

## Articles

# The political gorilla and the Pacific Forum: Getting it right?

### ABSTRACT

Fiji's Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, has often complained of 'inaccuracy, misinformation, distortion and bias' in reporting the Pacific region. Yet there is more to 'getting it right' than accurately reporting Qarase's facts. What of journalists' unstated cultures and conventions which frame international news so that international reporting of Pacific events may bear little resemblance to community priorities? Are the resulting perceptions of misinformation and distortion created by differing national agendas, corporate interests, cultural assumptions or even lingering colonial prejudices? This article examines Australian press reporting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit meeting held in Samoa in August 2004 and compares it to that of the Pacific and New Zealand regional press. Reporters' and editors' views are contextualised with the official communiqué issued at the end of the conference.

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There are some exceptions—journalists and broadcasters who can be trusted to get it right. I do not mean 'getting it right' from a politician's standpoint. I am speaking of the basics of reporting the facts, ensuring balance and placing stories in an accurate context. That's all. In the main our reporters, editors, presenters and interviewers tend to be ill-equipped for a crucial job. The result is often inaccuracy, misinformation, distortion and bias.

—*The Fijian Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, speaking at the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association Conference in 2004.*

## Introduction

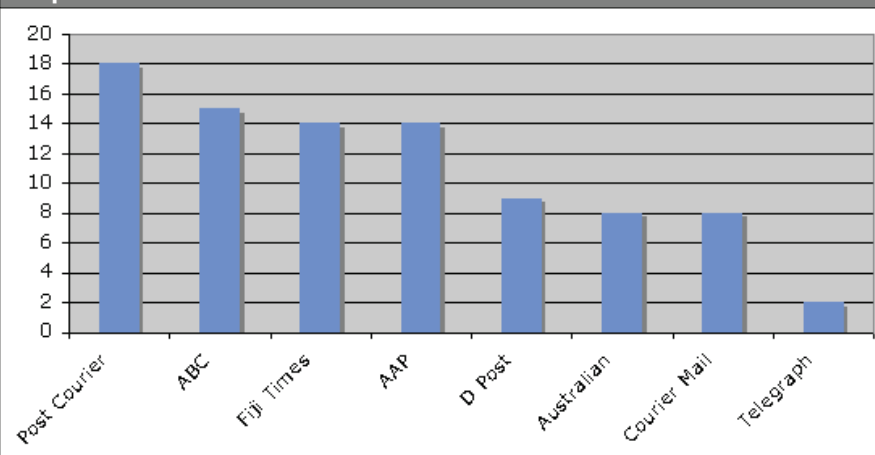
**F**IJI'S Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, complained of 'inaccuracy, misinformation, distortion and bias' in reporting the Pacific region. He saw the solution as more training for Pacific journalists. Yet there is more to 'getting it right' than accurately reporting Qarase's 'facts'. What of journalists' un-stated cultures and conventions, which frame international news so that Australian reporting of Pacific events may bear little resemblance to Pacific community priorities? How might these align with international diplomatic agendas?

Are the resulting perceptions of misinformation and distortion created by differing national priorities, corporate interests, cultural assumptions or even refreshed colonial prejudices? This article examines Australian press reporting of the Pacific Forum Summit meeting held in Samoa in August 2004 and compares it to that of the Pacific and New Zealand regional press. Journalists' views were considered in the context of the official communiqué issued at the end of the conference.

## Methodology

This study examined 88 articles and news items published or broadcast on the Pacific Forum in Samoa in 2004 (Graph 1). Stories were drawn from six newspapers: an Australian national newspaper (*The Australian*), two metropolitan dailies (*Courier Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*), a major newspaper based

**Graph 1: Articles on the Pacific Forum 2004**



in New Zealand's capital (*Dominion Post*) and the major newspapers in Papua New Guinea (*Post-Courier*) and Fiji (*Fiji Times*). Australia's national news agency, Australian Associated Press was surveyed. The study also considered items on the Forum distributed by ABC Online.

A list of journalists accredited to the Samoa Forum was supplied by the Forum Secretariat. Interviews were conducted with the *Courier Mail's* Dennis Atkins, the *Dominion Post's* Vernon Small and the ABC's Sean Dorney.

### **Fiji, the Pacific and a globalised media**

Fiji's Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase's lifetime spans the colonial period, post-colonial independence and what may be the rise of neo-colonialism, as the United States exercises 'soft power' through Western media culture and trade agreements. According to Qarase, Western media influences were far less pervasive during the period of direct colonial rule. He said that his childhood was spent on a remote island where he 'hardly saw newspapers'.

But the whole village would flock to the one house that had a radio. We would try to get as close as we could at programme time to hear that tiny voice speaking to us through the static. Even then to the villagers it was thought of as some kind of scientific magic. How could that announcer be talking from nearly 200 kilometres away through such a small machine? The house with the radio had walls of thatched reeds. Next morning you could see the holes in the thatch, which had been torn open, so the listeners could hear more clearly. (Qarase, 2004, p. 2)

In a speech to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association general conference, Qarase observed that previously remote communities were increasingly penetrated by global media and 'wired into the Net'. Reflecting on the Western cultural package that includes news, he questioned 'how distinct local and indigenous cultures ... will withstand the onslaught of the technology which is remaking the world':

I believe the special ways and traditions which give people their identities and sense of self-worth are under direct threat. We are being swamped in a rushing deluge of westernisation, materialism, consumerism and individualism. Commercial television engulfs our societies with much inappropriate foreign programming. Young, impressionable minds are fed a diet heavy with sex and violence. They are deliberately

targeted. It is o.k. to bare the body, don skimpy clothes, gyrate the hips and hop into bed with anyone you fancy. Madonna kisses Britney Spears on the mouth at some televised awards night; Justin Timberlake pulls down the top of Janette Jackson's dress and one of her breasts is on camera in front of millions. What do scenes like this say about the state of civilisation? (Qarase, 2004, p. 3)

Fiji and the Pacific could not however hope to stand back from these global changes. Qarase said that to the contrary, Fiji hoped to capitalise on its strategic location on the Southern Cross cable, by creating jobs and investment its own IT industry. 'That is the economic and commercial imperative' he said.

None of our countries can turn away or shut themselves off from the rest of the international community. Our citizens live in free societies. They have the right to receive and transmit information and ideas. Indeed, much of what is accessible on the Net provides new avenues for acquiring valuable knowledge and learning. But we are still left with the question of how to counter the destructive onrush of the Western programming and multi media messages, which are so often in conflict with local traditions and ideals. (Qarase, 2004, p. 4)

### **Australia, the region and the media superpower**

Australia's regional place in this globalised Pacific community was defined by President George Bush when he described the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, as a regional 'sheriff'. Did Bush's folksy Texan vernacular really mean that Australia had been appointed a gun-toting enforcer of US law on a wild west frontier? Bush had been asked whether he saw Australia as a 'deputy sheriff' in south-east Asia. Bush replied, 'No. We don't see it as a deputy sheriff. We see it as a sheriff' (CNN, 20 October 2003).

Three days after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, the US Congress gave George Bush a mandate to pursue terrorists with 'all necessary and appropriate force' (Bacevich, 2003, p. 237). President Bush subsequently proceeded with a policy of unilateralism, where US supremacy was globally declared to be permanent and universal. Even allies were '... with us, or you are with the terrorists'.<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky saw this adoption of unilateralism as the abandonment of any pretence of observing international consensus. 9/11 was significant, in his view, because the target in this case, was not a small and relatively powerless state. 'For the first time, an attack on the rich

and powerful countries succeeded on a scale that is regrettably not unfamiliar to their traditional domains’:

The atrocities of 9/11 serve as a dramatic reminder of what has long been understood; the rich and powerful no longer are assured the near monopoly of violence that has largely prevailed throughout history; and with modern technology, the prospects are horrendous indeed. Though terrorism is rightly feared everywhere and is indeed an intolerable “return to barbarism”, it is not surprising that perceptions about its nature differ rather sharply at opposite ends of the guns, a fact that is ignored at their peril by those whom history has accustomed to immunity while they perpetrate terrible crimes, quite apart from the moral cowardice so starkly revealed. (Chomsky, 2003, p. 209)

Writing in *American Empire*, Boston University international relations professor Andrew Bacevich said that Bush portrayed the civilised world as being pitted against a terrorist network intent on remaking the world order. Neutrality was not an option even for remote and previously independent states. In Bacevich’s view, the attack allowed Bush to depict the United States as a reluctant super-power which was forced to intervene in the affairs of others in the interests of US national security, on which hinged global stability:

Anyone qualifying for the label ‘terrorist’ now became a bona fide target (although the United States intended to reserve for itself the final say which *terrorists* were really terrorists.) As one commentator noted, the advantage of declaring war against such an amorphous adversary was that ‘if things go well it creates an opportunity to take care of other items on the agenda’. (Bacevich, 2003, p. 233)

The agenda, according to Bacevich, was global dominance. US-based financial historian Nial Ferguson saw the Bush government’s post 9/11 unilateralism as a historical development of the 19th century British empire which globally deployed its power to depose despots, encourage trade and institute sound governance (Ferguson, 2004 pp. 24/25). He claimed that the United States was running an empire, albeit a liberal one, in denial. Ferguson said the contemporary US exercised imperial power through both military interventions such as Iraq and through ‘soft power’ such as cultural exports. It used local elites to secure its aims.

[An imperial US] is primarily concerned with its own security and maintaining international communications and, secondarily, with ensuring access to raw materials (principally) but not exclusively oil. It is also in the business of providing a limited number of public goods; peace, by intervening against some bellicose regimes and in some civil wars; freedom of the seas and skies for trade; and a distinctive form of 'conversion', usually called Americanisation, which is carried out less by old style Christian missionaries than by the exporters of American consumer goods and entertainment. Its methods of formal rule are primarily military in character; its methods of informal rule rely heavily on non-governmental organisations and corporations and, in some cases, local elites. (Ferguson, 2004, p. 13)

Under this world order, the US and Canberra appeared to be renewing old attachments, in which Australia was the regional standard bearer for Western interests. Australia had been an enthusiastic agent of the British empire in the Pacific. In 19th century literature, imperial presumptions frequently constructed indigenous societies as poorly governed, denying local goods to imperial markets and subject to infiltration by foreign interests (Dixon, 1999, pp. 118-133). New Guinea, Fiji and even New Zealand had been acquired by the Crown with Australian support. Threatening foreigners were then described as French, Russian or German; Britain's imperial competitors. Today the threat was globalised. The enemies requiring metropolitan intervention now were simply those declared 'terrorists' by the United States. The rationale for intervention was also familiar; indigenous populations needed guidance in governance, so that communications, trade and investment might be protected.

Prime Minister Howard's embrace of US priorities had already attracted some criticism in Asia, particularly in Malaysia, where Prime Minister Mahathir said that there was a constructive role for Australia in the region, but 'not as self-appointed advisers and sheriffs, and things like that' (Bernama 6.7.200). Malaysian *New Straits Times* journalist Shamsul Akmar accused Australia of acting as a Western agent. 'These critics have a way of finding evil in others when the devilry they are up to is worse and, more often than not, unjustified,' Akmar wrote (*New Straits Times*, 14 September 2000).

In the 21st century, Australia might be seen as an exponent of 'soft power' exercising influence on behalf of the US on notionally independent Pacific micro states through economics, aid and media.

## **The Pacific Islands Forum**

The Pacific Islands Forum was established in the afterglow of independence from the old European empires. Member states were theoretically equal. But the inclusion of the regional super-power, Australia, meant that some states were more equal than others. The annual meeting of the national leaders of Pacific Island Forum may be seen as the most diverse and representative political event held in the Pacific Islands each year. The Forum, which was founded in 1971, represented Heads of Government of all the independent Pacific Island countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

The Forum's affairs were managed by a Secretariat, which employed about 70 staff based in Suva in Fiji. The Secretariat had responsibilities for South Pacific Trade Commission offices in Auckland and Sydney, the Pacific Islands Forum Trade Office in Beijing and the Pacific Islands Centre in Tokyo. It was established initially as a 'Trade Bureau' in 1972, and later became the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC). The name, South Pacific Forum Secretariat was approved by member governments in 1988 and changed to Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in 2000. The Secretariat was funded by Western countries including Australia, the European Union and the United States. It is currently headed by a former Australian diplomat, Greg Urwin (Pacific Forum, 2004).

According to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat vision statement, 'Forum members co-operate on the basis of equality, friendship and mutual respect—with due regard for what each can afford—in efforts to maintain security, improve living standards and ensure sustainable development throughout the region' (Pacific Forum, Madang, Papua New Guinea, 14 September 1995).

Under this aegis, Pacific leaders met in Samoa in August 2004.

## **Terrorism on whose agenda?**

To what extent did these post-colonial ideals mesh with the new global priorities of the US and its regional sheriff? The Pacific could be viewed as a 'soft target' for terrorist groups, according to James Kelly, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. Kelly was quoted in Samoa at the close of the Pacific Forum by Australian Associated Press (AAP).

'My country may be a target of terrorism and terrorists are likely to focus on "soft targets",' he said. Kelly told Pacific representatives that the Indone-

sian-based Jemmah Islamiah was not far in time and space from the Pacific. ‘We must be constantly alert,’ he said (AAP, 10 August 2004). AAP ran two stories on Kelly, including a breakout where he thanked John Howard for Australian support in the invasion of Iraq.

PNG’s *Post-Courier*, which adopted an almost identical lead, appeared to run an edited version of the AAP reporting in its Pacific News section, (*Post-Courier*, 11 August 2004).

In all, Kelly’s remarks were picked up in six articles on the Lexus Nexus data-base. *The Australian*, the only Australian newspaper surveyed to be represented here, reported that the US fight against terror was moving to the Pacific Islands (*Australian*, 11 August 2004). Kelly was also quoted by the BBC World Service and PACNEWS, the regional newsagency.

Much of the remaining AAP coverage focussed on failing island states such as Nauru, where Australia established detention centres for unwanted refugees. John Howard was quoted as saying that Australian aid to Nauru would be linked to improved governance (AAP, 7 August 2004).

US representative James Kelly praised the Australian Government’s Pacific interventions, in an interview with the ABC’s Sean Dorney. Dorney described Kelly’s entourage as ‘the highest powered American delegation to attend the Post Forum dialogue in several years. Kelly spoke of the “vulnerability of the Pacific” to terrorism and money laundering’:

There are security problems. There are bad people who look for places that they think are soft targets. Some of it relates to international crime. Some of it relates to terror. Some of it relates to financing issues, and we had a good talk about those sorts of things. (*The World Today*, 11 August 2004)

ABC Online carried 14 items on the Samoa Forum meeting, with reports from programmes including News, *AM*, *The World Today*, *Correspondents Report*, and *Asia Pacific*. The programme *Big Ideas* included a discussion with Greg Urwin, the former Australian appointed as the Forum’s Secretary General. Urwin said on ABC Radio that the Pacific countries were moving from what he called a ‘post independence period’. He said there should be a transition to a Pacific style of governance which ‘involves some synthesis between what you might regard as global standards of governance and practice in Pacific countries’.



I think fundamentally people in the Pacific were looking around for ways to run their affairs into the long-term future. And that was in response, I think, in turn, to a number of problems that were cropping up in the Pacific: old problems re-emerging; new problems resulting from global phenomena, et cetera. And so I think as that whole picture started to become, from the Canberra perspective, 'less neat', so the reaction in Australia had slowly to change. And so I think we're still in that period. We shouldn't be surprised that it's a complicated and somewhat messy one, and it's one that will continue for some time. (*Big Ideas*, ABC Radio, 9 May 2004)

Urwin said that the transition would require "an engaged response" from Australia and New Zealand.

### **What the leaders actually discussed: The Forum Communiqué**

At the conclusion of the Samoa Forum, the Pacific leaders issued a 40-point communiqué to summarise their deliberations. The leaders expressed support for the Pacific Plan which they intended 'to be the main instrument for promoting their new Pacific vision, deliver real benefits for the Pacific peoples by proposing concrete plans for the enhancement of economic growth and sustainable development'. The plan was to be developed by a Task force, managed by the Secretary General, and made up from senior officials and key regional organisations (Pacific Forum Secretariat, August, 2004).

Communiqué points five to 11 stressed economic growth with reference to regional transport, fisheries, tourism and mobile phone use. Points 12 to 24 covered sustainable development referring to an AIDS strategy, a regional oceans policy, the Tuna Convention, climate change, marine mammals protection and even the Palau Arts Festival. Point 23 recognised the significance of sports to national development while point 24 encouraged membership of the International Rugby Board.

The communiqué addressed regional security and governance (Points 25 to 32), referring to assistance to the Solomon Islands, support for Nauru, the Nuclear Free Zone treaty and the UN convention against corruption. Transnational crime and terrorism were covered in two points, 27 and 28, welcoming the establishment of the Pacific Transnational Crime Co-ordination Centre in Suva, Fiji.

External relations (Points 33 to 40) included visa matters, radioactive contamination of the Marshall Islands by the United States and a dialogue

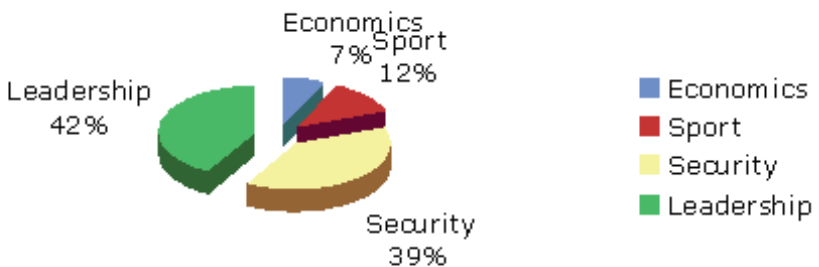
with Thailand. The communiqué concluded with a commendation to the Forum’s outgoing Chair, Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand.

### **Brisbane’s *Courier Mail* (News Corporation)**

The *Courier Mail*<sup>3</sup> saw engagement in explicitly paternalist terms, in which the Australian Prime Minister was characterised as a senior male member of the Pacific and the Island states leaders were implied as children. ‘This year Howard was playing the role of the kindly uncle,’ wrote Denis Atkins about what he saw as ‘a new spirit of co-operation’. However, co-operation was defined as submission to Australia’s directions for a region over which Australia may claim management rights and perhaps ownership. ‘[Howard] referred to the Pacific as “our patch” and said the rest of the world looked to the Australian Government to oversee the region,’ Atkins wrote. Was this arrogance? The Fijian Prime Minister was reported as commenting, ‘We are all part of the same carpet’ (*Courier Mail*, 9 August 2004). Dennis Atkins said ‘the interesting thing this year, was the high regard in which people held Howard, including [PNG PM] Somare who had previously been critical’. (Atkins, 2004).

*Courier Mail* reportage (Graph 2) was dominated by its perceived need for Australian leadership (909 words) closely followed by Australian concerns about security (860 words). In a preview to the Forum, Atkins observed that previously, ‘Howard didn’t bother with forum meetings’. ‘But all this changed with 11 September 2001. The US became worried about the ability

**Graph 2: Courier Mail by themes (by words)**



of criminal gangs and terrorist organisations to team up in failed states and fragile economies'. Howard could be proud of what he had achieved on behalf of the United States, according to Atkin. However, regional stability was seen as of secondary importance to the Australian elections. '[Howard] can rush home to the *real* [author's emphasis] contest' (*Courier Mail*, 6 August 2004).

The Pacific island states were characterised as incompetent and open to terrorists. Australia was 'spearheading a corruption and terrorism protection programme throughout the Pacific'. Once again island leaders were only quoted in the context of approving of Australian intervention. 'Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa acknowledged that some people accused Australia and New Zealand of forcing things on to Pacific island states, but added that "we have a good thing going"' (*Courier Mail*, 9 August 2004).

The sole report which was primarily concerned with economics, focussed on 'the former Australian protectorate' of Nauru. The forum was said to have agreed 'the situation in Nauru' was at crisis point.

The report on sport, 'Eales confident honest Aussie image will prevail' quoted former rugby player, John Eales, who launched a report on the sporting needs of the Pacific islands (*Courier Mail*, 4 August 2004).

### **The Sydney *Telegraph* (News Corporation)**

The Sydney-based News Limited tabloid, the *Telegraph*<sup>4</sup>, only made two mentions of the Pacific Forum. Both were centred on an Australian domestic issue: the eminent persons criticism of truth in Australian Government. In both cases, the Forum was cited merely as the location from which Prime Minister Howard was commenting (*Telegraph*, 9 August 2004). It would appear that the Pacific Forum was of little consequence to the Sydney *Telegraph*.

### **The Australian (News Corporation)**

Australia's News Limited flagship, *The Australian*<sup>5</sup>, described the Pacific Forum in terms of Australia's influence on the island countries. There were 'no cries of neo-colonialism' at the Forum, according to *The Australian* (*The Australian*, 10 August 2004, p. 12). But in *The Australian's* reporting there were repeated references to safety, security and counter terrorism.

The Pacific was 'Australia's patch', according to John Howard in *The Australian*. Howard had previously encountered criticism, *The Australian* re-

ported, when he had warned that Australian aid to the region would only continue if Pacific countries eliminated corruption.

A year ago that statement [‘our patch’] would have provoked outraged mutterings about ‘Australian bully-boy tactics’ among the island premiers and presidents, but the only signs of discomfort yesterday were a few beads of sweat on eminent foreheads. A new mood of acceptance and understanding of Australia’s role as ‘big brother’ was creeping through the region, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare said. ... The success of the Australian-led military intervention in the Solomon Islands and the gentle diplomacy exercised by Mr Urwin seem to have won over the region’s leaders. (*The Australian*, 9 August 2004, p. 2)

Claire Harvey wrote that Howard had been ‘extremely careful with his rhetoric and generous with his money’. The article, which summarised the conference at its conclusion, noted that Fiji was considering a pardon for a Vice President who had been jailed for recognising a recent coup attempt.

Other issues which *The Australian* found of note included ‘the alarming spread of HIV/Aids’ and sport. Rugby Union was seen as a ‘Pacific binder’. ‘Mr Downer, who played rugby, in his younger days in England, is pushing sport as a unifying and uplifting force in the Pacific region, where there are high rates of unemployment on tiny island states,’ political editor Denis Shanahan reported. (*The Australian*, 28 July 2004)

In short, *The Australian* might be seen to have constructed independent Pacific countries as poorly governed, having ineffective disease control and being susceptible to simplistic sports diplomacy. They also were seen to be receptive to cultural intervention in their region through military, economic and aid strategies.

### ***The Dominion Post* (Fairfax New Zealand)**

Australian notions of pre-eminence were not necessarily shared by non-Australian journalists. The Wellington *Dominion Post*’s Vernon Small claimed that Australia’s ‘big noting’ was out of touch with the more relaxed Pacific way. Small wrote Australia’s ‘muscular activism’, a paradigm shift in its Pacific relations, was obvious.

FAMOUS first words: ‘We’re here as a friend, not to throw our weight around.’

Australian Prime Minister John Howard was so keen to drive home this message he rehearsed it as he left Sydney, repeated it when he landed in Samoa and fed it to reporters outside the Pacific Islands Forum leaders’ retreat on Friday. His reassurance would definitely qualify as a ‘Yeah, right’ moment. As the region’s economic and military gorilla, Australia will always face requests for help while arousing suspicions that it wants to write its own rule book. (*Dominion Post*, 9 August 2004)

Small claimed that in Samoa, New Zealand-related issues loomed larger than Australian priorities. He cited ‘the local English language newspaper’ as being concerned with New Zealand immigration, visa requirements and fruit and vegetable imports. He lampooned the Australian delegation for carrying firearms and insisting that they check their own baggage.

What is certain is that Australian officials strong-armed locals into allowing Mr Howard’s press entourage to stay near him and other forum leaders at Aggie Grey’s hotel. Other contingents, including New Zealand, meekly accepted the ‘rule’ that news media would be excluded and filed off to hotels with less reliable showers and no cocktail service. (*DP*, 9 August .2004)

However, Small conceded that a regional transport study, funded and promoted by Australia, dominated the leaders’ statement.

The *Dominion Post* carried nine reports on the Pacific Forum in Samoa. There were two stories on rugby union, including the paper’s only front-page report on the Forum. However, the paper placed Forum high up in the paper, with five stories placed on page two. There were four stories on development or economics including two 1100-word feature articles. The *Dominion Post* summarised the outcome of the forum as follows:

- Approval for further progress on a ‘Pacific Plan’ to increase economic growth and cooperation in the region.
- Support for an Australian-led review of regional transport.
- A push to increase sustainable returns from the region’s fisheries.
- The appointment of a forum representative to cash-strapped Nauru and a move to assess what regional assistance could be given.

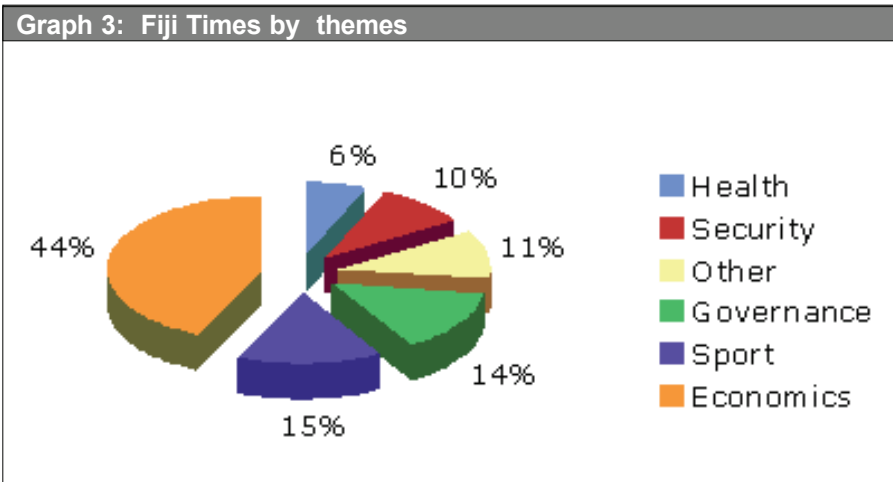
- An agreement that sport, including netball and the possibility of a future Pacific team in the Super 12, remain on the forum agenda (*DP*, 9 August 2004).

***Fiji Times* (News Corporation)**

*The Fiji Times* reported that the Pacific Plan should ‘deliver real benefits for their people’ by the enhancement of economic growth and sustainable development. Important elements of the plan involved protecting fisheries and developing domestic industry (*Fiji Times*, 9 August 2004). The Suva-based newspaper saw economic issues, specifically those relating to Fijian workers as those most worthy of reporting (Graph 3). Four of the 13 *Fiji Times* articles referred to economic matters (1596 words).

The *Post* reported on the NGO discussions at the parallel Pacific Civil Society Forum which called on the Pacific leaders to support visa free access to Australia and New Zealand for Pacific Workers (*FT*, 9 August 2004). In an attempt to set the agenda for the Pacific leaders, the Civil Society forum called talks on human rights, fisheries, security and HIV/AIDS. The Reverend Akuila Yabaka called on the leaders to co-operate for sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Fijian trades union official Rajeshwar Singh welcomed a decision by Australia to extend economic preferences for Fijian-made garments. (*FT*, 10 August 2004) The leaders forum was said to have failed to consider issues,



which might have provided training for garment workers and improved the administration of the agreement.

Fiji's Foreign Minister, Kaliopate Tavola, flagged talks with Australia and New Zealand seeking entry for Pacific agricultural workers (*FT*, 9 August 2004). The communiqué issued at the end of the Forum's formal session called for a 'Pacific plan to deliver real benefits for their people by proposing plans for the enhancement of economic growth and sustainable development' (*FT*, 9 August 2004).

Sport played an important part of *The Fiji Times* coverage, with two large articles totalling 572 words. *The Times* reported that the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, would be talking rugby at the Forum (*FT*, 29 July 2004). The Forum subsequently issued a communiqué which urged Pacific countries to seek membership with the International Rugby Board. (*FT*, 9 August 2004).

The only *Fiji Times* page one story on the Forum briefly reported its decision to allow French Polynesia as an observer (*FT*, 10 August 2004). This may have been seen as tacit support for independence supporters in French Polynesia.

### **PNG's *Post-Courier* (News Corporation)**

South Pacific nations were held back by economic and political mismanagement and were not better off than they were 20 years ago, according to a Samoan Minister quoted in the PNG *Post-Courier*. Commerce Minister Joe Keil nominated the issues of 'poverty, transactional crime, ethnic tension, bad governance and rising populations'. Inadequate education, youth unemployment, the spread of HIV/AIDS and the threat of rising sea levels also hindered development, he said. (*Post-Courier*, 5 August 2004).

Fishing rights were also seen as major issue, with Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi calling on Asian and American fleets to allow Pacific countries a bigger share of one million tonne tuna catch in the South Pacific (*PC*, 9 August 2004).

The *Post-Courier* carried 18 articles on the Samoan Forum, of which five were concerned with development and economics. The newspaper also focussed on external relations, with reports on Thailand and French Polynesia sending representatives to the forum. Australian leadership was not seen as an issue. However, Australia was reported as being 'no longer a bully' in a

112-word story sourced from Auckland. John Howard was reported as ‘a popular figure’ who came bearing gifts (*PC*, 13 August 2004).

The economic crisis in Nauru was reported in two articles, which considered social impacts rather than security implications or Australian aid. Indeed, the *Post-Courier* reported that Nauru had been evicted from its consulate in Australia after its government ‘failed to repay \$US172 million owed to an American finance company’ (*PC*, 6 August 2004).

A regional strategy to combat HIV/AIDS, a major problem in PNG, rated a 299-word article. The New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, was quoted as saying that urgent action was required before the disease reached epidemic proportions (*PC*, 9 August 2004). Clark, the Forum chair, was referred to in seven *Post-Courier* articles, compared to five which referred to John Howard.

## **Conclusion**

The study showed that the Australian press had little interest in what the Pacific Island leaders decided. Their reports often bore little resemblance to the Forum’s priorities enunciated in the official communiqué. Rather, their news agenda was an abiding interest in the perceived leadership role of the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard; a role so clearly defined by US President George Bush and re-affirmed by his regional representative, James Kelly.

Terrorism was described by the US as the driving issue in the sleepy Pacific. Australia reflected this foreign policy view and was portrayed as renewing and extending its influence in the region.

The *Courier Mail’s* rhetoric echoed colonial prose which once enthused about the great white mother, Queen Victoria. In the *Courier’s* view, John Howard became a ‘kindly uncle’. *The Australian* gave prominence to Howard’s claim that the Pacific was ‘Australia’s patch’. ABC coverage was more diverse, reflecting its employment of specialist Pacific reporters and its deployment of specialist programmes. The reporters in this study all covered the same event’s ‘facts’. Differences emerged in what they chose to report of those ‘facts’.

Australian coverage contrasted with that of the Fijian and Papua New Guinea newspapers which reported on what the Forum itself defined as the key outcome, the Pacific Plan with its designs for economic development and sustainability.



In summary, there were clear distinctions in the news agendas on display. Radio Australia's Sean Dorney, perhaps the most experienced Australian reporter of the Pacific region, said later he found it difficult to break into mainstream Australian media agendas with Pacific stories. He said it was of no surprise to him that Australian media failed to cover stories of importance to the Pacific Islanders:

They concentrate on the issues that they think are of interest to Australia. I've been covering it [the Pacific] for a long time, you know, and have got very used to not having stories that I consider to be of importance run domestically in Australia. But that is the way it operates. Until the Australian media starts taking the same interest that John Howard has in the Pacific, we are going to have pretty cursory shallow reporting of the Pacific by most of the Australian media. (Dorney, 2004)

Australian news priorities at the Pacific Forum were driven by Australian exigencies and shaped by US assumptions. Wider Australian perspectives on the Pacific were constricted by limited resources dedicated to Pacific reporting, which in turn fed editorial indifference to Pacific agendas. In this sense, Qarase's charge of biased journalism could be seen to result from skewed editorial agendas rather than individual reporters' inaccuracy, misinformation and distortion. Fijian and PNG journalists appeared to get the Forum's priorities right. In this case, it may be that it was the experienced Australian media, pre-occupied with Australian politics, who were 'ill equipped for a crucial job'.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. (Applause.) From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.' President George Bush, speaking to a joint session of Congress and the Senate, announcing the creation of the Homeland Security Department. 20 November 2001.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, the 16 member countries of the Pacific Island Forum were Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

<sup>3</sup> *The Courier-Mail* claimed to be the nation's second highest selling broadsheet

‘with a readership covering all demographics in sufficient numbers to retain the mantle of a true mass medium’. Based in Brisbane, it claimed a daily circulation of 342,000. Editor David Fagan said that the *Courier’s* prime interest was in its own back yard. ‘We are the prime news and information-gathering force in Queensland and have a well-won reputation for breaking big news stories,’ he said (News Media Net, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> According to the editor of Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, Campbell Reid, its philosophy is that its ‘readers come first’. With a circulation of 403,000, the *Telegraph* boasted the highest readership in New South Wales. Reid said, ‘It seeks to inform [*Telegraph* readers], answer their questions, help them understand, champion their causes and most importantly to see the world through their eyes’ (News Media Net, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> *The Australian* is Australia’s only national broadsheet newspaper. The News Limited description said that ‘editorial values focus on leading and shaping public opinion on the issues that affect Australia.’ ‘Led by a team of highly credible and experienced journalists, editorial themes cover economic, political and social issues.’ *The Australian* claimed a daily circulation of 133,000. Editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell said that the paper aimed to be impartial and informative. ‘We strive to be first with the big national stories. We aim for factual reporting and penetrating analysis. We seek to take our readers beyond the “spin” of the political, business and sport press release machinery.’ he said (News Media Net, 2004).

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