Keeping in touch with our Pacific colleagues

By Roger Patching

Good and bad, the news from PINA.

I was invited to the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) convention by the Association’s Secretariat to present a paper on my MA (Hons) research into journalism courses in Australia. I also offered to discuss with the PINA Executive areas of mutual interest.

Faced with minimal financial support from my university, I had decided to decline the invitation when the JEA Executive, at one of its regular tele-conferences, voted to pay my air fare to Tonga.

The executive felt it was important to maintain our contacts with journalists in the Pacific region. Links with Pacific Island journalists and journalism educators were strengthened when the JEA held its first offshore conference in Vanuatu in 1991. Pacific Island journalists have attended conferences since, in Newcastle (1992) and Brisbane (1993).

The Kingdom of Tonga: There would be few more pleasant venues for a conference than the Kingdom of Tonga. One of the Royal Tongan Airline pamphlets suggests Tonga “is one of the few remaining countries in the South Pacific that has not been subject to high-powered tourism development”. The Atlanta Olympics were on at the time of the convention and a local sporting hero, a heavyweight boxer, made it to the gold medal round. Traffic in the main street of Nuku’alofa virtually stopped for the duration of the bout on Monday, August 5. Their man won silver; the kingdom’s first Olympic medal.

The Convention: The convention began on Tuesday, August 6, with an official opening ceremony at the Queen Salote Memorial Hall. PINA President Monica Miller used her welcoming speech to appeal to the Tongan Government to lift a ban on PINA member and New Zealand journalist, Mike Field, attending the conference. The appeal fell on deaf ears. Discussion of the pros and cons of the Mike Field case – the Tongan Government accused him of insulting the King in his writings for the French newsagency, AFP, although they were unable to provide specific examples of the alleged insults – dominated informal discussion and some of the sessions of the convention. The Tongan Prime Minister, Baron...
Vaea of Houma, officially opened the convention with his own attack on the integrity and ethics of Pacific Islands journalists.

The convention proper got under way with sessions on Culture, Tradition and the News Media that afternoon. The following day the convention moved to the nearby island of Pangaimotu for a retreat and a series of forums, including one on journalism education and training. It was here that I presented my two papers (the one on journalism education in Australia, and another backgrounding the JEA and its desire to forge stronger links with journalists in the region), surrounded by palm trees and a few metres from the sparkling Pacific Ocean.

The education and training group also heard from the Coordinator of the journalism course at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, Francois Turmel, and the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation's Bill Southworth. Francois confirmed what had been learned from JEA member Phillip Cass that the USP journalism program was in danger of losing its French Government funding at the end of 1996. I took every opportunity - officially at various forums, and informally at the various social functions associated with the convention - to push the diversity of journalism training available through JEA members’ institutions in Australia, and the JEA's commitment to support journalism in the region. I also circulated JEA membership forms and details of how to submit material for both AJR and the newly-created Asia Pacific Media Educator.

Copies of the papers I presented at the island retreat were quickly snapped up, as were the other materials, and I was approached by a number of the PINA executive and general membership with questions – mainly about course content and the possibility of Australian Government study scholarships.

My presence was seen by PINA members as evidence of Australian journalism academics’ on-going interest in their welfare. (The jailing of Tongan journalists in late 1996 gave JEA members the opportunity to support their Pacific colleagues by joining the formal protests to the Tongan government).

PINA Delegates were delighted at the prospect of the 1997 JEA Conference being held in Fiji.

The convention discussed the expected range of issues like media freedom, the Monarchy, Democracy and the Media (Always in the context of the Mike Field ban), and held a series of workshops, two taken by veteran American journalism academic, Ralph Izard. Members may recall that Ralph was involved in the creation of the CSU (then Mitchell CAE) course. Incidentally, I shared the flight to Fiji en route to Tonga
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with the first life member of the Association, David Potts, and wife Wendy, who were heading for a Pacific cruise.

The surprise of the convention came at the PINA Annual General Meeting on the final afternoon, when it was announced that PINA was in a financial crisis, and only had sufficient money to continue the Secretariat in Suva until some time in October, 1996. A series of meetings were planned with senior executives of the PINA full member newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations to save the Association. The Association was awaiting word from the Australian Government on whether the Federal Budget would finance a new Australian Pacific Media Training Project. Prospects were gloomy.

A personal note: There are seven tertiary-trained journalists working in Fiji. Three are graduates of the journalism course at CSU, and all three were at the convention. They graduated in the early Nineties, two on Australian Government scholarships. Francis Herman is the News Director of the government-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and Samantha Magick is the News Editor of the opposition commercial radio station, FM96. The third CSU graduate is Chandra Singh, a Senior Information Officer at the Government Information Department. All three are involved in the Fiji Islands Media Association (FIMA). Francis is the President, Samantha is a Vice President and Coordinator of Training and Chandra is on the Executive. FIMA — with membership of 80 per cent of Fiji’s 120 working journalists — is at the forefront of lobbying for press freedom and freedom of expression in the Fiji Islands.

Post PINA convention update: The PINA Secretariat met in November 1996 to say that the meetings with PINA’s full members (individual journalists are not considered full members of the Association, since they don’t have the to power to increase PINA subscription rates paid by the media organisations in the region) were under way to make the Association more self-sufficient.

During the height of the Cold War, PINA had no trouble finding governments and other bodies willing to fund its various education and training activities. That funding has dried up in recent years. However, the Australian Government approved the new Pacific Training Project, and UNESCO is funding a new multi-faceted Pactrainer project. There’s also the possibility of some financial support from a Japanese foundation. But the Asia Foundation and USAID have withdrawn support for the region, and there have been severe cutbacks by the USIS. That’s a big blow to PINA, considering the level of support from those
organisations in the past. The journalism program at USP continues in 1997 with French help. The PINA Secretariat were keen to hear if JEA would still be holding their 1997 conference in Fiji, and would ensure that representatives from the Pactrainer group attended. Members may remember they were part of the Vanuatu conference.

I recommended to the JEA AGM that, given the continued financial pressures on PINA, the ongoing challenges to freedom of the media in the region highlighted by the recent jailings in Tonga, and the continuing financial problems of the USP course, that the JEA confirm that the 1997 conference would be held in Fiji as a show of support for journalism in the region. Even though there are likely to be heavy financial constraints on JEA members’ institutions in 1997 in the wake of Federal Government cutbacks, and funding for conference travel may be low, it would be an opportunity to ‘put our money where our mouth is’ and support our colleagues in the Pacific region.

Postscript: It became obvious from discussions before and during the AGM in Geelong that due to expected financial constraints the members present would not support the 1997 conference in Fiji. Instead, members voted to support financially up to five members attending the 1997 PINA Convention in Vanuatu in August. It was decided to hold the 1997 JEA conference and AGM in Sydney in December at a venue to be decided by the Executive.

JEA President Roger Patching reported to the Association’s annual general meeting in Geelong on his attendance at the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) convention in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, from 6 - 9 August, 1996. This is an abridged and updated version of that report. Roger Patching is a senior lecturer in Journalism in the School of Communication at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.