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### **Pacific Media Watch group takes on new challenges with grant**

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*Tongan publisher Kalafi Moala at the Pacific Media Centre: His jailing in 1996 led to the founding of Pacific Media Watch. Photo: Pippa Brown/PMC*

*Pacific Scoop:  
By Lucy Mullinger*

A Pacific media freedom monitoring project that began life campaigning for two journalists and a pro-democracy parliamentarian languishing in a Tongan jail almost 14 years ago has been given a boost by a \$15,000 development grant.

[Pacific Media Watch](#), founded by volunteer journalists concerned about a free media in the region, campaigned with a petition to have the [“Tongan three”](#) released from jail.

Now the project is run by AUT University’s Pacific Media Centre and it is being revitalised as a digital media freedom and development database.

The Pacific Development and Conservation Trust grant will be used to expand the regional database and community journalism resources which focus on media freedom, environmental issues, human rights and a sustainable press.

Current PMW contributing editor Josephine Latu of Tonga says the project gives media freedom in the region “publicity and a buzz” and professor Olaf Diegel of AUT’s Creative Industries Research Institute, which includes the Pacific Media Centre, says the grant is a “tremendous boost” for media research.

One of the founders of PMW, award-winning Sydney investigative journalist Peter Cronau, believes the grant will help the project keep up the challenge.

“In smaller communities there is a risk that political and commercial influences can have a more substantial effect on influencing the reporting of events,” he says.

### **Keeping democracy alive**

“A group like PMW keeps an eye on such transgressions and ensures they are given the openness and oxygen that keep democracy alive.”

The PMW project was adopted by the Pacific Media Centre in 2007 and has been developed by Pacific Islands contributing editors based in AUT’s School of Communication Studies for the past three years.

PMW was [originally established](#) in 1996 at the University of Technology, Sydney, by Peter Cronau, then director of the [Australian Centre for Independent Journalism](#), and then University of Papua New Guinea-based NZ journalist David Robie.

Associate Professor Robie, who is now director of the [Pacific Media Centre](#), says this is the first external funding for the PMW project.



“The voice of a ‘free press’ in the Pacific often used to be an issue owned by cozy elite media proprietors,” says Dr Robie.

Nowadays groups such as [Pacific Media Watch](#), [Pacific Freedom Forum](#), [International Federation of Journalists](#) (IFJ) and the [Pacific Islands News Association](#) are contributing to issues of media freedom being constantly debated around the region.

Dr Robie believes this is partly due to a perceived greater risk for journalists and the media in the region – “especially in the face of a sustained onslaught from the censors and the military regime in Fiji”.

### **Global media agencies**

Although there are other larger global free media agencies such as the New York-based [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) and [Reporters Sans Frontières](#) in Paris, Cronau believes a smaller programme such as PMW can devote more time to local issues and continue to follow-up on them long after world attention has declined.

“There is a localised corporate memory that allows the connections to be made between current events and the relevant historical background,” he says.

The catalyst which established the programme was the jailing of *Taimi 'o Tonga* journalists and editors Kalafi Moala and Filokalafi 'Akau'ola, along with pro-democracy MP in Tonga, 'Akilisi Pohiva, for alleged contempt of Parliament in September 1996.

With help from the PMW, which organised a petition of more than 100 media signatures from the Pacific region, and other groups such as the Commonwealth Press Union, they were freed by the Supreme Court in Tonga after it had ruled that their imprisonment was unconstitutional.

Moala has been a staunch supporter of the project ever since it started and has contributed many articles on the Pacific Islands region.

He believes the PMW is a great help information-wise to Pacific peoples.

According to Moala, media organisations across the Pacific benefit from the information that comes from the Pacific Media Centre.

“I do not know what others are doing in terms of Pacific research, but what we get out of AUT is definitely superb,” he says.

### **Contribute submissions**

The PMW and PMC also contribute submissions on media matters, such as for an independent review of the Fiji Media Council just months before martial law was declared in April 2009.

“We are also constantly working behind the scenes with journalists who are in jeopardy,” says Dr Robie.

*PMW's contributing editor Josephine Latu at work interviewing. Photo: PMC*

Contributing editor Josephine Latu says: “We try to watch for new projects or developments in the area and promote them by giving them publicity and a buzz through news coverage on our partner *Pacific Scoop*, as well as dispatching emails and newsletters to our subscriber list.

“We also document these developments by storing news stories, research papers, or important media reports in our database.”



Dr Robie says: “This is an important development for us and will enable the PMC to significantly improve the resources made available through the university’s PMW database and integrate it with other digital developments planned by the centre for later this year.

“The grant will help in expanding and improving our services, for instance, giving our database and website a makeover and making them more interactive with users. The grant will hopefully allow us to bring more Pacific Island people, or Pacific-interested people on board,” he says.

The centre also wants to organise other events in the future which will showcase and promote more student media work – such as the [Flavorz film festival](#) held last November, where a range of short films by Māori, Pasifika and diversity television students were shown.

The grant will be used to help Pacific people express their identity and worldview through media and to contribute to New Zealand’s knowledge base, says Latu.

“Pacific media does not only mean news coverage about the region – it also involves alternative perspectives and angles of these same issues from local people.

“We also need to bring this aspect of diversity to NZ media.” she says.

#### **‘Tremendous boost’**

Professor Olaf Diegel, director of the Creative Industries Research Institute at AUT, says the \$15,000 development grant represents a tremendous boost to Pacific research.

“Until the creation of the Pacific Media Centre there has been relatively little true research into Pacific media. Even getting the public and government to understand both the value of Pacific media-related research, and what constitutes good media research has been a challenge,” he says.

“It is only when tabloid worthy events – such as the coups in Fiji or Samoan tsunami occur – that we even realise that there is such a thing as Pacific media” he says.

He believes “this kind of synergy between research, industry and education” makes AUT the top institution in the field of Pacific research.

“I am convinced Pacific Media Watch will become a vital source of information on all things Pacific, and will be used extensively by the media, the government and the community.”

Is there a future for Pacific journalism? No doubt about it, believes Cronau

“As long as there are those who act to inhibit free speech and the work of inquiring journalists in Pacific countries, there will be a need for Pacific Media Watch’s unblinking eye.”

*Lucy Mullinger is a graduate journalist from AUT University’s [Pacific Media Centre](#) who files stories for Pacific Scoop.*

**The Pacific Media Watch digital repository: [www.pacmediawatch.aut.ac.nz](http://www.pacmediawatch.aut.ac.nz)**

**More information [about PMW](#).**

**The original [PMW website](#), hosted by a community NGO**

Research and educational resource provided by the Pacific Media Centre | Creative Industries Research Institute  
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