

Ch X: Pacific media

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Pacific media¹ in Aotearoa New Zealand are in a moment of transition, shaped by two key trends. Like all media, they are grappling with the need to reinvent themselves as multimedia outlets in a digital age. In addition, they are grappling with significant intergenerational change within their target Pacific communities, which are morphing from older Pacific-language-speaking migrant populations into younger, English-speaking populations of New Zealand-born Pasifika.

Background

Currently, Pacific peoples make up eight per cent of Aotearoa's population, comprising about 382,000 people, the majority of whom are born here. The population is estimated to increase by more than half to 650,000 people in 2038 (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020), cementing Pacific peoples as a significant part of Aotearoa's audiences. The population is diverse, comprising at least 17 linguistically and culturally distinct ethnic groups², which requires Pacific media to be many things for multiple, diverse and fragmented audiences. The Pacific population is also Aotearoa's youngest. More than a third of Pacific peoples are aged under 15, and the Pacific median age is 23 years compared with 25.4 years for Māori, 31.3 years for Asian and 41.4 years for European ethnic groups (Ministry for Pacific Peoples 2020, p.21). That makes the march of young audiences away from traditional to digital media (NZ on Air 2021a) even more pressing for Pacific media – and complicated, given Pacific youth are among those most at risk of digital exclusion (Zwimpfer et al. 2017, p.13), making a wholesale shift to digital difficult.

Most Pacific media blur the lines between traditional categories, combining news and entertainment content, linear and online platforms, and journalism and community service. Broadly, they comprise small family-, NGO- and church-run Access community radio shows, community radio stations, hybrid commercial/community radio stations, larger public broadcasters, one remaining newspaper, commercial TV production companies, and a

¹ Pacific media are understood here as media produced in Aotearoa by, for and about Pacific peoples (and not media produced in the wider region but available in Aotearoa).

² The 10 largest Pacific groups are Samoan (47.9%), Tongan (21.6%), Cook Islands Māori (21.1%), Niuean (8.1%), Fijian (5.2%), Tokelauan (2.3%), Tuvaluan (1.2%), i-Kiribati (0.8%), Tahitian (0.5%) and Papua New Guinean (0.3%) (Ministry for Pacific Peoples 2020, p.18)

growing number of online media. They operate with different ownership structures, from the informal to charitable trusts and private companies, but share a common sense of *tautua* (service) to their Pacific communities (Ross 2017). Most are small and face challenges around precarious income (Utanga 2007; Kailahi 2009; Ross 2017) and workforce development (e.g., smaller media rely on untrained employees and volunteers), and many rely on the drive and goodwill of those who run them. There is a high degree of churn within the field, and many of the media profiled in a 2015 snapshot of Auckland's Pacific media (Neilson 2015) are no longer operating.

Most larger Pacific media rely on direct or indirect state funding, and much of the broadcast content for Pacific audiences, for instance, is state funded³ though often in piecemeal ways and at low levels (like Māori media [Te Puni Kōkiri 2019, p.3], Pacific media have operated with significantly lower budgets for producing each hour of content compared with the wider public media sector). Several Pacific broadcasters juggle public service journalism alongside entertainment and music production, and even event management (e.g., the annual Sunpix Pacific Peoples Awards, which have become a key event in the Pacific calendar). Those not publicly funded have often been heavily supported by churches and other charitable sources (Utanga 2007). Because Pacific audiences are small and typically have less disposable income, few media (e.g., Tongan newspaper, *Kakalu 'o Tonga*) rely on subscription or pay-for models. Traditionally, there has been only small advertiser support for Pacific media, but the government's Pacific-targeted Covid-19 public messaging has proved a boon for many and is credited by several media with keeping them afloat through the pandemic.

Public media

One of the largest, longest-running media is the Pacific Media Network (PMN). It runs two radio stations (Auckland-based NiuFM, which marked its 20th this year, and the longer-running AM community radio station, 531pi, which broadcasts rotating programmes in 10 Pacific languages), and the digital news channel PMN News. The network has about 41 full-time staff and a total headcount of about 85 including casuals and part-timers, reflecting the fact it employs multiple community members to host and produce its 10 Pacific language shows (D. Mann, personal communication, September 30, 2022). The network is owned and

³ Pacific audiences are among the special interest groups NZ on Air must address under s36(1)c of the Broadcasting Act (NZ on Air 2012, p.1).

run by the National Pacific Radio Trust (NPRT), a charitable trust established in 2002 under a Trust Deed with the NZ Government to deliver a national Pacific media network to promote and preserve Pacific people's culture, language, and wellbeing. PMN is regulated as a public entity under the Crown Entities and Public Finance Acts and operates as if state-owned. Its trustees are government-appointed, it answers to two ministers (Pacific Peoples and Broadcasting), it has Ministry of Culture and Heritage oversight, operational reporting responsibilities to NZ on Air, auditing reporting responsibilities to the Office of the Auditor-General, and it cannot make any changes to its Deed of Trust or governance without sign-off from its ministers (D. Mann, personal communication, September 30, 2022). About 70 per cent of its income comes from NZ on Air, comprising annual platform funding of \$4,760,000 (for which it must reapply each year) and some contestable Public Interest Journalism (PIJ) funding for four new roles (including its first-ever video and Press Gallery journalists) and a share in the Te Rito Journalism cadetship training programme. It is funded mainly to provide linear terrestrial radio – AM and FM radio is still its core business – but is negotiating to be funded as a multimedia, digital entity and sees its future on social and digital media (even now, the highest rate of engagement with NiuFM is via Instagram and TikTok [D. Mann, personal communication, September 30, 2022]). The remaining 30 per cent of PMN's income comes from commercial advertising, with about two-thirds of sales comprising government agency advertising and Covid-19-related messaging.

The RNZ-hosted Radio Pacific, formerly known as Radio New Zealand International (RNZI), provides multimedia news about Pacific communities in Aotearoa and coverage about and for the South Pacific region via its 24/7 shortwave broadcast. Unlike other Pacific media, it is state-owned and wholly funded by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, about \$1.9m annually (RNZ 2021).

Privately owned media

Most other Pacific media are privately owned by small to medium owner-operated companies and charitable trusts, or are less formal outlets run by NGOs, community groups and committed individuals. Many, especially those focused on national audiences, rely on contestable government funding, either directly via NZ on Air grants or indirectly via government advertising and/or subcontracted work on other government-funded content.

One of the longest-running is TV magazine show *Tagata Pasifika*. Formerly produced by TVNZ, it is now produced by Sunpix, a company set up in 2014 by three former TVNZ employees after the state broadcaster outsourced its Pacific programming. Sunpix is wholly reliant on government funding, some of which it gets directly via NZ on Air, for example \$1.9m December 2021 for 53 *Tagata Pasifika* episodes, \$273,600 September 2021 for two PIJ-funded roles for Sunpix's web channel TP+, and funding for other ad hoc programmes such as *Maisuka*, a documentary investigating the rise of Type 2 diabetes in the Moana adolescent population, and *Ifoga*, a four-part video series investigating Pasifika stories of abuse in state care (NZ on Air, n.d.). It also receives state funding indirectly through its post-production company, Sunpix Post, which benefitted from the government's tsunami of Covid-19 messaging. Sunpix managing director Stephen Stehlin says Sunpix Post became a messaging factory during the pandemic, churning out Pacific Covid-19 content in 10 languages, which effectively "saved the company" (S. Stehlin, personal communication, August 30, 2022).

Independent production company Tikilounge Productions, established in 2013 by former *Tagata Pasifika* director Lisa Taouma, is one of the biggest Pacific media in terms of its raft of content. It produces the flagship Pacific youth show *Fresh* (with \$1.8m a year in contestable NZ on Air funding), and the online hub, TheCoconet.tv, which it launched in 2014 with NZ on Air Kickstart Digital Media funding. Taouma says establishing TheCoconet.tv as a platform has proved key to Tikilounge's success. It enabled the company to produce TV and digital content that would not have been commissioned by mainstream platforms and allowed it to apply to the PIJ fund for journalism training and staff, including a digital producer to expand TheCoconet.tv's news content onto Instagram and TikTok (L. Taouma, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Since September 2021, it has secured more than \$2m in NZ on Air funding, for RNZ documentary series *Untold Pacific History 2*, TheCoconet.tv web series *Akanuanua*, HEIHEI musical theatre series *Fresh Fairytale*s, Māori TV Pasifika high school drama *Inky Pinky Ponky*, and TheCoconet.tv documentary *Dusky Maiden*. Tikilounge produces about six projects a year across factual, scripted and cultural learning content, bunnyhopping across NZ on Air grants and small contracts from commercial clients and government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education.

Kava Bowl Media is a relatively new independent Pacific TV and video production company established in 2019 by former Sky TV executive John Tapu. It is co-owned by Tapu and his

cousin, AUT vice-chancellor Damon Salesa, and produces primetime shows from a studio Tapu built in his Mangere garage (Grieve and Tapu 2022; Kilgallon 2020). The company has produced several Pacific-focused mainstream sports shows, including the Oscar Kightley-hosted *Pacific Brothers & Sisters* (which ran on Sky Sport NZ and streamed on Rugby Pass and Pacific Islands networks) and the highly successful rugby league show *The Ditch*, which airs on Sky, Prime, Fox Sports Australia and throughout the Pacific on the Digicel Network and Watch NRL platforms (Kava Bowl Media, n.d.; Sky 2022). The company operates commercially and has a list of clients ranging from corporates like Sky and Deloitte to NGOs and Pacific and Māori community groups and enterprises, and produces a range of content, including corporate videos, advertising (including government Covid-19 messaging) and music videos (Kava Bowl Media n.d.).

Online magazine E-Tangata focuses on longform storytelling by Māori and Pacific peoples, and is owned and run by Mana Trust (an independent charitable trust set up in 2003 to strengthen Māori and Pacific voices in Aotearoa's media). E-Tangata has relied heavily on koha, both in terms of donated labour by co-editors Tapu Misa and Gary Wilson and, more recently, Press Patron donations, which, in 2022, averaged about \$12,000 a month (G. Wilson, personal communication, August 16 & 19, 2022). The website was launched in 2014 with funding from the Tindall Foundation, which has continued to support the website, and it is increasingly funded through contestable NZ on Air grants – initially for multimedia projects partnered with Moana Maniapoto's Tawera/Black Pearl Productions, and more recently for four full-time PIJ-funded journalists, including a digital marketer to grow the site's digital audience (G. Wilson, personal communication, August 16 & 19, 2022).

Auckland Samoan-language radio station, Radio Samoa, on the other hand, gets most of its income from advertising, including government-funded Covid-19 messaging and ad revenue from livestreaming its broadcasts and events on Facebook and YouTube (A. Ponifasio, personal communication, August 16, 2022). It is owned by the Samoa Multimedia Group and has been operating commercially as a 24/7 community radio station (and, more recently, online) since 1999. The station has a 1.3 percent share of the overall commercial radio audience in Auckland, ahead of other Pacific radio stations, and has about 15 full-time staff, which represents about half the company's pre-pandemic numbers (ibid.). During the first Covid-19 lockdown, Radio Samoa was unable to print and distribute its companion newspaper, the *Samoa Times* and was forced to lay off staff and, eventually, close the

newspaper. *Samoa Times* was Auckland's last remaining Samoan-language newspaper and, before its closure, it had a print run of about 20,000, several reporters and a fleet of delivery vehicles, and was freighting newspapers to Australia (A. Ponifasio, personal communication, August 16, 2022).

Wellington-based community radio station Samoa Capital Radio is much smaller in comparison (it relies on volunteers to fulfil almost half of its work) and predominantly focused on radio broadcasting. Like PMN, it is run by a charitable trust whose primary purpose is to educate and promote and preserve the Samoan language (Siufofoga Ole Laumua Trust 2021). It shares transmission facilities with Wellington Access Radio and operates with platform funding from NZ on Air (about \$240,000 annually), donations and some commercial income from hosting government agency programmes.

Smaller media

Most other Pacific media are much smaller. Among the longer-running is Auckland's last Pacific newspaper, *Kakalu 'o Tonga*, a Tongan-language weekly newspaper started in 2010 and run by Kakalu Media, a small company wholly owned by Ulu'alo Po'uhila, the former Auckland editor of *Taimi 'o Tonga*. The newspaper employs four fulltime staff in Tonga and survives on advertising and a \$4.50 cover price (recently lifted from \$3.50 to meet rising printing costs). Po'uhila says the newspaper is struggling as audiences drift toward digital and social media – it cut its print run this year from 5000 to 3000 a week – and it is looking at establishing a website and livestream capability with a \$9817 grant from NZ on Air's PIJ fund (NZ on Air 2021b). *Kaniva Tonga*, another Tongan outlet, is run wholly online. Launched in 2009 by Kalino Latu and run via the Ta'angafonua Charitable Trust, it has struggled in recent years (K. Latu, personal communication, September 8, 2022), surviving on a patchwork of grants, including Ministry for Pacific Peoples' (MPP) grants for language initiatives and Covid-19 community outreach, and a trickle of Google ad revenue (partly earned from RNZ and One News content it carries as part of a content-sharing agreement with state broadcasters). During the pandemic, *Kaniva Tonga* received \$7,619 from Google's Journalism Emergency Relief Fund, a \$12,085 government emergency media grant, \$17,000 from the MPP's Provider Language Fund and, most recently, approval for \$40,000 from MPP's Pacific Aotearoa Community Outreach fund (K. Latu, personal communication, October 3, 2022). The closure of award-winning Pacific magazine and website, *SPASIFIK* underlines the precarity of Aotearoa's Pacific media. The bi-monthly magazine, launched in

2004, was run by private company Oceania Media and published 75 issues before folding when Covid-19 hit. Co-owner Anne Logan says *SPASIFIK* had been struggling for advertising before the pandemic and simply became unsustainable: “Sadly, the Public Interest Journalism Fund was too little too late for us” (A. Logan, personal communication, August 31, 2022).

Other online media include: AsiaPacificReport.nz, a nonprofit publication formed out of AUT’s Pacific Media Centre and run by former AUT professor David Robie and Multimedia Investments Ltd (a company owned by former journalist Selwyn Manning); Oriana TV, an online outlet set up by former journalist and independent producer Samson Samasoni, which ran an initial nine-month pilot as a free-to-air Pacific TV channel on Kordia’s Freeview TV channel in 2021 (it broadcast nine hours every Sunday, from 3pm to midnight, and ran on money cobbled together from donors, charitable trusts and corporate work, and now runs educational programmes on YouTube [S. Samasoni, personal communication, 6 September 2022]); Samoan news vodcast Bluwave TV, run by digital media production company Bluwave Galumoana (Bluwave Galumoana n.d.); and Coconut Wireless, a private company that has grown from a Facebook page established in 2014 (Neilson 2015, p. 51) to a cluster of online platforms with more than 250,000 followers, and which specialise in news, social media and web consultancy and development, and event management (Coconut Wireless, n.d.).

The smallest in the field are the many Pacific radio programmes run on NZ on Air-funded community access radio stations and associated website, Access Media NZ. These are mostly volunteer-run by individuals and church and community groups, and self-funded through donations and sponsorships (Neilson 2015, n.d.), e.g. a Pacific wellbeing show, *Polyhood*, is sponsored by a Pacific health provider, while a healthy lifestyles programme, *The Voice of Pacific Women*, is sponsored by MPP. The largest Access station, Planet FM, has about 22 shows dedicated to programming for Pacific communities, all but one of which are in Pacific languages, mostly Tongan (Planet FM, n.d.).

Big picture

Overall, little has changed since Utanga (2007) described Pacific media as running very tight operations. Regardless of ownership structure or income model, Pacific media work hard to serve highly diverse communities, with precarious funding and staffing. Not surprisingly,

Covid-19 lockdowns and associated constraints on economic activity proved too much for some (e.g., *SPASIFIK* and *Samoa Times*). Conversely, increased government advertising and Covid-19 messaging kept other media afloat, while Pacific audiences' thirst for trustworthy news helped some beef up their news operations (L. Taouma, personal communication, 1 September 2022; D. Mann, personal communication, 30 August 2022). The pandemic continues to have a negative impact on media production, mostly through increased production costs but also because Pacific media operate in the communities hardest hit by Covid-19. For example, Tikilounge was filming the mini series *Teine Sā* with Pacific cast and crew when Covid-19 hit, and the series' producer had to withdraw after her father died with Covid-19, and many actors and crew fell sick on set (L. Taouma, personal communication, 1 September 2022).

Looking ahead, all eyes are on the creation of Aotearoa New Zealand Public Media (ANZPM). Pacific broadcasters such as PMN, Sunpix and Tikilounge are reliant on public funding and particularly vulnerable to any potential funding shifts associated with ANZPM's launch. They, and others, are concerned, too, about losing hard-to-replace staff to a better-resourced public entity. There has long been a lack of trained Pacific journalists in Aotearoa (Utanga 2007; Hollings et al. 2007) and few Pacific media have enough journalists, let alone the extra staff needed to develop social media content for younger audiences or to chase grants, and there is concern that the new entity will be created at the cost of media that have long-served Pacific communities. Several Pacific media have made submissions on the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Media Bill, urging the government to rethink its funding models to provide greater flexibility, sustainability and workforce development pathways for existing and new Pacific media, along with mechanisms that allow NZ on Air to continue developing media by Pacific for Pacific.

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