sup>2</sup>, and pivotal to enabling citizens to exercise other human rights, including their right to self-determination. It follows that support for independent media supports democracy.

To better grasp the cost to democracy of lost journalism, consider the activities where “journalism makes a real life contribution to civic life, particularly at the local level”, [as identified by the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute](#). The critical role of **informing** citizens has previously been discussed. Journalism also facilitates the flow of information the other way, **representing** the realities of communities and conveying their voice. Media organisations small and large play a powerful role in **campaigning** on issues directly relevant to their audiences. Then there is the integral watchdog role, with journalists **interrogating** governments, public authorities, institutions, companies and business through scrutiny and investigation.

In the Asia Pacific region, public interest journalism can play a pivotal role in developing and sustaining successful democracies. Quality public interest media plays a central role in explaining issues to the public. Yet, it is facing new and expanding perils.



Source: Global Forum for Media Development.

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<sup>2</sup> Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’

Without informed and engaged communities, the prospects of achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in the region are remote. The effectiveness of development programs, disaster preparedness and humanitarian assistance in emergencies, and of education, gender equality projects and inclusive economic development programs, together with basic democratic freedoms, rests on the provision of relevant information in local languages and respecting cultural priorities and sensitivities.

Similarly, communicating Australia's foreign policy and development assistance would be enhanced by quality, independent reportage by regional media in local languages and reflecting local cultural values. Independent media reporting on Australian development programs and projects in the Asia-Pacific is essential to their success, allowing aid recipients to voice their views on programs that affect them. The work of journalists on the ground, observing and critiquing programs, provides aid organisations and their funders, such as DFAT, invaluable feedback on their effectiveness.

We note that in the context of the current capability review of DFAT, the government has indicated that it wishes – in the [words](#) of Minister Pat Conroy – to “*centre development at the heart of DFAT*”, and to realise the advantages of a truly integrated aid program. A vibrant local media will be critical to informing, shaping, broadcasting and interrogating these ambitions. Yet Australia's aid sector does not appear to place value on independent public interest journalism or recognise the critical role it can play in development, nor does it have the expertise or capacity to deliver quality media development. Media development has consistently received minimal funding and support, and yet has made strong gains.

Australian media and government public relations communications in the region, along with its aid program, constitute ‘soft power’ tools that project and support our national interests. By demonstrating and promoting its values, including support for public interest journalism, these soft power tools expand Australia's international influence. Australia's foreign policy approach to the region must take account of the rapid digital transformation underway in the region and the impact it is having on local media and communications. While it poses significant challenges to regional media and democracy, it also offers extraordinary opportunities to expand Australia's engagement with the region in positive, respectful and supportive ways. CAJ urges the Australian Government to grasp the opportunities the digital transformation offers, particularly to the media sector, to help secure peace and stability in the Asia and Pacific regions.

In urging the Australian Government to reinvigorate its media presence in the region, the former Pacific Forum Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor, said: “*impartial analysis of the forces at play is critical if Pacific citizens are to achieve their Leaders' vision of a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives.*”

Given the new and existential challenges the region is confronting—climate change and other environmental risks, the geostrategic gaming by the major powers, the effects of rapid media digitisation of communications, the COVID pandemic and natural disasters—-independent media reporting of accurate information, across all mediums, is critical to saving lives and empowering people and communities to choose their governments, sustain their livelihoods, conserve their cultural traditions and protect the heritage of future generations.

## Media Environment in the Pacific

*The range of threats to media freedom is increasing. These include restrictive legislation, intimidation, political threats, legal threats and prosecutions, assaults and police and military brutality, illegal detention, online abuse, racism between ethnic groups and the ever-present threats facing particularly younger and female reporters who may face violence both on the job and within their own homes.*



### **Melanesia Media Freedom Forum Declaration, Brisbane 2019<sup>3</sup>**

In 2019, CAJ was a partner in an [initiative](#) lead by Griffith University bringing editors and journalists from across Melanesia to Brisbane for what was essentially a crisis meeting on the deteriorating state of media freedom in the region. It coincided with “an apparent shift in Melanesian politics, a slide to increasingly authoritarian attitudes, policies and practices exhibited by governments, often in the guise of ensuring ‘stability’.”<sup>4</sup> Worryingly, the pattern has continued. The Reporters Sans Frontier (RSF) 2022 [Global Media Freedom Index reported](#) that: “Press freedom has deteriorated dramatically” in the Asia Pacific region.

In the three years since the Melanesia Media Freedom Forum delivered its Declaration, the pressures on public interest media have grown commensurate with the enormous challenges confronting Pacific communities, such as the COVID pandemic, major disasters (many produced by climate change), the digital transformation and rising international and domestic political tensions.

A December 2021 USAID [report](#) on the Pacific stated that: “Information disorder, an environment in which distorted and manipulated information is ubiquitous, is believed to play an important role in affirming authoritarianism and destabilising democracy across the region.” Strong independent public interest media can effectively counter this by fact-checking and investigation and providing accurate, fair information based on credible sources, and by promoting public awareness campaigns, such as health promotions, and encouraging people to seek out quality information. The media sector in the Pacific presently lacks the strength and capacity to fully and consistently perform these functions and contribute to stable democratic governance.

In the Pacific and Asia, misinformation and dis-information, spread predominantly via social media, poses a major danger to democracy. Disinformation on [COVID](#) and other health misinformation, scams, trolling and online violence designed to create fear within communities (e.g. sorcery accusations in PNG) can generate violence and undermine trust in democratic institutions. ABC International’s [PNG COVID-19 Social media Tracker](#) found there was considerable confusion around pandemic response policies, including vaccination. “There is opportunity for building the capacity of journalists to report on health policies in relation to COVID-19,” the ABC said.

China ranks [175th](#) out of 180 countries on RSF’s 2022 World Press Freedom Index. There is deep concern about its [growing influence](#) on Pacific governments’ attitudes to media freedom and human rights. The deterioration of Australia and the US’s relationship with China has strengthened the Pacific strategically. Some Pacific leaders have sought to leverage the tensions between China and Australia to their political advantage. This has been most obvious in attacks on foreign and domestic media seen as evidence of [China’s growing influence](#) in the region.

In July 2022, a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to several Pacific nations saw Chinese officials take over media management and heavily restrict reporting on the signing of new bilateral agreements. In Solomon Islands, the Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI) [boycotted](#) coverage of Wang’s visit because most journalists were blocked from attending the press conference and only one question was permitted from a local journalist to Wang. No journalists’ questions were allowed during Wang’s visits to Kiribati and Samoa during press events announcing bilateral agreements. At the [meeting](#) between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Henry Puna, hosted by the Forum in Fiji, Chinese embassy officials prevented local and foreign journalists from asking questions or filming and press passes were revoked without reason, despite being invited to cover the event. Details of the meetings and bilateral

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<sup>3</sup> Pacific Journalism Review 26 (1) 2020. The Melanesia Media Forum represents media from Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and West Papua.

<sup>4</sup> Professor David Robie, Speech to the Melanesian Media Forum 2019. <https://www.griffith.edu.au/earning-futures/service-earning/events-and-innovation/melanesian-media-freedom-forum/pre-conference-keynote-address>

agreements signed by Pacific nations with China remain a secret. There is grave concern that some Pacific governments acted to support China's repression of their own journalists.

Anecdotally Pacific broadcast journalists are deeply concerned by the pressure their networks are experiencing from the Chinese government to carry their content. Other concerns include:

- the number of Chinese state-controlled English language services now broadcasting television, radio and publishing online in the region
- a push by Chinese state-owned media to sign MOUs with Pacific media companies
- an expansion of Pacific-based Chinese correspondents
- a comprehensive program of Chinese government sponsored visits to China for Pacific journalists for training or exchanges
- Chinese state-owned media has assumed control of Radio Australia's former Pacific shortwave frequencies
- strategic advertising and sponsored Chinese state-controlled content in Pacific newspapers
- expanding Chinese language media in the Pacific.
- concerns from prominent journalists and media executives that Pacific leaders are copying [Chinese media tactics](#) and stopping them doing their jobs
- donations by Chinese embassies of hardware and equipment (eg vehicles, maintenance of print presses) to cash-strapped newsrooms.

In August this year, to the consternation of Australian and local media, the [Solomon Islands](#) Government took financial and editorial control of its public broadcaster SIBC. Soon after, it publicly attacked the [ABC](#) and introduced new restrictions on foreign journalists to make it more difficult to enter the country. This followed a report on the government signing new security pack with China. Many fear, the Solomon Island's Government is modelling its media policies on China's repressive state-controlled media.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse to curtail media freedom in Asia and the Pacific. The Fijian Government introduced new media [censorship](#) rules. Similar action was taken in some countries in Asia. An International Federation of Journalists' [report](#) records the COVID media crackdown in Malaysia.

In South-East Asia, anti-democratic developments, such as the military coup in Myanmar and China's imposition of repressive national security laws on Hong Kong, have seen media and journalists targeted, jailed and killed. In Hong Kong, the founder of the *Apple Daily* tabloid newspaper and democracy activist, Jimmy Lai, is facing life in prison after being charged with conspiring to collude with foreign forces. His [trial](#) has been delayed because his British lawyer's request for an extension to his visa has been denied.

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar 2021 saw the country's ranking fall to 176th (of 180) nations on RSF's World Press Freedom Index. It is reportedly the world's [second-worst jailer of journalists in 2021](#), trailing only China, and has effectively criminalised news reporting, seriously curtailing [media freedom](#).

In Cambodia, the media is yet to recover from the crackdowns in 2016-18, which saw the murder of commentator Kem Ley, closure of the *Cambodia Daily* over a tax bill, and the sale (and subsequent shift to pro-government reporting) of the *Phnom Penh Post*. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America (VoA) were accused of operating illegally, although VoA has managed to return to the country. All television and most radio and print media are regarded as politically aligned to the ruling party, which won 100% of seats in the

2018 national election. Voice of Democracy is one of the few bright spots, with a small NGO-funded newsroom producing professional reporting. CamboJA is another NGO-supported media outlet that is also occupying the shrinking space for journalism that may include criticisms of the government. However, these outlets are fragile. The withdrawal of foreign funding could see Cambodia's credible media disappear overnight. While journalism training is important, funding for internships and support for media organisations is crucial for public interest journalism to survive in Cambodia. The Australian Embassy in Cambodia has supported a small number of these fellowships and CAJ urges the government to expand its support.

Vietnam and Laos remain hostile places for media workers, with censorship, self-censorship, intimidation and arrests an all-too-familiar part of the landscape. [Vietnam](#) ranks 174th (of 180 nations) on RSF's World Press Freedom Index in 2022 and is the world's third largest jailer of journalists—39 journalists are currently being held in Vietnamese jails. RSF reports that the army's Force 47 of 10,000 cyber-soldiers was formed to monitor and attack online dissidents. All media in [Laos](#) is under strict government control.

Indonesia hosts hundreds of independent media outlets and was seen in the post-Suharto era as a pioneer in media start-ups in South-East Asia. Yet, despite a slight gain in 2022, it continues to rank low in the Global Press Freedom Index—117th out of 180 countries. Journalists wanting to enter West Papua (comprising Papua and West Papua provinces) face heavy restrictions, reminiscent of media access to East Timor when it was under Indonesian control. Permits are required and security forces supervise journalists' movements and activities<sup>5</sup>. In an alarming move, a new [criminal code](#) due to come into effect in 2025 will introduce severe penalties to 'insulting the President' and other curbs on freedom of expression, generating serious international concerns that the nation is moving towards a new era of authoritarianism, more restrictive of human rights than even Suharto imposed. This comes as concern grows about [China's](#) growing influence in Indonesia.

Despite being a democracy, the Philippines under former President Duterte descended into the hyper media repression reflective of authoritarian regimes, even openly discussing the legitimacy of murdering journalists. Since 1986, more than 200 journalists have been killed in the Philippines, according to [Human Rights Watch](#). Famously, 2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, [Maria Ressa](#), editor of independent news service [Rappler](#), has been repeatedly targeted with malicious legal threats and vicious online violence. This pattern has continued under the new Marcos government. In June 2022, two independent online media sites were [blocked](#), and the following month the Philippines Securities and Exchange Commission [revoked](#) Rappler's publishing license.

Pacific people are understandably eager to participate in the new digital environment sweeping across the vast region of Oceania—it allows them to connect and communicate swiftly, organise, do business, stay safe, access education and vital information. Nonetheless, the digital transition comes at a dangerous cost, disrupting local newsrooms in ways that could spell their demise, as global behemoths like Google, Facebook and Amazon, lay claim to the modest funds available for advertising. This poses an existential threat to public interest journalism while providing a loud voice to foreign media players, not all of which support or provide access to journalism, let alone media relevant to the Pacific region.

The deteriorating media environment in many countries in Asia and the Pacific underscores the urgent need for Australia to actively support public interest media in the broader region and strengthen independent journalists' capacity to support democratic governance.

## Australia and Pacific Media

CAJ welcomes the government's decision to increase Australia's development assistance funding in the October budget. The restoration of ABC operational funding along with an additional \$32 million over four

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<sup>5</sup> Mambor, V., & da Costa Sarmiento, P. (2020). West Papuan contro : How red tape, d s nformat on and bogus on ne med a d srupts eg t mate news sources. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 26(1), 105-113. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26.1.1085>



years to support its international services is especially welcome. The [news](#) that the ABC will use some of this funding to employ Pacific journalists in the region is exciting and we look forward to seeing the results.

Nevertheless, funding for Australia's media development assistance programs is well below what is required to build its capacity to deal with the challenges it faces. The number of local journalists will continue to be too low and their wages so abysmal that the quality of media reporting remains at risk.

Australia is traditionally the main provider of public interest journalism development in the Pacific region. However, Australia has had little engagement in media development in Asia where China is now a major provider of journalism training programs from nearby countries. This is a serious gap in its development policy and neglecting the media's soft power role and significance for the growth and resilience of democracy.

The DFAT funded [Women in News and Sport](#) program delivered by the ABC provides valuable support and training across the Asia-Pacific region (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Philippines). The successful [Pacific Food Revolution](#) project, supported by the Australia government, demonstrated the power of mainstream media to tap regional audiences with quality multi-channel media.

In the Pacific, Australian government funding for its flagship Pacific Media Assistance Scheme ([PACMAS](#)) during Phase 3 (April 2017 to June 2021) amounted to just [\\$11.39 million](#) (\$2.8 million per year). The funding meant several Pacific countries could not access training or other support. In PNG, the Media Development Initiative ([MDI](#)) supports a desperately under-resourced media sector covering a larger and diverse population dealing with a plethora of serious human rights, political, governance and environmental issues. An Independent Progress Review of PACMAS 3 [noted](#) that it and MDI are effective, value-for-money programs. Still, it said "the need to strengthen media capacity is outstanding in the region".

CAJ welcomes DFAT's positive [response](#) to the review and notes that many recommendations may be actioned in PACMAS Phase 3 and 4. On the recommendations still under consideration, we particularly urge the government to consult with regional editors on how to best support and fund them to "operate more effectively in response to regulative and legislative restrictions on the media". We also urge the government to consult with regional and Australian media on strengthening collaborations. With a much wider brief than previous iterations of the program, PACMAS Phase 4 must be backed by commensurate funding. Without a significantly increased budget it is likely to fail to meet DFAT's objectives for the program.

We note that [Guardian Australia's Pacific Project](#), initiated in 2019, represented a long overdue and seismic shift in reporting from within and about the region. The Pacific Project identifies, supports, edits and pays an expanding network of journalists within the region. Their work showcases the value and insight of local reportage. Stories produced and published via this network became imperative through the COVID crisis, when despite the closure of international borders it provided continued visibility and coverage of critical issues unfolding within the region. But we also note that the Pacific Project relies on philanthropic funding from a single major donor and is therefore vulnerable without further support. We would encourage initiatives that might build on this model to develop and support this project and similar enterprises.

### **Gaps in Australia's support for free media in the region**

Australia has not provided any tangible support to media businesses to manage the digital transition and remain viable, or to support national and regional professional media organisations to increase their capacity to share expertise, represent their concerns to national governments, regional organisations and development partners or to defend journalists and media houses facing threats to media freedom.

Carefully targeted development assistance is needed to support Pacific media businesses and professional media organisations to manage the digitisation of media, to support their capacity to protect public interest journalism, and to resist political influence.

A recent [survey](#) revealed “Pacific journalists are more inexperienced and under-qualified than counterparts in the rest of the world. In addition, the Pacific has among the highest rate of journalist attrition due to, among other things, uncompetitive salaries, a feature of small media systems.” They are also trying to do their jobs under increasing restrictions.

The survey was the first undertaken in the industry in 30 years. This points to a significant gap in research funding on this vital sector, the function of which has profound implications for Australia’s foreign policy ambitions and development programs. CAJ urges the Committee to recognise the urgent need for dedicated research funding by Australian and regional academic organisations on the region’s media environment.

Australia’s Pacific Step-Up initiative is welcome, but what’s also needed is a step change in its funding for media development and support for regional journalism to ensure communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, do not miss the opportunities of the digital media transformation. Without support they are at risk of continuing waves of mis- and disinformation and propaganda, and of becoming mere consumers of culturally irrelevant and potentially damaging foreign media.

Australia’s media sector also needs to step up and better recognise the professionalism and capacity of the region’s media professionals and the quality of the work they do despite so many hardships and constraints. They are better placed than anyone to tell their stories, illuminating realities that outsider journalists might struggle to see or interpret, as the *Guardian* Pacific Project has demonstrated. The government and media sector should actively encourage, support and consume public interest media produced in the region - whether by taking news stories from media organisations in contra deals or through co-productions on current affairs, sports, children’s programs and everything in between, using all media platforms and channels to service domestic and regional audiences.

CAJ urges the government to seek out, train and employ creative content producers, media technicians and journalists from within the Asia Pacific diaspora to help Australia communicate more effectively with the region, and encourage them to participate in and lead media and communications teaching and training programs directed at the region in Australia and in country.

## **Australian government communications in the region**

Australia’s public engagement strategy in the Pacific requires careful consideration, drawing on well-informed targeting and deep cultural sensitivity.

The ambitions of journalism should not be confused with those of strategic communications strategies. Our interest is in the mission of clear-sighted journalism, not public relations or servicing the priorities of the government of the day. Nonetheless, CAJ recognises that Australia will seek to promote its strategic interests in the Pacific, and that it is legitimate and important to inform regional communities about activities or projects that may affect or involve them. The government also enlists strategic communications to encourage support in Australia for the government’s Pacific foreign policy objectives and aid strategy. These two very different audiences for Australian Government public communications on the Pacific need to be carefully considered. The target audiences demand different content to be effective. It is also imperative that funding to promote Australia’s aid programs not be drawn from the development assistance funding pool, and that journalism programs not be confused with communications-for-development initiatives.

Localised messaging by Australian Embassy and High Commissions in the Pacific region are welcomed and used by Pacific journalists as story leads. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that communications on Australian funded aid projects may be perceived as aid being used for “propaganda” instead of development

assistance. Local media professionals witnessing Australian crews being flown into the region to gather media content can generate resentment. Aid recipient communities involved in Australian government public diplomacy exercises may not be fully informed about how the content will be used, and again there is a risk of festering resentment if they are not given opportunities to view the end product.

DFAT communications targeting regional communities is best produced by media professionals with experience in the region, or relevant country, in local languages. Content targeting Australian audiences should be informed by, and as far as possible, be produced by media professionals with close connections to the region, reflect regional voices and images, and be sensitive to Pacific cultures.

CAJ strongly advises DFAT to contract media professionals based in the region or drawn from diaspora communities to produce and advise on content targeted at regional communities.

*CAJ's experts stand ready to assist the Committee on any of the issues discussed above.*

Signed:

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