

FRONTLINE REPORTERS: A STUDENTS' INTERNET COUP

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Abstract: On 19 May 2000, an insurrection led by failed businessman George Speight and seven renegade members of the élite 1ST Meridian Squadron special forces engulfed Fiji in turmoil for the next three months. Speight and his armed co-conspirators stormed Parliament and seized the Labour-led Mahendra Chaudhry Government hostage for 56 days. The crisis posed a pedagogical challenge for a group of University of the South Pacific journalism students who voluntarily chose to cover

the events for their own newspaper and website while the university closed down. Reporting the upheaval also posed ethical and professional challenges for the staff and students when the university administration shut down the website 10 days into the siege. This commentary presents a case study of the USP journalism students' response to the crisis. While the students carried on reporting with assistance from an Australian university journalism programme, debate has continued on at USP over the issue. The School of Humanities concluded that the closure was "unsound pedagogically... and that the journalism website provided outstanding and excellent training" on real issues.

The [Journalism] Programme "publications" – Wansolwara and the website [Pacific Journalism Online] - can be justified on one purpose only: to support a training function. That is, they provide a trial medium for practical skills training and for simulation work. They should not be regarded as a media outlet for students.

Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa, letter to the USP Journalism Coordinator, 18 June 2000.

The past six months have seen a major upheaval in Fiji, twice in fact, and of such stuff are the dreams of journalists made. What an opportunity to practise the theory and exercise the training from the classroom! You students will no doubt

have stories of what you did during the crisis, and that was perhaps the best training possible.

Tia Barrett, New Zealand High Commissioner, in a speech at the USP Journalism Awards presentation, 24 November 2000.

COVERING the Fiji coup and the three months of intensive trauma that followed has been the toughest call faced by the seven-year-old University of the South Pacific Journalism Program. Many stories of courage emerged out of the events – the neophyte "Indian" journalist who was kissed uninvited by rebel leader George Speight, the "barefoot" journalists who slipped daily into Parliament by bushtrack, and the editing team who camped out in the newsroom, sometimes sleeping there to avoid curfew arrest.

*Within days of the coup, the students' website and newspaper had created its own international niche market. In a sense, this was the Internet Coup, and the students were a vital part of it. And the plaudits mounted: "Young and brave," said *The Global Journalist*. "In a Pacific island paradise, journalism students cover a strange coup attempt for course credits" (August: p 26). "From trainees to professionals. And all it took was a coup," said the *Commonwealth Press Union News* (August: p 7). "Some of the best reporting has come from USP's journalism program ... it was a goldmine of information until it was shut down by the university ... 'for security reasons'," said *New Zealand's City Voice* (June 8: p 8)*

*Although the USP programme was ill-equipped logistically, it at least had a well-established, two-year-old website, *Pacific Journalism Online* www.usp.ac.fj/journal/, and a training newspaper, *Wansolwara*, already in place. It also normally had access to a student radio station on campus, *Radio Pasifik*, but university authorities shut this down immediately after the coup.*

The beginning

On Friday, 19 May 2000, almost to the day of the first military coup in the Fiji Islands in 1987, George Speight, a kailoma (mixed race) and bankrupt businessman, tore off his balaclava to reveal his identity after seizing Parliament and the elected government at gunpoint. Within minutes of the news of the hostage taking being flashed on Radio Fiji news on that day's 10am bulletin – scooped by one of our final-

year students on attachment – Professor Subramani came into my office and said: "There's been another coup". I was sceptical. Although a coup had been rumoured for sometime, I just couldn't believe it.

After quick phone calls to confirm the facts, sketchy as they were at that stage, I met our senior student editors to decide what we would do. At that stage, it was felt the crisis would be over in a few days and we decided to go all out to cover the events – but with a campus perspective. The rear of the university grounds is close to Parliament.

Three months later we were still covering the crisis.

We already had a team of reporters down at the protest march in downtown Suva that morning (which later erupted into rioting); the news editors set up our radio and television monitors; reporters were dispatched to Parliament; the television class was cancelled and a crew sent downtown to Suva where they filmed footage of the riots and arson in the capital.

As reporters came back with their stories and digital pictures, we posted everything we could on our website, Pacific Journalism Online
<http://www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/coup74.html> [coup archive]

By the time martial law was declared ten days later, on May 29, we had posted 109 stories, dozens of soundbites and scores of digital photographs.

But for this first day, we stumbled through the hours, in some cases overcome with shock and the trauma over what was unfolding. One talented 20-year-old student was so traumatised that he couldn't write about what he saw. He went home shaking. However, he recovered by the next day and took a leading role in the coverage for the next three months, finally winning an award for his coup efforts.

On Saturday morning, we carried on with the coverage but were already facing logistical problems. It was the weekend and not all journalism students were aware that we were covering events. And the university was about to close and send its 5000 students home. We managed to see through the weekend with a small core group.

On Monday morning, May 22, three shifts were organised

among the student reporters and editors to cope with the curfew – morning and afternoon shifts, and an overnigher comprising students who actually lived on campus. Sometimes reporters slept in the newsroom. I personally worked from 7am until curfew time daily.

At one stage, a group of us worked 36 hours in one hop, barricaded in the newsroom area to complete the editorial production of a special coup edition of Wansolwara.
www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/wansol.html

Although I had a curfew pass, and some of our senior students also had passes, we were handicapped by our lack of logistics. The university was not geared for our sort of journalistic activity and we had no vehicle – taxis were very unreliable after curfew time.

To add to the frustration, a senior administrator frequently passed the newsroom muttering loudly that journalism students were a threat to the university: "What will happen if George comes after us?" she complained.

As student online editor Christine Gounder wrote about it at the time:

Student journalists chose to be on the job. But it hasn't been easy. They survived threats, bureaucratic attempts to gag their website and newspaper, and a shutdown of the university to deliver the news.

Grabbing the opportunity to hone their skills, the young journalists didn't waste any time rushing to be on the spot at Parliament on May 19 and the looting and arson sites, around the capital, Suva (CPU News 2000b).

The shutdown

On Sunday, May 29, hours after a mob attacked Fiji Television and cut transmission for almost 48 hours, the university pulled the plug on the website, fearing a similar raid on the sprawling Laucala campus. Undaunted, the students were offered an alternative site hosted by the Department of Social Communication and Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, and carried on.

www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html

Australian Centre for Independent Journalism director Associate Professor Chris Nash at UTS said: "The suggestion that journalism staff and students, and indeed any academics, might somehow desist from reporting, commenting and publishing on the current situation is akin to suggesting that doctors and nurses should turn their backs on wounded people in a conflict. It's unconscionable" (ACIJ 2000).

Alison Ofotalau, a young Solomon Islander who was a former Wansolwara editor, said it was an unfortunate decision by the university since Pacific Journalism Online was one of only three Fiji websites which were reporting internationally with primary source material on the coup: "It was a great opportunity for us because things like this are rare and we are lucky to be reporting on a major world event."

Ofotalau made a name for herself by writing a quick transcript of the controversial Fiji TV Close-Up programme claimed to have sparked the attack on the station (Robie, 2000). It was widely posted on websites internationally and picked up from USP by news agencies. Ironically, it was the last item posted on our website before we ourselves were shut down.

At a meeting three days after the shutdown of the website, sought by the Journalism Programme with the Vice-Chancellor, senior university officials said they wanted "self-censorship" and for the newspaper Wansolwara to be "postponed". When told that Wansolwara had already gone to press, the authorities wanted distribution of the paper stopped and for the paper to be inspected with a view to removing articles. This was refused by the programme staff.

An American graphics designer, Mara Fulmer, who worked with the Media Centre at USP in the mid-1990s, also came to the rescue and independently hosted the students' gagged newspaper Wansolwara Online at her Looking Glass website in the US. (This contact was made through Pat Craddock, the Media Centre's senior audio producer, who worked tirelessly through the crisis supporting students and filing many audio and print reports internationally.)

www.lookingglassdesign.com/wansolwara/wansol.html

"I consider it an honour and privilege to do this for freedom of the press," said Fulmer. "The students have worked so

hard on this. They have truly earned their journo stripes"
(Noted, 2000: 5)

After a series of letters of protest to the university administration from groups and organisations as diverse as Reporters Sans Frontières in Paris, the Commonwealth Journalists' Association, the NZ Journalism Education Association, Queensland University's Journalism Department, PEN New Zealand and the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, I was sent a letter of "reprimand" by Vice-Chancellor Esekia Solofa – after Wansolwara had been distributed in defiance of the attempt to ban it. He said:

The decision I had taken to close down the Journalism Programme website was a straight-forward decision based entirely on one consideration: the safety and security of the property of the university and of the lives of the people engaged in it...

Let me make an important observation which should cover the criticisms you and others have raised over the closure of the website ...

The USP Journalism Programme is not a media agency, neither is it a news/information outlet. The USP Journalism Programme is an education and training facility for future journalists and others who need journalism knowledge and skills in their work... The current closure of the Journalism website has clearly illustrated that our students do not need it to publicise or publish their pieces if that is what their true intention is (Solofa, 2000).

The comeback

Three senior academic staff immediately protested and the president of the USP Staff Association, Dr Biman Prasad, called for the letter to be withdrawn, saying it was "unjustified" and condemning "self-censorship". Prasad added: "Academic freedom is always fundamental to the survival and operation of a university, even more so when there is a crisis and threats to academic freedom" (Prasad, 2000a).

He later described the incident in a paper about the "crisis of

conscience" for USP academic staff when addressing the annual conference of the New Zealand Association of University Staff (NZAUS) in Wellington:

The staff association was vigilant and took a firm stand on issues that we felt were designed to promote self-censorship. For example, soon after the May 19 coup,

the university administration in panic and unilaterally decided to close the journalism programme website. The journalism students were provided with a

fabulous opportunity to practise skills in the real life situation what they were learning in theory. Their reporting on the crisis was appreciated around the world.

The administration's drastic move to shut the website down was rather regrettable from the point of view of both staff and students of journalism. The

Association of USP Staff protested vigorously against the closure and it was allowed to continue (Prasad, 2000b)

On June 28, the website was allowed to reopen (to enable students to access its resources and Online Classroom), providing no further news was posted about the Fiji coup. Almost a month later, on July 25, the 40-strong academic staff of the School of Humanities' Board of Studies passed an unanimous resolution condemning the administration over the shutdown of the website. Two letters dealing with the political crisis and the role of the university were later forwarded officially to the Academic Committee. One of the important justifications that the academics gave was that the existence of the journalism website provided important information for their security. The letter defending the website, signed by the acting Head of School, Dr Desma Hughes, said:

- We believe [the closure of the journalism website on May 29] was unsound pedagogically...*
- It has been stated that the purpose of the journalism programme's productions and publications are as training grounds for*

prospective journalists from around the region. We consider that the journalism website provided outstanding and excellent training for the journalism students in that it involved reporting and commenting on real issues.

- *The situation that evolved during the time of the coup can hardly be simulated for the purposes of teaching.*
- *The coup gave our students an ideal opportunity to practise their journalism skills under the supervision of one of the school's professional staff members, especially in the area of investigative journalism. We therefore find it difficult to understand the rationale behind the decision to suspend the website that deprived our students (Hughes, 2000).*

The Board's letter said that being informed was a crucial element of personal security. While the university's security needs were understood, the journalism programme's "unique contribution" to the distribution of reliable and objective news and commentary to Pacific people and the world should have been carefully considered.

But while the academics wrangled over the issues of security versus academic freedom, the student journalists carried on with the job. They continued to feed stories and digital pictures on the Fiji and Solomon Islands crises by email to the UTS website until the end of August, when the USP Journalism website editorial policy was resolved – and unchanged. News coverage was now back to normal.

Footnote

*A footnote to the affair came in the USP Journalism Awards on November 24, when four students were honoured with prizes for their reportage during the coup and a group of second-year students showed their mini-documentary about the closure of the website, *Frontline Reporters: Coup Coverage by Student Journalists*. Tamani Nair, the reporter who scooped the takeover of Parliament for Radio Fiji won the Best Student Radio Reporter Prize; Matelita Ragogo, who was briefly held captive in the Parliamentary press gallery by the rebels, won the Best Indepth Story Prize for her profile on George Speight; Reggie Dutt won the Best Editor Prize for editing *Wansolwara and Pacific Journalism Online* during the*

coup; and Joe Yaya won the Most Promising First-Year Student Prize for his pictures of masked gunmen that were published around the world.

But the most remarkable point about the awards event was the diplomatic row unleashed by the chief guest, New Zealand High Commissioner Tia Barrett, who took a modest swipe at the slowness of bringing the coup perpetrators to justice. He also made an important statement about indigenous issues and journalism which riled the military-installed regime:

What is difficult to accept in this dialogue on indigenous rights is the underlying assumption that those rights are pre-eminent over other more fundamental human rights. This just cannot be so, not in today's world ... Nowhere is it written in any holy scripture that because you are indigenous you have first rights over others in their daily rights. You should be respected and highly regarded as an indigenous person, but respect is earned not obtained on demand (Barrett, 2000).

In the end, says Barrett, information will make the difference in the process of cultural change for Pacific Islanders in the face of globalisation to improve people's lives. This is where the journalist plays an important role. He appealed to the coup surviving graduates to always bear in mind the needs of their people and their thirst for knowledge.

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www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/news/coup74.html

Wansolwara Online:

www.usp.ac.fj/journ/docs/wansol.html

Department of Social Communication and Journalism (hosted

USP Fiji coup archive):

www.journalism.uts.edu.au/archive/coup.html

Looking Glass Design website (in the US, hosting the special Wansolwara coup edition);

www.lookingglassdesign.com/wansolwara/wansol.html

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