Old and New Media in the Pacific Islands: synergies, challenges and potential

Panel: Mediated Communication, Public Opinion & Society Section

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Vast geographical distances challenging for maintaining communication infrastructures
The Pacific Communication Context

• The Pacific Islands region contains very diverse geographic, socio-cultural, political and communication ecologies

• Each country has its own unique challenges and opportunities related to communication flows, systems and practices

• With growing social media presence in the region, Facebook and, to some degree, Twitter have become sources of information for journalists during natural disasters

• Recent studies though have indicated that ICTs are becoming more relevant, and indeed are underutilised for development despite presenting significant potential
Four case studies from the Pacific

• Cook Islands
• Tonga
• Fiji
• Papua New Guinea
Political participation and Pacific diasporic online media

• The ICT revolution in the Pacific has led to a growth of online sites dedicated to political issues “where citizens engage in the political process” Finau, Prasad, Kant, Tarai, Logan and Cox (2014)

• During the 2014 elections in Tonga, the Cook Islands and Fiji all campaigns featured a strong online political presence.

• Elements in the elections were the role of the internet in reaching diasporic groups, in moderating family influence on voting behaviour and a clear understanding by politicians and campaign strategists of the importance of the internet to younger voters.
Papua New Guinea: information & news consumption in the age of new media

• The biggest Pacific Island both in terms of geography and population (over 7 million).

• Low adult literacy rates & the linguistic challenges - with over 800 distinct languages

• A thriving media industry with an online presence through their own websites and social media profiles.

• However, the impact of their engagement with social media is yet to be seen
The entrance of new online media in the PNG news scene has added elements of time currency & citizen journalism as the LoopPNG & Mi Ripot cases indicate.

*LoopPNG*, the newest online news service owned by the Irish telecommunications company Digicel, relies on stringers in the provinces to provide stories and has regular updates on news as they happen.

For those who have access to internet, *LoopPNG* provides the ideal news service – short stories that are regularly updated, and an opportunity to check for a breaking news story.

With the improving connectivity throughout PNG provided by Digicel, *LoopPNG* is relatively easily accessible, as long as people can afford the smart phones and the cost of accessing Internet.
• EMTV, PNG’s oldest television station operates an online news service *Mi Ripot* (I’m Reporting in Melanesian Pidgin) that depends on citizen journalists for stories.

• It is separate from the daily news stories produced by the EMTV’s reporters which are also accessible online on EMTV website.

• TV audience is encouraged to send in a story about anything that is happening in their area. *Mi Ripot* will feature selected stories online and also telecast in the *Mi Ripot* program.

• Its site indicates citizen journalists are paid K20 (US$8) for stories without images, K30 (US$12) for stories with images, and K100 (US$40) for the best *Mi Ripot* story of the month.

• EMTV had engaged a media trainer who has travelled around the country providing basic training on how to identify, gather and write stories to interested people.
Conclusions

• Social media & online news media have had an affect on the democratic process in the Pacific in recent years.

• Those affects have been different for each country because of different social, political & cultural elements.

• In some cases the new media have had quite opposite effects
  • i.e. among the diasporic Tongan community they have been used to apply family pressure on voters from outside the kingdom.
  • Like the technology itself, political processes in the Pacific islands are being adapted to new circumstances.
  • Eventually each island nation will reflect its own distinct blend of technology, politics and culture.

• PNG: The potential of new media in terms of increasing information accessibility & dissemination goes hand in hand with increasing digital media literacy. In a country that has still persisting high illiteracy levels, this becomes a double impediment.