Investigative Journalism in Fiji

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Conditions are, and have been, difficult

But there are some fairly solid examples of investigative journalism

The National Bank of Fiji scandal in 1996 stands out as an outstanding example

The state-owned bank lost $375m due to dubious lending

Fiji’s biggest financial scandal to date.
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Defaulteres included businesses and politicians with powerful connections

Immense political pressure on media to go easy on the scandal

Finance minister Berenado Vunibobo described losses as ‘water under the bridge’

Veiled threats made against the media

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Media defied the pressure

The Review Business Magazine obtained and published the ‘confidential’ Aidney-Dickson report

The Fiji Times also published excerpts

Through the publication of the report that nation realised the full extent of the rot in their national bank.

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The Review published an exhaustive, 14-page account in the July 1995 edition of the magazine

Report included full list of debtors and amounts owed
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This took courage

Never before had so many prominent and powerful people faced such exposure

The media was stepping on some very powerful toes

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What emerged was that some powerful and ‘respected’ businessmen, politicians and relatives and clients of bank’s employees had been fleecing the institution unnoticed

The names of companies and individuals read like a who’s-who, and created a huge furor

The economy never quite recovered

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*The Review* publisher Yashwant Gaundur won the first Pacific Investigative Journalism Award in 1996 for the NBF report
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### The citation said:
- The article pieced together the maze of relevant facts
- It unearthed new information and interviewed major players in the matter
- It provided the reader with a compelling account of corruption and incompetence within a country's major financial institution
- The journalist used a range of investigative techniques, from relentless pursuit of a wide range of sources, to researching companies and individuals associated with the bank

## Investigative Journalism in Fiji

### 2008 Robert Keith-Reid Award for Outstanding Journalism

**Winners:**

Russell Hunter, former editor-in-chief and publisher of the *Fiji Sun*

*Victor Lal*, UK-based investigative reporter

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Award was for inquiry into Mahendra Chaudhry's controversial offshore accounts and tax issues
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The judges said:

They receive this for reportage on highly controversial taxation, and other matters associated with overseas bank accounts of the former interim finance minister, Mahendra Chaudhry.

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“Victor Lal displayed extraordinary persistence and skill in developing and uncovering the story in a series of articles over several months.

“His was a fine example of research and analysis based on documentation made available to him by sources who were also prepared to take a risk.”

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The Fiji Times was the first newspaper to publish the name of Chaudhry as the person at the centre of the controversy.

Both Hunter and Fiji Times’ publisher Evan Hannah was deported one after another.
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Good Governance:

One of the key reasons investigative journalism needs to be encouraged is because good governance is a major problem in Fiji and the Pacific.

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• A former governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, Siwatibau, suggested that the words of the president of the World Bank had been realised in Fiji:

“Corruption in all its forms is a crippling tax on the poor” and Pacific Island countries. (Siwatibau, 2001, p. 60).

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The 2006 Australian Treasury Department report — Pacific countries, including Fiji, have squandered $US75 million since independence through poor governance.

Dr Paresh Narayan of Griffith University believes the cost of bad governance to the Fijian economy stands close to one billion dollars.
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These figures are daunting

They underline how hard it can be for developing countries to need keep check on governance and corruption.

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The UNDP sees strengthening media and civil society capacities to act as watchdogs as key strategy to battle corruption. (Tackling Corruption, Transforming Lives, 2008)

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Governance Professor Ron Duncan advocates a Freedom of Information Act for Fiji (2005)

The Fiji Law Reform Commission report on Bribery and Corruption had called for the protection of those who "blow the whistle" on corruption (2005)
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Short survey of 3 senior Fiji journalists on Investigative reporting:

1. What is the level of investigative journalism in Fiji?
2. Why is it at this level?
3. Do we need more investigative journalism in Fiji?
4. What can be done to strengthen investigative journalism?

Investigative Journalism in Fiji

Discussion:
Investigative journalism virtually non-existent in Fiji
Lot of work needed to lift the level of IJ in Fiji
Access to information a problem
Lack of training and awareness of what investigative journalism is
Journalists are taught to apply investigative journalism tasks and skills
Government regulations discourage journalists from digging deeper
We need more investigative journalism— we hear rumblings of wheeling and dealing
But they remain rumors until it is properly investigated

Investigative journalism can be strengthened by:
Creating awareness about investigative journalism
Formal and practical training, including computer-assisted reporting
Removing censorship

Investigative Journalism in Fiji

Strengths

Commercial news media sector is well developed by Pacific island standards
Two daily newspapers — Fiji Times and Fiji Sun
Two commercial radio stations — Communications Fiji Ltd and Fiji Broadcasting Commission
Two TV stations — Fiji One and MaiTV.
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A major Online news company — Fijilive.com

Magazines — Mai Laif and Islands Business

Access to internet is improving

Emerging Blogging culture

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Fiji has a strong civil society sector, which is an asset

Media can collaborate with them

Count on them for support of persecuted

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Weaknesses

Lack of resources in newsrooms

Lack of expertise

Preference to optimize resources by focusing on daily news rather than chase stories that might not yield anything

Promotion and pay rise in Fiji is based on the number stories reporters produce in a day

‘McDonaldisation’ of news is not confined to Fiji, and it does not augur well for investigative journalism.
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Weaknesses

Affordability is an issue

Investigative Journalism is seen as a luxury in the South pacific where resources are limited

Can media ‘waste’ resources over something that might not amount to much after the investigation?

Wealthy organizations can take chance and withstand loss

But even Australian media with lots of resources has to prioritize nowadays

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Weaknesses

Lack of training — handful of reporters in Fiji have received tertiary education

Lack of experience — news reporter job seen by most reporters as stepping stone NGO and corporate PR jobs that pay better — as soon as reporters get some experience they leave

Lack of expertise (reporters in Fiji are generalists, and quite young because of high turnover)

Culture of respect for traditional chiefs and other authority figures — this means the tough questions sometimes do not asked.

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Investigative Journalism can be counterproductive

Overzealous, uninformed journalists can throw spanner in the works and delay legitimate projects if they report issues without thinking them through properly
### Investigative Journalism in Fiji

**Opportunities**

- No shortage of material to work with—official corruption and abuses are widespread in Fiji.
- Ample supply of dubious politicians and businessmen.

### Investigative Journalism in Fiji

**Crony capitalism**

- Refers to capitalist economy in which success in business depends on close relationships between businessmen and government officials.

### Investigative Journalism in Fiji

**Crony capitalism**

- Term became synonymous with Fiji during Rabuka government term.
- In reality crony capitalism was present before Rabuka came to power.
- It is still as a problem in Fiji.
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**Threats**

Politicians, Businesses

Reporters reluctant to disturb status quo, upset the apple cart or ruffle feathers over fear of consequences

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**Threats**

Backfiring effect—deportation of Fiji Sun and *Fiji Times* publishers for disclosing over Chaudhry tax evasion allegations

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**Threats**

Coup — Fiji has had four in the last 20 years

Media legislation — 2010 Media Development Decree—media can only go so far under severe restrictions
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Threats

2010 Media Development Decree

Promulgated 28 June 2010

Prescribes hefty fines and jail terms for journalists who publish material that is ‘against public interest or order, or national interest’

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Threats—2010 Media Development Decree

Authorities given new search and confiscation powers

New disclosure provisions compels reporters to reveal confidential sources or face fines of up to $10,000, or jail terms of up to two years, or both.

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Threats—2010 Media Development Decree

Media organisations do not have to disclose identity of the sources of any news item relating to corruption or abuse of office by a public officer.

But disclosure provision could scare of whistle-blowers

It will kill off a fairly healthy whistle-blowing culture in Fiji.
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**Threats— 2010 Media Development Decree**

Disclosure provision will kill off a fairly healthy whistle-blowing culture in Fiji.

It could, in effect, become a ‘shield law’ for corruption.

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Investigative Journalism in Fiji

**Threats— ‘For or against public interest’**

What is ‘for or against public interest’ can be highly debatable

Government, opposition and media can have conflicting views.

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**Threats— ‘For or against public interest’**

Media exposed National Bank of Fiji loans scandal in the 1995 believing it was in the public interest.
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**Threats**—For or against public interest

The Rabuka government thought otherwise

It accused media of acting against the national interest

It brings to mind what Samuel Johnson, the Englishman of letters, said in 1775:

“Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.”

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**Threats**—political, economic, and social debates are frequently racialised.

Investigations and revelations regarding the NBF was dismissed by the Government as “anti-Fijian”.

Rabuka Govt labeled questions about NBF scandal as attempts to discredit indigenous Fijians

Dismissed debate as an attempt to bring down his government, and warned of bloodshed.

Investigative Journalism in Fiji

**Threats**—political, economic, and social debates are frequently racialised.

The chief manager of NBF Visant Makrava said:

“Bringing down the NBF means bringing down the government.”