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CITIZEN JOURNALISM, SOCIAL MEDIA & THE MEDIA IN FIJI

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Citizen Journalism, Social Media & the Media in Fiji

Fiji's media landscape has been challenged by the consequences of Fiji's own political struggles (Pareti, 2009; Perrottet & Robie, 2011; Singh, 2010a; S. B. Singh, 2018). While scholars and policy analysts have pointed out the nuances of these consequences, the latest onslaught to Fiji's media landscape is irresponsible citizen journalism, specifically the morbid use of social media. Social media in Fiji has grown exponentially due to the increasing interconnectivity and proliferation of affordable data and mobile devices. This has enabled greater access and active online interactions, creating a massive potential for responsible and constructive social media use. However, ease of online access has revealed an almost inhumane and morbid form of social media use. This Brief argues that Fiji's media landscape, already challenged by Fiji's political struggles, is facing pressure from irresponsible citizen journalism. This is compounded by the quick pace and real time nature of social media. In discussing this argument, the Brief examines a recent fatality that highlights this pressure and its implications on the media and social media in Fiji.

Social Media in Fiji

Since Fiji's most recent coup of 5th December, 2006, online access – initially with blog sites – has provided an alternative means of sharing information in a challenged media environment (Foster, 2007; Singh, 2010b; Walsh, 2010). By 2010, social networking sites began to gain traction in Fiji's cyber sphere, especially with Facebook (Glen Finau et al., 2014). This was largely due to the affordability of internet access and hand held devices (Titifanue, Tarai, Kant, & Finau, 2016). Fiji's social media presence consists of over half a million Facebook account users (Audience Insights, 2018). This large online population has brought a variety of positive as well as negative effects. Positives can be found in the responsible use of social media; in a way that supports greater citizen and regional engagement around key governance, development and human rights issues (Glen Finau et al., 2014; Glenn Finau et al., 2018; Tarai, Kant, Finau, & Titifanue, 2015a, 2015b; Titifanue, Kant, Finau, & Tarai, 2017; Titifanue et al., 2016). On the other hand challenges include cybercrimes, online harassment and bullying, to name a few (Chanel, 2017; Chaudhary, 2017; Delaibatiki, 2016; Pratibha, 2017). These positive and negative effects call attention to the power relations between the state and the citizen, with regard to the responsible use of social media.

However, running alongside this is the emerging challenge to the media landscape brought on by the dynamics of social media. The speed of information transfer via social media has dramatically reshaped the definition of public interest in Fiji. As a result, the media is under pressure to mitigate a variety of concerns around media ethics and approach.

Fatality Fixation

On the 4th of August, 2018, six lives were lost in a road fatality at *Nabou*, in *Nadroga*, involving a truck, mini bus and a private vehicle at around 9:45am (Kate, 2018). It did not take too long for the fatality to garner attention as around two to three hours later uploaded videos and images of the scene went viral within Fiji's online networks (Nasiko, 2018). The fatality fixation at that point was at its peak, with many on Fiji's currently largest Facebook group, *ChatFiji* – comprising well over 200,000 active accounts –posting, sharing and commenting on the videos and images related to the accident. Public curiosity was shaped online via the viral videos, images and the bigger Facebook groups. Initially, the sentiments expressed were horror and grief at the gruesome videos and images. However, shortly after, the online sentiments began to amplify ethical concerns about the way the situation was being shared and discussed.

Citizen Journalism & Ethical Concerns

Citizen journalism is when the formerly conventional audience in mainstream media, use press or relevant tools in their possession to inform one another (Rosen, 2008). This accident exemplified a notable level of citizen journalism, largely through the use of social media. As the sentiments of anguish and loss accumulated online, so too did the online ethics-based reactions against the sharing of the gruesome videos and images. The ethical reactions against the widespread sharing of the gruesome images and videos centered on the ethics of care and empathy. There were a number of sentiments that exploded on Fiji's *Twitter-sphere* but none were as poignant as the statement expressed by an uncle of two of the deceased involved in the accident. The uncle of the two victims stated “*We are Fijians and we are known for having respect for others but after what I saw, there wasn't any compassion, empathy or respect for the dead*” (Radivi, 2018). A similar sentiment was echoed by the Prime Minister of Fiji, Voreqe Bainimarama, reemphasizing the need for the virtue of respect and care for the grieving families to be upheld by Fijians (Bainimarama, 2018).

The Media Implications

The incident coincided with the *Powerade* Deans Rugby Semi Finals in Suva. Ratu Navula College, a high school from the Western side of *Viti Levu* was playing for a place in the Finals. A cousin of one of the team's rugby players was a victim of the accident. Media outlets became enthralled with the online momentum of discussions in the same weekend. The moment the news was relayed to him was captured on video and by consent of his family, was widely shared online by a print media outlet (Kumar, 2018a). This became a matter of contention for some who argued that the grief video was inappropriate and that it was unnecessary for a mainstream media outlet to release it. The print media editor responded by accepting these reservations but reiterated that it had the permission of the family. In addition, the print media organization maintained that informing its readership was a matter of '*news judgement*' (Kumar, 2018b). The Media Industry Development Authority Chairman, Ashwin Raj, quickly criticized the release of the video and labelled it as an act of 'savagery' (Kumar, 2018a). He went further to quote the Media Code of Ethics and Practice in Media Industry Development Act, 2010 (Kumar, 2018b).

This showed the pressure on media organisations to keep up with the online momentum of discussions and public curiosity. But it also raises questions around accepted standards of media reporting.

Social Media Implications

The need for ethical standards of social media use in Fiji has become a pressing matter of concern, especially in light of cases of revenge porn, cyberbullying, online harassment and vitriolic online discussions (Brimacombe, Kant, Finau, Tarai, & Titifanue, 2018; Chanel, 2017; Doviverata, 2018). These concerns have been used to justify Fiji's recently introduced Online Safety Act, 2018 (Doviverata, 2018). In a similar vein, there is now growing concern around the morbid use of social media in grief stricken accidents or tragedies (Bainimarama, 2018; Radivi, 2018).

Interestingly, the recently introduced and passed Online Safety Bill, now Online Safety Act, 2018, does not cover the inappropriate use of social media in grief stricken accidents or tragedies (Naqelevuki, 2018). However, outlined in the Act are the functions of the Online Safety Commission, two of which are to promote online safety, to organise awareness and prepare educational programmes, including the provision of online safety material (Fijian Government, 2018). The Commission's role in public advocacy and awareness regarding responsible social

media use is going to be critical, notwithstanding the fact that at the time of writing, the Online Safety Act was yet to be gazetted (Muir & Samuela, 2018).

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that responsible citizen journalism has proven crucial in responding to Fiji's recent political challenges (Brimacombe et al., 2018; Chung, 2016). However, Fiji's media landscape now confronts the problem of irresponsible citizen journalism as witnessed in the case of the *Nabou* accident. This is specific to the morbid use of social media, which is not unique to Fiji and prevails as a global phenomenon with the expansion of online activity and digital behavior (Church, 2013; Phillips, 2011). Interestingly, the quick pace and real time nature of social media has altered the nature of the public interest, in turn complicating media reporting and coverage. The dynamics of public curiosity in this accident were amplified to an emotional, and almost obsessive extent. Even at the time of writing, emotional memorial videos of the victims have been made by online users, unknown to the family of the victims, which have been shared widely. This complex dynamic has pushed the ethical conventions of media coverage and reporting in Fiji.

The public interest was subject to the quick pace of and expanse of social media. The daily operations of many newsrooms in terms of covering stories are generally guided by a number of core news elements. Some of these include timeliness, proximity, prominence, impact and conflict (S. Singh, 2018). Social media has either assisted or complicated these key elements. The media have found themselves at a stage where they are having to play catchup. The *Nabou* accident certainly had a few of these elements; the news was fresh as it had just happened, people were affected by it emotionally and psychologically, it brought a sense of curiosity about how this happened, it impacted a whole lot of people and certainly captured the attention of the whole nation. By the time the news broke in the mainstream media, most of the people in Fiji had already caught wind of it. While reporting on such a tragedy raises ethical considerations about detailing the severity of what had happened and displaying images of it, social media transcends such boundaries. The core role of the media is challenged on a daily basis as far the key news elements are concerned.

This creates a dilemma for media reporting that can be very contentious. As a result, the need for up-to-date and context-based capacity building and training cannot be overstated. The willingness, approach and efforts of related authorities will be crucial in mediating the excesses of irresponsible

citizen journalism. To this extent, national awareness, education and advocacy would be pivotal to supporting Fiji's complex media and social media landscape.

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