

The good news and the not so good news from East Timor

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INTRO: We speak with Sydney Morning Herald journalist Jock Cheetham about efforts by Australian journalists to support a struggling newspaper in East Timor... and we hear from Dr Judy McGregor, who recently led a New Zealand Media Monitoring Mission to the tiny country.

Antony Funnell: Now to some good news and some not-so-good news about media developments in East Timor.

It might only be a tiny place, just under a million people, but that doesn't make it any easier to service when it comes to media.

We all know the country has had more than a few political and social problems of late and the situation certainly hasn't been helped by what one recent New Zealand media monitoring mission referred to as an 'information drought'.

Now we'll be joined by the leader of that mission, Dr Judy McGregor in just a few minutes. But first, let's hear about an Australian initiative which has helped at least one news outlet in East Timor to expand its service and reach.

For quite a few months now, staff at The Sydney Morning Herald and other Fairfax publications, have been donating money from their pay-packets to help fund the operations of a small newspaper called Tempo Semanal. So far they've raised over \$30,000.

The person behind the project is journalist, Jock Cheetham.

Jock Cheetham: Well initially it was Diario Tempo, which as a daily, and was publishing in Tetum and in Indonesian and the fact that it was in that local Tetum lingua franca that was important; it made it accessible to a lot of people. Now it's a weekly, and it's called Tempo Semanal, so it's kind of evolved, and it's a very widely distributed national newspaper, which is critical in East Timor where the outlying areas have a very deprived information system.

Antony Funnell: Well just on that point, how difficult is it for people in East Timor, average East Timorese, who aren't in Dili, to actually get reliable news and information?

Jock Cheetham: There's 13 districts in East Timor, and the district capitals do all right. The dailies are distributed there, but most people live in the villages and that is a very information-poor part of the country. And there's some parts of the country that get virtually no information, with the exception of the newspapers that manage to get through. That's because there isn't a sort of over-arching television network that covers the whole country, nor is there a radio network of that nature. They might get a little bit of Indonesian news on the radio, but that's not really relevant to them, certainly not to their political system.

Antony Funnell: And so because of that, in terms of crises... say like the recent election, are people more susceptible to propaganda and to scuttlebutt, that sort of thing?

Jock Cheetham: Well I think that rumour is a currency in East Timor, and it actually works to make things worse there in a time of crisis, because they're looking for information to help them make decisions, whether that be to actually flee, in some cases as they have done, to internally displaced camps, and just what kind of action to make, whether it's a political action or a security action. And I think rumours can create panic, and do.

Antony Funnell: Now you mentioned before that the newspaper Tempo Semanal is actually written in Tetum. Just explain again why that's so important, particularly for the people who live outside of Dili.

Jock Cheetham: Well not everybody speaks and reads Tetum, but certainly it's the most widely spoken of the dialects, and it's one of the two national languages along with Portuguese. Now Portuguese is not very widely spoken at all, so Tetum provides a lot more access for people generally. It's probably the most sensible language to print in, as well as Indonesian which is widely understood by the young.

Antony Funnell: Now tell us about the character of the newspaper itself, and also its staff.

Jock Cheetham: There's about a dozen staff, and they're all very committed because they're not earning a lot of money out of this. It's not an enterprise that can earn a lot of money, because of the economy at the moment. However, they're fiercely committed to their journalism, they started off with only a few thousand dollars, and yet they manage to put out this paper every week. It's a real testimony to commitment to journalism. They try to do as much investigative work as they can; they've exposed corruption in different parts of the governmental system. Their latest one is relating to misuse of government cars in recent years. And it's this kind of thing that it's hard to pull off in a small country where there's a lot of pressures, both economic and political, and I think that they're doing that quite well.

Antony Funnell: Now the program has already raised \$30,000; how has that money been used?

Jock Cheetham: There's been training and there's been the sending of equipment over to Dili. There's been several computers, which is sort of production computers for the page layout and the typing. There's been training on photography by some Timorese guys; and another important thing we do is provide a bit of a top-up payment for the journalists who work on the paper, about a dozen of them.

Antony Funnell: And you've set a new target of \$100,000. Tell us what the priorities will be for that. What's that going to be used for?

Jock Cheetham: Well the thinking there was that we're going along quite nicely with Fairfax staff donations and people have been very generous, and the company has matched a fair amount of those donations as well. But we'd like to take this a little bit broader, and involve the wider community, because there's a limited amount of support from Australia specifically for media, if we take that wider and get a broader amount of donations, we can do more. We'd specifically like to do some more training, including getting Australians over there to do that. And we'd like to broaden that out to beyond Tempo Semanal as well, to some of the other papers.

Antony Funnell: Jock Cheetham.

And for those who are interested the Tempo Semanal support program is being organised with the ACTU's overseas aid arm, known as Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA. And you'll find a link to the details on the Media Report website.

Now, while you're there you'll also find a copy of a report compiled by the members of the 2007 New Zealand Media Observation Mission.

The head of that mission, as I mentioned earlier, was Dr Judy McGregor, whose regular job is as New Zealand's Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner.

Dr McGregor says while there's much good news to report from East Timor, there are also some dark clouds, particularly regarding moves afoot to impose greater government control over the media.

Dr McGregor, welcome to the program.

Judy McGregor: Thank you, thanks for having us.

Antony Funnell: Now tell me about the latest sort of moves to regulate journalism in East Timor, and the concerns that your mission expressed in relation to those.

Judy McGregor: Well we felt that freedom of expression was under peril in a number of areas in East Timor, not the least the moves to criminalise defamation. While people kept telling us that there was no legislation currently under consideration, there were several draft bills around that we sighted, which were quite punitive, we felt. So in terms of legislation, while East Timor is currently quite free from media law, in the sense that it doesn't have a big infrastructure, and big legislative regulatory framework, we are worried about the future.

Antony Funnell: And there are also moves to, as I understand it, to bring in a licensing system for journalists, is that correct?

Judy McGregor: Yes, and we would be absolutely implacably opposed to that, just simply because once you start licensing journalists of course, you can take away licences of journalists that don't necessarily follow a particular political line.

And if they're issued by bureaucrats or by politicians, then they can be equally revoked by politicians and bureaucrats.

Antony Funnell: And so these moves, are these being considered under the government of Xanana Gusmao who many of us in the West think as a moderate force within East Timor?

Judy McGregor: I think the situation about the state of these moves is quite murky because almost everyone we spoke to in terms of political allegiance right at the top, because we were there monitoring the media's coverage of the elections, claimed that they wouldn't impose punitive restrictions on the media, and yet on the other hand, we found the existence of these sorts of suggestions. So I think it remains to be seen how it plays out, but I think that the international media watch community should be speaking up now.

Antony Funnell: Now as you mentioned, the country has just this year gone through the electoral process, What sort of pressures did the coverage of the presidential and parliamentary elections put on the resources and skills of East Timor's media?

Judy McGregor: Well we found that East Timor's media was incredibly energetic, quite courageous, given the fragile security issues that many journalists face, but it's also relatively new media, in the sense that there were young and inexperienced journalists covering the elections. So all of that, and of course the election process, this particular election process was also new to East Timor, so in that sort of climate, we found that the media does need to strengthen how it reports politics in terms of the sort of Fourth Estate accountability role. That was what we felt was lacking in the coverage of the election processes, both the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections.

Antony Funnell: Now you mentioned courageous there, but given East Timor's colonial past, and at times brutal colonial past, did you find that people were still afraid to take on authority? Was there too much respect for authority, too much deference to authority?

Judy McGregor: I think there is a terrible ambivalence or tension for journalists in East Timor. I mean many of them have been made homeless, many Timorese journalists were actually homeless through the last crisis, made homeless. So that makes you, when you have a wife and a family and no home because it was burnt, it does make you a certain, you know, quite different perhaps as a journalist. Even though you theoretically know that a journalist's role is to hold people you know truth to power. So I think there is an ambivalence and a tension for many journalists in East Timor, but we also saw signs of courage and anew energy I think. Journalists do understand that they have a role in the development of the country and they're trying to work through what that role should be and how best it can be expressed.

Antony Funnell: Now our previous guest Jock Cheetham talked about the problems associated with language in East Timor. Was that something your mission was made aware of?

Judy McGregor: Yes, we described it in our report as something of a language 'soup'. Because while Tetum is, you know, the East Timorese language, all of the laws and the language of administration and bureaucracy is Portuguese which very few East Timorese understand. Of course many East Timorese understand Indonesian and in fact receive Indonesian media via satellite. And of course then, you know, the aid community, by and large, uses either English or French. So all in all, there is a problem of a terrible language 'soup' going on. And we went to press conferences where the same people would make comments in three different languages and the tone and the tenor of the stories was quite different in each.

Antony Funnell: Well, Dr Judy McGregor thank you very much for talking to us on the Media Report.

Judy McGregor: Okay, thank you very much for having me.

Antony Funnell: Dr Judy McGregor, New Zealand's Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner, who recently led a media monitoring mission to East Timor. She's also a former lawyer and journalist.

Guests

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Dr Judy McGregor

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<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2007/2045080.htm>