Media— a destructive or a constructive force in peace and development?
Lessons from Tonga

Kalafi Moala, CEO, Taimi Media Network

International Human Rights Day address at the “Role of Media and Civil Society in Strengthening Democracy and Social Cohesion” Symposium, University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji Islands, 10 December 2010

MEDIA is a tool, a powerful tool that by the very nature of its existence, it inevitably engages in the process of social change either negatively or positively. Politicians, historians and anthropologists are usually the ones who give judgement as to the kind of impact media has on a society. But it is the people, the consumers of media, who must make the final judgement on the quality of media they choose to consume. Unfortunately, journalists and media practitioners are too often trained to do their job without being responsible to the kind of social outcome their performance produces.

It is like, "I'm not responsible to how people respond to my message and method of delivery. I toss it out there, and people do with it what they want." But when media engagement contributes to positive changes, there is an inevitable forward movement in regards to development of peaceful relations as well as construction of a healthy, harmonious, and prosperous society. At the same time, media can also be a tool of destruction in the same way that a wave can be harnessed to produce electricity to help people yet the same time can become a tidal wave that destroys villages.

I guess the fundamental thing I am saying here is that media is not an indifferent and ambiguous tool without any defined purpose and links to all the other sectors and spheres of society. It is an inevitable part of that society. It can be a partner in achieving socio-development goals of a society, or it can be a pest that eats away the strengths and good things in that society.

Tools are created for a purpose. Tools are not created for itself, or just for display purposes. Tools are high on utilitarian value. All tools are mechanisms of purpose, to perform a task outside itself. That's what tools are for. We create tools for eating, for transportation, for communication etc. And media is a tool created for information delivery, and essentially the nature of the message and method of delivery either, aid or hamper social development.

That notion constitutes the subject of my talk today - "Media: a destructive or a constructive force in peace and development? Lessons from Tonga."

The destructive or constructive force of media essentially depends on its primary purpose of existence. There is a pronounced convention in regards to the purpose of media, for those who believe that media must have a purpose. But the purpose for any particular media is dependent on that which is designed or set by ownership, which is why media ownership is an important
issue in the Pacific region today. Who owns the media is ultimate responsible for the performance of that media.

If the primary reason or purpose of a media is to make money, then the content and how its message is delivered is going to be geared to that purpose to make money. Quality in this case is defined by the bottom line. It does not really matter whether the content and how it is delivered yields a destructive or constructive effect on society. As long as it is making money...lots of it...this kind of media feels fulfilled in its purpose.

If the primary reason or purpose of a media is to contribute to positive changes to society, then we are talking about media with a purpose for social development. It is media that tells the stories of people, of the events affecting their lives, and of the issues that arise from those events. The real stories we must tell are the stories about the human condition, about the environment, and what is being done to improve human condition, socially, economically, and environmentally.

Our problem in the Pacific region is that media has been so parallel with the democracy everyone seems to love and worship - like it is the god that will serve all our needs. I contend that democracy has been wrongly touted in our region as the panacea that will solve all our problems. We engage in media taking on form and and format of Westernisation that is pinned to this ideology and practice we call democracy. We simply swallow lock-stock-and-barrel the Western ideological and methodological concepts of democracy, and have to adopt a Western media framework to serve that strange machinery we call democracy. We say that Western media practice is the oil that drives democracy.

Democracy has often been practised and expressed throughout the world in oppositional political frames, where the existence of conflict is a battleground where the will of the majority is given the victory. In the same way, modern Western media thrives in the arena of oppositional politics and the promotion of conflict. And we call this check and balance. We fail however to recognise that more things get done for a society when there is consensus politics, an alternative we fail to adopt in our island nations; and we do not develop media as a tool for creating peace rather than conflict. We think if the outcome of our service to society is peace, then we must be doing something wrong, because we only know how to report and propagate conflict. If the other party likes ice cream, then we must hate it, for that would be the politically correct thing to do. It does not matter whether ice cream is good for us or not; we must create a conflict by taking the opposite sides. That is "oppositional politics" and thus we must have "oppositional media”. We hardly report about resolving of conflicts, we are too busy looking for the next conflict.

The story of media in Tonga needs to be told parallel to the story of our development into a democracy. We've just finished a high turnout and tremendously peaceful and orderly election...for our first democratically elected Parliament. After the first two nights of our "honeymoon" in this supposedly "great victory for the people" and for democracy, we've begun to realise that we've just changed from the rule of one minority group to another minority group, a group we call "the people" - not all the people; just some of the people.

It's like changing a partner. You were sleeping with one person the night before, and then you had a democratic election. You wake up the morning after the election and you are on the same bed, same room, but you now have a group in bed with you, and they start telling you that they can screw you better than the guy you've lived with all these years. And don't worry; they've
amended the Constitution to make it legal. And so the message for this Christmas for Tonga is "Happy screwing for the future."

What is amazing of-course in all of this is that the media, especially foreign media have been celebratory in their reporting of Tonga, at least this one time. They are jumping with joy, especially in New Zealand and Australia, saying that now Tonga's problem is solved.

We've finally joined all the "free nations of the world." We are now a democracy. Most of them came to Tonga with stories already written; scripts in place, and they were just looking for some kind of evidence to fill in the gaps of their stories. If they cannot find the evidence, they can always get a friendly coconut to say something...give him a can of coke and a kilo of mutton flaps, and he will tell you what you want to hear. This is the nature of the destructive force in media. I give you an example: One prominent New Zealand newspaper, and I don't want to mention any names, other than the fact this mainstream heavily palangi-cultured newspaper, often Herald their news as factual. Did I say Herald? Well, in one of the lead reports about the Tongan election, they incorrectly said that the Democratic Friendly Islands Party led by ‘Akilisi Pohiva won 70% of the votes. This relayed the message to their readers that the overwhelming majority of the people of Tonga voted for Mr Pohiva and his group. They were setting up people to expect and, in fact demand, that the next Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers be from the Pohiva group.

This was a gross inaccuracy. In fact Mr Pohiva and his colleagues only won 31% of the votes. The other 69% voted against Pohiva and his pro-democrats. The voter turnout was of 90%. In other words the majority of Tongans voted for independent candidates, it’s just there were too many of them and they split the votes every which way among themselves, leaving 11 of the 17 people's representative seats to be won by pro-democrats.

But what foreign journalists also failed to recognise is that there were also 9 noble representatives elected to Parliament. That means there are 9 noble seats, two less than the 11 seats won by the pro-democrats. But six seats of the total 26 Parliamentary seats are held by independents, and they will be controlling whom they will side with to elect the next Prime Minister and consequently the next government.

I wish Mr Pohiva and his group all the best as Tonga awaits the election of a Prime Minister. But, that is not the subject of what we are talking about here. It is most unlikely they will have the numbers to form a government.

Another foreign reporter, among other things, claimed Tonga to be a Roman Catholic country, and that I had a conversation with the King of Tonga, and he was making tea for me, a commoner. Tonga is a Methodist a country, and I've never had tea with the King of Tonga. Trouble is when I tried to correct these inaccuracies this reporter’s lawyer wrote me a letter claiming I had defamed the reporter by trying to correct her facts.

Inaccuracies are not easy to correct, and harder to correct is the agenda, hidden or otherwise, that media organizations and journalists have. There are diversities of media, and it is apparent which media have a defined purpose in national social development, and which media are only looking for sensational stories in order to sell more newspapers and to solicit more listeners and viewers. Many have also used the cloak of media freedom to hide behind in their hate-journalism of Pacific Island countries.
I believe in media freedom, but I also believe in media responsibility and media accuracy and commitment to truth. I also believe that Pacific Island media is under no obligation whatsoever to follow a Western format, as in politics, of media coverage based on conflict.

There are two brief stories from Tonga I want to conclude with:

The first one has to do with a TV station called OBN that played a role in inciting people to anger against the Government of Tonga, resulting in riots and the burning down of the Central Business District in November 2006. It's what we call 16/11 for it happened on the 16 November 2006. This TV station was used by the pro-democrats to go from village to village, and simply assemble supporters, giving them "a voice" Unedited raw content in which a microphone was given to an angry man or woman, and a camera focused on them. There were personal hate accusations against Government leaders, allegations that were far from the truth, and fee people of Tonga were fed this information night after night.

A few weeks later, a drunken meeting at a central park in Nuku'alofa, led by oppositional politicians, instigated mobs of youth who broke out of the crowd and destroyed the businesses in the CBD. In fact they urged people to gather together and protest. 16/11 was a result. The meetings conducted daily for several days were broadcast on OBN TV.

Let me also share a story about a TV programming my organization has been running in Tonga for the past 2 years. We broadcast 6 hours daily from Monday through Sunday. It's called TMN-TV2. We made a deliberate choice when we started that we will focus on telling the stories of the Tongan people, of the events and issues affecting their lives. Our most popular program is called "The Village of the Week". We go to a village and tell the story of that village - who are their leaders, what is the main thing in the history of this village, the families in this village, how (they organise themselves in agriculture/fishing, handicraft making). What are the needs in this village, and how are they going about solving those needs? We find out about schools, churches, and other institutions in this village etc.

There is a key lesson we can learn from our Tonga situation. Media freedom and purpose-driven journalism are not opposed to each other. They are part and parcel of the same thing to do whatever you want, but it is the unrestricted ability to do what is right And what is right is always good for society. What is right always build up rather than tears down.