

Culture at the core: journalistic values in the Pacific Islands

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Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister Manoa Kamikamica at a press conference

Photo Credit: US Embassy Fiji

The role of journalism in society is shaped not only by professional norms but also by deeply held cultural values. This is particularly evident in the Pacific Islands region, where journalists operate in media environments that are often small, tight-knit and embedded within traditional communities. Our survey of journalists across Pacific Island countries provides new insight into how cultural values influence journalists' self-perceptions and practices in the region. The findings are now available as [an open access article](#) in the journal *Journalism*.

Cultural factors are particularly observable in many collectivist societies, where journalists emphasize their intrinsic connection to their communities. This includes the small and micro-media systems of the Pacific, where “high social integration” includes close familial ties, as well as traditional and cultural affiliations. The culture of the Pacific Islands is markedly distinct from Western cultures due to its collectivist nature, which prioritises group aspirations over individual aspirations. By foregrounding culture and values, our study demonstrates that the perception of their local cultural role is a dominant consideration for journalists, and we also see significant correlations between it and the cultural-value orientations of journalists.

We approach the concept of culture from the viewpoint of [journalistic embeddedness](#), that is, “the extent to which journalists are enmeshed in the communities, cultures, and structures in which and on whom they report, and the extent to which this may both enable and constrain their work”. The term embeddedness has often been considered undesirable in mainstream journalism, given ideals of detachment and objectivity which originated in the West and experiences of how journalists were embedded with military forces, such as the Iraq War. Yet, in [alternative approaches](#) to journalism, being close to those on whom they report has been a desirable value, such as in community journalism, whereas a critique of mainstream journalism has tended to be that those reporters do not really understand local communities. What is more, in the Global South, embeddedness is often viewed as an intrinsic element of [journalists' identity](#), making cultural

detachment both impractical and undesirable. **Recent research** highlights that journalists in many regions of the world, including in unstable democracies, often experience more pronounced cultural influences on their work compared to their Western counterparts.

To explore how cultural values and identity shape journalism in the region, we surveyed 206 journalists across nine countries: Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Nauru and the Marshall Islands. The study was conducted as part of a broader project about Pacific Islands journalists between mid-2016 and mid-2018. About four in five of journalists in targeted newsrooms agreed to participate, making this one of the largest surveys of journalists in the region. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of journalism's role in society and the extent to which cultural values inform their work.

Our respondents averaged just under 37 years of age and were relatively evenly split in terms of gender (49% identified as female) with most in full-time employment (94%). They had an average of nine years of work experience. Around seven in ten had studied at university, but only two-thirds of those had completed a university degree.

The findings showed that Pacific Islands journalists overwhelmingly supported ideas related to a local cultural role in reporting. A vast majority – 88% agreed that it was important for them to reflect local culture in reporting, while 75% also thought it was important to defend local traditions and values. Further, 71% agreed it was important for journalists to preserve local culture. Together, these roles were considered substantially more important than traditional roles such as the monitorial role, where journalists pursue media's watchdog function.

This suggests Pacific islands journalists see themselves not just as neutral observers or critics but as active cultural participants — conveying stories that strengthen identity, continuity and community cohesion.

To understand why journalists adopt this local cultural role, we looked at which values best predicted their orientation. We used a regression model to account for a range of potential influences, including socio-demographic aspects such as work experience, education, gender, the importance of religion and journalists' cultural-value orientations. Our results showed that the best predictor for whether journalists thought it was important to pursue a local cultural role lay in their own value system. In fact, the extent to which journalists adhered to so-called conservative values like self-restraint, the preservation of tradition and resistance to change emerged as the strongest predictors. Hence, our findings suggest that journalists who emphasize tradition and social stability in their personal value systems are significantly more

likely to prioritise a local cultural role. These values reflect a preference for preserving the status quo, respecting established customs, and fostering social harmony — all consistent with Pacific cultural norms.

While the importance of cultural values was clear in how journalists perceive their role, the findings were more mixed when it came to reporting practices. In general, we found that such practices were valued. There was considerable consensus regarding the importance of respecting traditional customs in reporting, which 87% agreed with. A further 68% said that their traditional values guided their behaviour when reporting. At the same time, only 29% agreed with the statement that they were a member of their cultural group first and a journalist second, whereas 44% disagreed. Conversely, 52% agreed that the story was more important than respecting traditional customs and values, while 27% disagreed. These variations suggest that while Pacific journalists broadly endorse cultural preservation as a goal, the practical realities of journalism — such as covering conflict, corruption or political issues — may sometimes create tensions with cultural expectations.

Our findings support the notion that Pacific Islands journalists are deeply embedded in local culture, informed by collective values, strong community ties and a commitment to tradition. Models of journalism training and institution-building that originated in the West often prioritise norms such as objectivity, autonomy and detached reporting, but in the Pacific such models may fall short or at least clash with the cultural values that underpin journalistic identity. These aspects need to be taken into account when examining journalism in the region.

Recognising and respecting local value systems is not about compromising press freedom — it's about contextualising journalism within its social environment. Effective support for journalism in the region must account for the realities of cultural embeddedness, where being a journalist often means being a community member as well. Understanding the values that motivate journalists — particularly the desire to preserve tradition and promote social stability — can help actors and policymakers engage more meaningfully with media practitioners in the region.

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