

PNG Election Reporting Review Workshop
Port Moresby
18-22 November 2002

Introduction

Building on two earlier CDI workshops, sixteen PNG journalists came together at a week-long workshop to review media coverage of the 2002 PNG elections and develop strategies for covering future elections. The Election Reporting Review Workshop followed a Public Affairs Reporting Workshop in November 2001 and an Election Reporting Workshop in March 2002.

The workshop provided an opportunity for reporters to share experiences and insights with a view to developing a set of practical principles that could be used by PNG journalists covering future elections, with the broader goal of contributing to the improved governance of Papua New Guinea.

It was facilitated by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the Centre for International Journalism at the University of Queensland. The host organisation was the PNG Media Council.

The workshop was led by Dr Stephen Tanner, of the School of Media, Communications and Culture at Murdoch University, with support from Mr Peter Niesi, the political editor of the *Post Courier* newspaper, and Mr Patrick Matbob, a tutor in journalism at Divine Word University in Madang. Guest speakers included Dr James Chin, an academic, and representatives of the PNG Electoral Commission and Transparency International.

Goals

The specific goals of the PNG Election Reporting Review Workshop were to enable PNG journalists who covered the 2002 election campaign:

- (1) to reflect on their experience, to discuss how they might have covered the campaign differently, and to explore impediments to better practice;
- (2) to learn from the experiences of other journalists, including from rival organisations; and
- (3) to develop "A 10-point plan on how to cover PNG elections".

For most of the journalists attending the workshop the 2002 election was the first election campaign they had covered. For some it was the first election they had voted in, with several reporting that the questions they found themselves asking during the election campaign were often designed to inform themselves, as much as their readers, viewers and listeners.

Participants

The participants were:

Ms Gorethy Kenneth	Post Courier	Buka
Mr Theo Thomas	Post Courier	Mt Hagen
Mr Peter Niesi	Post Courier	Port Moresby
Mr James Gumuno	The National	Mt Hagen
Mr Jack Metta	The National	Lae
Mr Patrick Matbob	Divine Word University	Madang
Mr Michael Asagoni	NBC	Port Moresby
Ms Lisa Pagelio	NBC	Port Moresby
Ms Mataria Rupa	FM100	Port Moresby
Mr Bona Tito	FM100	Port Moresby
Mr Peter Kilala	NBC	Rabaul
Mr Joe Kereme	NBC	Mendi
Ms Anisa Issimel	NBC	Madang
Ms Bertha Somare,	ABC	Port Moresby
Mr Ferman Nanol	PNGFM	Port Moresby
Ms Theresa Natera	PNGFM	Port Moresby

The instructors report that participants all had their own ‘war stories’ to tell: stories that convey the difficulties – and the dangers – journalists can confront when covering election campaigns in PNG. One young female reporter told how she had spent a night at a roadblock in Bougainville with armed rebel soldiers. On another occasion she was forced to swim a river in order to cover a story. A second reporter told how he was bashed by family members after refusing to vote for a cousin whom he believed to be corrupt.

In their evaluations, participants pointed to the value of the workshop as an opportunity to debrief, and to learn about the parallel experiences of colleagues from other news organisations and other parts of PNG.

The program

As many of the participants in the workshop had attended the March 2002 workshop, the program began with a retrospective session. The journalists were asked how well they had been assisted by the content of the “pre-election” workshop: information on political processes, tips on planning election coverage, types of stories etc. Generally, they felt that this information had been helpful, but they found that the task was made more difficult by the presence of corruption and family loyalties, both of which played an important role in the election outcome.

The program was built around a series of lectures, workshops and discussions, leading to the generation of a draft 10-point plan to help to journalists in their approach to covering future election campaigns.

THE 10-POINT PLAN

- 1: Journalists are society's watchdogs and, accordingly, they have an important role to play in ensuring that election campaigns operate smoothly.
- 2: Part of this watchdog role includes an educational function. In a country such as PNG where there are high illiteracy levels, the task of journalists, particularly those working for the electronic media, is to distil the vast quantities of information down into readily understandable chunks.
- 3: For the educational function to be effective, journalists and media organisations need to work with key groups in society to ensure that the right messages are being promoted. These include the fact that voting is a right and that people should be allowed to vote for the candidate they believe will best represent them, rather than be bound by clan or family ties.
- 4: Journalists recognise that corruption threatens to undermine PNG's democratic foundations. Along with the media organisations for which they work, the journalists recognise that corruption must be stamped out.
- 5: For journalists to be effective, they must be prepared. Preparation involves having a sound understanding of the PNG electoral system, including proposed changes to the voting system.
- 6: Preparation also involves having a good understanding of the election timetable, of the key events that take place within the election cycle, and of major pieces of legislation that can have a bearing on the election outcome.
- 7: Journalists must have a good working relationship with key political figures. The symbiotic nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists is particularly evident at election time. Journalists must recognise the need to cultivate such relationships across the major political groupings.
- 8: Preparation for an election campaign does not begin when the election is called. Journalists should be gathering information in the lead-up to the campaign. This can include profiles of key political figures and prominent non-political figures who intend to stand for election; assessments of a party's performance during the previous term, and likely policies.
- 9: Given the volatility of PNG politics, individual journalists and the media organisations for which they work must ensure that reporters can cover the campaign confident that the risks of danger will be minimised.
- 10: Journalists covering election campaigns will do so within the parameters of the law and established ethical principles.

The above draft of the 10-point plan should be regarded as a work in progress for trial by the PNG Media Council and its member organisations. The work of producing the plan also prompted discussions on the need for a comprehensive training manual on political reporting in PNG, an idea that the media council is seeking support for.

Evaluations and conclusion

The workshop evaluations show that participants valued the workshop highly and felt that that more courses of this kind would help advance political journalism in PNG. Participants said they appreciated the opportunity to sit down and discuss the election away from the office and the constant demands of their daily jobs, and they appreciated the opportunity to consider approaches to covering future campaigns. All participants contributed actively to the formulation of the 10-point plan and to other discussions. In short, the goals of the workshop were achieved.

The workshop was one of several professional development programs arranged last year by the PNG Media Council. The programs, which are organised for the council's training committee by manager John Rei, are strongly supported by PNG news media organisations and their staffs.