



USP News



Coup day: A gunman warns Wansolwara journalists to duck during Sunday night's crossfire.

Photo: Joe Yaya



Crisis edition: Students at work on the special Fiji crisis edition of Wansolwara.

Photo: Harry Aurere

[USP coup coverage at PJO](#)

[USP coup coverage at UTS](#)

[The UTS connection](#)

[USP coup pictures](#)



Coup day: Gunmen leader George Speight.

Photo: Kris Leua



Arson and looting: Guttled remains of the Boomerang store, Suva.

Photo: Pat Craddock



Parliament guard: A rebel gunman guards the compound.

Photo: Latu Matoto

FROM TRAINEES TO PROFESSIONALS. AND ALL IT TOOK WAS A COUP

- [Commonwealth Press Union News: August 2000:](#)

Have your say:

<http://www.TheGuestBook.com/vgbook/109497.gbook>

WHEN George Speight launched a coup in Fiji during May, journalism students at the University of the South Pacific suddenly found themselves on the front line. David Robie, a New Zealand journalist and journalism coordinator at USP, [introduces the school](#) and reports on [media coverage](#) of the affair. And Christine Gounder, final-year student and editor of the school's online news service, explains how she and her colleagues [grabbed the opportunity of a lifetime](#).

JUST six years ago, a new journalism school was founded at the [University of the South Pacific](#) - one of only two regional universities in the world.

Founded by former BBC French-language service director Francois Turmel and developed with French Government aid funds, it had humble beginnings with barely half a dozen students. Today it has the largest journalism degree programme in the south Pacific with some 70 students.

The students come from the 12 member Pacific countries. There are also international students from as far as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean.

Although most participants are on the double degree major programme in journalism, a group or part-time media industry people do a two-year Diploma in Pacific Journalism.

Since the first three graduates emerged in 1996, a total

of 28 USP media graduates have been produced in the region with a further 30 expected this year.

Media sources believe products from the programme will have a significant impact on the media industry. Outside of Papua New Guinea where the long established University of Papua New Guinea and Divine Word University have produced a generation of educated journalists have qualifications.

The programme is coordinated by [David Robie and other course resource people include former FM96 radio news director Samantha Magick and former Radio New Zealand Continuing Education Unit manager Pat Craddock](#), who is now with USP's Media Centre. In the short life of the journalism school, it has forged a reputation for being in the thick of things in covering news events.

The journalism programme won three awards for its publications last year. It won two honours in the prestigious Ossie awards organised by the [Journalism Education Association \(JEA\)](#) for the the best of student journalism in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. [Wansolwara](#) also won Fiji's 1999 Human Rights Award for its outstanding contribution to women's human rights in the field of the media.

TAKING A COUP IN YOUR STRIDE

By Christine Gounder
US Journalism Programme

WHILE most of the 5000 students at USP rushed home for safety on the day of the seizure of Fiji's elected government by rebel leader George Speight and his gunmen, student journalists chose to be on the job.

But it hsn't been easy. They survived threats, bureacatic attempts to gag their website and newspaper, and a shutdown of the university to deliver the news.

Grabbing the oppotunity to hone their skills, the young journalists didn't waste any time rushing to be ont eh spot at Parliament on May 19 and the looting and arson sites around the capital, Suva.

Since Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his elected government were taken hostage, the young journalists have been working to produce news for their website, [Pacific Journalism Online](#) which was updated on an hourly basis.

Stories were also used for their award winning training newspaper [Wansolwara](#) which was published in June.

On May 29, hours after a mob attacked Fiji TV 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 unfazed.

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."

Alison Ofotolau, a former Wansolwara editor now reporting on the hostage crisis, says it was an unfortunate decision by the university since Pacific Journalism Online was one of only three websites which were reporting internationally 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," says the young Solomon Islander.

An American graphics designer, Mara Fulmer, who used to teach at USP, also came to the rescue and independently hosted the students' gagged newspaper [Wansolwara](#) online at her Looking Glass website in the US.

The university has since allowed the site to reopen, after negotiations with the staff of the journalism

course and the Literature and Language Department.

The USP news team comprised about 20 volunteer first, second and third-year students who have been going to Parliament and other news centres every day to report the progress of events.

"We have an editorial meeting in the morning and assign students to do different stories," said Wansolwara editor Reggie Dutt.

"Some go to Parliament to report news and take pictures, and others keep track of events in the newsroom by monitoring the news on TV and on the radio."

Matelita Ragogo, also a part-time journalism student, who works at The Fiji Times, the country's largest daily newspaper, was in Parliament when armed men walked in and took them hostage. She was later released along with other journalists in Parliament.

Journalism coordinator [David Robie](#), who covered the 1987 coups as a journalist, said the students had done excellent work with limited transport and logistics facilities.

"It is tremendous opportunity for student journalists to cover a major international news event of this kind," he says.

"I don't know of any other journalism school that has covered an attempted coup as part of the general course programme.

"However, student journalists at the University of Papua New Guinea covered the Sandline mercenary crisis in 1997."

Robie added that USP students had dramatically improved with with stories and digital pictures at the week developed.

Some students' digital photos were used by international news services.

"A news website like ours also provides opportunities for independent analysis such as commentaries by our

academic staff and other informed commentators," he said.

The international response to the website and the work of the student journalists has also been strong.

The website's guest book [Talanoa](#) has been flooded with messages since the insurrection began.

One reader from New Zealand said: "Your coverage of the coup is simply phenomenal. thanks for doing the interanational community this tremendous service.

"All you journalists need to be commended and they have certainly reached the pinnacle of their training.

A reader from the UK said: "It's good to see you online as the news of the coup reaching Europe is vague and one-sided. Keep up with the good journalism".

Responses from other media and journalism schools was also enthusiastic.

"I've been watching their writing closely," said Commonwealth Journalists Association president Murray Burt. "For the most part it has been excellent - tempered, insightful, lawful and credible in its very closeness to the action.

"There has been a measure of bravery, too, which should not be forgotten when the dust settles."

ETHICS AMID BRINKMANSHIP

By David Robie

USP Journalism Programme

FOR a student journalist at state-owned [Radio Fiji](#), it was a baptism of fire. Tamani Nair was in the newsroom, listening to a live broadcast from Parliament when it was interrupted by shouting and gunshots.

Nair and a senior colleague, Samisoni Pareti, were sent to the sprawling complex, arriving before the police or any rival news team. They found the gates locked and guarded by masked gunmen.

"We were told, 'Get the hell out of here!' said Nair, who is in his final year of studies at the University of the South Pacific. "So we hid in nearby cassava bushes and watched what was going on."

The filed a brief report by cellular phone that made the 11am newscast.

On 19 May, George Speight and six gunment stormed Parliament and took 45 hostages, including elected prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry.

Speight, a failed businessman, declared himself Prime Minister and announced an interim government. But a military regime led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama took over 10 days later, pledging not to use force to free the hostages. Speight promised not to harm the hostages if the military kept its distance. And a standoff ensued.

Covering the takeover and its aftermath has seemed, by turns paradoxical, dangerous and even surreal. Although Speight at first threatened to execute the hostages, and Chaudhry reportedly was beaten, the rebel leader welcomed journalists inside Parliament for interviews.

Speight took delight in lording it over representatives of the international media: "THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE", as the Sydney Morning Herald put it.

That relationship soured in late May, when [Jerry Harmer](#), a British television cameraman working for APTV, was shot and wounded as he filmed a confrontation between military forces and Speight's supporters.

It was then that many journalists suspected they were effectively human shields for Speight's supporters, boycotting a press conference that night. The next day, [Fiji TV](#) was ransacked and transmission cut for nearly 46 hours. An exodus of foreign jornalists followed. Other news media have faced threats too.

The standoff has brought strange moments: during one news conference Speight kissed a journalist from the Maldives, asking her. "You're Indian?"

Speight is mixed race, the descendant of a fourth-generation white settler. Ethnic Indians make up 44 percent of Fiji's population of 813,000, while indigenous Fijians account for 51 percent.

Since Chaudhry's landslide election victory in May last year, tension between ethnic Indo-Fijians, who control much of the island's commerce, and indigenous Fijians has been growing. Speight has said he wants to give indigenous Fijians control of their destiny.

Media critics questioned the [close, at times almost fawning, relationship of many journalists with Speight](#), denounced abroad as a terrorist, that marked the early days of the takeover.

"We've seen a mass outbreak of this virulent strain of ego-journalism," complained Tony Parkinson, of the Melbourne Age. "It is not a pretty sight, and it raises an awkward ethical question: How far have the visiting media in Suva become unwitting accomplices in George Speight's brutal game of brinkmanship"?

Smarting at what he saw as unfair biased journalism - the foreign media have always given him a harder time than the kid-gloved approach of local journalists - Speight finally called off press conferences one weekend in mid-June.

Speight has since been arrested by the military authorities. He has been refused bail, and is awaiting trial on what could be charges of treason.

- [Fiji crisis coverage by the University of the South Pacific j-students at UTS](#)
- Post comments on our [Talanoa feedback](#) page

File created: 7 September 2000
Copyright © 2000 Journalism Program
University of the South Pacific
PO Box 1168
SUVA, Fiji Islands
Tel: (679) 212685 Fax: (679) 313238

| [Courses](#) | [Reporting](#) | [Hotlinks](#) | [Wansolwara](#) |



[Return to Journalism USP News Extra!](#)