Creating Watchdogs: The state of the media in Solomon Islands

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Research Question

• What, if any, change there has been to the media landscape of Solomon Islands since the Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Department’s intervention in the country via the Solomon Islands Media Assistance Scheme (SOLMAS)?
Why should we care?

• An estimated $US 1.4 billion is spent on media assistance programs around the globe each year.

(European Journal of Communication 26(2), 2009)
Democratic roles of journalism

• Agenda setters
• Draw attention to marginalized groups
• Watchdogs over governments and powerful people
• Gate keepers (gate openers)
• Fostering diversity, plurality and balance
Public Sentinel

- Pippa Norris (ed) in *Public Sentinel* asks:
  - Under what conditions does media performance match the ideals of the public sphere?
  - Where and why do media fail?
  - Which policy interventions are suitable to remedy failure?
Solomon Islands

- Solomon Islands is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) located in the Western Pacific and gets more than 50 per cent of its GDP from foreign aid (Feeny & McGillivray 2010, p. 38).

- Australia is the largest foreign aid donor to Solomon Islands.

- In the 2010-2011 financial year Australia provided an estimated $50.9 million in aid to Solomon Islands through its aid agency AusAid (Treasury 2009).
RAMSI

- Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.
- Australian led.
- First job to restore order.
State of the media before RAMSI

Freedom of expression was curtailed as most people were not able to participate freely in open dialogue and discussion because of fear.

The media was physically intimidated – journalists were threatened by militants and ex-combatants, who broke into the newsroom. The media imposed self censorship for protection.
Solomon Star and SIBC
SOLMAS Goal

• Established in 2008 to:
  • To contribute to a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands by improving the reach and quality of the country’s media
  • AND to work with Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), commercial and community-based radio stations, newspapers and the television station One TV.
SOLMAS

• The Solomon Islands Media Assistance Scheme, or SOLMAS, is assisting SIBC to upgrade its transmission infrastructure, enabling it to reach more people and fulfil its role as the country’s emergency services broadcaster.

• Support also focuses on improving the quality of output of across Solomon Islands media through training initiatives for media staff. Media organisations can also apply for grants to assess and rectify infrastructure issues.

• SOLMAS has 3 full-time staff based in and various short-term technical advisors and trainers.
SOLMAS

- ABC International has shunned publicity for the program.
- Nothing has been written about it in an academic sense, although Australian academics have been employed as consultants to do various reports, from audience surveys to scoping documents.
Wikileaks

- Despite large-scale Australian assistance and intensive institution building, Solomon Island democratic institutions clearly cannot cope with the deep fissures and frustrations that divide the many communities in its society ... A strong outside hand will be needed for a long, long time. (Dorling 2011)
Secrecy is understandable

- In 2006 Sogavare declared the Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole persona non grata for alleged interference in Solomon Islands domestic politics. (US cable via Wikileaks)

- The United States noted that there were concerns about the conduct of some officials/contractors have been heavy handed, not sensitive to cultural issues and at times patronising in their treatment of Solomon Islanders. (US cable via Wikileaks)
Risks listed by SOLMAS
Island Sun / Solomon Star

MASI congratulates Island Sun

Monday, 03 May 2010 15:57, administrator

Ms Coralie Ferguson of SOLMAS and MASI boss George Heming during Island Sun website launching

THE MEDIA Association of Solomon Islands (MASI) on Friday 30th April 2010 congratulated...
Content Analysis

• The stories were divided into their geographical focus area: Honiara; National; Province; Pacific; Australia/NZ and International. They were also categorized as being packaged reports with inserts; packaged reports with only the reporters voice; question and answer interviews; edited speeches. The analysis also looked at the major themes of the stories and categorized them as dealing with: political governance; economic governance; natural resources; development & community; law, conflict and security; human rights; gender issues; education; journalism; other. The number of sources in each story was considered with totals of sources quoted; officials/celebrities; ordinary people; identifiably male; identifiably female and gender unidentifiable. The main sources were further identified as: government; private/corporate; NGO; community representative; private individual; local media; regional media; international media, none of these; and source unknown. The researcher then looked specifically at technical issues: wind noise; inaudible sound; hollowness; other.
Findings

- All that money, and they’re. ‘relatively’ better than rest. (SOLMAS audience survey)
- Further research is needed.
- And if RAMSI leaves, will it all fall apart?
- The US state department has said ... yes .. The underlying causes that lead to the tensions are still there ... and that means they could come back.
- And that puts the media back where they started.
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John Lamani, Proprietor of Solomon Star, in recorded interview 2011.


Image credits

- Most photos taken by Alexandra Wake
- Solomon Islands map
  http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/solomons.htm
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  steynian.wordpress.com