Communication, information and the media

Amanda H. A. Watson

Abstract

This chapter discusses the flows of communication and information in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It argues that communication and information are essential to all aspects of life. As such, the concepts are cross-cutting. The chapter considers whether citizens have the means to communicate their views. It also asks whether citizens have access to timely information. The chapter is a literature survey that posits the importance of communication and information for governance and effective democracy. A key component of a functioning democracy is a citizenry that is well informed and actively engaged in debates about government policies. The chapter suggests that the mainstream media in PNG has a fragile freedom but does not carry out sufficient in-depth investigations. The argument is made that urban residents are much more easily able to access the media than those living in rural villages. The chapter also looks into uses of mobile telephones, the internet and social media.

Introduction

For thousands of years, people throughout what is now Papua New Guinea (PNG) have used traditional communication techniques. In some locations, these continue to be practised. In contemporary PNG, communication remains a vital part of daily life. This chapter explores
diverse contemporary communication types such as receiving a telephone call from a loved one in another part of the country, participating in a discussion on Facebook and ringing a radio station with a question for a studio guest. Intertwined with the notion of communication is the concept of information. The chapter considers how information is created and disseminated, and who has access to information.

The chapter is a literature survey that reviews relevant books, articles, research reports, news stories and other written materials. It begins by outlining the key roles of communication, information and the mass media in a contemporary democracy. It then focuses on the media in PNG, including the PNG media landscape, media access, media freedom, media investigations and gender in the media. The chapter then examines mobile telephony, which has become available in rural areas since 2007. Finally, it considers the internet and social media.

Communication, information and the media in contemporary PNG

This chapter examines contemporary trends in communication practices in PNG, while acknowledging that, in some locations, traditional communication techniques continue, such as the use of slit-drums (garamut) to convey messages to surrounding villages, individual family members and specific clans (Watson, 2011, pp. 98–101; Watson and Duffield, 2016, pp. 276–77). Communication is defined as imparting or conveying ‘one’s thoughts, feelings etc. successfully’ (Turner, 1984, p. 140). A key concept that relates to communication is the notion of information, which is defined as ‘what is told’ (Turner, 1984, p. 356) and is generally thought of as being factual or concrete (Bennett et al., 2005, pp. 186–87), for example, news (Turner, 1984).

A key term used in this chapter is ‘the media’ (also referred to as ‘mainstream media’, ‘news media’ or ‘mass media’), which is a ‘channel for communication of information, propaganda etc.’ (Turner, 1984, p. 427) and typically refers to means for transmitting packaged information to large audiences, such as newspapers (sometimes called ‘the press’), radio stations and television (Turner, 1984). People gathering information and writing news media stories are known as journalists, reporters or

In a democracy such as PNG, communication and information have key roles for the achievement of effective governance. A key component of a functioning democracy is a citizenry that is well informed and actively engaged in debates about governance, social and economic issues, and relevant government policies. Thus, it is important that citizens have the means to communicate their views and concerns. To formulate such opinions, citizens should ideally have access to timely information. As will be explained in this chapter, the media has a crucial role to play in this regard. Good governance ‘depends on people knowing what their governments are doing and therefore on an active free press’ (Firth, 2006, p. 6). Relaying the truth is the ‘cornerstone of the relationship between democracy and journalism’ (Greensmith, 2017).

As Ketan has explained regarding traditional leadership practices in the PNG Highlands, ‘transparency, accountability and equity were the principles that governed wealth distribution in ceremonial exchanges, food sharing and pig ceremonials’ (2013, p. 5). In other words, pigs and other foods were cut up and distributed in public spaces so that people could witness such actions and be aware of what each family received. Thus, people were informed because the transparent process meant that they had access to information about what was taking place. Similarly, Duncan emphasised ‘the public aspect of gift giving’ (2011, p. 154) in leadership practices across the Pacific region. In traditional contexts, information was available publicly and there was no secrecy about leaders’ actions.

Ketan argued that similar practices are desirable in the modern context, ‘ensuring greater levels of accountability and transparency in the disbursement of state resources, and providing vital information for planning and budgeting purposes’ (2013, p. 19). Likewise, international bodies emphasise the importance of transparency when it comes to effective governance: ‘the concept of governance emphasizes the participation and interest of the public as well as strong responsiveness, equity, transparency and accountability of public officials at the centre of public management’ (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015, p. 7). Thus, it can be seen that communication, information and transparency
have key roles in the effective functioning of a democracy, and that they resonate with traditional practices and values in PNG and other Pacific settings.

A crucial component of a democratic system is the media, which can be thought of as the fourth estate, keeping watch on the three arms of government (see Matane and Ahuja, 2005, p. 31 on the separation of the parliament, the executive and the judiciary, as outlined in the PNG constitution). The media acts ‘as a civil watchdog to keep an eye on those in power’ (Hirst, 2013). Importantly, the media as the fourth estate is ideally independent. In a healthy democracy with robust and inclusive debates, the ‘media plays its fundamental role, which is to educate and inform the masses’ (Kanekane, 2006, p. 387). The fourth estate role of the media exists ‘to provide an independent forum for open dialogue by all members of a society’ (Pamba, 2014, p. 2). It is not the role of the media ‘to tell people who to vote for, [but] merely to give them the ability to make an informed choice’ (Greensmith, 2017). The media ‘can both disseminate crucial information relating to governance, and also engage people in debate that can lead to tangible action’ (ABC International Development, 2014, p. 7). A survey of journalists in PNG found that they generally agreed with the notion of the media as a watchdog (Robie, 2011, p. 213).

The ‘fourth estate’ term refers to ‘journalists’ role in representing the interests of “the people” in relation to the business and political elites who claim to be doing things in our names’ (Hirst, 2013). In other words, in addition to monitoring government activities and policies, the media should also be a watchdog when it comes to the business sector. Interestingly, Pamba (2014) reported that the PNG Chamber of Mines and Petroleum held a series of workshops for journalists. While this may have had some benefits in terms of informing journalists about technical aspects of the industry, Pamba (2014, p. 2) argued that the industry’s ‘direct involvement in aspects of training of journalists may be viewed by some as undermining the independence of the media, raising issues of transparency and accountability’. Similarly, questions have been asked about whether donor aid programs subtly steer journalists to report favourably about the activities and agendas of aid agencies (Backhaus, 2020). While the role of the media as the fourth estate is commonly considered to be important in the PNG context, it is acknowledged that some commentators question whether this notion of the media’s role clashes with traditional cultures and values (M’Balla-Ndi and Obijiofor, 2020, p. 78).
The variety of media in PNG

Given the importance of the media to any country, this chapter devotes several sections to the media in PNG, beginning with this introductory one. Journalism training is offered at both Divine Word University and the University of Papua New Guinea (Robie, 2011). The Media Council of PNG was formed in 1994 ‘to maintain professional standards in the media industry, deal with and respond to complaints on conduct, [and] make representations on behalf of the industry’ (Media Council of PNG, n.d.-b). Singh (2017, p. 7) explained that it was revitalised in 2015 after a period of limited activity. It represents newspapers, television stations, radio stations and online news portals (Media Council of PNG, n.d.-b), each of which is discussed in turn.

Print media in PNG includes newspapers and various magazines. It is common in PNG for a newspaper to be passed from person to person and thus reader numbers are likely to be higher than the print run totals (M&C Saatchi World Services et al., 2014, p. 40; Word Publishing Company Ltd, 2020). There are two daily English language newspapers, which together present an important record of events and public debates: the information they print ‘is comprehensive and verifiable, being usually attributed to named sources’ (Watson, 2011, p. 68; see also Cox, 2018, p. 15). The Post-Courier was established in 1969. It is printed in Port Moresby and distributed to most provinces. Print runs vary from 20,000 copies to 35,000 copies per day. News Corp owns 60 per cent of the Post-Courier and 40 per cent is owned by PNG companies (Nambawan Super, Nasfund and others). The National was established in 1993. It is printed in Port Moresby and Lae and distributed to most provinces. It has a circulation of about 50,000 copies per day and is owned by Rimbunan Hijau, a Malaysian logging company (Pacific Media Watch, 2011; Perottet and Robie, 2011).

There are two weekly English language newspapers. The Sunday Chronicle was established in 2006. It has print runs of 25,000 copies and is owned by a PNG company. In 2018, then Opposition member Bryan Kramer accused the daily newspapers of favouring the government and failing to report the Opposition’s views, and he encouraged citizens to refrain from buying the two daily newspapers in protest (Gware, 2018). This inspired a PNG businessman to start a new publication, The Sunday Bulletin,
with the aim of publishing investigative journalism. It sells 5,000 printed copies in Port Moresby and several other provinces and its owner also publishes three magazines.

The weekly *Wantok* newspaper is in the Tok Pisin language and was established in 1970 (Cass, 2020; Word Publishing Company Ltd, 2020). More than 15,000 copies of each edition are printed in Port Moresby, of which 10,000 are distributed and sold around the country. Approximately 5,000 are provided free of charge to schools, churches and other groups, and a small number are posted to subscribers. It is owned by four churches.

Until fairly recently, PNG only had one homegrown television station, a commercial operation named EMTV. In addition, in urban centres such as Port Moresby and Madang, pay television services offer a range of international stations to subscribers. In 2008, the National Broadcasting Corporation launched a television station and it gradually rolled out its transmission around the country (*The National*, 2010). In 2014, the Digicel mobile telecommunication company began offering a pay television service (Business Advantage PNG, 2014a) and another company also commenced a similar television service at around the same time called Click TV (Business Advantage PNG, 2014b). The Australian television service broadcasting to the Pacific region was cut in 2014 (Betteridge, 2014).

Neglect of the government-funded, networked local radio stations has been documented (Boden, 1995; Matbob et al., 2011, p. 5), although the National Broadcasting Corporation, as it is now known, recently launched a new transmitter in the Highlands in order to boost coverage in several surrounding provinces (NBC News PNG, 2020). The network has also launched a youth-oriented radio station (Singh, 2017, p. 7). Within the last few years, the radio signal for the network’s local station in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville has been restored (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 5).

As well as government-funded radio stations, there are also commercial, privately owned radio stations and church-run radio stations. Yumi FM, Nau FM and FM100 are the most popular commercial stations and Wantok Radio Light is the most popular religious station (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 32). Talkback radio programs are particularly popular as trusted forums for community discussion (ABC International Development, 2019).
In 2017, Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts to the Pacific ended (Betteridge, 2017; Dobell et al., 2018; Duffield, 2020, p. 185) and a Chinese broadcaster now uses those shortwave frequencies (Dickey et al., 2019, p. iii). While these cuts were noticed in the region, Radio Australia nonetheless continues to provide coverage of Pacific news and current affairs through 13 local FM radio stations across the Pacific, five of which are in PNG, as well as through online platforms (Duffield, 2020, p. 185). Radio New Zealand (2020a) also broadcasts into the Pacific.

There has been a marked increase in PNG-related material that is available online in recent years. Both the daily newspapers have established websites that are updated with news stories daily (the Post-Courier in 2014 and The National in 2009). The Digicel company established an online news service called Loop PNG in about 2014 (Dorney, 2016, p. 69). The television station EMTV now posts stories online through Facebook and these are commonly shared by users in PNG. The Sunday Bulletin’s stories are available on its Facebook page. Some of the Wantok’s stories appear on its website. In mid-2020, a weekly English language newspaper for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville had its first print run, building on its Facebook presence (Radio New Zealand, 2020b).

News content about the Pacific, including PNG, is available online from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio New Zealand and the three outlets produced by the Pacific Media Centre: Pacific Media Centre Online, Pacific Media Watch and Asia Pacific Report (Robie, 2020a, pp. 27–28). A notable, recent addition to online reporting on the Pacific, including PNG, is the launch of The Guardian’s Australia edition, with the awarding of grant funding in 2019 for journalism focused on the Pacific (Duffield, 2020, pp. 186–87; Taylor, 2020, p. 16). Analysis on the Pacific is available through online outlets of The Australian National University, including the Devpolicy Blog, which has substantially increased the amount of material on PNG and by experts from PNG in recent years, and Policy Forum, which launched a Pacific section in 2020. Other Australian online outlets that include analysis of Pacific issues include the Lowy Institute’s The Interpreter, Griffith Asia Institute’s Pacific Hub, and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s The Strategist. Economic analysis is available from Business Advantage PNG and Islands Business. Various other websites provide PNG news, such as PNG Facts, while PNGi Central produces in-depth reports by ‘an informal network of academics, activists and journalists’ (PNGi, n.d.).
In recent years, there have been some examples of a decrease of availability of media, such as the end of Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts, while there have also been concurrent increases in the number of television stations and in the amount of PNG-related material that is available online. In terms of types of offering, there has been a net increase overall.

Access to the media in PNG

Most people in PNG live a rural life (see Table 6.1 in Chapter 6, this volume). In some rural villages, people continue to regularly use traditional forms of communication such as garamut or slit-drums (Watson, 2011). Radio stations are essential sources of information in many rural villages but overall ‘limited media access continues to be a major obstacle for the people of PNG’ (Matbob et al., 2011, p. 6).

A recent survey in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of six provinces reported that 53 per cent of people read a newspaper at least once per week, 50 per cent of people listen to the radio weekly and 60 per cent of people watch television on at least some occasions (ABC International Development, 2019, pp. 5–6). In rural areas where the majority of households do not have televisions, some people charge entry fees to allow others to view their screens – such enterprises are known as ‘village cinemas’ (‘haus piksa’ or ‘CD haus’ in Tok Pisin) (Matbob et al., 2011, p. 8; Thomas and Eby, 2016). Low levels of literacy continue to present a challenge to text-based mediums, particularly newspapers (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 6; Elapa, 2011, p. 119; Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, p. 284; Matbob et al., 2011, p. 6; Perottet and Robie, 2011, p. 166; Rooney, 2017a; Williams, 2019, p. 3).

In urban areas, there are two distinct groups of people: the largest group access traditional media (newspapers, television and radio), and a growing minority access information through the internet and social media (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 5). For those who use the internet, the social network Facebook is the most popular platform (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 6; Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, p. 289; Williams, 2019, p. 6).

Research conducted in rural areas of all six districts of Madang Province involved in-depth interviews with 120 people and determined that residents value the provincial radio station that is part of the National
Broadcasting Corporation, despite reception problems in some locations (Issimel, 2011). At a similar time, a survey in Western Highlands Province looked into young people’s media access in two villages: a peri-urban village and a rural village (Cangah, 2011). Sixty surveys were completed by people aged 16 to 26. In both villages, radio stations were popular. There was good access to the Wantok newspaper, but most respondents reported that they did not have access to the daily newspapers. Television was accessed more in the peri-urban village than the rural village (Cangah, 2011). Recent research in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville established that mobile telephone access is high, but newspapers are not available, with the exception of the Bougainville Bulletin, a periodic publication of the Autonomous Bougainville Government (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 5). Access to radio stations is limited across the region and those who have access to television tend to use Digicel’s service (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 5).

Overall, access to the media in PNG is trending towards an increasingly wide divide between urban residents with access to the internet and rural residents. The level of access to a variety of news sources is increasing for urban internet users, with the establishment of various online news outlets as well as additional weekly newspapers and television services. Meanwhile, some people in urban areas have limited or no access to the internet. In rural areas, communication options continue to stagnate or even decline, in particular due to the end of Radio Australia’s shortwave broadcasts, which had been a daily source of news for rural communities. (See also Table 6.8 in Chapter 6, this volume, for evidence of declining access to traditional media.)

Media freedom

Media freedom is ‘one of the most important pillars of any functioning democracy’ (Greste, 2017, p. xii). There are two components of media freedom: ‘freedom to be informed and freedom of expression’ (Robie, 2013, p. 101). Compared to other countries in the Pacific region, ‘the PNG media industry continues to have a relative degree of independence, diversity and robustness’ (Matbob et al., 2011, p. 6). Freedom of the media is protected in the constitution (Dorney, 2016, pp. 67–68; Duffield, 2006; Robie, 2013, p. 102). PNG is ranked 46th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders, 2020a),
meaning that the country’s media is considered to have relative freedom to conduct enquiries and report on issues without fear (see also Dorney, 2016, pp. 67–71; Kanekane, 2006, p. 386). A concern is that ‘journalists continue to be prevented from covering the fate of detainees in Australia’s refugee detention centres on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island and in the capital, Port Moresby’ (Reporters without Borders, 2020b). Freedom House rated PNG as ‘partly free’, indicating that it is a democracy with regular elections, albeit with problems of violence and corruption, where ‘the judiciary retains significant independence, and the media are mostly free to criticize the government’ (Freedom House, 2019). Nonetheless, ‘media freedom in Papua New Guinea remains endangered’ (Ubayasiri et al., 2020, p. 9).

The rights and responsibilities of the media are frequently debated in PNG. For example, respected journalist Scott Waide was suspended late in 2018 over a story critical of the government but was soon afterwards reinstated following public outcry (Wesley, 2020). In 2020, Police Minister Bryan Kramer, who has a strong ‘reputation for transparency and use of online media communication’ (Robie, 2020b), criticised two journalists from mainstream media outlets for inaccurate reporting of financial information and, in response, one of the outlets, Loop PNG, published an editorial defending its reporting (Robie, 2020b). There were also concerns about the media’s ability to access timely information when regular media briefings were temporarily suspended during the COVID-19 global pandemic due to a positive test result at the operations centre in Port Moresby (Pacific Media Watch, 2020; Robie, 2020c). Such concerns are not new, with one informed commentator having suggested in 2006 that relations between the media and the government were at that time tense, although day-to-day interactions were cordial and the government had refrained from official censorship (Duffield, 2006; see also Freedom House, 2019; Perottet and Robie, 2011, pp. 166–67; Robie, 2019; Singh, 2017, pp. 6–7).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (n.d.-a, n.d.-b) reports on murders of journalists around the world; it indicated that there had been one murder in PNG: a foreign journalist, Per-Ove Carlsson, was murdered in Kiunga, not far from the Indonesian border, in 1992. Carlsson went ‘to the region to make a film about the guerrilla organization Free Papua Movement’ (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.-b) in West Papua. To date, there have been no arrests related to his murder (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.-b).
The ownership of media outlets is relevant to discussions of media freedom because owners may influence editorial policy. For example, when an enquiry was looking into land leases, many of which were held by Rimbunan Hijau, *The National* was warned by one of the enquiry’s commissioners not to be biased in its reporting (Pacific Media Watch, 2011; see also Cass, 2004, p. 88). In fact, a recent report suggested that *The National* ‘rarely publishes any news story or op-ed [opinion piece or editorial] critical of the logging industry’ (Dickey et al., 2019, p. 22).

As Singh (2004, pp. 51–52) has explained, ‘public perceptions of a medium’s credibility are crucial for survival [and] any public perception of bias would hurt the credibility, and thus the marketability, of the medium’. PNG’s newspapers are highly reliant on a large volume of government advertising. Thus, it could be argued that they may not wish to antagonise the government in their reportage. Even if there is no direct influence on editorial decisions, there are concerns that, for business owners, a ‘profit motive overrides any consideration for improvement’ (Pamba, 2004, p. 59).

The *Post-Courier* is majority owned by News Corp and its executive chairman, Rupert Murdoch, is frequently accused of ‘political intervention through the use (or threatened use) of his media power in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia’ (Hobbs and McKnight, 2014, p. 1). It is alleged that ‘the company misuses its vast media power for corporate gain and to pursue political ends’ (Ricketson, 2012, p. 139). For instance, it has been argued that the company’s Australian newspapers ‘campaigned vigorously against the re-election of the Labor government in 2013’ (Hobbs and McKnight, 2014, p. 1) and again in 2019 (Dwyer and Koskie, 2019). Interestingly, one study comparing newspaper coverage found that News Corp’s coverage of Australia’s refugee detention centre on PNG’s Manus Island was more favourable in its representation of the PNG residents than the other newspaper studied (Allen and Hoenig, 2018, p. 118). This may be because the News Corp article ran in both the *Post-Courier* and its fellow publication *The Australian* at the same time (Allen and Hoenig, 2018). According to News Corp, PNG citizens should not be worried about the *Post-Courier* being foreign owned because editorial decisions are made by PNG staff (Dickey et al., 2019, p. 22).

Although the uptake of social media will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, it is worth noting here that PNG’s first cybercrime law was passed by parliament in 2016 (Dawidi, 2016; Kenneth, 2016). It ‘allows the
prosecution of people who publish defamatory material or incite violence on social media, raising concerns that it could be misused to punish legitimate speech’ (Freedom House, 2019). Such concerns about the law imposing limits on free speech have been expressed in various forums (Kant et al., 2018, pp. 69–70; Oxford Business Group, n.d.; Singh, 2017, p. 6; Tahana, 2014; Tlozek, 2015). Addressing such concerns, it has been argued that the law is ‘not the result of some sinister ploy by the Government to shut out our right to freedom of speech (which in any case, is a qualified Constitutional right) or opinions on corruption’ (Dawidi, 2016). Singh (2020, p. 55) has argued that ‘while governments could be accused of censorship, they have some real concerns about social media abuse, and the damage to individuals, communities and society’. Even so, it has been pointed out that the PNG law ‘does not have a clear section or subsection which protects freedom of expression, specifically critical political discourse’ (Kant et al., 2018, p. 70).

**Media investigations**

It is essential in an effective democracy ‘that the media has the capacity to investigate and distil information from various stakeholders and to make sense of it for the average consumer of news’ (Pamba, 2014, p. 2). This section asks about the extent to which the media is able to carry out in-depth investigations. Matbob (2011) documented a strong history of investigative journalism in PNG. For example, the former PNG weekly newspaper *The Independent* uncovered major corruption scandals through its investigative journalism while it was in operation (Kanekane, 2006, p. 385). Examples of such investigations can still be found today, especially on the PNGi website. However, there have been repeated assertions that, overall, the media in PNG fails to undertake a sufficient amount of investigative journalism (Duffield, 2006; Lasslett, 2015; Popot, 2011; Reporters without Borders, 2020b). This section considers why this is the case. The contributing factors, which will be discussed here, are monetary considerations, workplace issues, a culture of deference and the lack of a substantial presence of foreign correspondents. As will be outlined here, these factors tend to lead to a habit of reprinting or broadcasting material directly from media releases produced by government departments, businesses and others.
Monetary considerations directly contribute to a lack of investigative journalism. There is a ‘lack of funding and material resources for proper investigative journalism and reporting in the field’ (Reporters without Borders, 2020b). Robie (2011, p. 214) stated that lack of resources is a major challenge inhibiting the practice of investigative journalism, specifically ‘lack of staff, money and time’. Firth (2006, p. 6) argued that, in PNG, ‘the media is constrained, above all, by the need to make money’, but this can be difficult for media businesses, due to factors such as ‘low disposable incomes, limited product sales and small profit margins’ (Singh, 2020, p. 58). Across the Melanesian region, there are ‘dwindling resources in many newsrooms, especially for investigative journalism’ (Robie, 2020a, p. 30; see also Melanesia Media Freedom Forum, 2019; Singh, 2020).

Workplace issues within media organisations in the region, including PNG, comprise ‘longstanding, unaddressed issues such as underqualified and inexperienced journalists, uncompetitive salaries, [and] high journalist turnover’ (Singh, 2020, p. 56). High turnover of staff is also mentioned as a problem by several other commentators (Krishnamurthi, 2020; Matbob et al., 2011, p. 11; Pamba, 2014, p. 1). Journalists’ salaries in PNG are generally low, compared to other professions in PNG (Robie, 2011, pp. 212–13) and there are insufficient training opportunities (Singh, 2017, p. 1). Staff at media outlets are busy covering daily news events and therefore do not have time to undertake in-depth investigations (Duffield, 2006).

A culture of deference has also been blamed for an apparent unwillingness to undertake in-depth investigations. Recently, Transparency International PNG carried out a review of PNG newspapers. It examined stories about then Prime Minister Peter O’Neill and found that only 4 per cent portrayed him in a negative light (79 per cent were positive while 17 per cent were neutral or indifferent), ‘demonstrating an overwhelming deference to the incumbent Prime Minister’ (Transparency International PNG, 2020; see also Krishnamurthi, 2020). According to Lasslett (2015), there is a lack of willingness on the part of media in PNG to undertake thorough investigations: ‘there is a systematic failure to inquire into, and report on, the daily scandals profoundly affecting the region’. This may, in part, be because of a culture of deference in which ‘many Pacific journalists are reluctant to ask the hard questions of political leaders and those in high office’ (Robie, 2020a, p. 18; see also Shaligram, 2019; Singh, 2020, p. 52). A practical reason for deferential behaviour could be to ensure
access. As journalist Scott Waide has argued, limited access to information presents a challenge for the media in PNG: ‘you are excluded from events or deliberately not informed’ (quoted in Krishnamurthi, 2020). One way that deferential reporting has been sidestepped on occasion has been for PNG media to provide information that they are unwilling to handle to overseas outlets and, after they release the news, then report it as second-hand information (Hill, 2018).

At present, and for some years, there has only been one foreign correspondent based in PNG. While the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s correspondent has been able to generate a substantial amount of coverage of PNG for Australian audiences and others (Duffield, 2020; Ginau et al., 2011), one person cannot cover daily news and also undertake regular in-depth investigations in such a large and complex country. A greater number of foreign journalists based in PNG might increase the amount of investigative journalism completed because these people would likely be more willing to ask difficult questions and their operations would generally be better resourced. There certainly would be many possible investigations that could be embarked upon (Lasslett, 2015). The various chapters of this book have presented areas that are ripe for investigation and in-depth media coverage, including governance, economic performance and social issues.

Due to the factors outlined above, “copy-and-paste” journalism’ (Reporters without Borders, 2020b) is frequently employed by the PNG media, meaning that media releases written by government departments and corporations tend to be reprinted or broadcast in full without any analysis (Shaligram, 2019; Singh, 2020, p. 57). While not unique to PNG, this is certainly not good journalistic practice. In doing their work, ‘news organisations inevitably have to quote politicians and analysts’ (Greste, 2017, p. 307). However, ‘a disciplined news organisation would shy away from repeating’ (Greste, 2017, p. 306) the language of leaders time after time and would instead try to find other ways to describe occurrences (Greste, 2017, pp. 300–12). When the newspapers in PNG reprint press releases in full (Matbob et al., 2011, p. 8; Singh, 2020, p. 57), they fall into the trap of presenting the world in the way that others want them to, rather than examining stories from multiple perspectives.

The Media Council of PNG (n.d.-a) has a code of conduct that aims to encourage professional standards and suggests that media workers should strive ‘to provide balanced coverage by providing a fair opportunity for
any individual or organizations mentioned in a news story to respond to allegations or criticism before publication’. Indeed, it is important to allow ‘different viewpoints [to be] expressed to enable a healthy societal debate on governance’ (Transparency International PNG, 2020). In their defence, PNG newspapers do at least reproduce media releases from opposing sides of various controversies, sometimes on consecutive days.

This section has argued that there are insufficient in-depth investigations conducted by the media in PNG. Several reasons have been outlined. The result is that the practice of reprinting media releases is commonplace. To increase the number of investigations undertaken, further effort could be made to attract content funds. For instance, a PNG journalist was granted funding in 2020 to report on environmental issues (Internews, 2020). Current affairs programs on television or radio, or collaborations across media outlets, could potentially provide avenues for thorough investigations through which bureaucrats, politicians and companies could be held to account.

**Gender and media**

Popot (2011) examined articles referring to gender-based violence in the two daily newspapers. In nearly all of the 113 stories analysed, the only source for the articles was a police report: ‘most of the stories were very brief and reported just the assaults, without doing further interviews’ (Popot, 2011, p. 77). Several years later, media coverage of gender-based violence continued to be a contested issue, with one commentator suggesting that there should be allocation of funding ‘to the media industry to support timely, accurate and independent reporting on these issues’ (Rooney, 2017b).

More female journalists might increase the presence of female voices in media reportage and could enable more effective reporting of issues such as gender-based violence (e.g. because female victims may feel more comfortable talking to female journalists rather than males) (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, p. 72). According to Dorney (2016, p. 64), the composition of the media workforce has changed: when he began work in the PNG media in 1974, management positions and coveted political reporting assignments were all occupied by males, but there are now many female journalists and media managers. A survey conducted in 2001 found that about half of journalists in PNG were female (Robie, 2011, p. 207).
A recent study identified that within the PNG media sector women hold a third of content-maker positions and a third of decision-making roles but only a small percentage of board positions (Media for Development Initiative, 2018, p. 2; see also Melanesia Media Freedom Forum, 2019; Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020). A 2010 study also found ‘evidence of the general under-representation of women in power and decision making structures’ (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015, p. 7) in the PNG media sector.

It has been claimed that female journalists have been silenced in various ways – for instance, because editors have rejected their stories or because sources have refused to be interviewed by females (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, pp. 69–70). In addition, ‘facing threats of violence and suppression is a daily occurrence for many female journalists’ (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, p. 70). There are significant concerns about workplace culture and insufficient handling of reported sexual harassment: ‘safety concerns, lack of managerial and organisational support for effective safety practices and extensive accounts of harassment and sexual harassment dominate the experiences of women working in the media sector’ (Media for Development Initiative, 2018, p. 2). It has been suggested that journalists’ typically low salaries tend to be even lower for women than their male colleagues (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2020, p. 68), although further research is required on this issue (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015, p. 5).

Several media products have made deliberate efforts to present positive images of women. Stella magazine produced four editions per annum from 2012 to 2016. Lily magazine launched in 2013 and continues to print two to three editions each year. Since 2012, a television program presented by Jennifer Baing-Waiko has aimed at encouraging healthy eating habits. The Lewa Show is an online television show that commenced in 2019 in which women’s issues are discussed. Nonetheless, there is room for improvement with regard to the portrayal of women by the media. Writing about a sexist cartoon that appeared in one of the newspapers, Rooney (2017a) suggested that the cartoon ‘only serves to reinforce social, cultural and political challenges women face … and the PNG mainstream media should lead efforts to strengthen equitable and fair coverage of women’. Indeed, the media could play a role ‘in sustaining a national conversation about important issues such as gender equality’ (Rooney, 2017a).
Mobile telephones

The chapter transitions now from the media to more interactive forms of communication, starting with the mobile telephone. Until 2007, most people in PNG had to travel to the nearest town to queue at a public telephone if they wanted to make a telephone call. The government telecommunication provider, Telikom PNG, held a monopoly (Barker, 2008; Foster and Horst, 2018, p. 1; Jorgensen, 2018, p. 54; Marshall, 2007) and had established mobile network coverage only in urban areas (Barker, 2008; Watson, 2011, p. 47; Watson and Duffield, 2016, p. 271). The monopoly ceased when the Independent Consumer and Competition Commission opened up the market, granting licences to two companies. Digicel, which advertised extensively, expanded its network across the country quickly and offered cheap handsets. GreenCom, the other licensee, never actually offered any mobile telephone service (Watson, 2011, p. 47).

Digicel commenced operations in PNG on 1 July 2007 and rapidly expanded mobile network coverage to all provinces, starting with provincial capitals and extending to rural areas. Initially, uptake increased at an astonishing rate – Digicel signed up 600,000 customers by March 2008 (Marshall, 2008). In the first few years of its operations in PNG, mobile telephone uptake reportedly led to increases in the gross domestic product (Watson, 2011, p. 48). Figure 8.1 shows the number of mobile telephones in use in PNG over the past two decades.
In research conducted in rural villages during 2009, when the Digicel network coverage was a novel phenomenon generating new experiences, it was ‘found that the introduction of mobile telecommunications has generally been viewed positively, although several negative concerns have been strongly felt’ (Watson, 2011, p. iii). People were delighted to be able to hear the voices of loved ones residing in other parts of the country and appreciated the usefulness of mobile telephony during time-critical emergencies (Watson, 2011). Worries related to affordability and concerns about the impact of the introduction of a means for private communication (Watson, 2011). For example, random telephone calls to unknown numbers can lead to ‘phone friendships’ (Lipset, 2018, p. 24; Wardlow, 2018), which may fall outside of the rules governing communities.

There are three mobile network licences available in PNG. In 2008, there was a partial sale of bmobile, which was initially a subsidiary of Telikom PNG, with the PNG Government retaining an interest. Telikom PNG launched its Citifon service in 2011. Citifon was replaced by Telikom PNG’s 4G LTE service in 2016. This meant that, for a number of years, the PNG Government had, in effect, an interest in two competing mobile networks: bmobile and Telikom PNG’s offering (first Citifon and later 4G LTE). At the time of writing, a process of merging these two entities is ongoing. The idea is to create one competitive market player out of the two entities with PNG Government involvement (Watson and Patel, 2017), although additional funds are required to complete the technical aspects of merging the two networks (Moi, 2020). The merger has made the third licence available and there are indications that a Fijian company is likely to enter the PNG market in the near future because the Asian Development Bank recently announced funding for it to set up a mobile network in PNG (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

Currently, Digicel has a 92 per cent market share, with approximately 2.5 million mobile telephone users (Highet et al., 2019, pp. 18–19). It has ‘an effective monopoly [because it] is the only network that covers rural and remote locations’ (Watson and Fox, 2019). Despite its parent company carrying a substantial amount of debt, Digicel’s PNG operations are ‘remarkably profitable’ (McLeod, 2020b). Its competitor (the merged bmobile/Telikom entity) has a large amount of debt and is loss making (Wall, 2020).
Two-thirds of people now live within mobile network coverage (Hight et al., 2019, p. 19). The coverage can be intermittent though, with recent research in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville having identified frequent mobile network outages, particularly in Central and South Bougainville (Watson, Miller et al., 2020). There are 2.8 million active mobile telephones in PNG (Hight et al., 2019, p. 24). This suggests that, although access to telephones has increased since 2007, many people do not own or use a mobile telephone. The majority (55 per cent) of the mobile telephones in use in PNG are second generation (2G) handsets, which means that they are suitable for telephone calls and text messaging (Hight et al., 2019, p. 18). Twenty-three per cent are third generation (3G), which is suitable for browsing the internet, and 22 per cent are fourth generation (4G), which enables faster internet speeds (Hight et al., 2019, p. 18).

In many countries, ‘digital connectivity, internet access and smartphone services are weak or even non-existent in deep, rural regions, such as small, remote islands’ (Watson and Park, 2019). It is important to note that less than 15 per cent of the PNG population has reliable access to electricity (Hight et al., 2019, p. 11). This means that mobile telephone owners regularly struggle to keep their handset batteries charged (Hight et al., 2019, p. 23; Wardlow, 2018, p. 41; Watson and Duffield, 2016, p. 275; Watson, Miller et al., 2020, p. 8; Yamo, 2013, pp. 96–97). A survey conducted with more than 1,000 households in rural and remote locations around PNG found that 65 per cent of households had reliable mobile network coverage but more than half of the households had no mobile telephone (Benson, 2019, pp. 2–5). As might be expected, ‘households that own a solar panel or generator are more likely to own a phone’ (Benson, 2019, p. 6). Households with high educational attainment levels are more likely to have mobile telephones than those with lower education levels and ‘richer households are more likely to own mobile phones’ (Benson, 2019, p. 6).

Most of the mobile telephones in use are prepaid (Hight et al., 2019, p. 19), which means that ‘users assume fiscal responsibility for managing their phone credits’ (Foster, 2018, p. 109). For example, one user expressed frustration at the slow pace of her relatives’ speech because of her awareness that every second of a telephone call costs her money (Foster, 2018, pp. 111–12). At the time of writing, a government policy of compulsory registration of mobile telephone owner details is ongoing and could potentially result in some users being excluded from mobile telephone access, at least temporarily (Watson, 2020b).
There are three key opportunities for use of mobile telephones to promote development that will be discussed here in turn, using relevant examples from across PNG: (1) effective two-way communication for government workers and others; (2) information dissemination; and (3) citizen reporting.

First, two-way communication will be considered using two examples from the health sector. Yamo (2013) explored the establishment by the Western Highlands Provincial Health Authority of a list of mobile telephone numbers and a system through which health workers and managers could communicate with one another as needed. The system was found to be beneficial, particularly during time-sensitive medical emergencies, but it was evident that improvements could be made in its management to maximise its effective use, reduce costs and enhance internal organisational communication (Yamo and Watson, 2014). In Milne Bay Province, a maternal health hotline was established so that rural-based health workers could telephone the labour ward at Alotau Provincial Hospital during time-critical childbirth emergencies. The hotline was found to save women’s lives (Watson et al., 2015) and continues to operate (Highet et al., 2019, p. 39).

Second, regarding information dissemination, a project undertaken by the non-government organisation Population Services International, which consisted of weekly health tips in the form of text messages, was the first attempt to use mobile telephony to disseminate information to community members in PNG (Highet et al., 2019, p. 40). This was a free service available to Digicel users. At least 30,000 people subscribed to the service but it ‘eventually ceased due to funding and questions about impact’ (Highet et al., 2019, p. 40; see also Cullen, 2017, p. 327). In other words, it cost money to send tens of thousands of text messages every week and there was no way to know whether those receiving the text messages read them, liked them or considered adopting healthy behaviours as a result of receiving them.

Another example of information dissemination was a project of the Department of Education called SMS Story. Elementary teachers at selected rural and remote schools in two provinces received daily text messages containing short stories and lesson plans to aid them in teaching English to students. Research revealed that the reading ability of students whose teachers received the materials improved more than the ability
of students whose teachers did not receive them (Kaleebu et al., 2017). Since then, the SMS Story model has been used in India and Bangladesh (Kaleebu et al., 2017, p. 643) as well as Uganda.

Third, in terms of citizens reporting information, a useful example is the Department of Finance’s Phones against Corruption project, which allows reporting of alleged corruption free of charge through text messaging (Watson and Wiltshire, 2016). The project has led to at least two arrests, but district treasury officers reported no prior knowledge of the service and recommended enhanced and targeted promotional activities about it (Watson and Wiltshire, 2016).

Through informal communication networks, there are also likely many instances in which telephone calls and text messaging are used by community members to engage in two-way communication, disseminate relevant information and perhaps report local issues or provide feedback on policies. An example of effective informal communication involves coastal villagers communicating with relatives in town during tsunami alerts. Prior to the introduction of mobile telephone networks in rural areas, tsunami alerts led to panic among villagers, but since mobile telephones have been available, villagers have been able to liaise with educated, urban relatives to access timely information (Watson, 2012). A critical component of this example, which links with the next section of this chapter, is use of the internet by urban residents to find accurate information to pass on to rural-based relatives through telephone calls (Watson, 2012). The villagers had 2G network coverage and basic handsets that they could use to make telephone calls to relatives with internet access through desktop computers at their workplaces in urban centres.

The spread of mobile telephone networks throughout rural and remote parts of PNG since 2007 heralded a notable change in people’s communication options and information access. While there have been some keenly felt concerns regarding the introduction of a private communication tool (Watson, 2011), there have also been noticeable benefits. For many people though, usage challenges remain, such as limited electricity and weak, patchy or inconsistent mobile network coverage (Watson, Miller et al., 2020). Despite early praise and appreciation for Digicel’s network coverage in rural areas, concerns have emerged about Digicel’s effective monopoly (Logan and Forsyth, 2018; Watson and Fox, 2019; World Bank, 2020, pp. 61–62) and some of the services it provides (Foster, 2017; Logan and Forsyth, 2018; Rooney et al., 2020). There are
also concerns that competition is being limited due to ‘the government’s ownership of a number of telecommunications companies, combined with the presence of government-owned companies across the entire value chain’ (World Bank, 2020, p. 61).

Internet and social media

Since about 2012, an increasing number of people in PNG have had internet access, most commonly through a mobile device. This change has been driven by the introduction of 3G network coverage in some places, and 4G in urban areas, and by the availability of cheap smartphone handsets. The latest figures indicate that there are about 600,000 smartphones in use in PNG (Highet et al., 2019, pp. 18–19). With regard to internet access, some groups are less likely to be connected, ‘namely residents outside of urban areas, women and older citizens’ (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 5; see also Sagrista and Marbob, 2016; Watson and Park, 2019). There are 750,000 people in PNG using Facebook, of which 39 per cent are women (Highet et al., 2019, p. 33).

To date, the internet in PNG has been costly, slow and unreliable (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2016; Logan and Suwamaru, 2017; Watson, 2020a; Williams, 2019, p. 5). PNG continues to rank very poorly compared to other countries in terms of internet affordability (World Bank, 2020, p. 50). An undersea cable connecting PNG to Australia was completed late in 2019 and a domestic undersea cable connecting numerous provinces of PNG was completed in 2020 (Coral Sea Cable System, n.d.; The National, 2020; Watson, 2020a; Watson, Airi et al., 2020; Williams, 2019). It is anticipated that the new cables may make the internet cheaper, faster and more reliable for consumers (Watson, Airi et al., 2020; Williams, 2019). In the first half of 2020, there was no improvement in price and several factors may influence whether there is a discernible price reduction in the future, including the need to recover the costs of the new domestic cable, market competition and existing supplier contracts (Watson, Airi et al., 2020). It has also been alleged that the wholesaler has been ‘restricting access’ (World Bank, 2020, p. 61) to the new international cable. At the time of writing, the regulator is working to determine appropriate prices (Watson, Airi et al., 2020).
The internet and social media can be utilised for communication and for information dissemination. Regarding communication, discussion groups on the Facebook platform allow people in PNG to communicate for a range of purposes. For instance, regional and local groups are popular for discussing issues with a geographical focus (Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, pp. 289–90; Rooney, 2012). The discussion group function is commonly used for discussing current affairs: ‘the PNG-based Facebook discussion groups which have the most members and are most prominent are those devoted to discussions of governance and related social issues’ (Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, p. 289).

In terms of information dissemination, it has been argued that ‘social media plays a crucial role in keeping the public informed on matters that the mainstream media may have missed’ (Kant et al., 2018, p. 71). For instance, numerous PNG politicians share local news, opinions, media releases, government information and so on through Facebook (McLeod, 2020a). The internet can also be used for the distribution of misinformation. As Robie has noted regarding trends in several countries in Asia, and with a caution for the Pacific, ‘disinformation and media manipulation are now critical issues’ (2020a, p. 19). Facebook users in PNG view inaccurate or misleading information to be common and generally can recognise it, although they feel that they have on some occasions been deceived (ABC International Development, 2019, p. 12). A study of a Facebook group for the Fly River region of Western Province found that posts about COVID-19 during March to May 2020 generally shared factual information (Dwyer and Minnegal, 2020). In the main, the Facebook group seemed to play a positive role in communication and information dissemination and users ‘did not take either religious tropes or conspiracy theories as primary sources of comfort or explanation’ (Dwyer and Minnegal, 2020, p. 243).

In addition to misinformation, there are negative concerns about access to and use of the internet and social media for the spread of ‘child abuse content [and] explicit material’ (Aualiitia and Wilson, 2020). Critics argue that popular platform Facebook ‘is not doing enough to stop abusive and harmful content in local languages’ (Aualiitia and Wilson, 2020). There are:

Several active PNG-based Facebook groups with thousands of members where users share hundreds of explicit images, almost always of women, sometimes depicting sexual behaviour [and] it is unclear how these images were obtained and whether the subjects have consented to their distribution. (Aualiitia and Wilson, 2020)
A research project that sought the views of children from a settlement on the fringes of Port Moresby found that they are worried about online safety and in particular ‘encountering sexual or violent content (including news coverage of violent events or photos of the deceased), harmful influences, cyberbullying and hacking’ (Third et al., 2020, p. 5). PNG’s cybercrime law does aim to address ‘a whole range of illegal online activities such as – but not limited to – hacking, data and system interference, electronic fraud and forgery, pornography, animal pornography, child pornography and defamatory publication’ (Kant et al., 2018, p. 69).

Citizen journalism is the practice of citizens reporting news or events from their local area and it is a relatively new trend in Melanesia (Singh, 2020, p. 50) that warrants further investigation. As a vehicle for distributing local-level news – for example, news about instances of abuse or violence – social media can play a ‘role in giving voice to the marginalised and to bringing such cases to the attention of the police, authorities and general public’ (Rooney, 2017b). Distributed primarily through social media, citizen journalism can ‘support and strengthen traditional journalism, but also weaken it by diverting away revenue’ (Singh, 2020, p. 55). On the one hand, journalists working for the mainstream media can use social media to source story ideas, images, videos and the like. On the other hand, social media can be used by those who wish to establish a presence as independent producers of material (Newman et al., 2012). Thus, it can be seen that social media ‘both helps and hobbles the practice of journalism’ (Singh, 2020, p. 60).

As Logan (2012) posited, increasing access to mobile telephones, the internet and social media may have impacts upon the political sphere, although further research is required. Online and offline activism combined in the organisation of protest rallies in PNG during the Easter weekend in 2012 when there was a constitutional crisis, with two members of parliament claiming to be prime minister (Logan, 2012; Logan and Suwamaru, 2017; Rooney, 2012). It is important to note that there has been ‘collaboration between Facebook discussion groups and offline community groups, such as trade unions and churches in organizing protests and other political activity’ (Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, p. 291). Although further research is required on this topic in PNG, examples from the Pacific region of political engagement online include climate change activism (Titifanue et al., 2017), feminist activism (Brimacombe et al., 2018), the Free West Papua campaign (Logan and Suwamaru, 2017, p. 291; Titifanue et al., 2016), and election-related
campaigning in Fiji (Tarai, 2019). An increase in the use of social media was also noticed in relation to the 2017 election in PNG, compared to previous elections (Haley and Zubrinich, 2018).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a literature survey that has assessed the extent to which people throughout PNG have access to communication channels and to accurate, timely information – both of which are critical for democracy and development. The chapter argues that media freedom is reasonably healthy in PNG but that it has vulnerabilities and is worth safeguarding. There are a number of media outlets, yet, as a whole, the media conducts insufficient in-depth investigations. The chapter has highlighted an increase in the availability of television stations, weekly newspapers and online information in PNG in recent years. However, as the chapter has pointed out, there is a gulf between urban and rural access to communication options and information mediums. While mobile telephone access has increased since 2007, and internet access has risen since about 2012, many people remain offline, with limited access to electricity.

**Acknowledgements**

Various staff members at media organisations provided details for the media section of the chapter. Detailed and useful feedback was received from Jemima Garrett on a draft. Other contributors to this volume are thanked for their encouragement and ideas.

**References**


B. COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION AND THE MEDIA


PNGi. (n.d.). About. pngicentral.org/about.


